



Lesson Units

The Great Jazz Innovator



**Louis Armstrong with the
Colored Waif's Home Brass Band**

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives
at Queens College

act 1

New Orleans Beginning: 1901–1922



Louis Armstrong was born August 4, 1901, in a poor uptown section of New Orleans, Louisiana, a cosmopolitan city with a distinctive blend of cultures and a rich musical history. The city's African American community and culture would become the shaping force of jazz. Historically, Louisiana went back and forth between Spanish and French control until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Soon thereafter, slaves in New Orleans were given permission to meet for recreational purposes. They began to gather in a large open area of the city called Congo Square, a reference to a location on the African continent from which many of them came. Here they would dance for hours to the beat of handmade drums, reminiscent of their homeland. Following the Civil War, the Congo Square dances continued for over a decade, then gradually declined.

During the 1700s slavery had existed in Louisiana under a system somewhat different from that of the other Southern states. Freed, or manumitted, slaves were given freedom as whites. These free people intermarried with whites and created a cultural group known as Creoles of colour, especially in New Orleans. In a rigid caste system, they were effectively separated from both blacks and whites, although they were very involved in such French culture as trades and the arts—especially music. Many Creoles of colour were fine performers and composers. The Creoles had higher education than blacks, and, as in white society, many of their children studied abroad. They lived in a section of the downtown French Quarter, while the black population lived uptown. In 1894 legislation was passed that designated Creoles as black, and they were forced to leave the French Quarter and live with the uptown blacks, who had a tradition of spirituals, ragtime, and blues. The mixture of the two groups produced the music we know as jazz. It was into this dynamic sociocultural milieu that Louis Armstrong was born.

Louis Armstrong was born in a city with respected musical traditions of opera houses, symphony orchestras, and brass bands and parades, with music for every occasion indoors and out. After his father left the family when Louis was an infant, he and his older sister Beatrice, nicknamed “Mama Lucy,” were raised by his grandmother, Josephine, and mother, May Ann. He joined a quartet of other young boys and earned a little money singing on street corners for tips from passersby. In his autobiography, Armstrong states: “In those days . . . I was going to church regularly for both grandma and my great-grandmother were Christian women. . . . In church and Sunday school I did a whole lot of singing. That, I guess, is how I acquired my singing tactics.”

One day when he was about twelve years old, he secretly took his stepfather's gun and fired it in the air during a New Year's celebration. He was promptly arrested and sent to a reform school for boys, the Colored Waifs Home. There he was taught to play the cornet by the school's band director, Peter Davis. He joined the marching band and led his schoolmates in parades. He left the Waifs Home after a year and worked on junk wagons selling coal for a Jewish family, the Karnofskys. The family treated him kindly, and he developed a great love and affection for them. With their help, he was able to purchase his first instrument, a cornet.

During his teen years, Armstrong continued practicing diligently on his instrument, working during the day and playing in honky-tonks with local bands at night. He was also hired by bandleader Fate Marable to play on one of the riverboats that traveled up and down the Mississippi River. His reputation began to spread, and he was becoming known as one of the finest young cornet players in New Orleans.

“He was the cause of the trumpet in jazz.” —Dizzy Gillespie, trumpeter



The African Music Heritage

Music on accompanying CD: “Ka Foo,” Ghanaian folk song

“Bata Drums,” Nigerian drummers

PROCEDURE

1. Give the class the following background information:

The tradition in New Orleans of allowing slaves to dance, sing, and play drums in Congo Square was a unique example of West African musical performance in the diaspora. It was symbolic of a tradition that survived to influence black musicians in New Orleans, thereby laying the seeds of a new sound that led to the creation of jazz. To begin the study of Louis Armstrong’s life and music, an introduction to the sounds of African music will highlight some of those early precursors of jazz that remained in the African American community and left an enduring tradition. As the majority of the slaves in New Orleans were brought from the west coast of Africa, students will listen to two examples of traditional music from that area: a song from Ghana and a Nigerian drum ensemble.

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn to recognize and perform certain characteristics of African music that later became staples of jazz, such as instruments and voices in repeated patterns and complex drum rhythms.

The objective incorporates the following National Standards in Music:

- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture.



