

The Ambassador

It all started in New Orleans in a place called Storyville. This was the red-light district of New Orleans and was set up in 1897 and closed in 1917. It took up thirty-eight blocks. The owners of the brothels, dance halls and saloons needed musicians to entertain their clients. Storyville was where New Orleans Jazz was born and it took off like a rocket. Several of the famous musicians who played there were Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory, King Oliver and a young man named Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong was born in New Orleans on August 4, 1901. He was born in the poorest quarter of New Orleans and by the end of his life he was one of the best-known entertainers in the world. When Armstrong was born, he was deserted by his father and raised by a part-time prostitute. At the age of eleven he was sentenced to the Colored Waif's Home for firing a pistol on New Year's Eve. There, he developed his cornet skills by playing in the school band. As Armstrong said years later, "Me and music got married at the home."

As time went on, Armstrong played in brass bands and riverboats where his skills increased. When Storyville closed at the end of 1917, a majority of the musicians

were out of work. Many of these musicians moved north to Chicago. It is interesting to note that jazz has thrived around some kind of vice: in New Orleans it was prostitution and in Chicago it was prohibition.

In 1919, Armstrong married a prostitute named Daisy Parker but their marriage deteriorated. He took a job playing for the Fate Marable Band on a boat that cruised the Mississippi River. Marable was a tough task master who insisted that all his musicians be able to read music. Louie played with Marable for three years and he called those years, his time at the university.

In 1922, King Oliver asked Armstrong to come to Chicago to play in King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. This was probably the greatest New Orleans jazz band of all time. You had King Oliver and Armstrong on cornets, Honore Dutrey on trombone, Johnny Dodds on clarinet, his brother Baby Dodds on drums, Bill Johnson on banjo and Lil Hardin on piano.

Lil Hardin was a big influence on Armstrong. She told him how to dress and she knew that he had more talent than King Oliver. Even though they were both married, they became romantically involved and after their divorces they married

on February 5, 1924. That same year at Lil's urging, he left the King Oliver Band and went to Harlem to play for the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. After fourteen months, he left the band because Fletcher Henderson would not let him sing.

In 1925, he went back to Chicago to play at the Dreamland Café at night and during the day, he and Lil recorded twenty-four records as "Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five". During one of these sessions, he was recording the song "Heebie Jeebies". He accidentally dropped the paper with the lyrics and without skipping a beat, he started scatting, which is using improvised non-sense syllables in sync with the music: de bah doo bat...

Armstrong did not invent scat singing, but he was the first person to record it.

In 1926, he started going out with a pretty teenager named Alpha Smith. Lil Hardin Armstrong had done a lot to promote Louie, but she was too pushy and in reality, their marriage was over. Lil would not agree to a divorce until 1938.

From 1929 to 1947, he would lead a big band that traveled throughout the U.S. It was the era of big bands. During this period, he also made several trips to Europe. In 1932, he traveled to London and played at the London Palladium on July 18 and toured England for four months playing at full houses. The following year, he returned to London and played before King George V and stunning the audience he pointed to the Royal Box and shouted, "This one's for you Rex!" Apparently, the King liked the music because he gave Armstrong, a gold-plated trumpet. From there, he went to Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Sweden and then back to England. He left London in May of 1934 and traveled to Paris.

Wherever Armstrong played, he always had a white handkerchief in his left hand and in his right hand, his trumpet.

In 1935, Joe Glaser would become the most important person in Armstrong's life. He would become Armstrong's manager for the rest of his life. Glaser was tough, foul, hot tempered and connected to the Chicago mob; having once worked for Al Capone. The agreement was a fifty-fifty split: Glaser would take care of the bookings and the band and pay all of Armstrong's professional and personal

expenses, including his divorces. Some friends of Armstrong thought this was an unfair arrangement but both men died millionaires.

In September of 1938, Louie and Alpha were married when Lil agreed to a divorce. But this marriage would not work either. A few years later, Alpha started having an affair. During this time, Louie had also met a pretty chorus girl named Lucille Wilson. She was fourteen years younger than Armstrong. On October 10, 1942, he divorced Alpha and a few days later he married Lucille. The following year they bought a house in Queens, New York. The marriage and the house would last until he died.

At the tail end of 1946, the big band era was over. Glaser wasn't sure what to do. On May 17, 1947, Armstrong and six great musicians played at Town Hall, a 1,500 seat concert hall in New York City. Playing the trombone was Jack Teagarden, who had performed with Armstrong before. The night was a tremendous success and Joe Glaser quickly realized that his troubles were over. He signed Teagarden to a long-term contract and from that day on, it would be Louis Armstrong and His All Stars: trumpet, trombone, clarinet, piano, drums and bass. Glaser had found a winning formula and he wasn't going to change it. For the next 25 years,

Armstrong would always open with “Indiana” and close with “Sleepy Time Down South” and when the song was over, he would smile, arms outstretched and say, “Good evening everybody:.

Armstrong became the first jazz musician to appear on the cover of Time Magazine on February 21, 1949. He was also one of the first jazz musicians to perform on television.

