

## Louis Armstrong, *What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?*

### Racism in Jazz - Middle School level, grades 6-8

#### **Objectives:**

1. The student will explore how Louis Armstrong dealt with the issue of racism in the United States during the 1950s and '60s.
2. The student will listen to the recording and discuss what they think Louis Armstrong meant by "How did I get so black and blue?"
3. The student will connect civil rights events in the United States to the time this recording was made (1955).

#### **Optional Objectives:**

1. The student will explore Civil Rights web sites and Louis Armstrong web sites below to find out more about why Louis Armstrong cancelled his tour of the Soviet Union that was to be sponsored by the U.S. State Department.
2. The student will journal about what they think about Louis Armstrong and racism.

**Time:** One class period

#### **Materials needed for objectives:**

Computer access to Internet recordings and speakers for playback to the class (or individual headphones for students to listen on their own). Optional: journal

#### **Procedure:**

**Activity 1** - Louis Armstrong was a beloved musician and entertainer during all of his adult life. Much like all jazz musicians before the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, Armstrong was constantly faced with rude people who degraded him and wouldn't allow him to use their restaurant, bathroom facilities, or water fountains. Most of the time he shrugged the bad behavior off and appeared sweet and happy to even the most ugly people. Many African Americans faulted him for smiling and joking when so many horrible events were occurring everyday to his fellow African Americans. In 1957 the Governor of Arkansas refused to obey an order from the U.S. Supreme Court that said black students could attend an all-white high school in Little Rock. Arkansas Governor Faubus ordered the National Guard to prevent black students from going to school and President Eisenhower refused to intervene. Louis Armstrong said to the press: "The way they are treating people in the South, the government can go to hell!" As for the well-liked Eisenhower, Louis said publicly, "The President has no guts." This was a very brave thing to say in those days. Standing up like that could have lost him many fans and much income, but he felt very strongly about doing the right thing and decided to cancel a state department trip to the Soviet Union rather than represent his country.

Listen to *What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?* and think about the possibility of

this being a protest song. To read the words you can go to this website:  
<http://tinpan.fortunecity.com/riff/11/frame/b9.html>

**Activity 2** - “What did Louis Armstrong mean by ‘[What did I do to be so black and blue?’ How does he play his trumpet to reflect the way he is feeling in this song?”

**Activity 3** - Explore web sites below to find out what was happening politically to change the way some of U.S. people treated African American people.

### **Optional Activities:**

**Activity 4** - Learn about the Civil Rights era and what changes African Americans were asking for. Since musicians and entertainers were very popular, do you think it was appropriate for them to speak out about the injustice to their race? What would be the best way to show disagreement with the racist system happening in some places of the United States?

**Activity 5** - Journal about your thoughts about Louis Armstrong the man and his music.

### **Extension:**

View the video *Satchmo* and learn about Louis Armstrong and the Civil Rights Era.

### **Indicators of Success:**

Students recognize that *What Did I Do To Be so Black and Blue?* was a powerful song that addressed the ugliness of racism.

### **Learn more about Louis Armstrong:**

[http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/class/armstrong/la\\_match.asp](http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/class/armstrong/la_match.asp)

[http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist\\_id\\_armstrong\\_louis.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_armstrong_louis.htm)

### **Lyrics to *Black and Blue*:**

<http://tinpan.fortunecity.com/riff/11/frame/b9.html>

### **About the meaning of *Black and Blue*:**

<http://archive.blackvoices.com/articles/daily/mu20040627.asp>

### **Louis Armstrong and racism:**

<http://pmc.bluepower.com/pmcspec5.htm>

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/exploring/louis/resources/multimedia.html>

<http://gadflyonline.com/archive/MarchApril00/archive-louisarmstrong.html>

### **Video resource:**

*Satchmo*. VHS/DVD, 90 mins. Sony Video Distribution, 1989.