



**Music on accompanying CD: “Cake Walking Babies from Home” and “Saint Louis Blues”**

#### PROCEDURE

##### 1. Give class the following information:

As good as King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band was, it could not contain Armstrong for long. He was destined for stardom as a soloist, the first great soloist in the new music, jazz. He married the band’s pianist, the talented Lil Hardin, who encouraged him to leave Chicago and go to New York, the capital of the music world, away from the influence of his early mentor and teacher, Joe Oliver. With some reservations, Armstrong took her advice. In October 1924 he accepted Fletcher Henderson’s invitation to come to New York and join his band, which was the outstanding ensemble in the city.

The Henderson band played at the Roseland Ballroom for white customers, whose musical preferences tended toward more familiar music such as waltzes and foxtrots. The band played from charts, and everyone was expected to read music. This was far different from what Armstrong was accustomed to, but he not only blended in with the band, he taught them something entirely different—how to swing! Soon his reputation was spreading in New York, and musicians came from everywhere to marvel at the sounds and technique of the new cornet player in the Fletcher Henderson band. His influence on musicians and arrangers in New York was remarkable.

During his stay in the Big Apple, Armstrong recorded with Bessie Smith, the great blues singer crowned the “Empress of the Blues.” He also made a series of fine recordings with the Clarence Williams Blue Five, on which he paired with Sidney Bechet, the former New Orleans clarinet and soprano saxophone player. Still, his talents were not being used fully. In addition to wanting to play a more swinging and inventive type of jazz, he wanted to sing, which Fletcher Henderson would not allow due to the music specialties of his band. Armstrong stayed in New York for about fourteen months, and again, on his wife Lil Hardin’s advice, returned to Chicago.

#### OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to Louis Armstrong’s contributions to jazz in New York and to terms such as the “break” and the “blues.”

The objective incorporates the following National Standards in Music:

- Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
- Evaluating music and music performances.
- Understanding music in relation to history and culture.
- Singing alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
- Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.

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

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

## 2. Significance of the music selections

The 1924 recording of “Cake Walking Babies from Home” features Sidney Bechet (1897–1959), the great clarinet and soprano saxophonist, playing soprano saxophone with Louis Armstrong. At that time, the two men were the only jazz musicians who were famous nationally for virtuosity on their instruments. They had nearly identical backgrounds: both were born in New Orleans and had played with King Oliver’s bands. Early in his career, Bechet became highly regarded in Europe. He lived most of his life in France and died in Paris in 1959. About the song title: the cakewalk was an African American dance that first became popular during the ragtime era and grew into a worldwide dance craze.

After William Christopher Handy (1873-1958) published “Saint Louis Blues” in 1914, it quickly became the composition that made the blues famous all over the world. In essence, the blues is basically a twelve-bar form wherein the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> notes of the diatonic scale are flatted. The words follow a pattern wherein a line is stated, then repeated, and the third line concludes the thought. Although the words of blues songs are often sad and rather mournful, such as the lyrics of “Saint Louis Blues,” they also can be upbeat and satirical.

Singers followed Handy’s lead, adding the blues to their repertoires, and a new industry was created for songwriters. The blues invigorated the recording industry—millions of records were sold in the 1920s, especially by black women blues singers. Bessie Smith (1894–1937) was the most famous. When Armstrong recorded “Saint Louis Blues” with her, it was one of the high points in music making: a great song by a great composer, sung by a great vocalist, accompanied by a great instrumentalist. About his work with Bessie Smith, Armstrong said, “Everything I did with her, I liked.” The roots of jazz are heard clearly in the blues, a uniquely African American musical expression that grew out of the black experience in this country.

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



## 3. Guided Listening Lesson

**“Cake Walking Babies from Home” by Clarence Williams, Chris Smith, and Henry Troy (Time: 3:00)**

The Red Onion Jazz Babies: Louis Armstrong, cornet; Sidney Bechet, soprano saxophone; Charlie Irvis, trombone; Lil Armstrong, piano; Buddy Christian, banjo; Alberta Hunter and Clarence Todd, vocals.

- A 0:00 Bechet and Armstrong lead the swinging ensemble.
- B 0:59 Vocal duet by Alberta Hunter and Clarence Todd, 16 bars.  
1:39 Band swings.  
1:55 Soprano sax breaks, band continues.  
2:37 Trombone breaks, band continues.
- C 2:48 Saxophone solo, 8 bars.  
2:57 Cornet and saxophone lead band into end of composition.

#### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

The “break” is one of the most important features in jazz. It is usually a short, improvised solo done by a player while the rest of the band is silent for a few notes, or bars. This leads into a longer solo by either the same player or by another band member. Armstrong was first to use the break extensively as a lead-in to solos.

1. Have students raise their hands when they hear a break.
2. Encourage the class to tap the rhythm softly as they listen; use small drums or other rhythm instruments. This helps to develop a feel for the swing of jazz, a music meant to be danced to. Let class members dance!
3. To encourage careful listening, have students write 1 to 4 on a sheet of paper when they hear the following:
  - When Armstrong solos on cornet.
  - When Bechet solos on soprano saxophone.
  - When singers are heard.
  - When Armstrong and Bechet “swing” together.



#### 4. Guided Listening Lesson

“Saint Louis Blues” by W. C. Handy (Time: 3:05)

Bessie Smith, vocals; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Fred Longshaw, organ.

Intro	0:00	Chord is heard.
A	0:04	Smith sings: “I hate to see the evening sun go down
	0:19	I hate to see the evening sun go down
	0:33	It makes me think I’m on my last go-round
A1	0:48	Feeling tomorrow like I feel today
	1:03	Feeling tomorrow like I feel today
	1:17	I’ll pack my grip and make my get away
B	1:31	Saint Louis woman wears her diamond ring
	1:44	Pulls my man around by her apron strings
B1	1:59	If it wasn’t for diamonds and this store-bought hair
	2:13	The man I love wouldn’t go no-where, no-where
C	2:25	I got them Saint Louis blues just as blue as I can be
	2:40	He’s got my armor cast right there in the sea
	2:53	Or else he wouldn’t go so far from me.”

#### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

In “Saint Louis Blues” we hear a different type of playing by Armstrong—he provides important phrases, or *obbligato* accompaniments, to Bessie Smith’s singing. An *obbligato* is a very important and necessary accompaniment to a composition; if it is left out the music would not be the same. Armstrong’s *obbligatos* are considered perfect examples of delicate, beautiful playing.

1. Have the class make a mark on a piece of paper every time they hear an Armstrong *obbligato*.
2. Give the class the words to follow as Bessie sings. They will see where she changed or improvised some of the original lyrics.
3. Encourage students to work in small groups and make up a short blues song of their own; it could be about homework, the food in the cafeteria, or almost any other subject. Make a tape recording of each song. Upon playback, the “composers” almost always have ideas on how to make it better!
4. Assign research into the life and music of Bessie Smith, W. C. Handy, Sidney Bechet, and Alberta Hunter. Videos and recordings are available in libraries.