

Understanding Legends in History Using “Heebie Jeebies” by Louis Armstrong

The Basics

Time Required

1-2 class periods

Subject Areas

11th Grade US History

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Author

Mark Brown (2004)

The Lesson

Introduction

Louis Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901 in New Orleans. His father abandoned him, and young Louis went to work to help support the family. On January 1, 1913, Armstrong was arrested for firing a pistol in the air and was adjudicated to the Colored Waifs Home. There he learned how to play the coronet.

When Armstrong returned to New Orleans, he began to follow King Oliver’s band. When Oliver left for Chicago in 1918, Armstrong took over his chair.¹ In 1922, Oliver invited Armstrong to Chicago, where he made his first recording, “Chime Blues.”

As Armstrong’s fame grew, he began recording with his own band, The Hot Fives. On February 26, 1926, they recorded “Heebie Jeebies.” This was a major hit for the band and introduced scat singing² to a wider audience. Legend³ has it that Armstrong dropped the sheet music and invented a scat so as not to waste the tape. This is a story that Armstrong perpetuated himself. In a 1951 interview for *Esquire Magazine*, Armstrong commented on many of his early recordings with the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens. For the recording of “Heebie Jeebies” Armstrong said “[W]hen I dropped the paper, I immediately turned into the horn⁴ and started to scatting. Just as nothing had happened. When I finished the record I just knew the recording people would throw it out. And to my surprise they all came running out of the controlling booth and said ‘Leave that in.’ My, my, I gave a big sigh of relief. And sure enough – they did publish

¹ chair: position/part in a music ensemble

² scat: to sing using nonsense syllables

³ legend: story passed down, although not verifiable

⁴ horn: microphone

“Heebie Jeebies” the same way it was mistakenly recorded” (Armstrong, *In His Own Words*, 132). Most critics argue that it is simply a story, that scatting existed before this, and that the record “Heebie Jeebies” only popularized a well-established musical style. “Armstrong always insisted that the sheet music slipped from the stand and he started scatting to save the take.⁵ His unforgettable vocal is the high point of an otherwise uninspired performance, and it’s hard to believe he didn’t know exactly what he was doing. That chorus did more than introduce a language of nonsense syllables that jazz singers could use when the song’s lyric proved too constricting; it embodied a joyous, vernacular, and convincing attitude that complimented the spontaneous nature of the new music” (Giddins, 87). Regardless of the origin of scat itself, Armstrong’s “Heebie Jeebies” is the first commercial recording of a song with scat.

Armstrong’s popularity continued to grow. His influence on jazz and popular music, both trumpet and vocal, is renowned. In 1947 he formed his All Star Band. He was given the title “Ambassador Satch” and toured the world on behalf of the U.S. State Department. Armstrong continued to perform throughout his life. He died on July 5, 1971.

Guiding Questions

What is an urban legend?

Why do urban legends continue to be told?

Learning Objectives

By using the song “Heebie Jeebies,” students will evaluate the role of legends in history. Students will research well-known legends to determine their accuracy and explain their relevance in the historical perspective.

Preparation Instructions

Recordings used in this lesson:

- Armstrong, Louis. “Heebie Jeebies.” *Louis Armstrong: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Columbia/Legacy: C4K 57176. 1994.
- Ellis, Seger. “To Be In Love.” *Louis Armstrong: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Columbia/Legacy: C4K 57176. 1994.

Lesson Activities

Introductory learning activities:

This lesson can be integrated into a unit on the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties.

- Begin by reviewing the biography of Louis Armstrong. More information about Armstrong may be found in the books listed in the bibliography, or by visiting “The Official Site of the Louis Armstrong House and Archives” (<http://www.satchmo.net>).
- Have students listen to “Heebie Jeebies” and answer song discussion questions. Use the legend of Armstrong scatting in the song to begin a discussion on the role of legends in history. What is the

⁵take: a recorded performance

importance of legends? Why do some legends continue to exist even after they are known to be false? The assessment at the end of this lesson will have students research a legend, determine its validity, and explain its relevance in the historical perspective.

Song discussion questions and activities:

- After listening to “Heebie Jeebies,” what stands out most about the song?
- Distribute the Artifact Sheet to allow students to answer the next two questions. According to legend, Armstrong began to scat when he dropped the sheet music during recording. How believable is this story? Most critics argue that the account is fictional, what does this say about Armstrong’s character? *He was a fun loving man, who enjoyed a good story.*
- Armstrong also said that July 4, 1900, was his birthday, why would he say this? *With a lack of knowledge, many people picked a famous day for their birthday. Armstrong lied about his age to appear older, and to enlist in the army.*
- Compare what Armstrong said about the recording of “Heebie Jeebies” with what Giddins says. Which viewpoint is more convincing? Why? Does adding time to an event offer a better or different perspective?
- If Armstrong did not want to ruin the take, what does that indicate about early recording technology? *Recording was expensive. Editing and mixing were not possible.*
- “Heebie Jeebies” introduced scat singing to a larger audience. Name and explain modern songs that contain nonsense syllables. What is the purpose of nonsense syllables in song? *Rhyme, rhythm, secret language, annoy older generation.*
- “Heebie Jeebies” was about a new type of dance. What are some dance songs that you are familiar with? How do your parents and older relatives feel about this type of dancing?

