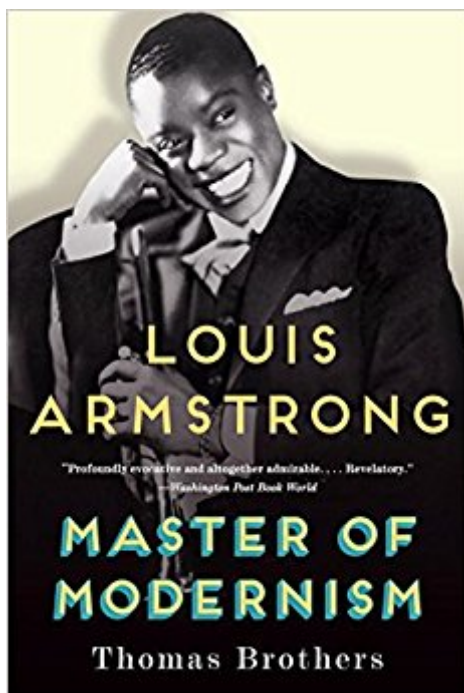


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Louis Armstrong, Master Of Modernism



Synopsis

Finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Biography. "Profoundly evocative and altogether admirable" [The writing and detail are so brilliant that I found the volume revelatory." —Tim Page, Washington Post

Nearly 100 years after bursting onto Chicago's music scene under the tutelage of Joe "King" Oliver, Louis Armstrong is recognized as one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. A trumpet virtuoso, seductive crooner, and consummate entertainer, Armstrong laid the foundation for the future of jazz with his stylistic innovations, but his story would be incomplete without examining how he struggled in a society seething with brutally racist ideologies, laws, and practices. Thomas Brothers picks up where he left off with the acclaimed Louis Armstrong's New Orleans, following the story of the great jazz musician into his most creatively fertile years in the 1920s and early 1930s, when Armstrong created not one but two modern musical styles. Brothers wields his own tremendous skill in making the connections between history and music accessible to everyone as Armstrong shucks and jives across the page. Through Brothers's expert ears and eyes we meet an Armstrong whose quickness and sureness, so evident in his performances, served him well in his encounters with racism while his music soared across the airwaves into homes all over America. Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism blends cultural history, musical scholarship, and personal accounts from Armstrong's contemporaries to reveal his enduring contributions to jazz and popular music at a time when he and his bandmates couldn't count on food or even a friendly face on their travels across the country. Thomas Brothers combines an intimate knowledge of Armstrong's life with the boldness to examine his place in such a racially charged landscape. In vivid prose and with vibrant photographs, Brothers illuminates the life and work of the man many consider to be the greatest American musician of the twentieth century. 65 illustrations

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Jazz fans have been blessed in 2013 with two exceptional biographies, Stanley Crouch's *Kansas City Lightning* (the first volume in his life of Charlie Parker) and Terry Teachout's *Duke*. That pair is now joined by Brothers' monumental follow-up to Louis Armstrong's *New Orleans* (2006). The focus here is on Armstrong's most fertile period as an instrumental and vocal innovator—in Brothers' convincing argument, a modernist—from his youthful arrival in Chicago in 1922 to join Joe "King" Oliver through the years of the Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings (culminating, sadly, with the degrading movies of the early 1930s). The strong emphasis, properly, is on the music, with Armstrong's personal life (his marriage, his eccentricities, his marijuana use) handled only superficially. This is an enormously rich, if sometimes difficult, biography, and it delivers a remarkably clear and knowing discussion of a new musical form rooted in African music and the blues. Although his book is not for those unfamiliar with jazz, Brothers does note, after a particularly dense explication, that "the listener does not need this all spelled out . . . for the ear will recognize it effortlessly and unconsciously." True, but this biography provides an illuminating accompaniment. There has been much written on Armstrong, but Brothers' work, covering an astonishingly creative decade, is comprehensive and firmly grounded in musicology and in the racial and cultural climate of the 1920s. It is voluminously researched, compellingly written, and supported by a valuable discography and bibliography. A bravura accomplishment, soon to be followed, one hopes, by a third volume covering Armstrong's role in midcentury popular music. --Mark Levine --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Balances technical language with scene-setting context and colorful descriptive passages. . . . A rounded, rigorous, vivid portrait." - Financial Times "Evokes the quick-fingered, megawatt-smiled music legend's formative years, when he moved from New Orleans to Chicago and on to New York in pursuit of musical fame—and a style all his own." - Vogue "Thomas Brothers has brought together startling new discoveries and insights, a fresh look at hallowed recordings, and an understanding of the multifold influences that helped shape Louis Armstrong. In

