

REVIEWS

Music is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz. By Daniel Stein. (Jazz perspectives) Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012. [viii, 349 p. ISBN: 978-0-47-20180-7 \$80 (hdbk); 978-0-47-205189-9 \$45 (pbk); 978-0-47-202850-4 \$40 (ebk)]

The topic of autobiography in jazz is one that has received a good deal of scholarly attention in recent years, proving to be a rich source of analysis for artists' lives, music, and the ways in which they situate themselves within critical and public discourses. Into this growing body of literature comes Daniel Stein's new book from the University of Michigan Press' "Jazz Perspectives" series, *Music is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz*. As is the case with most studies of jazz autobiography, Stein's study of Armstrong provides an analysis of his subject's written work, which, as he notes, is substantial, with two book-length autobiographies, numerous articles for magazines, and a plethora of correspondence to his name. But Stein invokes a "modified conception of autobiographics" (p. 13) as a concept that goes beyond the production of a specific written text. Instead, it encompasses the entire breadth of Armstrong's public persona, of who he has presented himself to be in the public eye. Thus what Stein gives us is not simply an analysis of Armstrong's writing about himself, but of how he wanted to be regarded in the public sphere, and how and why he "performed" his life story the way he did. The idea of the autobiography as a performance that resonates with an artist's music is not a new concept in jazz studies; Kathy Ogren, for example, advanced similar arguments about the performative nature of jazz autobiography in her essay in *Jazz in Mind* (Wayne State University Press, 1991). But Stein gives Armstrong's autobiographical performance a much more thorough, detailed analysis than has heretofore been attempted, and the resulting study shines a bright light not only on Armstrong the person but, more importantly, also on the identity of Louis Armstrong as an iconic public figure.

There are two underlying theoretical contexts within which Stein assesses Armstrong's autobiographical narrative. From a "transmedial" perspective, Stein argues that Armstrong was an individual who was "communicating similar sentiments in and through different media" (p. 23); be it music, public statements, letters, or published writings, Armstrong displayed similar tendencies and communicative strategies. The second theoretical context is the "intermedial," in which the various expressions of Armstrong's story come together to form a whole, creating what might justly be termed a "multimedia" figure. Music, writing, and other aspects of Armstrong's autobiography cannot be easily detached from one another. The bulk of Stein's argument is taken up with an assessment of how these processes played out, as well as the ways in which Armstrong was a conscious, active participant in them, and these two themes run in parallel throughout most of the book.

In the first half of *Music is My Life*, Stein is concerned mainly with the different ways through which the narrative of Armstrong's life and music are created and communicated. The first chapter, for example, examines how music (or the more process-oriented "musicking," a term coined by Christopher Small) influences Armstrong's telling of his own past. Musical performance and written discourse are not, in this view, to be considered separately, but are to be read, as Stein argues, "in conjunction with . . . each other" (p. 33). Stein highlights Armstrong's employment of vernacular techniques of storytelling in recounting his formative years in New Orleans, recollections that were often portrayed differently in his earlier and later writings. In narrating the story of early New Orleans jazz, Stein suggests that Armstrong performed in a manner that is not far removed from his vernacular-influenced musical style, citing important musicians and social contexts in language that could easily be employed to describe musical performance. More importantly, Armstrong is shown to be acutely aware of his audience, ensuring that "he has not severed his roots" to the old tradition, even as he assumes a place as a major media star (p. 54). In the second chapter, Stein turns his attention more directly to Armstrong's efforts as a writer, showing the jazz legend as one who frequently

worked to put down his thoughts on paper, going so far as to carry a portable typewriter with him on his travels. Stein situates Armstrong's writing within the context of important historical moments. The evolution of Armstrong's autobiographical life story over the course of several decades is, in Stein's view, part of a long tradition of change in vernacular idioms. In assessing Armstrong's numerous writings (including a detailed analysis of his two autobiographical books, the largely ghost-written and multi-voiced *Swing the Music* from 1936, and the 1954 book *Satchmo*), Stein argues that Armstrong told his own life story multiple times over the course of his career, the variations on these narratives running in parallel with his multiple recordings and performances of particular songs (a point which he connects – following cultural theorist Dick Hebdige – to African diasporic traditions of variation, or *versioning*). Chapter three more closely examines these relationships between Armstrong's writings and his musical style, which Stein labels (in the chapter's sub-title) "Writing Scat and Typing Swing." Noting the tendency of critics to draw parallels between Armstrong's music and writing (what one writer called a "literary jam session"), Stein points to Armstrong's penchant for "verbal play" (p. 110), "jive" talk and slang, and other forms of language that have an improvisatory, performative character that he employed both in spoken *and* written forms. As Stein notes, Armstrong sought to "reconnect the physical body of the writer and the sonic sensations of the music with the spoken word" (p. 141).

