Louis Armstrong

Introduction

Louis Armstrong was one of America's great musical geniuses—equally outstanding and innovative as trumpeter, singer, and entertainer. He was also the leader of fine bands and composed tunes that highlighted his talents and capabilities. Almost single-handedly he transformed jazz from a music born and nourished in African American communities into a stellar art form enjoyed, respected, and performed all over the world. Scholar and music educator David Baker has delineated the following contributions and innovations by Louis Armstrong:

- He was the first great jazz soloist–improviser. He established the concept of improvisation as an integral part of a jazz solo. More than anyone else, he is responsible for jazz becoming an individual improviser's art rather than a collective group improvisation.
- He was the first jazz musician to make a continuous impact on both the United States and Europe as jazz's first popular entertainer.
- He was one of the first to popularize "scat" singing.
- He extended the role of the soloist by his virtuoso style, and he pioneered a wide range of dramatic effects and devices, including the terminal vibrato.
- He extended the octave range of the trumpet and expanded the instrument's technical possibilities.
- By 1950 he was America's best-known entertainer.

Louis Armstrong influenced virtually every player and singer who followed him. He established the jazz tradition of thinking in terms of vocally conceived lines, and he sang just as he played.

- He helped shape the entire vocabulary and direction of jazz.
- He started musicians thinking about improvisation as something other than a restatement or embellishment of a given melody.
- He was involved with Broadway and Tin Pan Alley in the early 1930s with recordings such as "I've Got the World On a String" by Harold Arlen, whose later works such as "Over the Rainbow" show the effects of Armstrong's improvisational–tonal ideas. Armstrong was among the first African Americans allowed entry into this select circle of composers and lyricists.
- He was the first African American to be featured in major motion pictures, and the first to appear regularly in feature-length films, making more than sixty popular movies.
- In 1937, he became the first African American to host a sponsored radio show.
- The sixty recordings by the Armstrong-led bands, the Hot Five and the Hot Seven, transformed jazz and included his own compositions, such as "Cornet Chop Suey" and "Struttin' with Some Barbecue."

Louis Armstrong and his horn

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College

The Louis Armstrong Education Kit: Overview

The *Louis Armstrong Education Kit* is designed to guide teachers in the instruction of their students about the life and music of Louis Armstrong. The kit contains easy-to-follow lesson plans and an accompanying CD that provide guided listening experiences and activities to help students recognize and appreciate Armstrong's contributions and innovations in music, as outlined by David Baker.

The *Louis Armstrong Education Kit* is based on the format of the award-winning *Beyond Category*: *Duke Ellington Education Kit* (1998), which took its inspiration from the Duke Ellington Youth Project, an educational initiative of the Program in African American Culture of the National Museum of American History, Behring Center, Smithsonian Institution.

The *Louis Armstrong Education Kit* approaches Armstrong's life and music within the sociocultural context of his time, with lesson plans that are pedagogically sound and appealing to young people. The lesson plans can be used as a multidisciplinary tool, appropriately incorporating National Standards in music, visual arts, United States history, and language arts. Teachers are encouraged to establish their own methodology for continuing implementation of the National Standards in their subject areas.

The National Standards incorporated in the lessons are:

- **Music Education:** singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music; performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music; listening to, analyzing, and describing music; evaluating music and music performances; understanding music in relation to history and culture. Standards for the following subjects are also applicable:
- **Visual Arts**: understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture; making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.
- **United States History**, grades 5–12: drawing upon visual, literary, and musical sources; hypothesizing the influence of the past.
- **Language Arts:** listening and speaking strategies for different purposes; general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Kit Materials and How to Use Them

I. Teacher Resource Book

This resource book follows the Smithsonian Institution prototype *Beyond Category: Duke Ellington Education Kit* and contains an opening prologue followed by six study units with lesson plans, called "Acts."