so doing, he has written by far the most complete and original look at an American icon whose influence continues into its second century. • - Loren Schoenberg, artistic director, the National Jazz Museum in Harlem • "Honest, uncompromising, and wholly sympathetic to its subject, Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism is the ideal for jazz biography and criticism." • - Scott DeVeaux, author of *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*

Books about Jazz often fall in the panegyric category: "every Jazz musician is a genius" (see the encomiums penned by French critic Hugues Panassié) replete with fanciful anecdotes (a trumpet player blowing so hard that he blows the mute out!!); or the straight, well documented biography. These books rarely offer an accessible mix of solid historical and musical analysis. Thomas Brothers' *Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism* is one of the best books written about Armstrong, covering the decade starting in 1921 which is generally considered the most creative of his career. For another fascinating look at Armstrong's All Star period in the late 40s and 50s, *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* by Terry Teachout is a must. Prof Brothers masterly describe the sociological (i.e racial, not to put too fine a point on it), musical and music industry background of the period. Joe Oliver, Lil Harding, Fletcher Henderson and other are fleshed out. I found his explanation of the copyrighting of written out tunes very revealing. His analyses of early masterpieces like *Weather Bird* or *Tight Like This* very clear to anyone without knowledge of advance musical theory, although knowing basic solfeggio will enhance your pleasure. As a side note, the famous cadenza from *West End Blues* is convincingly explained as inspired by arpeggios exercises Armstrong was practicing (see samples of classical cadenzas in Arban's method) Finally, Prof Brothers include throughout the book references to recordings, giving the time in seconds where the examples he mentions are played.

In volume two of his biography of Louis we are treated to a day-by-day walk through and evaluation of the career of the greatest musical genius of the 20th century starting at the moment he was summoned from New Orleans to Chicago by King Oliver. Lots of detailed information that every jazz lover should know.

It started a little slowly, but the book picked up steam as it began to put out a great amount of information about characters apart from Armstrong who were important in their own right and also as context for the rise of Armstrong. Depending on how widely and or deeply you've read, this will

be a source that can fill in a lot of gaps in your knowledge.

Exceptionally well written, drawing the reader into the formative years of Armstrong's growth into a master of his craft.

Liked it.

We could not get a more detailed, thorough and scholarly study of the development of Louis Armstrong's musical abilities, especially during this - the most creative phase of his musical life. Once having absorbed the author's carefully-built argument it is easy to understand the breadth and depth of Louis' influence on Western popular music, let alone his influence on jazz. This volume will stand the test of time for decades to come, taking its rightful place among the canon of books about Louis. Hats off to Dr. Brothers. Five stars!

Thomas Brothers is the definitive scholar on Louis Armstrong. In future centuries, when people wish to study Armstrong, one of the most important figures of the 20th century, they will need to look no further than Brothers' extensive oeuvre on Armstrong to get every aspect of the picture.

This is a great, thoughtful biography of the first 21 years of Louis Armstrong's life and a great, provocative history of the birth of jazz in New Orleans during those same years (roughly 1900-1921). It is a fascinating look at the sociological factors that made New Orleans the ideal place for the birth of jazz and how that coalesced into the creation of one of the two most influential jazz musicians of all time (Kansas City's Charlie Parker being the other). Thomas Brothers writes with an academician's accuracy (he's a professor of music at Duke) but without academic jargon. I found this to be an extremely interesting, informative, compelling read. Even if you aren't a jazz fan (which I am) but just interested in the history of race relations and the development of African-American culture, you should check this out.

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