The book's second half situates Armstrong's autobiography within broader cultural contexts, particularly in relation to race, identity, and the lingering discourses of blackface minstrelsy in American popular culture. The fourth chapter addresses Armstrong's interactions with elements of the blackface minstrel tradition, suggesting that Armstrong's invocation of minstrel stereotypes in his performances resonates with a conflicted relationship with white audiences, managers (particularly Joe Glaser), and writers. This is not simply a matter of adopting the minstrel pose, but of donning what Houston Baker has called the "minstrel mask"

(p. 155). The following chapter examines the influence on Armstrong of earlier African American entertainers whose work was also informed by minstrelsy, with particular attention paid to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Bert Williams, two of the best known African American stage performers of the early 1900s. Robinson and Williams had roots in the minstrel shows of the late 19th century, and like Armstrong, their relationship to the genre was complex and conflicted. Both men also had, as Stein illustrates, a deep and lasting impact on Armstrong's performance persona. Stein cites numerous instances of Armstrong's public praise for each man, noting their influence on Armstrong's creation of routines such as "Reverend Satchelmouth" (which Stein links to Williams' "Elder Eatmore" character). The chapter concludes with an assessment of Armstrong's 1949 appearance in the New Orleans Mardi Gras parade as "King of the Zulus," complete with blackface makeup and an outlandish costume. Occurring at a moment when the discourse of race in America was shifting, this event seemed to cause some consternation about Armstrong's role in perpetuating minstrel stereotypes, and as Stein argues, it may have for Armstrong as well. In the book's final chapter, Stein assesses Armstrong's often ambiguous and contradictory relationships to politics, particularly the increasingly urgent topics of racial justice and civil rights. Sensitive to his public image, Armstrong's sentiments about the current state of race relations had to be balanced against his appeal to an overwhelmingly white audience. In one representative piece of correspondence cited by Stein (p. 238), Armstrong cabled President Eisenhower to appeal for action to de-segregate Little Rock Central High School; in the cable, Armstrong addresses Eisenhower as "Daddy," a remark that could either reflect a sense of "jive," or a sense of paternalism. In all these cases, Stein employs a critical thoroughness to argue that Armstrong's public performances were reflective of a nuanced and complicated relationship with the stereotypes of the minstrel tradition, which was neither fully embraced, nor completely discarded. He neither castigates nor excuses Armstrong for his

choices, choosing instead to view him as an artist who was situated in the midst of a number of competing cultural forces.

This book is emphatically not a biography of Louis Armstrong, nor is it a musicological analysis of his work. Readers looking for an in-depth study of Armstrong's music might be disappointed in *Music is My Life*, as there is very little detailed discussion of the music itself. This should not be taken as a criticism of Stein's approach, as his attention is directed towards other topics. Additionally, the book assumes a level of familiarity with Armstrong's life and writings that some readers might find imposing. Those who have not read Armstrong's two autobiographical books, for example, might have a particularly difficult time navigating Stein's arguments. And to be sure, the book is not for the casual reader; grounded in the interdisciplinary scholarship of the "new jazz studies," the language, writing style, and arguments are sometimes dense and complex, and those without a solid grounding in cultural theory or literary criticism might find the book to be a challenge.

What Stein has shown us in *Music is My Life* is that an artist's identity in the public sphere must be understood not simply as a function of a single individual, but as a tangled web of cultures, histories, and media, of which music is only one example. Autobiographies, writ large, are not simply texts, but are themselves discourses which have complicated, messy, and often contradictory narratives. The Louis Armstrong shown to us by Stein is a complex, multidimensional figure who was an active participant in the creation of his own public persona, but one whose participation in that creative act had to be negotiated with larger currents in popular culture. As an exhaustively researched, intricately argued work of scholarship, *Music is My Life* will undoubtedly be seen as a significant contribution to our understanding of Armstrong, as well as a model for examining the ways that musical artists engage with the creation of their public images.

Ken Prouty
Michigan State University

The Life and Twelve-Note Music of Nikos Skalkottas. By Eva Mantzourani. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011. [438 p. ISBN 0-754-6531-0-2. €66.50]

In 1998, the Swedish label BIS released the first of a series of CDs of works by the Greek composer Nikos Skalkottas (1904–1949). This series is now up to its seventeenth CD, and has been successful in exposing a large part of Skalkottas' compositional output. Although Skalkottas was a fairly well-known composer among the circles of twentieth century music connoisseurs, most know him as a talented Schoenberg pupil who had lived in Germany from 1921 until 1933 and was present and active during the development and expansion of the twelve-note movement.

Skalkottas had an interesting but sad life that Greek readers were aware of from books such as those included in Mantzourani's bibliography. However, for non-Greek-speaking readers, Skalkottas and his life remained mostly unknown – there have been a few articles in music journals and some Ph.D. dissertations on him, but no large-scale studies. Eva Mantzourani gives us the first major English-language introduction to Skalkottas' life and work in this book, which is divided into three major parts (I. A Biographical Study, II. Twelve-Note Technique, and III. Twelve-Tone Compositional Development: Case Studies). Clearly, Mantzourani's main strength is music analysis, to which two out of the three parts of this book are dedicated.

Part I covers Skalkottas' lifetime in detail. In the first chapter, 'The Early Years in Greece (1904–1921)', Mantzourani gives a brief overview of the musical situation in Greece from the time of Skalkottas' birth until his graduation from the Athens Conservatoire. In the second chapter, 'The Berlin Period', she discusses the composer's years in Germany, his attachment to the circle of Schoenberg's friends and pupils, and his development into a modernist composer. One of the very interesting parts of the book is reading about the different phases of the Nikos Skalkottas-Manolis Benakis friendship (p. 39ff). Mantzourani includes details and information that are

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