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### Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz

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## Book Review

### **Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz**

DANIEL STEIN

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012

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349 pp., \$80.00 (hb), \$45.00 (pb)

Had Louis Armstrong ended his career in 1930, the greatness of his recordings from the 1920s would have earned him a place as one of the founding fathers of jazz and among the most innovative soloists the music has ever produced. Fortunately he lived until 1971, remaining in the public eye for the duration, acclaimed as a masterful instrumentalist, greatly skilled “scat singer,” and charismatic personality. As one of the most successful African-American entertainers in history, Armstrong penetrated echelons of upper society that were previously off-limits to his race and was a pioneer in demonstrating an expanded range of opportunity and possibilities for black entertainers. But there was an implicit contradiction in Armstrong’s success, in that his talent and innovations were couched in a persona that could be (and was) argued to be taken directly from American minstrelsy. Many thought that his constant broad smile, exaggerated facial expressions, and eye-bulging clowning were reinforcing black stereotypes in order to win the approval of white audiences.

Fortunately, Armstrong’s life, opinions, and interactions with others are anything but shrouded in mystery. On the contrary, he harbored a near obsession with documenting nearly everything that happened to him during his long and active career. Armstrong seems to have been a prolific letter writer from his early years and he began to carry a portable typewriter with him early on. Later, when tape recorders became available, he added that to his efforts to chronicle just about every aspect of his life. Then, of course, there were the formal media of autobiographies, movies, interviews, magazine articles, and a myriad of recordings, resulting in a staggering archive of autobiographical material.

While there are several biographies of Louis Armstrong, Daniel Stein’s book is the first to examine Armstrong’s autobiographical record carefully to see what it reveals about the man, his life, and his music. The result is a fascinating book that is likely to offer unexpected insights and information to even the best-read Armstrong researcher. Stein makes a reasonable effort to organize his journey through the wealth of material Armstrong had accumulated. The Introduction, “Louis Armstrong’s Jazz Autobiographics,” gives a brief overview of the source material and states his aims for the rest of the book. Chapter 1, “New Orleans Musicking,” focuses on Armstrong’s early years in New Orleans and how the modes of expression learned there would

remain with him throughout his life. Chapter 2, “Versioning Autobiography,” explores how Armstrong, whether performing or writing, would tailor the language used for the intended audience, sometimes presenting an alternative version of a story he had told before. Chapter 3, “Writing Scat and Typing Swing,” suggests that Armstrong’s speech and writing are expressive counterparts of his playing and singing, including the hidden meanings found in scat, slang, and jive talk. Chapter 4, “The Productive Ambiguities of Minstrel Sounding,” identifies how twentieth-century performers (of all races) were still involved, intentionally or not, with minstrel traditions of the previous century. Chapter 5, “The Double Resonance of Postcolonial Performance,” continues the explorations introduced in the previous chapter, focusing on the humorous aspect and how Armstrong and other black performers evoked “Sambo” minstrel images for comic purposes. Chapter 6, “Armstrong’s Cultural Politics,” documents Armstrong’s political opinions, his reluctant but occasional direct involvement in cultural concerns, and his coping strategy when changing attitudes during the civil rights movement left him vulnerable to charges of “Tomming” and “blackface buffoonery.” Finally, the “Conclusion” explores in depth Armstrong’s 1933 recording “Laughing Louie.” While rife with minstrel overtones, the recording also reveals the ambiguity of the humor, and Armstrong’s ability to put forth a “trickster’s laughter” in the guise of a “contented Sambo.”

The Louis Armstrong that emerges from this study is a sincere musician, willing entertainer, and sensitive individual, proud of his origins and loyal to his race, who navigated the complex social structures of twentieth-century America the best he could. He always expressed nostalgia for his boyhood and neighborhood—horrible as those conditions were—and maintained many things he learned there throughout life. He often repeated the advice an elder had given him, “Always have a white man . . . [who will] put his hand on your shoulder and say, ‘This is my nigger and can’t nobody harm ya’” (131). From the same source, he seemed to follow the advice, “Always remember, no matter how many times you get Married—Always have another woman for a Sweetheart on the outside” (73). Armstrong was a daily marijuana smoker throughout his life, displayed a penchant for scatological humor, insisted on maintaining a working-class lifestyle, and shunned most of the refinement and expectations that would have been associated with his income and the circles he worked in. “The value system of his youth prevented him from fully embracing notions of bourgeois respectability and modern elegance” (166).

Perhaps the hardest to accept was his willingness to reinterpret but nevertheless work within the “Sambo code” that was expected of blacks in the time and place of his youth. “The coexistence of Sambo and New Negro resonances in the Satchmo persona (with a heavy dose of New Orleans working-class ethics thrown into the mix) created productive ambiguities that secured the performer’s widespread appeal and his double status as master musician and grinning entertainer” (162). Surely this at least partially explains Armstrong’s devotion to autobiographical discourse as he attempted to reveal himself—to help people understand that the charismatic performer and masterful musician on stage was a deeper and more complex human being than one

might expect. He was well aware of his stature and knew that his place in American culture was a complicated one.

Stein has taken an important step in assessing Armstrong's autobiographical record and placing it within a larger cultural narrative. His approach is academic, citing theories in pertinent fields that may bring insight to his inquiries. I have no qualms about this, but Stein's writing can occasionally be dense. For example: "Theodor W. Adorno foregrounds this view [of recording an improvised performance that would otherwise have been lost] when he observes that sound recordings create a kind of herbarium by transferring the living sounds of music to a deadened static sonic text but thereby also preserve an otherwise ephemeral and essentially elusive music that could not otherwise survive" (64); or, "Armstrong's narratives are complex performative negotiations between an African American musician and his heterogeneous audiences that are best described as transmedial enunciations of specific 'scat aesthetics'" (109). One can only chuckle when contrasting such passages with Armstrong's own words, such as his comments on the jazz press: "Bring up terms, goddam [*sic*], the people reading it got to have a dictionary" (100).

The quibble is minor and not meant to detract from the importance of Stein's contribution. This book will surely provide a model for others to follow toward a better understanding of Armstrong's life as well as a broader approach to jazz autobiography in general.

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