- **Prologue:** The two-part prologue consists of a scholarly essay by David Baker, a composer, music educator, and jazz scholar, entitled, "Louis Armstrong—the Man." The essay pinpoints Armstrong's contributions and innovations in explicit terms and with music examples. The accompanying essay entitled "Louis Armstrong—Overview of the Great Innovator's Life," by Luvenia A. George, music educator and ethnomusicologist, gives an account of Armstrong's life with the historical and sociocultural background of his early environment, and traces his life from its musical beginnings to his death. The lesson plans in the kit are developed from this essay.
- **Timelines:** The historical timeline cites contemporary events by year and decade that coincide with Armstrong's life, placing his career in context with his times. The biographical timeline contains the order of events of his life with significant dates.
- **Six Study Units with Lesson Plans:** Each unit contains lesson plans with the following:

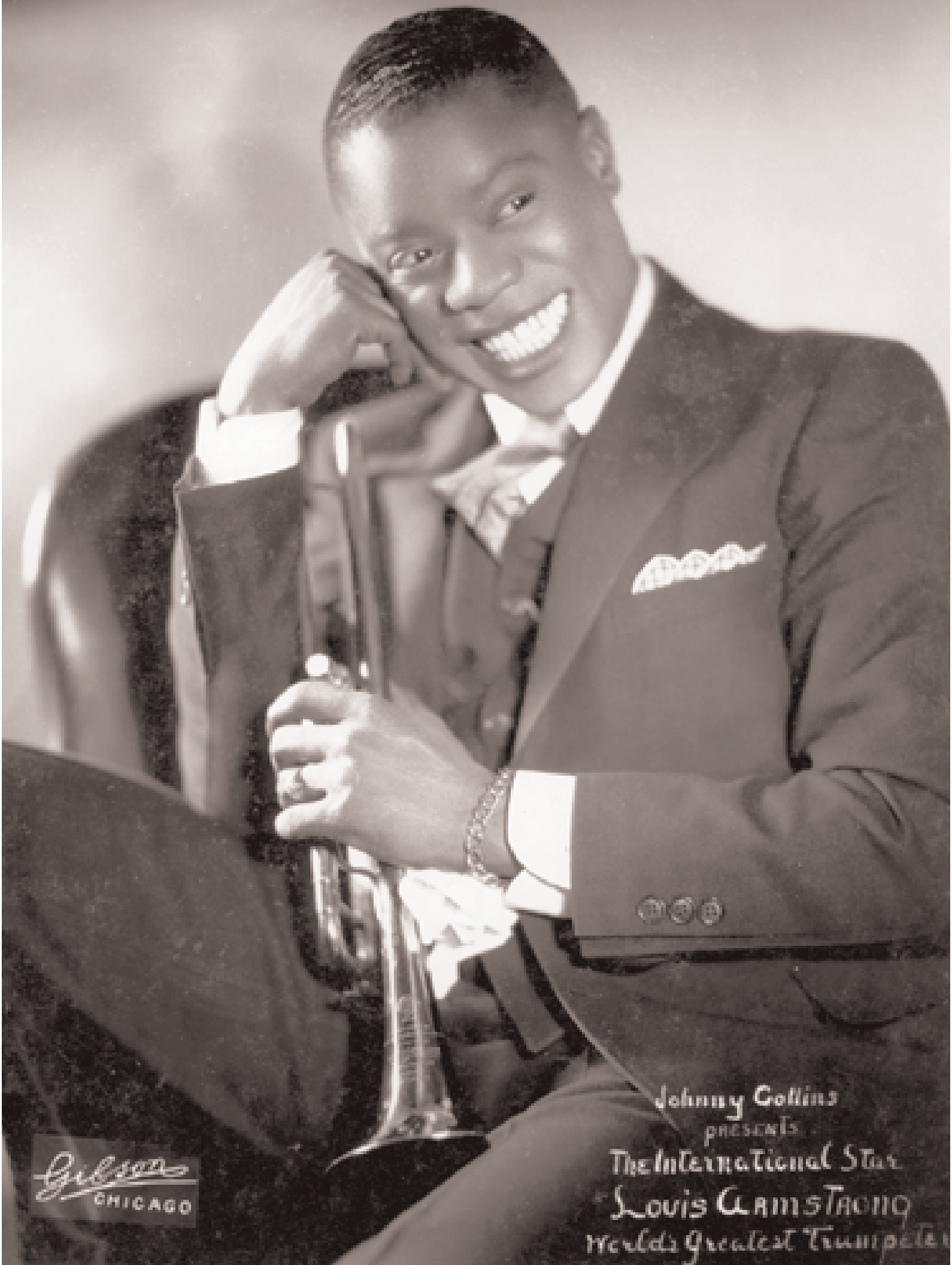
  1. Procedure: step-by-step method to assist teachers in covering the basic material in one class period.
  2. Introductory Text with information and background for the lesson.
  3. Objectives of the lesson, including National Standards for Music and U.S. History
  4. Significance of the Music Selections explaining why the music on the CD was chosen for the lesson.
  5. Guided Listening Lesson with timed intervals that helps students to follow what is happening in the music as they listen. This also assists teachers in making detailed lesson plans.
  6. Suggested Activities for students that enhance their understanding and provide opportunities for teacher assessment.

