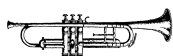


Live Like Louis!



Inspiring Stories
From the Life
Of Louis Armstrong
To Help You Lead
A More *Wonderful* Life

Phil Lynch



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Intro

*in which you and I become acquainted
and begin at the end of Louis's life*

I invite you to close your eyes and think of Louis Armstrong. What comes to mind? If you picture something, I'll bet it's Satchmo's huge smile. He was indeed a happy man who enjoyed life with a very positive outlook. When you think of Louis, do you hear anything? Maybe you can hear his boisterous laugh or that warm, gravelly voice singing "What a Wonderful World," the song that has become his anthem of sorts. It's an appropriate one for him, since it pretty much summarizes his actual outlook on life. As a musician, when I call him to mind, I hear his lively early jazz playing that established him as a great soloist and the founding father of "swing."

There are many facets to Louis Armstrong: jazz icon, innovative singer, "pop" crossover artist, radio and movie star, globetrotting jazz ambassador, and non-stop professional musician who toured almost to his dying day. And of course there's Louis Armstrong, the man. Whenever I would tell some-

one I was writing about Louis, literally each person would smile and say something positive about Louis or one of his songs. Even my high school students, even *they* feel positively about him, and they're "cool" teenagers! Years ago I was in the church business and someone advised me that you can talk about religion or your beliefs and really turn some people off. But talk about Jesus and pretty much everybody still likes *him*. I've found the same thing true with Louis: seriously, who dislikes Louis Armstrong? Moreover, a number of events and individuals in his fascinating life can serve to inspire us to be better people ourselves.

If you're not really into jazz or music history, you can rest easy: this isn't a book about music. It's a book about living. Someone once asked Louis if jazz was folk music. He replied, "All music is folk music. I ain't never heard no horse sing a song." I intend this book not for jazz fans or music buffs, but for folks, for anyone who can use a little inspiration to be a better person. If that's you (and I hope it is), I invite you to come along as we explore stories and people from the life of Louis Armstrong. I'll be careful not to give advice; I won't say, "Just do thus and such." I think it works better to offer reminders and examples of how we can be. So at the end of each chapter, you'll find personal growth practices to try if you wish. There are also suggested songs to listen to, with links available on the companion website, www.livelikelouis.com.

One of leadership expert Stephen Covey's famous seven habits of effective people is to begin with the end in mind. So, before we begin in chap-

ter one to contemplate the difficult early surroundings Louis overcame, it's important we share an understanding of what he did with his life.

Accomplishments

I thought I knew "Pops" (the name his friends called him) pretty well. But while researching his life, I was really impressed by how "far out" Louis Armstrong really was. Or is. You see, he's still far out today, literally out of this world: one of his early recordings is on the Voyager spacecraft now leaving our solar system! I can think of no better representative of the human race. Some alien "cats" will be "diggin' ol' Satch" light years away some day.

But seriously, let's hear what experts have to say about Louis. *Time* named him one of its 100 most important people of the 20th century. That's people in general, not just entertainers. Filmmaker Ken Burns says, "Armstrong is to music what Einstein is to physics and the Wright Brothers are to travel." Gary Giddins, one of our best music critics, calls Armstrong "America's Bach." Duke Ellington, whom many would nominate as America's greatest composer, simply called Louis "Mister Jazz." Tony Bennett (himself a U.N. Citizen of the World) says, "The bottom line of any country in the world is 'What did we contribute to the world?' We contributed Louis Armstrong."

Halls of fame really like Louis. He's in at least eight including the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (for his influence on the blues). That same hall includes

his "West End Blues" as one of its 500 most influential recordings. Eleven of his records are in the Grammy Hall of Fame, and he won the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award posthumously. Naturally, Louis has a star on that famous sidewalk in Hollywood.

Let's move back in time a bit. At Louis's passing in 1971, both the president and State Department issued public statements of condolence. Louis's honorary pallbearers included the governor of New York, the mayor of New York City, the aforementioned Duke of Ellington, plus Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Johnny Carson. At the time of his passing, Louis had played hundreds of dates a year for almost thirty years, including one in Ghana attended by 100,000 people. He had made countless TV appearances, been in over thirty films, and officially represented his country on three foreign continents. Always traveling with a typewriter, he had written two autobiographies. He was the first black man to have a national radio show.

Musically, he wrote dozens of songs and put many others on the map. He transformed singing by being the first to sing songs as freely as a jazz instrumentalist would play them. He would still sing the lyrics (mostly), but alter the rhythm and change the tune. He was improvising, in other words, and no one on record had sung like that before. Tony Bennett believes

Armstrong practically invented jazz singing and was the greatest influence not only in jazz, but for all music. . . . Armstrong influ-

enced Billie Holiday, Sinatra, everybody. To this day in the music business . . . you'll find Armstrong got there first.