Assessment

- Students will research a legend from history, determine its validity, and explain its importance in history.
- Choose one of the legends from the handout. Using the Internet and other resources, explain if the legend is accurate or not. If the legend is false, explain the truth behind the story. In either case, explain why the story is so widely known in society. In other words, why is the legend relevant to history?

Extending the Lesson

Louis Armstrong had a great influence on American popular music. Listen to the song “To Be In Love” sung by Seger Ellis, with Armstrong on trumpet. How is Ellis’ vocal performance different from Armstrong’s? *Clearer diction of Ellis. Song is about a typical subject: love.*

Resources

Lyrics

“Heebie Jeebies” available at
<http://www.heptune.com/heebieje.html>

“To Be In Love” available at
<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/t/tobeinlove.shtml>

Artifact Sheets:

“Heebie Jeebies” Artifact Sheet

Below are two statements regarding the scat chorus from Armstrong’s 1926 recording of “Heebie Jeebies.”

Artifact 1

“[W]hen I dropped the paper, I immediately turned into the horn and started to scating. Just as nothing had happened. When I finished the record I just knew the recording people would throw it out. And to my surprise they all came running out of the controlling booth and said ‘Leave that in. My, my, I gave a big sigh of relief. And sure enough – they did publish “Heebie Jeebies” the same way it was mistakenly recorded”

Louis Armstrong, 1951 *Esquire* Interview

Artifact 2

“Armstrong always insisted that the sheet music slipped from the stand and he started scating to save the take. His unforgettable vocal is the high point of an otherwise uninspired performance, and it’s hard to believe he didn’t know exactly what he was doing. That chorus did more than introduce a language of nonsense syllables that jazz singers could use when the song’s lyric proved too constricting; it embodied a joyous, vernacular, and convincing attitude that complimented the spontaneous nature of the new music”
Gary Giddins, *Satchmo*, 1988

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Compare what Armstrong said about the recording of “Heebie Jeebies” with what Giddins says. Which viewpoint is more convincing? Why? Does adding time to an event offer a better or different perspective?

Legends Worksheet

Legends of History

- John Hancock made his signature large enough on the Declaration of Independence so that King George could read it without his glasses.
- George Washington was not the first president of the United States, it was John Hanson.
- A clause in the annexation of Texas allowed it to be divided into five states.
- A black woman served as the model for the Statue of Liberty.
- Harry Truman’s middle name is the letter S.
- John Kennedy went hatless at his inauguration, beginning the decline in the sale of men’s hats.
- Mussolini made the trains run on time.
- Churchill was born in a ladies room during a dance.
- Members of Congress receive large pensions and do not pay Social Security.
- Motorists in some U.S. states can be fined for not slowing down or changing lanes when passing parked emergency vehicles.
- U.S. law specifies that a creditor does not have to accept more than 100 pennies toward payment.
- Social Security numbers are coded to identify a person’s race.
- The Baby Ruth candy bar was named for President Cleveland’s daughter.
- Being an only child exempts you from military service.

- Senator Hillary Clinton was the only politician in Washington D.C. who refused to meet with a delegation of Gold Star Mothers.
- An American flag is folded thirteen times for special meanings.
- Rush Limbaugh was disqualified from the Vietnam draft due to a pilonidal cyst.
- The state of Missouri named a stretch of highway adopted by the Ku Klux Klan the “Rosa Parks Highway.”
- Overpaying a traffic ticket will keep points off your driving record.
- Interstates are numbered based on direction and location.
- The Great Wall of China is visible from the moon.
- The nursery rhyme “Ring Around the Rosie” is a coded reference to the Bubonic Plague.
- Governor George W. Bush proclaimed June 10, 2000 as Jesus day in Texas.
- The Marlboro Man died of lung cancer.
- Little Mikey, of Life Cereal fame, died from eating pop rocks and drinking Coke.
- The Disney film *Song of the South* has never been released on video in the United States.
- Jello is made from animal bones and hides.
- Caesar salad was invented by, or named for, Julius Caesar.
- The Titanic had a sister ship with the intended name of Gigantic.
- The nursery rhyme “Sing a Song of Sixpence” was a code for recruiting pirates.
- 911 days separated terrorist attacks on the United States and the 2004 train bombings on Madrid Spain.
- George W. Bush has been nominated for a Noble Peace Prize.

All legends were taken from the website Urban Legends Reference Page. <http://www.snopes.com>.