

"You can't play anything on a horn that Louis hasn't played." —Miles Davis, trumpeter

Louis Armstrong
—The Man

By David N. Baker

From *The Humanities through the Black Experience*

Louis Armstrong, probably the most significant jazzman in the history of the music, was born on August 4, 1901, in New Orleans and died on July 6, 1971, in New York City. At the age of eleven he was placed in the Colored Waif's Home for delinquent black children in New Orleans, where he remained for a year and a half. It was there that he learned to play the cornet and joined the band and chorus.

Still in his teens, he played in the band of trombonist Kid Ory, and then joined Fate Marable's Orchestra in 1920. In 1922 he moved to King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band in Chicago. In 1923 Armstrong made the first of more than 1,500 recordings. The following year he moved to New York City to join Fletcher Henderson at the Roseland Ballroom. In 1925 he returned to Chicago billed as "The World's Greatest Trumpet Player" and began to record under his own name. The next four years saw him recording with the Hot Five and the Hot Seven. These records from the 1920s are among the great classics in jazz and proved to be catalytic in turning jazz from an ensemble to a solo-oriented music.

In 1929 Armstrong returned to New York with his own band where he continued to record as his fame spread via radio and live performance. In 1932 he made his first international tour, performing in Scotland and Northern England and appearing at the London Palladium. In 1933 he played in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Louis Armstrong was the first popular entertainer in jazz, the first player to receive international fame, and the first person to make a continuous impact on jazz in Europe. In 1935 he became interested in big bands, but ultimately returned to the more compatible surroundings of a small ensemble.

In 1944 he played the first jazz concert in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. His world tours in the 1950s and 1960s earned him the title "Ambassador of Goodwill." In 1964 he had the biggest recording hit of his career with "Hello, Dolly."

Among his most important solo performances are "West End Blues," "Potato Head Blues," "Weather Bird," "Muggles," "Beau Koo Jack," "Cornet Chop Suey," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," "Heebie Jeebies," "Ding Dong Daddy" and "Shine."

Louis Armstrong—The Innovator

Louis Armstrong—trumpeter, composer, vocalist, raconteur, and innovator—was the most influential and imitated musician of the first fifty years of jazz. His innovations were many and varied and transcended his chosen instrument. As Gunther Schuller has said, "Through Louis Armstrong and his influence, jazz became a truly twentieth-century language. And it no longer belonged to New Orleans, but to the world."

A trumpet solo with a big band

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College



Louis Armstrong's Hot Five in Chicago, about 1926. Left to right: Armstrong, Johnny St. Cyr, Warren "Baby" Dodds, Kid Ory, and Lil Hardin Armstrong.

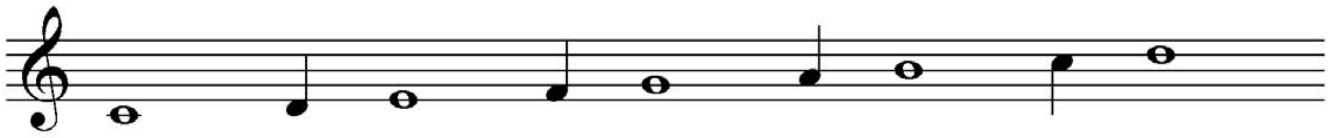
Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College

