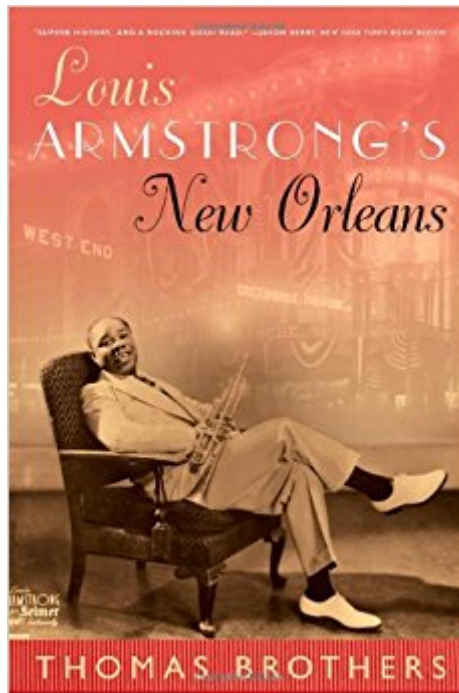




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Louis Armstrong's New Orleans



Synopsis

"The best book ever produced about Louis Armstrong by anyone other than the man himself." —Terry Teachout, *Commentary*

In the early twentieth century, New Orleans was a place of colliding identities and histories, and Louis Armstrong was a gifted young man of psychological nimbleness. A dark-skinned, impoverished child, he grew up under low expectations, Jim Crow legislation, and vigilante terrorism. Yet he also grew up at the center of African American vernacular traditions from the Deep South, learning the ecstatic music of the Sanctified Church, blues played by street musicians, and the plantation tradition of ragging a tune. Louis Armstrong's New Orleans interweaves a searching account of early twentieth-century New Orleans with a narrative of the first twenty-one years of Armstrong's life. Drawing on a stunning body of first-person accounts, this book tells the rags-to-riches tale of Armstrong's early life and the social and musical forces that shaped him. The city and the musician are both extraordinary, their relationship unique, and their impact on American culture incalculable. 16 pages of illustrations

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this many-sided chronicle of Armstrong's early life, *Brothers* (Louis Armstrong: In His Own Words) paints a passionate, intimate picture of the teeming musical brew of early 20th-century New Orleans and how it was uniquely suited to nurture both jazz and Armstrong's exceptional musical talents. "Armstrong lived a childhood of poverty, on the margins of society, and this position put him right in the middle of the vernacular traditions that were fueling the new music of which he would eventually become one of the world's greatest masters," *Brothers* writes. As he

shows in his erudite narrative, "Little Louis" was influenced by a number of local factors: the heterophonic singing in his mother's Sanctified church; the blues music of "rags-bottles-and-bones" men who played on three-foot-long tin horns; the sights he witnessed peeking into Funky Butt Hall, where "chicks would get way down, shake everything

Starred Review As its title indicates, Brothers' book is more about Armstrong's context than his life, more a focused microhistory than a biography. It is motivated by the perennial question, how did Armstrong become the central figure in the most significant musical development in American history? Certainly, he had an initial strong attraction to music and a good ear, but Brothers shows how he was in the right place at the right time. Fin-de-siecle New Orleans had a musical culture of great depth, thanks to its white French and Spanish heritages; a pool of artisan-class musicians trained in European technique in the Creoles of color; and an influx of African-based musical forms and practices contributed by the newest, ex-slave contingent of the populace. Jim Crow was pressing the Creoles, forcing associations with previously disdained darker blacks that proved particularly helpful to budding musicians looking for gigs and, should they realize its advantages in terms of greater earning power, technical finishing. If that structure of opportunity is Brothers' central theme, it is also just the main channel in this river of a book. Tributaries to it include the distinctives of black sanctified worship, the possibilities of black children's street life, ragtime and the blues as separate resources for nascent jazz, and masculine roles in Armstrong's New Orleans. Place this book at the core of jazz and American culture collections, and don't expect it to be displaced--ever. Ray Olson
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In-depth well written biography of the early years of Louis Armstrong. Recommended for anyone interested in learning about the birth of jazz and Armstrong's role in its formation. A fascinating history of how America's multi-cultural heritage was essential to creating Armstrong's unique "voice" and jazz as a new art form.

It gives a great overview of the NOLA Satchmo grew up in.

Thomas Brothers has pulled off the near-impossible for a youngish man living in the 21st century. He has managed to dissect and explain most of the complex social and musical interactions in New Orleans as they existed in the years when Louis Armstrong was growing up, coming of age, and

