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CHICAGO, 23 November 2021

Chicago celebrates centennial of Louis Armstrong’s arrival in the city

Year-long series of multidisciplinary events shows how his Chicago years changed the course of jazz

The 100th anniversary of jazz pioneer Louis Armstrong’s arrival in Chicago will be celebrated in a series of concerts, exhibits, films, panel discussions, and educational programs in 2022. The celebration will be programmed by the Jazz Institute of Chicago (JIC), the city’s long-running, internationally praised jazz advocacy organization.

"The Jazz Institute of Chicago is proud to celebrate the life and legacy of Louis Armstrong. His time spent on Chicago’s south side, his impact, his social justice stance and of course his joyous and bright personality are all worthy of praise and honor, and we are looking forward to shining even more light on his role in jazz and American history," said executive director Heather Ireland Robinson.

During his Chicago years, which spanned much of the 1920s, Armstrong remade the still young jazz genre. It was in Chicago that Armstrong’s artistry blossomed, allowing him to transform jazz into a soloist’s showcase, a radical departure for an idiom theretofore strictly focused on collective improvisation. While in Chicago, Armstrong made the seminal Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings that catapulted him to worldwide fame. He remained the world’s best known jazz musician and, as a vocalist, a global icon of popular music for the next half-century.

Speaking of Armstrong, another famous figure in jazz history, the trumpet star Dizzy Gillespie, put it most succinctly: “No him, no me.”

Also in Chicago, Armstrong met and married the pianist Lil Hardin, who helped him evolve from a country bumpkin from New Orleans into a shrewd and literate showman. Lil Hardin was a pioneer in her own right – the first female star instrumentalist in jazz (as opposed to the singers and dancers of her time) – and her mentorship of the young Armstrong, along with stewardship of his early career, played a critical role in his success.

For all these reasons, the Armstrong Chicago Centennial also will honor Lil Hardin Armstrong, who continued to live and work in Chicago after the couple’s divorce and until her death in 1971. A special focus on Hardin will take place during March 2022, to dovetail with Women’s History Month.

The ambitious celebration of Louis and Lil Hardin Armstrong will include jazz performances throughout the city – many of them featuring re-creations of Armstrong’s signature small groups and jazz orchestras – as well as tributes at the Chicago Jazz Festival featuring major artists influenced by and knowledgeable about the trumpeter. Several of the more than two dozen films in which Armstrong appeared will be screened at selected theaters.
In addition, panels, lectures, and exhibitions – conducted by Armstrong historians including Armstrong biographer Ricky Riccardi, curator and Director of Research Collections for the Louis Armstrong House Museum – will tell the story of Armstrong’s career in words, pictures, and interactive discussions. And the Jazz Institute’s popular Jazz Links program, which mentors and presents jazz students, will concentrate on teaching the trumpeter’s music and other projects to be announced.

“The jazz world is indebted to the Armstrong legacy,” said Kent Richmond, chair of the Armstrong Chicago Centennial Committee that is organizing the celebration. “It is the mission of the JIC to honor their legacies, and inspire and energize Chicago, as the Armstrongs electrified the city’s jazz scene in the 1920’s. Our hope is that the arts community will take this opportunity to coalesce around this centennial and create a positive synergy for the arts community emerging from this pandemic.”

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**About the Jazz Institute of Chicago**

Founded in 1969, the Jazz Institute of Chicago promotes and nurtures jazz in Chicago by providing jazz education, developing and supporting musicians, building audiences and fostering a thriving jazz scene. For more information on our programs, visit [jazzinchicago.org](http://jazzinchicago.org).

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