



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

Armstrong, jazz and stardom under Jim Crow

By DAVID MENCONI
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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 leopard-skin 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 It's Sleepy Time Down South' was Armstrong's theme song all through the '50s," Brothers said. "It's this highly romanticized vision of South-

Exhibit, talk and music

What: Thomas Brothers discusses Louis Armstrong at First Thursday showing of the "Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist" exhibit; program includes music by the John Brown Trio.

When: 6-9 p.m. Thursday

Where: Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham

Cost: Free

Info: nasher.duke.edu

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 hometown 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.



Brothers

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, You Rascal You.” The fact that Armstrong did not openly challenge segregation was probably the only reason he got away with that.

As one of the world’s foremost authorities on Armstrong, 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



1966 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.

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 Crescent 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 Broadway, Armstrong forged a hugely 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 instrument of budding African-American consciousness during the “Great Migration” northward during the 1920s and ‘30s.

Second-class status

At the same time, Armstrong 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 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 America, 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

“Satchmo,” the elder square who sold out with soft hits like “Hello, Dolly!” But as Brothers points out, that wasn’t fair given the magnitude of oppression Armstrong faced.

“Race was the ever-present elephant in the room,” Brothers writes. “It affected Armstrong every day and every moment of his life, on different levels simultaneously. Today we live in a country that yearns for ‘postracial’ harmony, which makes it comfortable to ignore this distant reality and concentrate instead on the astonishing splendor of his music.”

Succeeding generations of black musicians who followed in Armstrong’s wake certainly didn’t have an easy ride. Still, the obstacles they had to face weren’t quite as daunting.

“Miles Davis, for example, came from a different gener-

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

ation and a much more privileged 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 Armstrong did. Things had changed enough by the 1950s that he didn’t have to dress up like a cannibal.”

Menconi: 919-829-4759 or
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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 ceremony, the father of the bride hosted a reception at The Pavilion at the Angus Barn.

The bride is the daughter of Mr. James Wendell

ENGAGEMENTS



Photo by J & J Photography

Miss Packard

Phillips ~ Packard