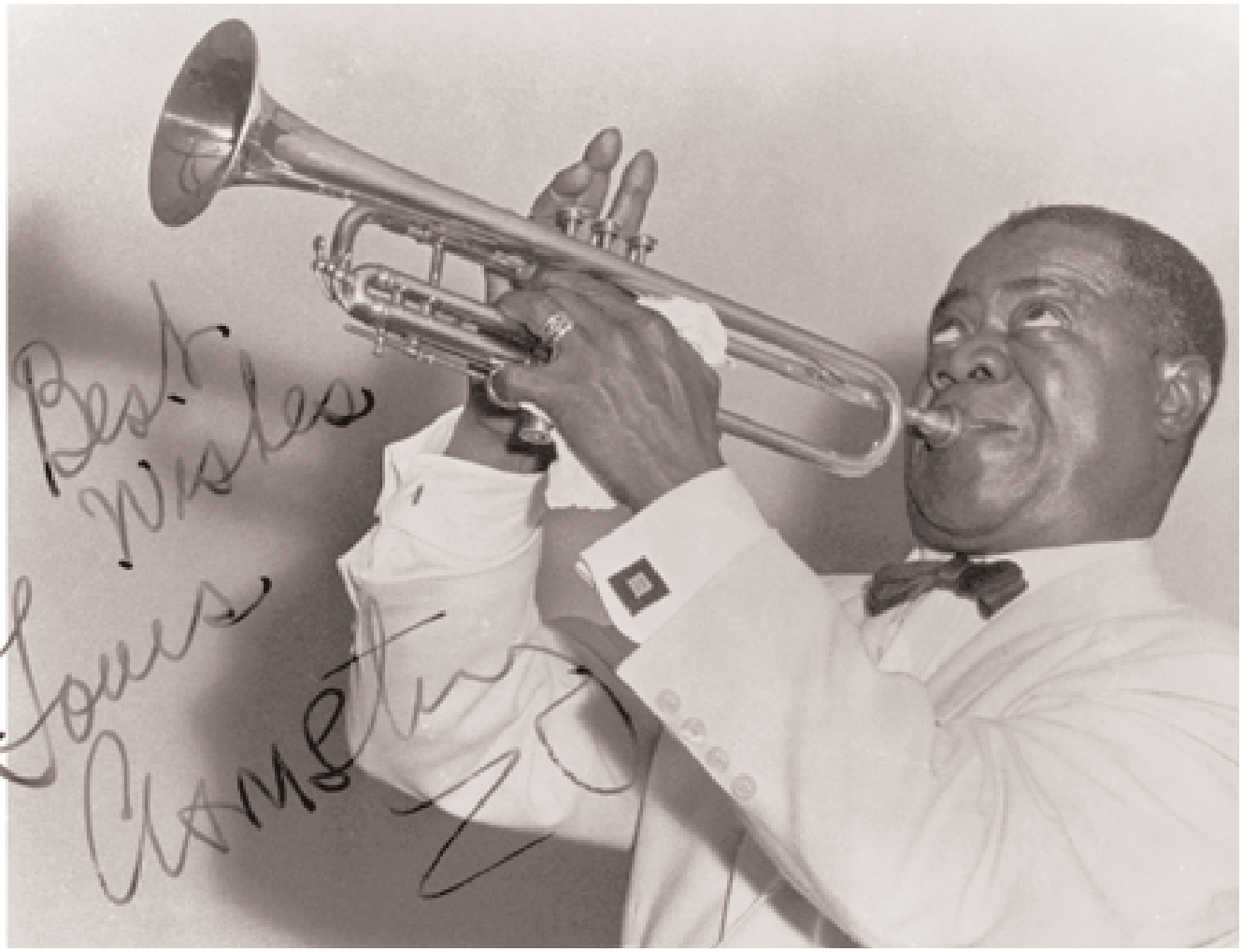
Armstrong introduced an array of subtly differentiated vibratos, shakes, and rips into the jazz language. He was one of the first in jazz to use the vibrato as an expressive device. These expressive devices, many of which sound like African vocal techniques, give the music an exciting, personal, living quality. Armstrong's techniques are now an integral part of the playing of all instrumentalists including most players in contemporary Western art music idioms.

Armstrong was among the first instrumentalists in jazz to break away from melodies tied to instrumental limitation. He effected this in a number of ways. First, he linked the pitches in the overtone series together, which resulted in scalar, rather than triadic, playing (see Example 1). He carried on the African tradition of thinking in terms of vocally conceived lines and sang just as he played.

