

# Musician Biographies



**LOUIS ARMSTRONG** - Louis Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901 in **New Orleans**. He began playing the cornet at the age of thirteen and grew up to become one of the most influential musicians in the history of music. Joe "King" Oliver was the most famous cornetist in New Orleans and became Louis' mentor. When Oliver moved north to Chicago, he invited Armstrong to join him, an invitation he accepted. Eventually, Armstrong moved farther north to New York City, where he joined the band of Fletcher Henderson. Armstrong is known for popularizing scat singing and perfecting the improvised jazz solo as we know it. He died in New York City on July 6, 1971.

**WILLIAM "COUNT" BASIE** - Born in Red Bank, New Jersey, on August 21, 1904, Basie is known as one of the most influential pianists and bandleaders in jazz. As a youngster, he did chores for local movie houses in exchange for free admission (in those days, movies were accompanied by live music, usually piano or organ). Around 1924, at just 20 years of age, Basie moved to Harlem, New York, where he began playing professionally. It was there that he met one of his biggest influences, Fats Waller. Basie moved to Kansas City in 1929 where he joined Bennie Moten's band. When Moten died, Basie formed his own band. William "Count" Basie led the Count Basie Orchestra for nearly 50 years until his death in 1984.



**BUDDY BOLDEN** - Often called the founding father of jazz, the legendary Charles "Buddy" Bolden was born in **New Orleans**, Louisiana, in 1877. As the first New Orleans trumpet king, he paved the way for Joe "King" Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Although Bolden left no recordings, he is still remembered as one of history's most talented jazz musicians. Bolden died in Jackson, Louisiana, on October 4, 1931.



**MILES DAVIS** - Without a doubt, Miles Davis is the most significant musician to come out of the **St. Louis area** and one of the most influential musicians in the history of jazz. The son of a prominent dentist, Miles Davis was born on May 26, 1926, in Alton, Illinois. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to East St. Louis, Illinois (he attended the famed Lincoln High School) where he stayed until 1944 when he moved to New York to attend the prestigious Juilliard School of Music. Davis got his start in jazz when he met with Charlie Parker. After striking out on his own, Davis formed many groups that were instrumental in shaping the history of jazz. He also is credited with changing the course of jazz music four times in his life. Davis' album "Kind of Blue" is a landmark recording and is the best selling jazz recording of all time. Miles Davis died on September 28, 1991.



**EDWARD KENNEDY "DUKE" ELLINGTON** - Born on April 29, 1899, Ellington (along with Count Basie) was one of the creators of the big band sound, which fueled the "swing" era. Although he was classically trained, his early interests were in ragtime and jazz. While a teenager, he played with dance bands at parties and clubs around his home town of Washington, D.C. One of the most recognizable figures in jazz, pianist, composer, arranger and bandleader Duke Ellington is widely recognized as America's most prolific composer, having written over 2000 compositions! He died on May 24, 1974.



**BENNY GOODMAN** - Born in Chicago on May 30, 1909, David Benjamin "Benny" Goodman was a clarinetist and band leader during the swing era of the 1940s. During this time he led one of the most popular bands in America, helping to launch the careers of the day's most famous musicians. In an era of segregation, he led one of the first racially-integrated musical groups. Dubbed the "King of Swing", Goodman is credited with bringing swing to a larger audience and ultimately its rise as America's popular music.





**JOHN BIRKS "DIZZY" GILLESPIE** – Trumpeter, composer, arranger and bandleader Dizzy Gillespie was born on October 21, 1917 in Cheraw, South Carolina. Together with Charlie Parker, he helped usher in a new era in jazz called "bebop." In addition to his contributions to "bebop," Gillespie was responsible for bringing Afro-Cuban rhythms together with bebop to create new rhythmic possibilities within the music. His famous compositions include "A Night in Tunisia," "Manteca," and "Tin Tin Deo." Dizzy's trademark was his bent trumpet and puffed-out cheeks. He died on January 6, 1993.



**WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER "W.C." HANDY** - Composer, arranger and conductor William Christopher "W.C." Handy was born in Florence, Alabama, on November 16, 1873. He worked as a school teacher and band leader after attending an agricultural and mechanical college in Huntsville, Alabama. From 1903 to 1921, he conducted his own orchestra. Handy was an active composer in the days when ragtime was evolving into jazz, and he used elements of the blues in his music. His best known compositions are "Memphis Blues" in 1911 and "St. Louis Blues" in 1914. One of the first people to write down and publish blues music, he is often called the father of the blues. W.C. Handy died in New York City on March 28, 1958.



**FLETCHER HENDERSON** – Considered the first great "arranger" of jazz, Fletcher Henderson's concept of sound and orchestration influenced many of the most popular bands of the 1930s, helping to create the big band concepts still used today. Born in Georgia in 1897, Henderson formed his own band in 1922 upon moving to New York City. In 1924, Louis Armstrong joined Henderson's band, changing the feel of the band from a polite "society band" to one that played "hot" jazz in the New Orleans tradition. In the 1930s, Benny Goodman purchased some of Henderson's arrangements for his own band; they were a hit with mainstream audiences. When Fletcher's own group disbanded, Goodman hired him as a full-time arranger.



**THELONIOUS MONK** – Pianist Thelonious Sphere Monk was born in 1917 in North Carolina and moved to New York City in 1922. Dubbed "the high priest of bop," Monk is regarded as a founder of bebop yet his rhythmic concept and improvisational style differed drastically from his contemporaries. These differences, combined with his sometimes strange behavior, caused him to struggle for recognition by his peers in the music industry and the general public. Despite his struggles, Monk never strayed from his musical concepts, eventually winning critical claim. His face even appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1964. Some of Monk's greatest contributions to music come in the form of his compositions, which remain part of the standard jazz repertoire to this day.



**JELLY ROLL MORTON** – Jelly Roll Morton was born in **New Orleans, Louisiana**, on October 20, 1890. Morton was a very talented pianist, and he knew it. By the age of 15, he was making a living as a piano player, playing in New Orleans' many establishments of questionable reputation. At one point he even claimed to have invented jazz all by himself! Like others, Morton played the popular tunes of the era, which included blues and ragtime. Jelly Roll, however, could improvise in a new style people called jazz. A gifted composer as well, his compositions were some of the first to include grooves from different styles of music. His music showed people all over the country that New Orleans jazz was an art form worthy of study. Morton died in Los Angeles, California, on July 10, 1941.



**JOE "KING" OLIVER** – Cornetist, bandleader and composer Joe "King" Oliver was Louis Armstrong's mentor and main musical influence. He pioneered the use of mutes and wrote many early jazz tunes, some of which are still played today ("Dippermouth Blues," "West End Blues" and "Dr. Jazz"). Born in Abbeville, Louisiana, on December 19, 1885, Oliver played in the brass bands and dance bands that were popular in and around New Orleans. In 1919, Oliver decided to leave the south for Chicago and by 1922 he was the jazz king of Chicago. Throughout the 1920s, Oliver continued to play and rise in popularity, despite some bad business decisions. The Great Depression, however, did not treat the King well. He lost his life's savings when the Bank of Chicago collapsed leaving him stranded in Savannah, Georgia. There he worked as a janitor until he died on April 10, 1938.



**CHARLIE "BIRD" PARKER** – One of the greatest saxophonists in the history of jazz, Charlie "Bird" Parker was born on August 29, 1920, in Kansas City, Kansas, but was raised from an early age in **Kansas City, Missouri**. He began studying music as a young teenager and left school at the age of 15 to pursue a musical career. In 1939 Parker moved to New York City, where he met trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, who became his close friend and collaborator. Parker and Gillespie formed their own quintet in 1945 and together created the revolutionary style known as bebop. Widely recognized for his complex, fast-paced solos, Parker's playing was equally impressive on soft, slow ballads. His virtuosic style and groundbreaking compositions permanently changed the face of jazz. He died on March 12, 1955, in New York City. (*Taken from Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jazz for Young People Curriculum*).