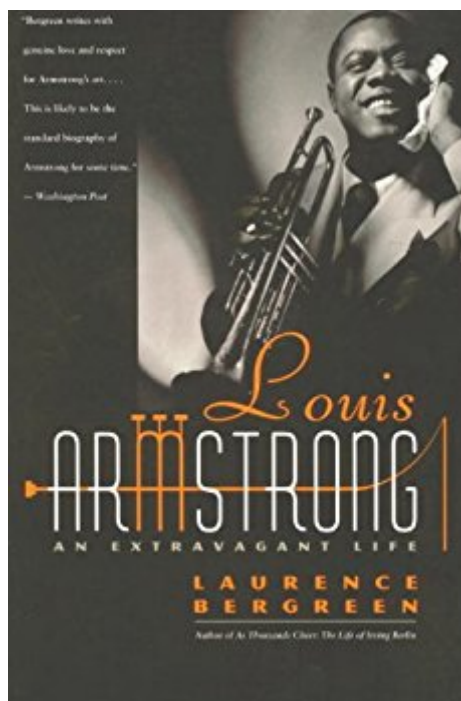


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Louis Armstrong



Synopsis

Louis Armstrong was the founding father of jazz and one of this century's towering cultural figures, yet the full story of his extravagant life has never been told. Born in 1901 to the sixteen-year-old daughter of a slave, he came of age among the prostitutes, pimps, and rag-and-bone merchants of New Orleans. He married four times and enjoyed countless romantic involvements in and around his marriages. A believer in marijuana for the head and laxatives for the bowels, he was also a prolific diarist and correspondent, a devoted friend to celebrities from Bing Crosby to Ella Fitzgerald, a perceptive social observer, and, in his later years, an international goodwill ambassador. And, of course, he was a dazzling musician. From the bordellos and honky-tonks of Storyville--New Orleans's red light district--to the upscale nightclubs in Chicago, New York, and Hollywood, Armstrong's stunning playing, gravelly voice, and irrepressible personality captivated audiences and critics alike. Recognized and beloved wherever he went, he nonetheless managed to remain vigorously himself. Now Laurence Bergreen's remarkable book brings to life the passionate, courageous, and charismatic figure who forever changed the face of American music.

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Customer Reviews

This biography of Louis Armstrong presents the rich mosaic that was the life of one of the greatest musicians and entertainers of the 20th Century. It uses his life story to describe the history of early jazz--from his childhood on the streets of New Orleans, his move to Chicago where he made his famous recordings with the Hot Five and Hot Seven, and on to New York and Europe. I was surprised to learn that in many ways his charismatic stage persona was his real personality. But at the same time he was quite a complex character (four marriages, daily marijuana use, managers with mob connections, laxative proselytizations). Aside from his musical genius, he was a cultural icon--the first African American entertainer to cross over to broad popularity throughout America. The story is often told in Louis's own words, making it easier to get to know him. I loved the story about his first trip back to New Orleans after he spent nearly a decade going from being a local talent to an international star. When I got to the last chapter I put the book aside for a little while--I didn't want the book or Louis's life to end.

Louis Armstrong, *An Extravagant Life* is superb because it recreates the man and his times--and how the man changed his time. Laurence Bergreen details the poverty of Storyville, New Orleans: its honky tonks and violence, and the surprising sustenance a resilient child found there. We see how Louis Armstrong found his family among the white, Jewish Karnovskys, and in the stern Waif's Home where he became a musician. Bergreen shows us the shameful racism of the South (and North), and how Louis' exuberant personality and music helped transcend it. The Armstrong we come to know is humble, humorous, brimming with the energy of jazz itself. We learn how Armstrong invented solos and scat singing, and how his jazz went beyond even music. That is, he mesmerized America with a personality that brought rich and poor, black and white, hip and square together. Armstrong's blowing and singing, his restless amiable spirit, is a bracing ode to being alive. Bergreen's meticulous empathy lets us share the extravagance.

I believe I've read them all and nothing ever written about Louis Armstrong is as detailed as this book. Moreso than the "tired old stories" you see repeated in version after version of other tales of Armstrong, this one actually delves into the personal life as well as the persona of the man. Every Armstrong fan needs to read this book - it's an awakening!

If you are looking for a discography of Louis Armstrong, don't look to this book. However, if what you want is the life and times of the man - then this is the book for you. Personally, this is what I want in a jazz biography - I'll listen to the CD's or radio for a discography. Mr Bergreen describes in telling

detail the early stages of Louis's life in New Orleans - and believe me, it was no paradise! He (Bergreen) is also adept at giving the reader the overall feel of New Orleans at the turn of the century. So at the beginning we get a view of Louis hauling coal to make money for his mother amidst abject poverty and racial discrimination. It is really beyond belief that Louis - at the very bottom of the heap - was able to struggle through this and become an American icon. We are also introduced to a cast of characters that entered or played significantly in Louis's life. None of these people were angels - so in effect they all make for interesting reading. And although Louis is "King of Jazz" he is no saint himself (his 4 wives could attest to that!). This book is a great read - not only if you are interested in the rise to fame of a great African American, but it truly captures the spirit and tough times of that era from New Orleans to Chicago to New York. Kim C.

This biography does an excellent job of painting a portrait of a man who changed 20th Century music, not only in America, but across the globe. Learning the details of Louis' life and struggles only enhances my appreciation of his music. The impact of Louis Armstrong is still felt on several levels in our society. While Armstrong did not have a hand in inventing jazz, he was instrumental in pushing it artistically. With a minimum of formal instruction, he revolutionized the trumpet as well as singing in Jazz and popular music. He was also instrumental as one of the early African-American celebrities, in breaking down racial barriers. Laurence Bergreen does a fine job of illustrating the joys and struggles that Armstrong encountered. The devastating poverty and harsh social environment of Louis' youth are keenly detailed. He shows how these obstacles are overcome by Armstrong's love of music and of life. He also shows the prejudice and mob intimidation that Louis had to endure on his road to stardom. All in all, this book is an inspiring work and testimonial to the life and music of one of the greatest trumpet players and entertainers to grace this planet. I would seriously recommend this to anyone with an interest in music, especially jazz.

An Extravagant Life is much more than a biography of Louis Armstrong. Having been born at the turn of the century, in New Orleans, this book is a travelogue of that city from a unique perspective (the underside), a history of jazz, a snapshot of race relations and segregation in America for this entire century, AND a rich tapestry of the life of a man who started out with no advantages except his musical gift and a positive attitude. Armstrong was a man of very strong tolerances: alcohol, marijuana, food, women, gangsters, laxatives, and music, to name just a few. The essence of Louis is captured in Bergreen's book: We like him, we care for him, we pity him, and we almost understand him. We are definitely fascinated by him.

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