Armstrong was the first player to think in terms of a non-reiterative rhythmic role. That is, most other soloists thought in monorhythmic terms, duplication of the rhythms of the piano, bass, and drums. This is consistent with Rev. A. M. Jones's assessment of black music—that all African and African-derived music is based on a constant conflict of rhythm. Armstrong's playing established a

EXAMPLE 1





A publicity photo of Louis Armstrong

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College
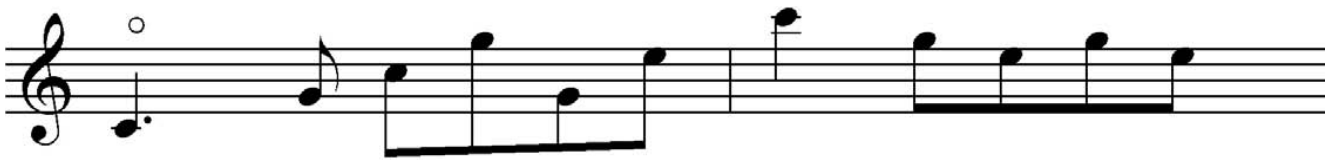
way of setting up conflict with the basic time unit. He is usually credited with moving phrases and figures away from the prevalent "ricky tick" time feel.

In addition to his many innovations in jazz, he made many breakthroughs in trumpet technique. He extended the range of that instrument. During a time when high C was considered extraordinary, Armstrong was playing high F's—a perfect 4th above. He moved away from the bugle-like melodies endemic to the construction of brass instruments (see Example 2). He advanced the instrumental technique far beyond that of his contemporaries, and he added to the instrumental palette by making use of greater contrasts, greater subtlety of tone, and more refined technique.

All of these innovations add up to a much broader expressive range because they allow the soloist expanded operational parameters and therefore the possibility for more interesting lines, shapes, and musical ideas.

Louis Armstrong influenced virtually every jazz musician who followed him. He had an effect on the entire vocabulary and syntax of jazz. And he influenced the flow of jazz by transforming the language as well as by setting up the directions subsequently taken by the music.

EXAMPLE 2




“Louis not only
influenced trumpet players, he
changed the modus
operandi of jazz
by inventing the solo.” —Dizzy Gillespie, trumpeter

Louis Armstrong
—An Overview of His Life

By Luvenia A. George, Ph.D.

New Orleans Beginnings: 1901–1922

Jazz scholar David Baker described Louis Armstrong as "the trumpeter, composer, vocalist . . . and innovator who was the most influential and imitated . . . musician of the first fifty years of jazz." Armstrong was born August 4, 1901, in a poor section of New Orleans, Louisiana, a cosmopolitan city with a unique blend of cultures. One of these cultures, the African American, became the shaping force of jazz.

Historically, Louisiana went back and forth between Spanish and French control until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. During the 1700s slavery existed in Louisiana under a system somewhat different from that of the other southern colonies. 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 very involved in such French culture as trades and the arts, and especially in music. The Creoles of colour had higher education than blacks, and, as in white society, many of their children studied abroad.

Louis Armstrong was born in a city that had a respected musical tradition: opera houses, symphony orchestras, bands, and parades, with music for every occasion both indoors and outdoors. The Creoles were musically educated and produced fine performers and composers. They lived in a section of the downtown French Quarter, while the black population lived uptown. In 1894 legislation was passed that designated Creoles to be black, and they were forced to leave the French Quarter and live among the uptown blacks, who had a tradition of spirituals, ragtime, and blues. The mixture of the two groups produced the music called "jazz." It was into this dynamic sociocultural milieu that Louis Armstrong was born.

Louis's father, William Armstrong, left the family when Louis was an infant. He was raised by his grandmother, Josephine, and mother, May Ann. His older sister, Beatrice, was given the nickname "Mama Lucy." As a young boy, Louis helped support the family by selling newspapers and hard coal from a wagon. Having learned to sing in church, he joined a quartet of other young boys and earned a little money singing on street corners for tips from passersby. In his autobiography, Louis 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."

On December 31, 1912, when he was about eleven 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 the school's band director, Peter Davis, taught Armstrong to play

Louis Armstrong at the footlights

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College



Louis Armstrong and Joe "King" Oliver in Chicago, about 1923

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College

the cornet. He joined the marching band and performed in parades. He left the 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, Louis worked during the day and played his horn in honky-tonks with local bands at night. New Orleans's greatest jazz cornetist, Joseph Oliver, later called "King" Oliver, became his mentor. The teenaged Armstrong practiced hard and earned a reputation as an excellent player. When Oliver moved to Chicago, Armstrong replaced him in Kid Ory's band. 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 had spread, and he was becoming known as one of the finest young cornetists in New Orleans. But soon he would have to make the greatest decision of his life.