2. Guided Listening Lesson

“Kaa Fo,” a cradle song of the Ga people of Ghana (Time: 1:24)

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUSIC SELECTION

Most traditional African music events include dancing and singing, along with handclapping and musical instruments; children’s songs are often performed in the same manner. Even babies learn to feel rhythms very early, strapped to the backs of dancing mothers. Inform students that traditional African music is not just an art of combining sounds, but a combination of sounds that express many aspects of life, ranging from ceremonial to everyday events.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

You will need: The accompanying CD to the Guided Listening Lessons; a classroom drum and an African hand bell, or a cowbell, for the rhythm activities (if instruments are not available, have the class clap the rhythms—this works as well); a map of the African continent; a chalkboard.

PRIOR TO LISTENING TO THE RECORDING, DO THE FOLLOWING:

- Have students locate Ghana on the map.

Ghana is a tropical country in West Africa on the Gulf of Guinea, which bulges westward into the Atlantic Ocean. It was formerly called the Gold Coast due to its large deposits of gold, diamonds, and other precious metals. It is about the size of the state of Oregon, with nearly five times as many people. More than half of the people of Ghana are farmers who live in rural areas.

- Have the class clap the following patterns they will hear in the song “Kaa Fo.” Combine hand claps with instruments.

Hand Claps	4/4	:	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	:								
Bell	4/4	:	1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+		1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	:
Drum	4/4	:	1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+		1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	:

- **Play the recording “Kaa Fo”**
Inform class: English is the official language of the country, but many Ghanaians also speak African languages. The Ga people are one of the major cultural communities in the country with their own language, which we will hear on the recording.

Ask students to raise their hands as each instrument and voice enters:

- A Bell begins
- B Hand clapping
- C Drum
- D Voice singing
- E Second voice joins

- **Play “Kaa Fo” again as class claps and plays instruments with recording.**

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Ask: What is a cradle song? Put the translated words of the cradle song on chalkboard:

“Don’t cry, don’t cry; don’t cry and let them see your mouth
 There is gold in your mouth; don’t cry and let anyone see your mouth.”
 Challenge class to compose a cradle song for a sibling.



3. Guided Listening Lesson

“Bata Drums: for Egungun” —a drum ensemble of the Yoruba people of Nigeria (Time: 2:53)

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUSIC SELECTION

Nigeria has the largest population of any country on the African continent, making it one of the most populous nations on earth. The Yoruba (YAW-ruh-buh) people are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria and are admired for the *bata* (BAH-tah) drums that are indigenous to their music and culture. Bata drums have conical shapes with two heads of animal hide and are usually played in sets of a large, medium, and small drum. Bata are played by male professional musicians and are famous for the complexity and excitement of their rhythms. African slaves brought the tradition of bata drumming to the Americas. The music on the recording is played at *Egungun* (eh-GOON-goon), a Yoruba festival.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Have the class locate Nigeria on the map.
- Have students listen to the music and raise their hands when they hear:

A 0:00: Drums begin playing a very rapid pattern against a slower, steady rhythm.

B 1:24: Drums slow down.

A 1:48: Drums play faster.

B 2:48: Drums slow down and gradually stop.

2:53 Drums stop.

Challenge students to play the slowest drum pattern on a drum in the classroom. Then give them a bigger challenge: play the fastest pattern they can in time with the recording. They might not be able to do it, but it's fun to try. And who knows—someone might come very close!

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

These two lessons have been one approach to getting students involved with listening for complexities in African music that provide the basic understanding of jazz traditions. If the class shows interest, obtain some additional African recordings from libraries or record stores. Encourage reading about Africa and collecting pictures of the wide varieties of musical instruments on the continent. Show videos of African musicians and musical instruments, available at libraries. Take trips to museums to see African exhibits and musical performances.



Ragtime

Music on accompanying CD: “The Maple Leaf Rag,” by Scott Joplin

PROCEDURE

1. Give class the following background information about ragtime and Scott Joplin:

Ragtime, an African American creation, has been defined as a musical composition for the piano. It reached its greatest popularity between 1890 and 1915. It is difficult today to realize the enormous impact of ragtime on the public during the peak years of its appeal. The music, a combination of African American syncopated rhythms and prevailing Western harmonies, became an international craze. Bands and singers around the world picked up the infectious, swinging rhythms of ragtime.

Ragtime inspired and supported the dance fads of the period, such as the turkey trot, bunny hop, and the famous cakewalk. Black artists both composed and notated ragtime, making the re-creation of their music as consistent with their intent as possible. The accentuation of “off beats” would later become a standard practice in jazz, in which musicians would improvise melodies in many ways: on the beat, off the beat, and around the beat.

