

# LOUIS ARMSTRONG

His groundbreaking style changed the course of jazz music.



**AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:**

What challenges did Armstrong face?

In 1913, a group of boys paraded through New Orleans, Louisiana. As a crowd watched, the kids played musical instruments. Leading the band was an 11-year-old named Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong was just getting started on a journey that would lead him to become one of the world's greatest jazz musicians.

**A Rough Start**

Born on August 4, 1901, Armstrong had a tough life from the start. He lived in a neighborhood so dangerous that it was

**WORDS TO KNOW**

**improvise** *verb.* to make up something in the moment, without planning

**influential** *adjective.* having the power to bring about change

called the Battlefield. His family was very poor.

“He grew up without any shoes on his feet,” says Ricky Riccardi. He works at the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Corona, New York. “He sometimes didn’t know where his next meal was coming from.”

To help support his family, Armstrong took jobs selling newspapers and collecting junk. He left school in the fifth grade.

But Armstrong dreamed of making music. He loved to sing and taught himself to play a

trumpetlike instrument called the cornet. When he was 10, Armstrong and three friends would sing on the streets of New Orleans. People would drop coins in a hat for the boys.

“Early on, the seeds were planted that music might be his way out,” Riccardi says.

**Finding Success**

After an incident on New Year’s Eve in 1912, Armstrong was sent away to live in a home for troubled boys. It was there

**Watch a  
SLIDESHOW**  
Learn more  
about Louis  
Armstrong.

Illustrations by Beart Pelemack; Shutterstock.com (background); Donaldson Collection/Getty Images (1906); Benitley Archive/Popperfoto via Getty Images (1970)

that he learned how to properly play musical instruments, including the cornet.

“Once he had a cornet in his hands, it was almost like it had magic powers,” says Riccardi.

Armstrong practiced morning, noon, and night. He was determined to become a professional musician.

Before long, Armstrong was one of the most popular horn players in New Orleans. He later moved on to play in popular bands in Chicago, Illinois, and New York City.

**His Music Lives On**

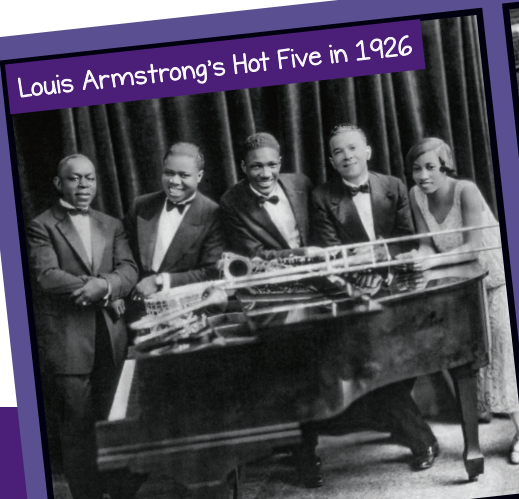
Armstrong’s unique style took the world by storm. Instead of playing music exactly as it was written, Armstrong would **improvise**. He’d layer in bursts of scat singing, using his deep voice to make different sounds.

Armstrong and his bands, the Hot Five and the Hot Seven, made dozens of records between 1925 and 1928. They are considered some of the most **influential** jazz recordings of all time.

Armstrong continued to perform for decades, until he died in 1971.

“It didn’t happen overnight,” Riccardi says. “But in the end, he said all of his boyhood dreams had come true.”

—by Alicia Green



Louis Armstrong's Hot Five in 1926



Armstrong making music with kids in his New York City neighborhood in 1970

## MAKING MUSIC

Here's a look at Louis Armstrong's musical beginnings.

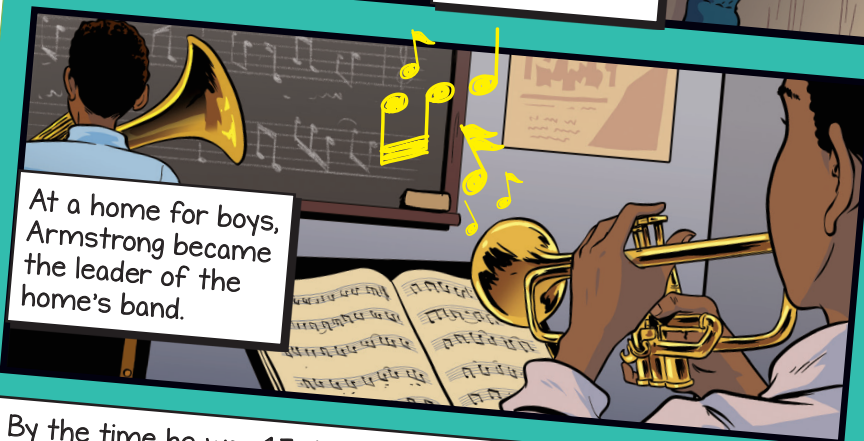
When he was 7, Armstrong worked for a local junkyard. He'd blow into a tin horn to announce the arrival of the junk wagon.



Armstrong had to borrow \$5 to buy a used cornet. It took him weeks to pay back the money, but it was worth it. He played the horn all the time.



At a home for boys, Armstrong became the leader of the home's band.



By the time he was 17, Armstrong was the lead cornet player in the most popular band in New Orleans.

