

# LEARNING UNIT IV

## LOUIS ARMSTRONG

*By far, the most influential and innovative musician in early jazz was the great trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong (1901-1971). Also known as “Satchmo” or “Pops,” Armstrong was the first American musical superstar and was the first jazz musician to achieve international fame. Not only a dazzling entertainer, Armstrong changed how people performed and listened to jazz and popular music--the only musician ever to influence the music of his time equally as an instrumentalist and vocalist.*



This unit will focus on the first great musician in jazz: Louis Armstrong. During the 1920s in Chicago, Armstrong was responsible for numerous musical innovations. These are evident in the recordings he made with his **Hot 5** and **Hot 7** groups. He established the solo format and helped to make jazz a more individual art form. He brought a new dramatic sense to the music through his distinctively original improvisations. Armstrong’s musical personality was so strong that no matter what was happening in the music, one’s ears would focus on him.

A true trumpet virtuoso, Armstrong introduced many new performance techniques to the instrument. He increased its practical playing range, playing higher and stronger than his predecessors. He introduced impressive new sounds such *rips*, *growls*, and *shakes*. As a matter of fact, his playing was so brilliant that when he traveled to Europe for the first time in 1932, trumpet players there wanted to “inspect” his instrument thinking that he must have trick devices on it. Louis also played with a very bright and round tone quality with a distinctive *vibrato*, and had a very authoritative, yet relaxed, rhythmic conception.


As a vocalist, Armstrong sang with an instrumental concept that set the standard for all jazz and popular singers that followed. The way in which he interpreted the words and melodies of a song strongly influenced numerous singers from Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday to Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra, and his distinctive “gravelly” voice was known throughout the world.

Armstrong also popularized *scat singing* (or *scatting*)--the stylized vocalization of improvised non-sensical syllables. Although scatting had been performed in New Orleans, it was new to Chicago in the 1920s, and Armstrong always claimed that it was introduced by accident. Legend

has it that in 1925 during a recording session of the song “The Heebie Jeebies” with his Hot 5, Armstrong dropped a sheet of paper that had the words to the song and instead of stopping the recording, he started making up his own syllables. Whatever the case may be, this new way of singing became a trademark for him and introduced a new technique to jazz singing.

Armstrong made nearly a thousand recordings throughout his 50-plus year career and had numerous hits in many decades (many of them however, were more commercial-pop than jazz). His version of “Hello, Dolly” topped the charts in February of 1964, replacing the very popular group The Beatles as having the #1 song in the nation. Even after his death, the Armstrong 1959 recording of “What a Wonderful World” became a hit when it was featured in the 1988 motion picture Good Morning, Vietnam. Armstrong himself appeared in over thirty motion pictures. He is also the only musician to ever have an international airport named after him (The Louis Armstrong-New Orleans International Airport). Some would argue that Armstrong was the most successful American entertainer of the 20th century.

Let’s watch the first two parts of great introductory documentary of Louis Armstrong entitled “Satchmo” produced in 1989 by director Gary Giddens. It highlights his career in general and his formative years through the 1920s.



**SATCHMO**  
**Written and Directed by Gary Giddens**  
Narrated by Hattie Winston

Part 1 and Part 2  
Links found in Jazz Appreciation Audio and Video Playlist document

After watching that video, it is difficult for one to overestimate the impact Louis Armstrong had on the American musical scene. Of course his trumpet playing was revolutionary. Let’s listen and analyze three masterpieces from the 1920s he made in Chicago.

One of the most delightful and representative recordings of Armstrong and His Hot 5 is an original tune by Lil’ Hardin entitled “Struttin with Some Barbeque” recorded in 1927. This classic recording incorporates spontaneous New Orleans-based collective improvisations, individual solos, and clever compositional techniques. Armstrong’s playing here displays his uncanny and authoritative sense of rhythm. Even during the full ensemble statements, the sound of Armstrong’s cornet is heard above all. Armstrong’s solo builds a continuous line of tension and release via his syncopated rhythmic figures over a difficult stop-time accompaniment on beats 2 & 4.



**LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT 5**  
**"Struttin With Some Barbeque"** (Lil Hardin-Armstrong)  
Recorded on December 13, 1927

Armstrong (cornet); Johnny Dodds (clarinet); Edward "Kid" Ory (trombone);  
Lil' Armstrong (piano); Johnny St. Cyr (banjo).