On to Chicago: 1922–1924

Joe Oliver sent for the twenty-one-year-old Louis to come to Chicago and join his band. In August 1922, Armstrong arrived in the Windy City for the first

Louis Armstrong with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, about 1924.

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College



"When I was coming up all the players and singers, everyone was inspired by Louis Armstrong. Anyone who says anything else is telling a damn lie."—Clark Terry, trumpeter

time. Chicago had become a leading city for the new music called "jazz," and Oliver had one of the most successful ensembles in town. The title "King," which he earned with his band in New Orleans, remained with him up North; he was the star of the city's black South Side. With much trepidation, Louis joined the band and almost immediately achieved immense success. He made his first recordings at Gennett Studios in Richmond, Indiana, as a proud member of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. During this time, nearly all black bands were identified as Creole.

The band consisted of the following: King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, cornets; Honore Dutry, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Lil Hardin, piano; Bill Johnson, banjo; Baby Dodds and Johnny St. Cyr drums; and Stump Evans, C-melody saxophone. The recordings the band made are noteworthy even today. Armstrong was second cornet to King Oliver, but his playing with Oliver is outstanding. He was so powerful that, when recording, he was moved farthest back from the pick-up horn of the recording device.

The band epitomized the New Orleans sound: exciting, amazing energy combined with a swinging feeling that was described as "wild." Though not yet the soloist he was destined to become, the recordings proved that Armstrong was King Oliver's equal—and more.

The band was the talk of Chicago and packed the huge Lincoln Gardens with enthusiastic fans, black and white. Jazz musicians from all over the city came to hear Oliver and Armstrong in their fabulous cornet "duets" and try to figure out how they did it, night after night, with what appeared to be instantaneous inspiration. The New Orleans players had brought the sounds of jazz "up north," and to the delight of their enthralled listeners, they sounded like players from another planet.

New York Introduction: 1924–1925

As good as King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band was, with two brilliant cornetists and a swinging style unequalled anywhere, it would not contain Armstrong for long. He was destined for stardom as a soloist, the first great soloist in the new music of jazz. He married the band's pianist, the talented, college-educated Lil Hardin. Lil 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 the 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 spread 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 considerable.

During his stay in the Big Apple, Armstrong recorded with Bessie Smith, the great blues singer crowned the "Empress of the Blues," and other outstanding singers. He also made a series of very 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, Armstrong's talents were not being used fully. In addition to wanting to play a more swinging and inventive type of jazz, he also 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.

Innovative Trumpeter: Chicago 1925–1929

In Chicago in 1925 Armstrong made the recordings that revolutionized jazz. Switching from the cornet to the trumpet, he was billed on his return as "the World's Greatest Trumpet Player," and began to record as the leader of his own band, the Louis Armstrong Hot Five. Organized solely to record, the band made only one public appearance. The Hot Five were Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Kid Ory, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; and Lil Hardin Armstrong, piano. All were outstanding musicians who had played with Armstrong in New Orleans, with the exception of his wife. On the recordings this group made, Armstrong had the room to expand and showcase his considerable talents—incredible power, unmatched technique, and unlimited imagination and inventiveness.

The Hot Five and a later group, the Hot Seven, departed completely from the collective improvising style of King Oliver and other contemporary bands. Instead, it focused on "the break," which signaled a solo player taking the lead. The sound was still swinging, and still hot, but the soloist became the star. Armstrong was an incredible soloist. As creator and master of the extended jazz solo, he solidified the concept of the solo as an integral part of jazz. With his trumpet, he played longer and faster in higher registers, with techniques that included vibrato and wide leaps, while improvising with more all-around

virtuosity than anyone had done before. He was a powerful lead. His trumpet playing influenced the styles of all other players, including those on other instruments, and even the brass sections of American symphony orchestras. More than anyone else, he is responsible for jazz becoming an improviser's and a soloist's art rather than a collectively improvised solo style.