In the fall of 1949, the All Stars took a five-week European tour. When Armstrong was in Rome, he was invited to a private audience with Pope Pius XII. The pope asked Armstrong if he and Lucille had any children and Louie replied, “No Daddy, but we are workin’ on it.”

In July 1954, Elvis Presley waltzed into a Memphis recording studio and recorded the song, “That’s All Right”. Had Armstrong’s music become out of date? A year later, Armstrong and the All Stars recorded “Mack the Knife”. The song climbed to number 20 on the Billboard pop chart. A few days later, they flew to Europe.

Over the years, Armstrong was referred to by many names: Louie, Louis, Satch and Pops. He was about to get another one: Ambassador Satch. The New York Times wrote “Armstrong’s European concert tours had made him the most effective ambassador for the American way of life”.

In May of 1956, Armstrong made his first trip to Africa and in Ghana played before 100,000 enthusiastic listeners. A few weeks later, he made his Philharmonic debut at Lewisohn Stadium in New York City playing W.C Handy’s “St. Louis Blues”, before a crowd of 22,500 with Leonard Bernstein directing. It was the first time that Armstrong had played with a symphony orchestra and for Armstrong, it was a dream come true.

As famous as Armstrong was, he had always been treated as a second-class citizen. Most hotels he could not stay in and most restaurants he could not eat in, especially in the south. Many black musicians criticized him for not speaking out. That changed in September of 1957, when nine black students enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock. Governor Orval Faubus called out the Arkansas National Guard to keep the black students from entering the all-white high school. Three years earlier, the Supreme Court had ruled that segregated public schools were

unconstitutional. President Eisenhower met with Faubus on September 14th but nothing happened.

On September 17th, Armstrong was staying at the Dakota Hotel in Grand Forks, North Dakota. A journalism student from the University of North Dakota interviewed Armstrong and when he brought up Little Rock, Armstrong lashed out at the President and said he was “two-faced and had no guts and Faubus was an uneducated plow boy”. The reporter’s editor refused to print the story without iron-clad proof that Armstrong had said those words. The following morning, the reporter accompanied by a photographer snapped a picture of the two men together. The reporter showed Armstrong his draft of the story. Armstrong said, “That is just what I said and still say”. Then Armstrong wrote “solid” on the draft and signed it. That was good enough for the Associated Press which put the story on the wires.

Whether Armstrong’s harsh words swayed the president, no one will ever know, but on September 23rd, Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne Division to maintain order and two days later, the Little Rock Nine attended Central High School for their first full day of classes.

In any outstanding career, there are usually three things you have to have to achieve great success:

1. Talent
2. Hard work
3. And sometimes luck

Armstrong was both a gifted trumpet player and singer. He had the talent. As far as hard work was concerned, he played 300 nights a year for most of his career.

Armstrong was now 63 years old, and he hadn't recorded a song in two years.

Many people in the music industry thought Armstrong and his music were obsolete. But they would be wrong. All of a sudden, lady luck knocked on his door. And he pulled one of the greatest upsets in the history of music.

Before opening on Broadway, there was a new show called "Dolly: A Damned Exasperating Woman", a title no one liked. David Merrick, the producer of the show, wanted Armstrong to record the title song, "Hello Dolly". When Armstrong recorded the song, a banjo was added for a heavier rhythm sound. The song was recorded on December 3, 1963. The name of the play was changed to "Hello Dolly" and opened on Broadway on January 16, 1964. Finally, on May 9th, "Hello Dolly" became the number one song in America dislodging the Beatles from the number one spot that they occupied for the previous 14 weeks with three different songs. At 63 years old, it made Armstrong the oldest person to ever record a

number one song. In a two-year period, the song sold 3,000,000 copies. “Hello Dolly” was such a great song that Armstrong sang it every night he played, for the rest of his life. Armstrong’s record made the show a great success, the longest running Broadway musical up to that time. In 1966, Armstrong appeared on the cover of Life Magazine.

In 1967, Armstrong recorded the song “What a Wonderful World”. It was recorded by ABC Records, but the president of ABC hated the song and didn’t promote it. The song disappeared in the U. S. but in England it stayed on the charts for 13 weeks and sold 600,000 records.

By 1968, his health started to give out. Heart and kidney problems forced him to slow down. His long-time manager, Joe Glaser, died in 1969. After a two year stretch of poor health, Armstrong died on July 6, 1971.

During his lifetime, he had recorded nineteen “Top Ten” records and he appeared in more than thirty movies including “High Society” with Bing Crosby, Grace Kelly and Frank Sinatra. From 1923 – 1970, he recorded over 1,000 songs. He had toured all over the world. Armstrong was probably the greatest trumpet player

of all time and he had an incredible voice that was easily recognized. He also had a charismatic stage presence that made him second to none and without a doubt he was the most creative force in the history of jazz. Because of all this, Louis Armstrong really was America's most famous ambassador.

Epilogue:

In 1986, fifteen years after Armstrong died, his song "What a Wonderful World" was included on the soundtrack of the movie "Good Morning Vietnam". The song was reissued as a single and rose to number 33 on Billboard's Hot 100.

500,000 records were sold a year after the movie came out and eventually 2,000,000 records through 2014.

Obviously, Louis Armstrong and his music are timeless.

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