Any consideration of ragtime must begin with the towering figure of **Scott Joplin**, who was called the “King of Ragtime Composers.” Joplin was born in 1868 in Texarkana, Texas, the border city between Texas and Arkansas, and died in New York City in 1917. His father, a former slave, had been a violinist who played for dances on a plantation. Young Scott played the guitar and bugle and was given piano lessons, during which he showed a remarkable talent for improvising. He left home at the age of fourteen and made his living playing the piano in saloons in Texas, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Valley areas of Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri. In 1899 he wrote his most famous composition, “The Maple Leaf Rag.”

OBJECTIVES

Ragtime was developing at the same time as jazz, and its syncopated rhythms undoubtedly influenced Louis Armstrong and the young New Orleans players. The objectives of the lesson are:

1. To guide students in listening for and identifying the following: (a) syncopation as the primary characteristic of ragtime, and (b) ragtime as a forerunner of jazz.
2. To introduce students to ragtime and its greatest composer, Scott Joplin.

The objectives incorporate the following National Standards in Music:

- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- Evaluating music and musical performances.
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

The objectives incorporate the following National Standard in U.S. History:

- Integrating history, the social sciences, and the humanities

You will need: The accompanying CD to the Guided Listening Lessons.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MUSIC SELECTION:

“The Maple Leaf Rag” (1899) was the first great instrumental sheet music hit in America and the most popular work of the era written by an African American. The syncopated melodies with their infectious swing defined an era and made the word “ragtime” synonymous with American music. Scott Joplin made this recording in 1916. “The Maple Leaf Rag” is a prime example of “classic” ragtime, the precursor of stride piano and later jazz piano styles. The form of “The Maple Leaf Rag” is traditional. It is one large work with four **different** themes, called “strains.” One of the strains is repeated, giving it a total of five strains, in the pattern A B A C D. Each strain has sixteen measures that balance each other. The great charm of the piece is the relentless, continuing **syncopation** in the right hand, which is supported by a steady rhythm in the left hand.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Have class clap the following patterns, accenting the “off beats,” which create syncopation.



2. Guided Listening Lesson

The Guided Listening is timed to the CD. As students listen to the recording, have them indicate on a sheet of paper, or raise their hands, when each theme begins. Encourage hand clapping and finger popping while listening; encourage dancing, too!

Music: “The Maple Leaf Rag,” by Scott Joplin (Time: 2:56)

- A 0:00 First theme (or strain) begins; note contrasting patterns.
- A 0:23 First theme repeated.
- B 0:45 Second theme begins in different tonality from the first theme. The right-hand syncopated pattern was imitated widely by ragtime composers and pianists.
- B 1:07 Second theme repeated.
- A 1:29 First theme reappears.
- C 1:50 Third theme begins: the trio section. “The Maple Leaf Rag” is in the form of a rondo, a classical music form which always has a section called a trio.
- C 2:13 Trio section is repeated.
- D 2:34 Fourth theme begins. This theme has a different right-hand pattern from the other themes, adding variety to the composition.
- D 2:56 Fourth theme is repeated, bringing “The Maple Leaf Rag” to a rousing end.



New Orleans Brass Bands

Music on accompanying CD: “New Orleans Function”

PROCEDURE

1. Give the class the following information about New Orleans brass bands:

New Orleans has long been famous for its brass bands. It is the most enduring musical tradition in the city, beginning in the 1700s and lasting to the present. The bands always attracted crowds of people who marched behind them—these music-loving followers were called the “second line.” On the way to a funeral, the bands played solemn, mournful music while the crowd walked behind them slowly. After the funeral, the musicians would strike up a lively, jazzy tune and the second line marchers would dance, prance, and strut in time to the music. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the young New Orleans musicians who associated with these bands became pioneers of a new music, as the brass bands began to play “jazz.” The music and pageantry associated with the brass bands undoubtedly had a direct influence on the sensibilities of Louis Armstrong, who often danced in the second line as a young boy.

OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the music and traditions of the black brass bands of New Orleans.

The objective incorporates the following National Standards in Music:

- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

The objective incorporates the following National Standard in U.S. History:

- Integrating history, the social sciences, and the humanities.

You will need: The accompanying CD to the Guided Listening Lessons.

