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Louis Armstrong was the founding father of jazz and one of this century's towering cultural figures. The musical talents of Satchmo - as Armstrong became universally known - were prodigious and groundbreaking. After learning to blow his horn in the bordellos and honky-tonks of Storyville, New Orleans's bustling red-light district, he honed his sound on a Mississippi riverboat and later became a featured solo trumpeter in the nightclub bands of Chicago and New York, where his stunning musicianship, gravelly voice, and irrepressible personality captivated audiences and critics alike. Countless recordings, nonstop touring of America and Europe, a radio show - the first ever hosted by a black man - and film appearances catapulted him to international stardom, yet he always remained true to himself and loyal to his roots. Despite his successes, Armstrong's career was also marked by intense struggle - against the Depression, against the Chicago gangsters of the 1930s, and, above all, against racial prejudice.

Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life Details

Date : Published June 16th 1997 by Bantam Dell Pub Group (Trd)

ISBN : 9780553067682

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Format : Hardcover 576 pages

Genre : Biography, Music, Nonfiction, History, Jazz



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Potomacwill says

This biography makes the man palpable. The biographer never makes the mistake of appearing to dissect his subject as though he were conducting an autopsy, an all too common mistake.

Most of the recordings mentioned in this book are available free on the Web, adding a postmodern dimension to the text. Armstrong's life, work, social relations, and musicality legacy have so many facets that readers doubtless would do well to read more than one book about him.

He has written an autobiography and I am adding it to my reading list.

Louise says

You get not only a bio of a great musician & person, you get a detailed description how Blacks lived New Orleans through the turn of the century. You also get a better understanding of how the pre-recording (and therefore unrecorded) sounds of untutored musicians became the roots of the New Orleans musical genre and how the odds were stacked against Louis. You come to understand his workaholism and his deference to his eventual agent, who probably exploited him.

As the book progresses, the historical descriptions are not as detailed but you feel the music and the person developing. Ironically, the two best known pieces "Hello Dolly" & "It's a Wonderful World", were late stage, not representative, but somehow routine work for the prolific Louis.

It's hard to imagine from the impoverished roots, the raw deals and the omnipresent daily racism (even to his death in 1971 segregation both de facto and Jim Crow continued), how Louis kept his optimism and exuberance. It was not self deceptive, when the chips were down, he supported the Brown v Board of Ed decision, not just in his heart, but words and actions.

He was an unfaithful lover and husband. We don't know if he ever promised otherwise... all his wives but the first (who was common law married) knew he was a married man when they started "dating" him. The world owes Mrs. Armstrong the 2nd (Lil) a debt. She gave him confidence and a platform to be the star he became.

In the Acknowledgments the author says this is the first bio he's written where his admiration for his subject grows.

Louis Armstrong blazed a trail. He was a tough cat, much tougher than all the supposedly macho dudes who posture now. He doesn't have to posture because he's dealt with the mob and prostitutes who slash with the knives in their shoes, and somehow reminds us, that despite all this, it's a wonderful world.

Bill O'driscoll says

Thoroughly engaging and notably enlightening biography. I went into it an Armstrong fan, but came away with a full understanding of why he's arguably the most important figure in American popular music (at least in the first half of the 20th century). Crucially, Bergreen paints a fine-grained picture of New Orleans as Armstrong lived it in his formative years, including the stint at a boy's home which was a major turning point in his life. We also get nice portraits of jazz giants like Buddy Bolden, Armstrong's mentor King Oliver, and more, and vivid depictions of Louis's complicated relationships with women (at least one of which, his marriage to Lil Hardin, was very important in his musical career). You'll also learn about his struggles with and against racism, in complicated New Orleans, the North, overseas and in the segregated South; the origin of the nickname Satchmo; the ins and outs of Louis' lifelong love affair with ganja (he was as tight with it as any Rasta); and how he basically invented the solo as we know it. Armstrong was a much more complex character, as a person and a musician, than is generally recognized, and Bergreen's biography will tell you why, even as it sends you scurrying for Armstrong recordings.

dejah_thoris says

Armstrong had an amazing life and Bergreen showcases it well. Like I noted for the other books of his I've read, this one has many unique words. If you love learning new ones, it's a bonus, but if not, it may be a handicap. Aside from that feature, this thick book is worth reading. Now to work my way through the rest of the Hot Five's discography.