II. Music Selections

The CD accompanying the kit has twenty-three music selections. They range from African folk music, ragtime and New Orleans brass bands—which were Armstrong's heritage and earliest influences—to recordings he made that illustrate his contributions and influences on jazz and popular music. The music selections appear on the CD in their order of use in the kit.

III. Photos

Photographs of Armstrong and some of his contemporaries are included in the kit. Teachers may use them to accompany the lessons as bulletin board material, as part of a jazz display in the classroom, or in other imaginative ways. Encourage students to look for pictures and articles about Louis Armstrong in newspaper and magazine stories about jazz and African American music. Also, suggest that students look for material about Armstrong on old record jackets in flea markets and in jazz collections of relatives and friends.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Unit Summaries

The unit summaries describe the contents of each of the Acts and list the music selections in order of appearance in the lesson plans.

ACT 1

New Orleans Beginnings: 1901–1922

Act 1 introduces the city and traditions into which Louis Armstrong was born. New Orleans's unique musical history includes Congo Square, African-influenced music, ragtime, and brass bands. Armstrong absorbs these influences to become one of the shaping forces in the history and development of jazz.

Music: "Kaa Fo," "Bata Drums," "Maple Leaf Rag," "New Orleans Brass Bands"

ACT 2

On to Chicago: 1922–1924

In 1922 Louis Armstrong joins his former mentor Joe "King" Oliver in Chicago. Oliver had joined the exodus of musicians from New Orleans after World War I. Armstrong becomes a sensation in Chicago with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band.

Music: "Dippermouth Blues," "Chimes Blues"

ACT 3

New York Introduction: 1924–1925

Armstrong leaves Chicago to join the Fletcher Henderson Band in New York. Although the band plays an entirely different music from the New Orleans style Armstrong was accustomed to, he blends in perfectly and begins to influence the New York musicians with his "swing." He makes recordings with Bessie Smith and other stars, but still seeks an outlet for his full talents, which include singing.

Music: "Cake Walking Babies from Home," "St. Louis Blues"

ACT 4

Innovative Trumpeter: 1925–1929

Armstrong returns to Chicago and becomes the leader of the Hot Five and Hot Seven, two groups organized primarily to make recordings. On these now-classic recordings, he leads a complete departure from the collective improvising typical of the New Orleans bands to the emergence of the soloist as star.

Music: "Cornet Chop Suey," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," "Hotter than That," "West End Blues"

ACT 5

Memorable Singer: 1929–1949

Now firmly established as the premier jazz trumpeter, Armstrong concentrates on singing backed by his own groups. He travels abroad, appears in more than sixty films, and is the first African American to host his own national network radio show.

Music: "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Memories of You," "Star Dust," "I've Got the World On a String," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Blueberry Hill"

ACT 6

Ambassador Satch, Superb Entertainer: 1950–1971

By 1950, Armstrong has become one of the most famous entertainers in the world, with the most recognized voice in America. In 1960, the U.S. Department of State sends him on a series of international tours to enhance goodwill abroad. He performs and records to the end of his life.

Music: "Mack the Knife," "I Got Plenty O'Nuttin'," "Duke's Place," "Hello, Dolly," "What a Wonderful World"

A publicity photo in Chicago, about 1931

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College