Struttin' with Some Barbecue: Louis Armstrong and the growth of jazz

The music of everyday events

Review of Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life by Laurence Bergreen

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Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life *by Laurence Bergreen. Broadway paperback edition, 1998, 564 pages, $16.00*

Shakespeare invented Caliban. Who the hell dreamed up Louis? Some of the bop boys consider him Caliban, but if he is, he is a mask for a lyric poet much greater than most now writing. Man and mask, sophistication and taste hiding behind clowning and crude manners--the American joke, man -- Ralph Ellison

Louis Armstrong was the single greatest influence on all jazz musicians and is musically without a peer. -- Wynton Marsalis

In an age of disposable pop culture, Louis Armstrong is known to many people only through a handful of recordings made late in his career. For those whose only exposure to Armstrong has been through such innocuous pop tunes as "Hello Dolly" and "What a Wonderful World," it may seem odd to suggest that this gravel-voiced old man was arguably the most innovative and influential musical performer of the century. For anyone who has had the chance to study his entire career, it may seem foolish to suggest otherwise.

Of the many studies of Louis Armstrong, Laurence Bergreen's*Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* is perhaps the first to do him justice as an artist and a man. Originally published in 1997 and now available in paperback, Bergreen's book convincingly demonstrates the true scope of Armstrong's influence, not simply on jazz and music in general, but on the entire realm of twentieth-century art and culture. A supremely talented musician, Armstrong was the first important jazz soloist and vocalist, whose early masterpieces prefigure many of the key developments in jazz by years, even decades. In the process of defining jazz, Armstrong also largely redefined the very relationship of composer and performer, and the notion of the role art should play in the modern world. Bergreen offers considerable insight not only into Armstrong's musical innovations, but his personal character. In the end, Armstrong comes off as a courageous, principled man, whose career offers valuable lessons about the potential of art, and the destructive forces which threaten the artist in class society.

Louis Armstrong was born in extreme poverty to a 15-year-old single mother in New Orleans in 1901. The musical life of New Orleans--"the cradle of jazz"--during this period has of course been extensively documented, but Bergreen does an admirable job both of delineating the musical forms and styles which contributed to jazz, and showing the profound influence they had on Armstrong's early development. In doing so, Bergreen counters one of the most persistent and destructive myths of jazz criticism, the suggestion that Armstrong (or Charlie Parker, or John Coltrane, or Thelonius Monk) was essentially a self-made genius, whose work was so boldly innovative that it is foolish to speak of him being directly influenced by any other performer or style.

In his peevish biography, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius*, for example, James Lincoln Collier concludes, "We can understand how fully original a genius he was when we remember that the influences on *him* were so few ... we find hardly anything that could be called a direct influence.... He came, in the end, out of himself." Such a romanticized view of jazz as a spontaneous, almost mystical process is condescending both to the artist and his art. Armstrong was a highly disciplined performer, who, like any great artist, consciously worked to broaden his artistic horizons. Growing up in the rich musical environment of New Orleans, he was exposed to an extraordinary range of musical styles reflecting the city's history of French, English, Caribbean, Acadian and Latin American settlement. In his memoirs, Armstrong cited many influences, ranging from jazz pioneers Bunk Johnson and King Oliver, to tenors Enrico Caruso and John McCormack, to the songs he heard in the home of the family of Lithuanian Jews for whom he worked collecting junk. To be sure, these individual influences were radically transformed in Armstrong's music, but this is a very different matter from suggesting that they did not exist.

After dropping out of school in the fifth grade, Armstrong was arrested on New Year's Eve, 1912 for firing a pistol into the air. Sentenced to an indefinite term in the Colored Waif's Home, he was given the chance to perform in the reformatory's brass band and began to devote himself seriously to music. After his release in 1914 he began performing as a cornetist with various marching bands and jazz ensembles, and by his mid-teens had developed a formidable reputation in the hundreds of Storyville brothels and honky-tonks which provided the major source of income for the city's musicians. After a two-year stint with the Fate Marable Orchestra on a Mississippi riverboat, he was called north in 1923 to Chicago to join the band of his mentor, cornetist Joe "King" Oliver. Over the next two years, he refined his skills and consolidated his reputation while performing with Oliver's Creole Jazz Band and the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra.