Hubert says

I lingered over reading this biography for a number of years. Was at one point probably one of the stronger Armstrong bios out there, but a) it dwells too much on the salacious (even if his life story welcomes such attention) and b) not enough is written about the later career, e.g. collaborations with Fitzgerald and Ellington. Still good to learn, esp. the earlier part of the career. Comes with a unique insider view into the underworld of the players, including music managers, who surrounded Satchmo.

Sam Irwin says

A wonderful account of a life well lived. For me the biggest lesson I learned from Louis Armstrong is "be happy." Even when he was down he was happy. And he maintained his happiness when he was up. Louis Armstrong transcended his time and defined jazz. And he was from New Orleans, the craziest town in the USA. Pops may be the best trumpet player who ever lived. Read this book. Learn something about music. Learn something about living.

Spiros says

A thoroughly workmanlike account of the life of a truly great American: short on analysis, but rich in detail. I was struck by the parallels between Satchmo and that other towering figure of the Jazz Age, Babe Ruth; both men grew up in shambolic circumstances, both spending time in institutions where, amongst hardship and deprivation, they were given the chance to develop the skills with which they revolutionized their

respective fields.

Trung Nguyen Dang says

I read biography of the greats to learn their wisdom and to be inspired, which unfortunately I didn't have those with Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life.

His life is full of sex, prostitutes (he married one who continued to walk the street after marriage), drugs, infidelity He grew up around prostitutes (his mom was probably one, unacknowledged by him). So besides his raw talent, there is hardly anything to learn from him or his life. The biggest lesson is probably to marry the right person. He had 4 wives.

I only recommend the book for Louis Armstrong fan. If not, forget it, there are better dead people to learn from.

Todd says

Excellent portrait of the artist who can arguably be called the greatest jazz musician who ever lived. Bergreen gives us Armstrong the man and musician with a meticulously detailed look at his life and career. Armstrong more than anyone seemed to embody the jazz philosophy that permeated the 20th Century. This book captures that spirit and shows us why Satchmo is really the indispensable figure in jazz.

Linda says

When I was fourteen years old I went to a Louis Armstrong concert and was absolutely mesmerized by the man who filled the entire fieldhouse with his awesome presence and brilliant musicianship. Fifty-plus years later, I'm quick to tell you that Louis Armstrong is still my favorite musician. In the years following that October 1961 concert, Louis came across as the ambassador of goodwill around the world, and his gravelly-voiced rendition of Hello, Dolly and What a Wonderful World reintroduced his name to a younger generation.

Laurene Bergreen's 1997 biography of Louis Armstrong is filled with the reality of the man behind the legend, and the world and times in which he lived.

Rick says

Bought this after reading a favorable review some 13 years ago but then read a bunch of less than favorable reviews so it took me awhile to get around to it. Mostly the unfavorable reviews are right. This is only a serviceable biography with its best feature being the amount of talking the author allows Armstrong to do through his own writings. Armstrong wrote for almost all of his adult life. Letters, scraps of memoirs, articles. So his papers are a great resource and they pepper this biography with humor and with fond recollections of a rough childhood and a rough and tumble apprenticeship in the New Orleans music scene

where jazz first emerged. Bergreen is a chronicler, not an historian or any kind of interpreter. He flounders between hyperbole and clumsy co-opting of jazz slang to say little that is insightful or even much informed. Don't get me wrong, you can't overstate Armstrong's accomplishments as a musician or singer. It would be hard to argue for anyone in 20th century American music as more influential...not Frank or Elvis or Ella or Billie or Woody or Bob or Duke—great and influential as they each are. But it takes someone more knowledgeable than the author to actually capture Armstrong's genius and document his influence. A definitive biography is still overdue Armstrong.