Armstrong also sang on many of the recordings, introducing a type of singing called "scat," in which he used wordless phrases and sounds instead of the lyrics. He made one of the first recorded songs with scat in "Heebie Jeebies," when he said he dropped the sheet of lyrics but still wanted to keep going. In 1928 the classic recordings of the Hot Five and Hot Seven marked the end of Armstrong's career solely as a jazz musician and as leader of a New Orleans-style band. He had laid the foundation for a new era, during which his jazz innovations would be the bedrock of a musical expression that would sweep the world.

Memorable Singer: 1929–1949

By 1929 Louis Armstrong was one of the brightest stars in the music firmament, but he was not secure financially. Jazz was still not accepted or appreciated by the majority of the mainstream public. Like ragtime before it, jazz was considered a somewhat corrupt form of legitimate music, whose popularity and acceptance was centered in African American communities. The music industry produced records for separate consumers: "race" records were

Louis Armstrong in London

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College





Louis Armstrong's first group of all-stars, about 1946. Left to right: Earl Hines, Jack Teagarden, Barney Bigard, Cozy Coles, Armstrong, Arvell Shaw, and Velma Middleton.

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College

intended for blacks, a distinct commercial market, but were sold to anyone. Armstrong had a considerable following within the larger jazz community and among lovers of his music both at home and abroad.

Up to 1929, Armstrong's fame was primarily among African Americans, but this soon changed. He returned to New York and took a job in the band at Connie's Inn, a popular Harlem nightclub. The show onstage when he arrived was a revue, *Hot Chocolates,* with a score by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf. With singing, dancing, comedy, and other specialty acts, it was taken to Broadway where it earned rave reviews and enjoyed a long run.

Armstrong was featured in the pit band and also sang the show's most famous number, "Ain't Misbehavin.'" This became his first big recorded hit and established his performance pattern for the next two decades. He concentrated on popular songs and led his own big band, whose job was to back up his playing and singing. He had decided to put showmanship in his music and make entertainment a priority.

Louis Armstrong's singing style was unique: his voice was gravelly, but flexible and expressive. With crystal-clear diction, he could put almost any song across. He used his voice as he did instrument–with masterful inflection and phrasing. Recording songs by Hoagy Carmichael, Harold Arlen, and other famous writers, he influenced the styles of the best-known singers of the time, including Bing Crosby and Billie Holiday, as well those of every player and singer who followed him.

Armstrong made his first trip to Europe in 1932, appearing in the United Kingdom as the first jazz musician to be featured as an individual artist and not as a bandleader or member. He was received rapturously by the many jazz

fans and musicians in England, but with some caution by the general public. When he began to play, many people could not believe what they saw and heard—one group of musicians wanted to examine his trumpet and mouthpiece to see whether they had been altered. He was heartened to find so many influential people abroad who took his music seriously and to be in a place where racism was not as oppressive as in the United States. He toured England again, and the rest of Europe, many times. In 1933 in Copenhagen, Denmark, a crowd estimated at ten thousand greeted him at the train station.

Back home, Armstrong also began appearing more frequently on the big screen. He was the first African American to be featured in Hollywood films and eventually made more than sixty movies. His films desegregated many motion picture theaters. He was also the first black to host his own national network radio program, *The Fleischman's Yeast Show*, in 1937.

In the late 1930s, the swing era was gradually coming to a close, and by the 1940s a new type of jazz, called "bebop," began to grow in popularity. Armstrong stopped leading his own big band in 1947 and formed a septet, the All Stars, returning to an earlier New Orleans-style format that he was to follow for the rest of his career. The Louis Armstrong All Stars included the white trombonist Jack Teagarden, making it a genuine rarity for the times—an integrated jazz band in America.