Bergreen extensively details the conditions of racism and economic exploitation which Armstrong and other black musicians faced in this period. At various times in his career, Armstrong was threatened with lynching (once by the Memphis police force), and on one occasion a stick of dynamite was thrown at a theater in which he was performing. Bergreen recounts how Armstrong's first recordings, made with Oliver's band in 1923, were recorded in a Richmond, Indiana studio which

functioned as an unofficial home base for the Ku Klux Klan. So hostile was the environment that the musicians did not risk staying overnight during the two-day session, but instead went back to Chicago and returned by train the following morning. Against this background, the exuberance of these early recordings seems all the more remarkable.

From the outset of his recording career, Armstrong revealed himself as an exceptional talent, whether as a soloist in Oliver's septet, a sideman in Henderson's orchestra, or an accompanist to a variety of singers including Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Alberta Hunter. It was on the first recordings made under his own name, however, the so-called Hot Fives and Hot Sevens recorded between 1925 and 1928, that Armstrong truly came into his own as an artist. More than seven decades after it was created, this is music which still astonishes with its relentless energy and self-assurance. At times, Armstrong seems to operate on an entirely different plane from even the most talented of his contemporaries. Whereas jazz instrumentalists had previously constructed solos which generally adhered to the basic melodic and rhythmic structure of the song on which they were improvising, for Armstrong the "head" became little more than a starting point for exploring new worlds of melodic and rhythmic possibility.

Again and again, one hears the energy level of the music rise with the first notes of an Armstrong solo. His tone and articulation are superb and his upper register simply breathtaking (this is a musician who fellow players report could hit 350 high Cs during a single song). Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of his playing, however, is the rhythmic freedom it expresses. Trailing impossibly behind the beat, he will build a whole chorus on a few staccato bursts, before tearing into a rapid-fire cluster of notes which standard music notation cannot begin to accurately transcribe, but which can be fully understood only by listening to the actual performance. Working within the simple structures of blues and pop melodies, Armstrong creates a tension between form and content which makes a mockery of the notion that the inherent value of a music is proportional to the complexity of its forms.

In these early recordings, Armstrong established himself not only as the preeminent instrumentalist of jazz, but as the dominant vocal influence as well. Both skills are shown to best effect on the record widely regarded as the finest of his career, "West End Blues," recorded in 1928 with a version of the Hot Five featuring another key figure of jazz history, pianist Earl Hines. Other essential performances from this stage of Armstrong's career include "Wild Man Blues," "Potato Head Blues," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," and a stunning duet with Hines, "Weather Bird." Throughout the late '20s and early '30s Armstrong also continued to record widely as a sideman and accompanist, backing, among others, country singer Jimmie Rodgers.

By 1929 Armstrong had abandoned the small-group format in favor of a large orchestra, with which in various forms he was to work for the next 15 years. Less perceptive critics have suggested that this transition marks the beginning of the end of Armstrong's creative peak, and that the work of the 1930s is simply *en masse* inferior to the music of the previous decade. Bergreen, however, goes to great lengths to argue that Armstrong continued to produce work of substance and value, not only through this period, but until the very end of his career. That the 1930s signaled a period of *general* decline, however, is undeniable. One of the most valuable contributions of this book is to show how, given the conditions under which Armstrong was forced to work, such decline was nearly inevitable.

With the institution of Prohibition in 1919, control of nightclubs and whole sectors of the entertainment industry began to shift rapidly to the same gangs which controlled the flow of illegal liquor. It was impossible to escape the influence of these gangsters, and throughout the period of his peak creativity, Armstrong's career was mismanaged by a series of thuggish agents connected to Al Capone and Dutch Schultz. After running afoul of the management of Connie's Inn, the New York club co-owned by Schultz, Armstrong began receiving death threats. His problems escalated when control of his career became the bone of contention between rival gangsters Tommy Rockwell and Johnny Collins. With the complicity of the American Federation of Musicians, Armstrong and his musicians were blackballed for refusing to return to Connie's Inn. Everywhere they went the band was shadowed by thugs. Finally, with his career in tatters, in 1932 Armstrong embarked on the first of two extended tours of England and the Continent. Despite the vitriolic racism displayed by certain sectors of the British press, he was warmly received by the thousands of devoted fans who regarded his music not merely as entertainment, but as art of a very high order. In a typical comment, the influential French critic Hughes PanassiÃ© declared, "I do not think I am making too strong a statement when I say that Louis Armstrong is not only a genius in his own art, but is one of the most extraordinary creative geniuses that all music has ever known."

