This is Duke professor Thomas Brothers’ third book about Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong, jazz and stardom under Jim Crow

By David Mescoski

given the overheated rhetoric, it would be easy to think that America is more racially polarized in 2014 than it's ever been. But imagine if one of the most popular African-American entertainers of our time — someone on the level of Kanye West or Samuel L. Jackson — were coerced into appearing in a movie cartoonishly dressed as a stereotypical cannibal, wearing a leopardskin loincloth.

That’s what happened to the great jazzman Louis Armstrong in the 1932 short film “Rhapsody in Black and Blue.” And it’s one of several eye-openers recounted in Duke University professor Thomas Brothers’ new book, “Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism” (Norton, 594 pages). But in Brothers’ telling, such indignities were part of the Faustian bargain for black artists during America’s segregation era.

“‘When I’m Sleepy Time Down South’ was Armstrong’s theme song all through the ‘50s,” Brothers said. “It’s this highly romanticized vision of South-
ARMSTRONG
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ern happiness where the slaves were content and spent their
days singing — 'darkies crooning
under a pale moon.' Armstrong
sang that twice every show, at the beginning and the end,
but it was protection for him. He may have been the
best trumpet player and most
interesting singer in America,
but he had no designs on social
progress, which should not be
surprising. He had a fifth-
grade education and grew up
under Jim Crow segregation,
disenfranchised in a position
of political powerlessness. He
was not engaged politically
very much.

Even so, Armstrong still
pushed back when and where
he felt he could. Armstrong
refused to play in his homet-
town of New Orleans for
almost a decade after the city
banned integrated bands in
the mid-1950s. And Brothers
opens "Master of Modernism"
with an amazing scene
from Memphis
in 1931.

After spending a night in
jail for sitting next to a white
woman on a bus (his manager's
wife), Armstrong performed for
an audience that included the
cops who arrested him. So he
opened the show with a song
dedicated to the Memphis
Police Department, "I'll Be
Glad When You're Dead, Yo
Rascal You." The fact that
Armstrong did not openly
challenge segregation was
probably the only reason he
got away with it.

As one of the world's fore-
most authorities on Arm-
strong, Brothers is the
perfect guide for a tour through
his musical and racial legacy.
Brothers began his serious
study of Armstrong by editing
a 2001 collection of his
writings, "Louis Armstrong: In His
Own Words: Selected
Writings."

That led to a second book,
2007's "Louis Armstrong's
New Orleans," largely based
on thousands of hours of oral-
history tape recordings of
Armstrong and other Cre-
cent City musicians. Then
Brothers decided to write a
third book covering the
period immediately after
Armstrong moved from New
Orleans to Chicago.

"These were the glory
years of Armstrong's career,
1922 to 1932, when he had
the most historical impact
and was 'The Man,'" Brothers
said. "He invented a solo
style of trumpet that might
be the most influential in jazz
history, as well as a singing
style that was a big influence
on Ella Fitzgerald, Billie
Holiday, Bing Crosby. Virtually
all jazz singing comes from
him doing the repertoire of
popular songs that everybody
knew."

Armstrong had just turned
21 when he arrived in Chicago
in 1921 to join the band of
another New Orleans expatriate,
King Oliver. Through stints in
various bands and on Broad-
way, Armstrong forged a huge-
ly influential style of trumpet-
playing that combined the
loose swing of New Orleans
with classical precision. As
Brothers writes, Armstrong's
music even became an instru-
ment of budding African-
American consciousness
during the "Great Migration"
northward during the 1920s
and '30s.

Second-class status
At the same time, Arm-
strong was very conscious of
his second-class status in Jim
Crow America, and just as
determined to move up the
economic ladder. So in the
1930s, he began making rec-
Recordings aimed at the white
market, singing "Stardust,"
"Mack the Knife" and other
popular songs of the day.

The strategy worked and
Armstrong became the top-
selling record-maker in Amer-
ica, but many of his African-
American peers branded him
as a sellout or worse. In 1949,
bandleader Dizzy Gillespie
would dismiss Armstrong as
"the plantation character that
so many of us ... younger men
... resent."

Armstrong, who died in
1971, would have this image
for the rest of his life. He was
quoted as saying, "I'm not a
racer, I'm not a color, I'm
Louis Armstrong."

1986 AP FILE PHOTO
Louis Armstrong greets the crowd at the Atlanta Jazz Festival in 1966. A new book by
Duke professor Thomas Brothers explores Armstrong's life in Jim Crow America.

"Satchmo," the elder square
who sold out with soft hits
like "Hello, Dolly!" But as
Brothers points out, that wasn't fair given the magni-

Book discussion
What: Thomas Brothers
discusses "Louis Armstrong:
Master of Modernism" at the
N.C. Literary Festival.
When: 2:30 p.m. April 6
Where: James B. Hunt Jr.
Library, N.C. State University
Centennial campus, Raleigh
Cost: Free
Info: lib.ncsu.edu

literaryfestival

Children of an unprivileged background," Brothers
said. "His father was wealthy
and owned property, he was
well-educated and did not
have to present himself in the
white world as Louis Arm-
strong did. Things had
changed enough by the 1950s
that he didn't have to dress
up like a cannibal."

Menconi: 919-829-4759 or
www.newsobserver.com/OnTheBeat

Celebrations

WEDDINGS

Lentz ~ Jones

Sabrina Renee
Jones of Winston-
Salem, NC and
Samuel Smith
Lentz, Jr. of
Greenville, NC
were married on
Saturday,
March 29, 2014
at St. Andrews
Presbyterian
Church. The
Reverend Reginald
Hunt, friend of the
bride, and The
Reverend Diane
Knauf officiated.
Following the cer-
emony, the father of
the bride hosted a
reception at The
Pavilion at the
Angus Barn.

The bride is the
daughter of Mr. and
Mrs. John Lentz of
Winston-Salem. The
bridegroom is the
son of Mr. and
Mrs. Samuel Lentz
of Greenville.

Phillips ~ Packard

Miss Packard

Photo by J.S. J Photography

Phillips ~ Packard