Mladen says

Amazing. The book, the life, the music, everything.

A good book to read by any who love music, especially jazz, or by those who love Louis Armstrong.

Learned so much about the early 1900's, and about the birth of jazz.

The writer not only captures the life of Louis, but also you have glimpses into the lives of some of the more important people who had crossed paths with the great Satchmo.

Betty Confetti says

I've read several other books by Bergreen, and this one is also well-written, organized well, and interesting. I am reminded of "two" books about musicians. Edmund Morris's Beethoven, where Morris's efforts to sound really smart about music--not his specialty--feel a lot like Bergreen's efforts. And I think, Bergreen is reaching too far. Part of it is that words can't possibly communicate musical sound, and much of the early playing is lost forever. But how many ways can one write that Armstrong was an amazing trumpeter? The other books I think of are the 2-part autobiographies by Arthur Rubinstein, the greatest pianist of the 20th century. His accounts focus on connections with people, what he thought of others, and how the life of a star musician unfolded. This reminds me of the life story of Armstrong, and this is the strength of Bergreen's biography. If it weren't for music, Armstrong would have led a very sad life with lots of lows. It was a life without parameters, much like how Rubinstein's life unfolded--although his situation was completely different (e.g., sent to live with other people to hone his craft, whereas Armstrong essentially also grew up with little parental focus due to poverty).

All in all, if you're a jazz lover who has a lot of musical knowledge (which I lacked), I think a reader would be disappointed. But if you enjoy books about amazing lives of amazing people with a lot of flaws, well Louis Armstrong An Extravagant Life is the book for you.

Brendan says

Bergreen tells a good story, but that's not enough to make this biography work. Too many of his facts are wrong and he doesn't provide particularly good documentation of his sources. It seems clear that he doesn't know too much about jazz music either. Louis Armstrong deserves much better than that.

Steven Kaminski says

Really powerful book that goes deep not just into the great Satchmo but also more broadly into how Jazz evolved & grew in his age...

- Louis grew up an illegitimate child in New Orleans. He would grow up with his grandmother while his mother gave him up early in his life. His grandmother was both a strong believer in both Catholicism & voodoo which influenced him. At age 5 though his mother would get ill & sent for him to join her and his younger sister.

- He was in school until dropping out in the 5th grade. He would go on to work night and day for a Jewish family that had a junk wagon that went from neighborhood to neighborhood. That family nurtured Louis and often fed him because he was working with them so much. They encouraged him to get into music & bought him his first trumpet (coronet).

- Louis in what little free time he had started to join fellow kids who wanted to play music. They started playing on the streets before he was 10 and started to get noticed. But at age 11 while playing a prank with a loaded gun he had taken from the family home he was arrested & sent to a waif home for lost kids for a few years. He was pulled out of the home at age 15 to work full time to support his family.

- He was signed by a promoter & jazz musician to be in a band playing riverboats. The South was still segregated at this time making it difficult to broaden his appeal unless he was playing at other gigs or on the street. In 1919 he joined the band of King Joe Oliver & moved to Chicago. In the age of the roaring 20's he really started to establish himself there as money poured into the city.

- He married Lil Harden while in Chicago & she pushed him to get to a point where he would front a band. He started to become more of a singing getting broader appeal with his solos. After 2 & 1/2 years he moved to NY where he started recording. As radio became more prominent as well he grew even more popular. He would move to play in the Cotton club in a time that became known as the Harlem Renaissance.

- He kept recording with his band the Hot 5 but the depression really hammered Harlem causing a lot of clubs to close. Louis would continue to play by going on the road.

This is only a fraction of the book it is beautiful in its detail. A part of it is also sad because most of the real jazz recordings from that time were lost. Because of race Jazz wasn't given the respect nor were the performers. Most of us might know Armstrong's song 'What a wonderful World' but that song wasn't even promoted in the United States. If you want to learn a lot about Jazz this is a great book that shows Jazz through telling Armstrong's life story...