learning his way around the horn and the music business. He adroitly explains how the social and cultural climate of New Orleans was exactly right for not only the formation of the music we call jazz, but also how it trickled down from the uptown African-Americans to the downtown Creoles. I only give the book four stars, however, for one reason. Mr. Brothers does not include or describe the jazz music created by Jack "Papa" Laine, Tom Brown and THEIR bands in the further downtown white districts. Laine was leading jazz bands from the mid-1890s on, and his graduates included virtually all the better-known white jazz musicians such as Nick La Rocca, Larry Shields, Eddie Edwards and Alcide "Yellow" Nunez. While it is true that the "Original" Dixieland Jazz Band claimed credit for music that was not their own, the same was true of "blues composer" W.C. Handy, whose wholesale theft of folk material was exposed by Jelly Roll Morton in 1938; of Clarence Williams, who routinely stole songs from everyone (Brothers even blithely credits him with stealing "I Wish That I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate" from Armstrong); and of Benjamin and Reb Spikes, who stole songs from EVERYBODY, black, Creole or white. As a matter of fact, the ODJB's original clarinetist, Alcide "Yellow" Nunez, even stole "Livery Stable Blues" from his former bandmates, copyrighting it under his name and that of white bandleader Vincent Lopez! So much for honor among thieves. Despite this oversight, the book is excellent in every respect. Armstrong's development, musically, intellectually and socially, is explained in painstaking detail. (One of my few complaints is that Mr. Brothers overuses the word "hegemony" as much as Gene Santoro overuses the word "zeitgeist.") Very well written, thoroughly researched, and a full explanation of exactly "how" jazz developed, especially in New Orleans, and how this development affected the greatest early jazz soloist of them all. Highly recommended.

The book looks at the history of Louisiana, Louis Armstrong and music as a complex organism, and it was and is. Great Book.

Having known Louie for some years, this book is an fine account of a superior life and artist!

It is amazing, beautiful, and triumphant that African Americans, who at the beginning of the 20th-century were mostly despised by the dominant White culture and subject to wanton and homicidal violence in the South, should at the same time have created jazz -- the only original American music and which, in its origins, is essentially happy and upbeat. In Mr. Brothers's superb new book, he examines the reasons for this aspect of jazz, as well as many other aspects. As he says in his introduction to "Louis Armstrong's New Orleans", it is not so much a biography of

Satchmo as it is an attempt to place him and jazz in the historical, social, political, and musical contexts into which the man and the music were born. Satchmo was the perfect person in the perfect place at the perfect time. The aftermath of the defeat of Reconstruction and the institution of Jim Crow laws was the impetus for 40,000 ex-slaves to flee the plantations and move to New Orleans. Among their possessions they brought their music. This music and its players fused African rhythms and tonalities with Western instruments. The old plantation bands, which were composed mostly of string instruments, began the tradition of "ragging" the tune; that is, taking the melody, breaking it apart, and riffing on it. When this music arrived in New Orleans, it was translated into wind instruments such as the clarinet and trombone, but especially the cornet. Blues structure also developed at the same time. At the beginning of the 20th century, brass bands were flourishing in New Orleans. Buddy Bolden, a cornetist who played the blues, became the first jazz soloist. The music took off. Into this fecund world, Louis Armstrong was born (1901). The son of a teenage mother and absent father, Louis roamed the streets of New Orleans selling newspapers, carrying the instruments of band players, and getting himself into trouble occasionally. Trouble sent him to school where he got his own instrument and emerged as a cornetist who, at the age of 14, was good enough to be a substitute in bands. By 17 he was renowned in his hometown and by his mid-twenties he had moved to Chicago as part of the Great Migration of Blacks to the north. He had come to Chicago by invitation of his cornet mentor, Joe "King" Oliver. Soon, Satch would be cutting the records -- with his Hot Five and Hot Seven bands -- that first made his reputation and then made him a planetary legend. All of this Mr. Brothers tells in a literate, compulsively readable style. But he brings more to the table. What is crucial in his book is the understanding of the many strands of context so important to a full picture of any artist's achievement. One example: Mr. Brothers highlights how important the cornet was to the origins of jazz in New Orleans because it was a brass instrument that could be played LOUD and with dexterity. In fact, everybody who remembered Buddy Bolden remarked on the fact that he played loudly (Bolden went insane around 1907 before he could be recorded). This was important because the music mostly took place outdoors in the streets and could be heard a mile or two away. Thus audiences flocked to the bands. Of equal importance in this analysis is that jazz developed before there were automobiles; consequently, cities were quiet enough so that a band could be heard from two miles away. Another thread of analysis Mr. Brothers foregrounds: The established Creole musicians of New Orleans. They lived downtown on the west side of Canal Street. They were of French heritage and classically trained because of it. They looked down on the "raggy" people, i.e., Blacks, who lived uptown on the other side of Canal. Eventually the Jim Crow laws caught up with the Creoles, and so there grew some

empathy between the groups as outsiders trapped by White racism. This social and political dynamic eventually brought the musicians together and benefited both ethnic groups. Many Black musicians learned to read music from the Creole example, and many Creole musicians learned how to "rag time," i.e., play jazz. Sidney Bechet (note the French last name), the greatest of early jazz clarinetists, is the most famous example of a Creole jazz musician. Jelly Roll Morton may have been partly Creole as well. There is some examination of jazz in Mr. Brothers's book that requires an understanding of very basic music theory. It is helpful to know the fairly rigid and repetitive musical structure of 12-bar blues. It is also of use to know that 4/4 "flat" time means that every beat in a 4-bar measure is of equal weight -- unlike European music in which the first and third beats are accented. Knowing what a melody is and that the heart and soul of jazz is to take the melody apart ("rag" it) is also necessary. I confess to being a musician, but still, these are minor matters, not major ones in appreciating this terrific book. Finally: One highly recommended companion to "Louis Armstrong's New Orleans", is Lee Friedlander's book of photographs, "The Jazz People of New Orleans."

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