

Chrissy Minyard on Louis Armstrong

Louis Armstrong rose to become one of the most innovative musicians and beloved personalities of his time, all the while incorporating his values throughout his life and subtly leading a movement that broke racial boundaries within the United States.

Born on August 4, 1901 to the children of slaves in New Orleans, Louis Armstrong's father left the family before Armstrong turned five years old and his mother worked as a prostitute for several years throughout his youth. He dropped out of school and spent his adolescence hauling coal, selling discarded food to restaurants and singing in street quartets, all the while listening to bands play in dance halls and brothels in the red-light district. He first taught himself to play the cornet at the New Orleans Home for Colored Waifs, where he had been sent several times for general delinquency. From there he went on to lead the New Orleans Home's band and eventually play in parades and various brass bands and riverboats throughout New Orleans. At 20, he learned to read music, and begun being featured as a trumpet soloist, one of the first Jazz musicians to do so, injecting singing and personal style into these performances.

Armstrong moved onto to play in prominent bands in Chicago and New York and later in Europe. His unique voice and inflections served as a foundation for jazz vocal interpretation going forward.

Louis Armstrong died in 1971, one month before his 70th birthday. His honorary pallbearers included Governor Rockefeller, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Guy Lombardo, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, [Frank Sinatra](#), [Ed Sullivan](#), Johnny Carson, David Frost, Merv Griffin, [Dick Cavett](#) and Bobby Hackett among others.

Be Real

Louis Armstrong was very clear what was important to him and acted with the utmost integrity regarding commitment to these values and aspirations. He cared for his family, he supported the struggles of others and most importantly, he wanted to be a great entertainer. All of these principles manifested themselves in every aspect of his life.

Be Whole

Entertaining

His gift as an artist was of utmost importance to him. Every move he made and relationship he developed was in promotion of his passion for music. He was an entertainer in everything he did. Even his biographers were unclear on multiple aspects of his life because he regularly contradicted his own stories, telling them differently and more extravagantly each time.

Believing in Equality of All

When Louis Armstrong was seven years old, he worked for a Lithuanian-Jewish family, the Karnofskys, who ran a junk-hauling business. Even at this very young age, Louis Armstrong recognized the discrimination that this family endured in New Orleans and later wrote a memoir recounting his relationship with the family and describing what he learned from them: "how to live—real life and determination." Armstrong wore a Star of David pendant for the rest of his life.

Family

Louis Armstrong fully integrated his family, his career and his self throughout his life. His second wife, pianist, Lil Hardin Armstrong had a heavy hand in his choices regarding his location and the bands that he played for. "Lil had her husband play classical music in church concerts to broaden his skill and improve his solo play and she prodded him into wearing more stylish attire...Lil's influence eventually undermined Armstrong's

relationship with his mentor, especially concerning his salary and additional moneys that Oliver held back from Armstrong and other band members.” She played in several bands with him and was the first to bill him as “the World’s Greatest Trumpet Player.

Be Innovative

His passion for music brought about the greatest innovations he accomplished. His improvisations on the trumpet are unsurpassed by later jazz performers, his playing technique demonstrated unmatched range, tone and capabilities for the trumpet and he single-handedly created the role of the jazz soloist taking folk music to an art form that allowed for individual expression. He popularized scat singing and his deep vocals had a major impact of several artists to come.

He then managed to use these talents while choosing his place in the civil rights movement through his belief that one of the greatest impacts he could have on the acceptance of African Americans in the United States was by being a respected artist himself. He was incredibly well integrated into white society in a way that few other African Americans were. He was often criticized by other African American advocates for not utilizing this privilege to progress the civil rights movement politically. However I believe this demonstrated a strength of character, that he knew the position he wanted to take in the civil rights movement and followed through with that.

Application of Louis Armstrong’s Leadership Example

Louis Armstrong knew exactly what was important to him and he embraced it wholly. Pursuing his passion of music was the most important and he did so with grace and respect for those around him. Particularly as I approach my upcoming career decisions, I look to emulate his conviction regarding his own career and allow that focus to inspire passions in other aspects of my life without sacrificing all else that I value.

References:

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