Meter: 4/4 meter  
Tempo: Medium Fast; 194 beats per minute  
Form: 32-bar song form

<u>Time</u>	<u>FORM</u>	<u>BARS</u>	
0:00	<i>Intro</i>	12	Full Ensemble polyphonic texture some pre-arranged stop-time figures
0:13	<i>I.</i>	30	Ensemble Chorus I polyphonic texture Armstrong plays main melody, Dodds and Ory play improvised countermelodies
0:51		2	banjo solo break
0:53	<i>II.</i>	14	Clarinet Solo (Dodds) banjo and piano play a flat-four rhythm
1:10		2	clarinet solo break
1:13		14	Trombone Solo (Ory) banjo and piano play on all beats but with accents on beats 2 & 4
1:29		2	trombone solo break
1:31	<i>III.</i>	14	Cornet Solo (Armstrong) stop-time accompaniment as the banjo and piano play only on beats 2 & 4
1:50		2	solo break
1:53		14	solo and accompaniment continue
2:09		4	Full Ensemble Break pre-arranged, two-bar syncopated figure played twice
2:14	<i>IV.</i>	14	Out Chorus Armstrong improvises around the main melody Dodds and Ory play improvised countermelodies
2:32		2	banjo break
		8	full ensemble continues
2:44	<i>Tag</i>	10	Full ensemble plays pre-arranged syncopated figures



Later in 1927, Armstrong permanently switches from the cornet to the trumpet. Armstrong found the trumpet to have a brighter and more cutting sound and he found it easier to play high notes. His trumpet playing influenced most every cornet player at the time to also make the switch.

On the next recording, Armstrong is joined by the masterful stride pianist Earl “Fatha” Hines, who was not only one of many musicians that were strongly influenced by Armstrong, but an inspiring collaborator as well. On this joyous performance of “Weather Bird”, Hines demonstrates what he called “trumpet style piano,” playing the piano as to emulate Armstrong’s trumpet sound and style. Sit back and enjoy two incredible musicians just having fun!



**LOUIS ARMSTRONG/EARL HINES**


**"Weather Bird"** (Joe Oliver)

Recorded on July 12, 1928.

Armstrong (trumpet); Earl Hines (piano)

Let’s listen to another landmark recording: “West End Blues.” The opening *cadenza* by Armstrong is one of the most famous musical passages in jazz history. Again, it shows Armstrong’s mastery of rhythm and phrasing. The aggressive playing in the opening is contrasted by the melancholy flavor of the rest of the piece. “West End Blues” also displays Louis’s expansion of the practical playing range on the trumpet (playing very high and very low on the instrument). Armstrong’s understated scatting in a call & response fashion with Jimmy

Strong's melodious clarinet during the third chorus, shows that the phrasing of Armstrong's singing was similar to that of his trumpet playing.



**LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT 5**  
**"West End Blues"** (Joe Oliver, Clarence Williams)  
 Recorded on June 28, 1928.

Armstrong (vocal, trumpet); Jimmy Strong (clarinet); Fred Robinson (trombone); Earl Hines (piano);  
 Mancy Cara (banjo); Zutty Singleton (drums).

Meter: 4/4 meter  
 Tempo: Slow; 90 beats per minute  
 Form: an opening cadenza, then five 12-bar blues choruses

<u>Time</u>	<u>FORM</u>	<u>BARS</u>	
0:00	<i>Intro</i>		Opening unaccompanied <i>rubato</i> cadenza by Armstrong
0:15	<i>I.</i>	12	Ensemble Chorus polyphonic texture Armstrong embellishes the main melody The clarinet and trombone play improvised countermelodies and harmonies.
0:50	<i>II.</i>	12	Trombone Solo (Robinson)
1:24	<i>III.</i>	12	Clarinet and Scat Vocal Duet (Strong and Armstrong) call & response
1:59	<i>IV.</i>	12	Piano Solo (Hines) unaccompanied "stride" style
2:32	<i>V.</i>	8	Out Chorus Armstrong begins by sustaining a very high note and continues with a rhythmic phrase in the high register
2:56	<i>tag</i>		Piano Alone
3:05			Armstrong enters followed by the other horns--ending

Despite all of Armstrong's success and international fame, Armstrong was a humble man, never a "Hollywood elitist." He was married to his third wife Lucille Wilson for 29 years where they lived in a very modest home in Corona, New York. Armstrong died in his sleep at his home in 1971.

## **KEY TERMS** for Unit IV

<b>CADENZA</b>	A solo played with no accompaniment where there is often no sense of pulse (rubato); Cadenzas occur most often at the beginning or near the end of a piece that features a particular soloist
<b>RANGE</b>	Refers to the measured distance between the lowest and highest possible pitches on an instrument or within a particular performer's capability
<b>RUBATO</b>	Free of strict tempo, or free of a beat or pulse
<b>SCAT-SINGING</b>	Vocalizing stylized nonsensical syllables in the manner of an improvised jazz horn solo: SCAT: SCATTING
<b>VIBRATO</b>	A rapid fluctuation of a tone's pitch by repeatedly alternating above and below the basic pitch; It is a very individual, expressive, and stylized device used by singers, horn players, and string players in many styles of music; It is not possible on fixed pitched instruments such as the piano