Notwithstanding the powerful response of critics and audiences, however, Armstrong was again plagued by mismanagement and the physical ailments brought on by an unending series of concerts. When he returned for good to America in January, 1935 he faced lawsuits from French and English managers, as well as his ex-wife, Hot Five pianist Lil Hardin. Johnny Collins barred him from a lucrative engagement at the Apollo Theatre. After a few months of low-paying one-night stands, he turned for help to another gangster-turned-agent, Capone henchman Joe Glaser. An ex-pimp, pedophile and convicted rapist, Glaser was, in the words of one club owner, "the most obscene, the most outrageous and the toughest agent I've ever bought an act from." Using a management style based on his sheer ability to out-thug his thuggish rivals, Glaser quickly solved Armstrong's legal woes and gave new direction to his floundering career. For the next 35 years Glaser would remain as Armstrong's agent, all the while allegedly claiming 50 percent of all revenues as his fee. But while Armstrong would never be short of work again, such stability carried an enormous artistic cost.

As Bergreen makes abundantly clear, to Glaser, Armstrong, Billie Holiday and all the other performers he managed were not artists, but a salable commodity. Glaser had no interest in Armstrong's artistic legacy, and managed his career only with an eye to maximizing revenue. For the rest of his life, Armstrong was committed to an exhausting tour schedule of 300 dates per year. Progressively, Louis Armstrong the artist necessarily gave way to Louis Armstrong the entertainer. Glaser viewed recording as a less reliable form of income than touring, and so generally refused to allot more than two or three days, sliced out of the latest world tour, for even the most important recording sessions. When one recognizes that such major Armstrong recordings as the sublime duets with Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington were made under these conditions, one begins to recognize the true extent of his talent.

Following the Second World War, Armstrong returned to the small-group format with a series of bands called the All Stars. Although these units featured many of the finest musicians he ever worked with, including Hines, trombonist Jack Teagarden and clarinetist Barney Bigard, the years of touring under Glaser's guidance had taken their toll. Armstrong suffered from chronic lip problems, and the All Stars performed a set repertoire within a tightly packaged show which gave little rein to the free improvisational character of the music. Worse still, Armstrong's spontaneous, joyful stage presence had been transformed into exaggerated, clownish mannerisms, an image reinforced by a series of stereotypical and essentially demeaning film roles in which he appeared. To the rebellious and musically adventurous new generation of be-boppers, Armstrong came to represent an embarrassing symbol of racial and artistic accommodation. Dizzy Gillespie decried his "plantation image." Miles Davis went a step further, criticizing both Armstrong *and* Gillespie. "I hated the way they used to laugh and grin for audiences,"

Davis said. "I know *why* they did it--to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players ... they both liked acting the clown."

If Armstrong eventually captured much more respect from the boppers, he did so both through his artistic and personal example. His "plantation image" was reinforced in some minds when in 1956 he began his career as a "goodwill ambassador" for the State Department on a series of international tours. In September of the following year, however, he was preparing for another such tour when he saw images of the Little Rock school desegregation crisis on TV. Declaring that President Dwight Eisenhower was "two-faced" with "no guts," and Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus "an uneducated plow boy," he told a reporter, "The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell." As Bergreen says, "His logic was irrefutable, but in the South, such words were tantamount to a lynching, and in show business, they were suicide."

Despite a secret FBI investigation, boycott campaigns and public condemnation by such prominent figures as Sammy Davis Jr. and Adam Clayton Powell, Armstrong's popularity was such that the Little Rock incident soon blew over. For the remainder of his life, he continued to take a principled stand on political issues, including refusing permanently to return to his home state of Louisiana in protest over a law banning integrated bands, or to appear at the Nixon White House. Even after suffering serious heart and kidney failure in the late 1960s he ignored doctors' orders and continued to perform. By the time of his death in July 1971 his place in musical history was secure, but his exceptional courage and integrity remain under- appreciated. Even if for no other reason, Bergreen's book would deserve to be read for its clarification on that score.