Ambassador Satch, Superb Entertainer: 1950–1971

By 1950 Louis Armstrong had become one of the most famous entertainers in the world and was credited with having the most recognized voice in America. Although constantly on the road, he maintained a full recording schedule, often with additional musicians added to the All Stars. He also recorded with other big bands and choral and string ensembles. He recorded with stars Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Jordan, and began a tour with bandleader Benny Goodman, which was shortened when Goodman became ill. Armstrong was featured in major films such as *The Glenn Miller Story* (1953) and with top stars Bing Crosby and Grace Kelly in *High Society* (1956) and Danny Kaye in *The Five Pennies* (1958).



A billboard in Japan announces a performance by Louis Armstrong and His All Stars.

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College



Louis Armstrong with Ella Fitzgerald and Lionel Hampton

Courtesy Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College

Armstrong's second autobiography, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans,* was published in 1954, and his 1957 recording with Ella Fitzgerald of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is a classic. His song hits during the fifties include "A Kiss to Build a Dream On" in 1951 and the blockbuster "Mack the Knife," by Bertolt Brecht, in 1955. Armstrong's numerous trips abroad with the All Stars included two firsts: to the Far East in Japan in 1953 and his first tour of the African continent to Accra, Ghana, in 1956.

In 1957 Armstrong spoke out against racial injustice in the United States in the wake of the disturbance accompanying the forced integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Although strongly criticized for his stand, he steadfastly refused to back down. He had endured a lifetime of segregation in America in spite of being lionized abroad, and he was unhappy to see young black students abused for attempting to receive an equitable education. A scheduled government-sponsored trip to Russia was canceled when he refused to depart during the unrest in Arkansas.

Armstrong's successful tours abroad created huge amounts of publicity on television and in newspapers and magazines at home. His initial concerts in Japan and Africa received extraordinary coverage from the media, while his frequent visits to Europe continued to make news. It seemed he was in the papers almost daily. Known for a relentless performing schedule, he suffered a heart attack and collapsed on stage during a performance in Spoleto, Italy. After a short

"I'm proud to acknowledge my debt to the reverend Satchmouth. He is the beginning and the end of music in America."—Bing Crosby, singer

stay in the hospital, he resumed touring as if nothing had happened. He was always happiest playing his trumpet and singing for his beloved fans, and he never let them down with less than a stellar show, at home or abroad.

Armstrong's popularity outside the United States was so great that in 1960 the U.S. State Department requested that he make a series of tours abroad to help improve and maintain international relations. During the era of the Cold War, when America needed friends and allies in its struggle for pre-eminence, the nation couldn't have recruited a better "ambassador." Armstrong, as always, was a hit and drew large crowds wherever he went. Armstrong's love for people was genuine; he contributed financially to friends and family throughout his life and was well known for his humanitarianism.

In 1961, Louis Armstrong and the All Stars made an epic recording with the great Duke Ellington on piano. That same year, Armstrong appeared with Ellington in the film *Paris Blues.* As the sixties wore on, Armstrong continued to tour at home and abroad, but began to sing more and play trumpet less. His overall health and recurring problems with his lips caused him considerable discomfort. Still his recording of the song "Hello, Dolly," replaced the Beatles on the Top Ten in 1964. He followed this in 1967 with a recording of "What a Wonderful World," which became a hit in Great Britain. Armstrong became a favorite on the television circuit as a guest on top-rated shows, and in 1968 he was in the Barbra Streisand movie *Hello, Dolly,* in which he sang the song that helped make the movie a hit.

Armstrong performed and recorded to the end of his life. In 1971 he and the All Stars had a two-week engagement at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York. His last recording was an animated reading of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," made in his den. He passed away in his sleep at his home in Corona, New York, on July 6, 1971. But he never really left us—in 1987 his "What a Wonderful World" became a number-one hit all over again as the theme of the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam.*

Louis Armstrong's contributions to music were unmatched. He was the first great jazz soloist and the first jazzman to become an internationally known popular entertainer. Armstrong was the first jazz musician to make an enduring impact as an instrumentalist and a singer, both in the United States and abroad. Music scholar Gary Giddings considers him the "single most creative and innovative force in jazz history." Louis Armstrong was an African American genius whose spectacular trumpet and incredible voice were totally American and utterly unique.