Bing Crosby said, "Do you realize that the greatest pop singer that ever was and ever will be forever and ever is Louis Armstrong?"

In addition to singing lyrics more freely, he pioneered "scat singing": eliminating the lyrics altogether and singing nonsense syllables. Imitating a horn, in other words. It's a staple of jazz singing now, made famous by greats like Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Tormé. Louis wasn't quite the first to do it on record, though he might have been the first to do it in an improvised (spur-of-the-moment) way. Regardless, he put scat singing on the map with one huge hit record that even changed how people spoke in Chicago.

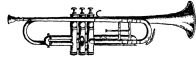
If this weren't enough, Louis Armstrong changed how the trumpet was played, exploring with his high notes where no trumpeter had gone before. Early on, both jazz and classical players liked to examine his horn, expecting to find a trick trumpet. Each time, they discovered the magic was not in the horn, but in the man. Dizzy Gillespie, who took trumpeting to even greater heights in the 1940s and '50s said simply, "Without him, no me." Trumpeter Miles Davis pioneered several distinct styles of jazz and remarked, "You can't play anything on a horn that Louis hasn't played."

One last thing: in the 1920s he merely changed what jazz essentially was and established what it then would be. As a soloist in others' bands, he set

the bar both for virtuosity and a relaxed, swinging feel. Then with the records he made with his own small combos, he established jazz as a music for soloists rather than the more collaborative, ensemble style it was before. Instead of B.C. and A.D., it wouldn't be at all unreasonable to date music history B.A. and A.A., if you know what I mean.

Jazz founder. Trumpet virtuoso. Pioneering vocalist. Jazz/pop crossover artist. Radio, movie, and TV star. Musical ambassador. International icon. And most importantly, a man who lived with the purpose of bringing joy to others and leaving the world better than he found it. His purpose and way of living are much harder to quantify than accolades and achievements, but ultimately far more important. As Duke Ellington put it, Louis was "born poor, died rich, and never hurt anyone along the way." As an educator, I'm not going to end up with one of my lesson plans onboard a spacecraft or be nominated to the Teaching Hall of Fame. I can, however, learn from the way Louis lived and be a better human being through his example. So in the pages to come, we'll explore ten aspects of living well, such as encouraging others, building on your strengths, showing courage, and living out a sense of purpose.

As we begin the first chapter, keep in mind Louis's accomplishments and the positive way he lived his life. Because now we're traveling back to the beginning, to appreciate the magnitude of the journey Louis Armstrong took. The man who died beloved by millions was born in a battlefield.



Listening Suggestions

*Links to audio and video files are found at
www.livelikelouis.com.*

Let's save trumpet virtuosity and scat singing for other chapters and focus here on how Louis improvised. That is, how he spontaneously created new tunes and rhythms.

It's impossible to hear Louis Armstrong now as people heard him in the 1920s and '30s when he was musically going where no "cat" had gone before. It's hard to hear how he's altering a tune or rhythm if we're not familiar with the "straight" (normal) version. Granted, the "standard" songs recorded by many artists over the years have had a resurgence lately, thanks to artists like Rod Stewart, Carly Simon, and Michael Bublé. Still, we're often unaware of the straight versions of Louis's songs, to appreciate how masterfully he changed them.

Of the songs Louis recorded in his most energetic years, "Georgia on My Mind" probably has the best chance of being known by us post-moderns, thanks to Ray Charles. Satchmo begins with eight measures played pretty straight; but he's already altering things a bit in the next eight bars. Sixteen measures of violins and syrupy saxes bring us to Louis's vocal treatment of the song. Listen to a masterful singer improvise, altering the song's tune and rhythm, though the melody is still close

by. Then listen to the then-unequaled master of the trumpet improvise on his horn.

During his trumpet solo he'll even throw in a two-measure quote from "Rhapsody in Blue" for you, if you know that piece. Louis established jazz as a soloist's art and was the first player in modern times to show how improvisers could be just as beautifully imaginative as composers who write down their notes. In fact, jazz artists are composing a new melody each time they solo – and in front of an audience. No pressure there, eh?

There's another song by Hoagy Carmichael many of us still might know. It's "Stardust," of which *Wikipedia* presently says there are 1,800 recordings. Listen to Louis's 1931 recording. Most jazz artists will play a melody pretty straight the first time, with minimal changes. But right out of the blocks, King Louis is wonderfully altering an already-beautiful melody, though it's still recognizable. After he plays one chorus, he enters singing the same note repeatedly. Then he takes off. Groundbreaking. And just as important, joyful.

Notes

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