In developing an overall view of Armstrong's art, one finds some useful perspectives in the statements of his detractors. Describing one of his first English appearances, an anonymous critic was appalled by his "savage growling ... as far removed from English as we speak or sing--and as modern--as James Joyce." In one sense, the comparison is valid. In his playful experiments with both spoken and musical language, Armstrong was transforming the musical landscape as surely as Joyce was redefining the boundaries of literature, but for all their similarities, there are essential differences as well. While based on the everyday experiences of a Dublin worker, Joyce's *Ulysses* is the quintessential modernist work--detached, self-consciously allusive and written in a dense prose utterly beyond the comprehension of the vast majority of readers. By contrast, as Bergreen notes, Armstrong's music "really wasn't 'art' in the modernist sense--something singular, apart from society--but actually belonged to daily life, to nightclubs and brothels, to funerals and parades and picnics and other everyday events." To begin to understand the cultural impact of jazz one need only read Bergreen's description of Chicago's "Black Belt" in the 1920s:

"Louis's black neighbors, hardworking porters, stevedores, postal clerks, and laborers by day, went home, rested, washed, and in the middle of the night -- at 2:00 A.M.! -- rose, dressed in their best, and went out to the street to meet companions, to find women, to go to the joints over on 35th Street where New Orleans jazz was heard: the Dreamland, the Plantation, the Sunset, the De Luxe, and the Elite Cafe."

Clearly such a phenomenon cannot be explained simply as a fad or popular entertainment. That an entire community should be so energized and united in a common activity shows how fully this new "music of everyday events" gave form to the hopes, desires and fears of an entire population. Jazz suggested the potential of art to transform the audience from passive observers to active participants in a creative process by nature spontaneous, risky and unpredictable.

It is significant that the leading figure of a music whose appeal lay in its power to capture the rhythms of everyday life for millions of people was a man as cosmopolitan as Armstrong. The picture which emerges from Bergreen's biography is that of an individual utterly free of prejudice and narrow-mindedness, who saw his art as a means for overcoming the divisions of race, culture and class. Within the stifling racial hierarchy of New Orleans, where racial lines were drawn not just between black and white, but according to apartheid-style determinations of racial purity (Creole, quadroon, octraroon, Negro), this is a matter of no small importance to an understanding of Armstrong's work. As Bergreen shows, dark-skinned blacks like Armstrong were subjected to discrimination not only by whites, but by pale-skinned Creoles. Racial stratification extended to the musical life of New Orleans, particularly in the contrast between the raucous music of black combos and marching bands and the more restrained, self-consciously "European" sound of the Creole orchestras. There was considerable antipathy between the groups, to the point that even after establishing a reputation in Chicago, Armstrong was snubbed by bandleader Sammy Stewart when he applied for a position in Stewart's Creole Orchestra. Undeterred by the prejudice around him, Armstrong found inspiration in an enormous range of musical sources and styles, declaring his admiration even for the schmaltziest of white orchestras, the Guy Lombardo band ("That band plays the tune. They put that melody there and it's beautiful"). The sheer breadth of Armstrong's tastes may have been exceptional, but, as Bergreen shows, the diversity of influences was a key factor in the development of jazz.

In tracing the complex interplay of races and cultures and the tensions within the respective communities in the growth of jazz music, Bergreen undercuts the perspective of a recurrent strain of jazz criticism first articulated in (Amiri Baraka) LeRoi Jones's influential 1963 work *Blues People* and continued in the writings of critics such as Angela Y. Davis (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*). Baraka and his followers present jazz and its antecedents in quasi-mystical terms as a sacred ritual of a self-enclosed and fundamentally timeless African-American society--in Baraka's words: "a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood." Viewing jazz through the murky lens of black nationalism, such writers inevitably present even the most important white innovators in jazz as imitators whose work, whatever its virtues, nonetheless represents a dilution of an artistic form ultimately traceable not to particular social origins, but to the ineffable mysteries of Race.

Ultimately, such writing serves to obscure an understanding of the social contradictions which help give birth to art, and against which art in turn serves as a powerful weapon. As would rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll a generation later, jazz provided a common language through which millions of people were able to test, however tentatively, some of the artificial barriers thrown up by class society. Armstrong himself was involved in a number of early interracial recordings, and two of his most important musical partnerships were with a white Texan (Jack Teagarden) and the privileged son of a German-American family from Davenport, Iowa (Bix Beiderbecke).