2. Significance of the music selections

A brass band consisted basically of a trumpet, trombone, clarinet, and snare drum. It accompanied the funeral cortege of a prominent citizen or popular musician to the cemetery playing mournful music such as “Flee as a Bird.” At the cemetery, with friends and family gathered around, the minister would conduct a brief ceremony at the gravesite and the deceased would be interred. And then the excitement began as the drummer gave a roll on his instrument, and the band struck up a “happy” number. One of the favorite songs was “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble,” by J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954) and Bob Cole (1868–1911), two well-known early African American creators of musicals and plays.

Suggestion: Let the class hear and/or sing the following songs before listening to the recording.

“Flee as a Bird” by M. S. B. Dana (see page 33)

“Oh, Didn’t He Ramble” by J. Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole (see page 34)

J. Rosamond Johnson used the pen name Will Handy.



3. Guided Listening Lesson

Music on accompanying CD: “New Orleans Function” (Time: 6:16)

In the introduction, Louis Armstrong describes the music and events of a New Orleans funeral at which a brass band plays. This recording was made in 1950 with his famous ensemble, Louis Armstrong and the All Stars. All of the band members were outstanding musicians. They were Armstrong, trumpet; Jack Teagarden, trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano; Arvell Shaw, bass; and Cozy Cole, drums.

A. Introduction

0:00 Piano begins

0:08 Armstrong: “Next, we’re going to bring back another New Orleans memory in the days when I was second line behind the brass bands.

0:12 This is something I’ll never forget . . . the music they played at the funerals.”

B. “Flee as a Bird”

0:00 Drum plays four beats: 1, 2, 3, 4

0:10 Trumpet plays solo, “Flee As a Bird”; band accompanies him playing slowly.

1:09 Trumpet solo and band continue song.

2:12 Armstrong (with sounds of people crying in the background): “And as the family’s crying they lower old Brother Jake in the ground and as the old Reverend says, ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust, it’s too bad old Jake couldn’t have stayed with us.’ And as the snare drum player, he takes the handkerchief out of the snare and rolls up so the members would be forming a line to swing back to the hall playing ‘Oh, Didn’t He Ramble!’”

2:45 Snare drum is heard.

FLEE AS A BIRD.

SPANISH MEXICAN.
MARY S. B. DANA, 1840.

Expression.

1. Flee as a bird to your moun - tain, Thou who art wea - ry of sin; . . .
 2. He will protect thee for - ev - er, Wipe ev - e - ry fall - ing tear; . . .

agitate.

Go to the clear flowing foun - tain, Where you may wash and be clean; Fly, for th' a - ven - ger is
 He will forsake thee, Oh, nev - er, Sheltered so ten - der - ly there! Hasten then, the hours are

a tempo.

near thee, Call, and the Sav - iour will hear thee, He on His bo - som will
 fly - ing, Spend not the mo - ments in sigh - ing, Cease from your sor - row and

rit.

bear thee; Oh, thou who art wea - ry of sin, Oh, thou who art wea - ry of sin.
 cry - ing, The Sav - iour will wipe ev - e - ry tear, The Sav - iour will wipe ev - e - ry tear,

Oh, Didn't He Ramble

Will Handy (J. Rosamond Johnson)
and Bob Cole

CHORUS

Voice

Piano

Oh did n't he ram ble ram

ble? He ram bled all a round in and out the

town, Oh did - n't he ram - - - ble, ram - - -

ble. He ram - bled till the butchers cut him down.

C. “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble”

- 3:00 Trumpet begins playing “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble.”
- 3:35 Snare drum plays.
- 3:41 Trumpet solos melody in upbeat tempo
- 4:19 Clarinet solo by Barney Bigard
- 4:58 Trombone solo by Jack Teagarden
- 5:34 Trumpet solo
- 5:50 Band swings to end with Armstrong soaring over all.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Have the class create a second line and march around the room to the music of the recording. To recreate an actual performance, they would need second line umbrellas and sashes. In New Orleans, when followers are holding decorated umbrellas and dancing behind the band, it is called, “doing the second line.” Second line sashes are worn by members of brass bands and social clubs who participated in second line parades. The leader, or grand marshal of the parades, also wears a sash; these are made in many different styles and materials.

Let class sing “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble” while doing the second line. Have fun!

Also, encourage reading about the lives of Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson, who, with his brother, James Weldon Johnson, composed “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” considered the Black National Anthem.