The contrasting styles of Armstrong and Beiderbecke show how accommodating jazz proved to different artistic temperaments. Influenced heavily by the compositions of Schoenberg and Debussy, Beiderbecke's tentative, oblique cornet playing was seemingly far removed from Armstrong's warm and assertive style, but within the framework of jazz the two men developed an intimate musical relationship. In one of the most memorable passages of the book, Armstrong recalls their after-hours meetings:

"When Bix would finish up at the Chicago Theatre at night, he would haul it over to the Sunset where I was playing and stay right there with us until the last show was over and the customers would go home.... Then we would lock the doors. Now you talking about jam sessions, huh, those were the things, with everyone feeling each other's note or chord, and blending with each other instead of trying to cut each other. We tried to see how good we could make music sound, which was an inspiration and play some of the sweetest things, real touching."

Against this backdrop, the racial categorizing of an Amiri Baraka is seen in all its crudeness ("The white musician understood the blues first as music, but seldom as attitude, since the attitude, or world-view, the white musician was responsible to was necessarily quite a different one"). Within such criticism, art is effectively reduced to a mechanical reproduction of the ideological values of a given culture--however the writer chooses to define the cultural boundaries. This is nonsense. As a profound expression of the deepest human desires and needs, art necessarily places the artist in conflict with the ideological values of a class society whose very existence depends on the suppression of these impulses. Few art forms of the twentieth century have demonstrated as dramatically as jazz the absurdity of the suggestion that the limits of art are dictated by the artist's sense of "responsibility" to a particular set of cultural prejudices and assumptions.

Through Armstrong's example, the fundamental form of jazz was changed from polyphony (that is, the free interplay of voices within a melodic structure) to a more simplified ensemble approach in which the soloist played the dominant role. His innovations served as a focal point for developments taking place independently throughout the country, and showed musicians possibilities scarcely hinted at in the comparatively primitive work of early recording artists such as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Despite the efforts of bland imitators like Paul Whiteman to "civilize" the music, authentic jazz continued to thrive as a popular art form. By the 1930s, the music of black ghettos had become a truly international language, whose major performers included an Argentinean Indian (the brilliant, still largely unrecognized guitarist Oscar Aleman) and a Belgian Gypsy (Django Reinhardt). Jazz also served as the cornerstone for other musics ranging from the western swing of Bob Wills to the *hapa haole* style of Hawaiian Sol Hoopii. Through all these developments, Armstrong remained a primary influence. Later artists would continue to expand the technical frontiers of jazz, but the passion, joy and simple beauty of his music are unsurpassed.

We can only speculate what Louis Armstrong might have achieved under social conditions less hostile to art. Born into poverty and racial oppression and forced to endure a lifetime of exploitative treatment seemingly ruinous to a creative imagination, he nonetheless produced one of the most impressive bodies of work of any musical performer this century. *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* is an intelligent and deeply moving account of the life and work of this remarkable man.

Suggested recordings:

Louis Armstrong's work as a recording artist is well represented, with over one hundred CDs currently available. The 3-volume Columbia series *Louis Armstrong--Hot Fives and Hot Sevens* provides a comprehensive introduction to the most influential recordings in jazz history, but the single disc *Twenty-Five Great Hot Fives and Hot Sevens* (Living Era) also gives a good overview.*Great Original Performances, 1923-1931* (Louisiana Red Hot) includes a number of Hot Five and Seven tracks, along with some of the best of Armstrong's early 1930s work with a large orchestra. Of all the collections devoted to the latter period, *Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, 1932-1933* (Louisiana Red Hot) is perhaps the best. *Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines*, (Columbia) is also well worth seeking out.

Armstrong's early work as a whole, from the Creole Jazz Band to the Louis Armstrong Orchestra, is surveyed in the excellent 4-CD Columbia anthology *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1923-1934* .

Some of Armstrong's finest vocal performances were his 1937-1940 collaborations with the Mills Brothers. All these sessions, along with other brilliant tracks by the Mills Brothers with Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, are included in the Jazz Archives CD *Louis Armstrong and the Mills Brothers.* The album also provides a revealing glimpse of the contradictory social attitudes of the period, with songs ranging from a satirical attack on Roosevelt's WPA program to the astonishingly anachronistic celebration of the antebellum South, "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny."

Among the many recordings by the All-Stars, *Carnegie Hall Concert, 1947* (Ambassador) and *Louis Armstrong and His All-Stars* (Louisiana Red Hot) are particularly worthwhile. Some of the best tracks from the three albums with Ella Fitzgerald are collected in the Verve Masters CD *Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.* The collaboration with Duke Ellington is also available on a Capitol CD entitled *Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington: The Complete Roulette Recordings.*