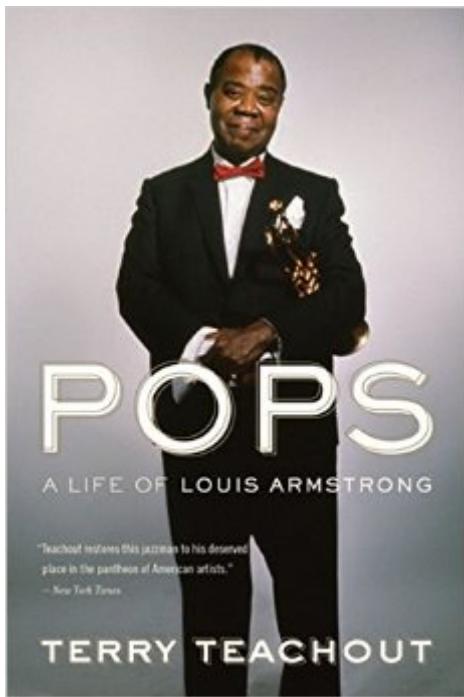


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Pops: A Life Of Louis Armstrong



Synopsis

Louis Armstrong is widely known as the greatest jazz musician of the twentieth century. He was a phenomenally gifted and imaginative artist, and an entertainer so irresistibly magnetic that he knocked the Beatles off the top of the charts four decades after he cut his first record. Offstage he was witty, introspective, and unexpectedly complex, a beloved colleague with an explosive temper whose larger-than-life personality was tougher and more sharp-edged than his worshiping fans ever knew. Wall Street Journal critic Terry Teachout has drawn on a cache of important new sources unavailable to previous biographers, including hundreds of candid after-hours recordings made by Armstrong himself, to craft a sweeping new narrative biography. Certain to be the definitive word on Armstrong for our generation, Pops paints a gripping portrait of the man, his world, and his music that will stand alongside Gary Giddins' Bing Crosby and Peter Guralnick's Last Train to Memphis as a classic biography of a major American musician.

Book Information

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; 1 edition (October 7, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0547386370

ISBN-13: 978-0547386379

Product Dimensions: 1.5 x 5.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (91 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #367,786 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #86 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Jazz #422 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Jazz #2442 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National

Customer Reviews

Pops isn't just a good biography of Louis Armstrong's full and varied life. It's an exceptionally good biography. It shouldn't replace Laurence Bergreen's excellent Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant life (New York Times Notable Book for 1997) in anyone's library. But Teachout's book complements Bergreen's and it stand on its own as a model of sympathetic, scrupulously researched biographical writing. For those who are interested in him, there is little new that they can learn about the well examined life of this American icon. As soon as popular critics and serious scholars started writing about that uniquely American pop music, jazz, they wrote about Armstrong. They couldn't avoid it

because Armstrong, more than any other individual, set the standards and many of the conventions for jazz, in his playing and his singing. (Where would Bing Crosby have been without Louis to imitate?) He wasn't the first great jazz soloist: Sidney Bechet holds that honor by a few years. And Armstrong's seminal group, the Hot Five (later Hot Seven), played outside the recording studio just one time. It was never a working group, never a combo formed to play in the clubs and dance halls where jazz was being forged in the twenties and thirties. Trying to imagine jazz without Armstrong is like trying to imagine modern art without Picasso or the essay form without Montaigne. His contemporaries knew it and admitted it. Even those who were on the outs with him -Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins--knew that Louis was The Man. Red Allen, the trumpeter with (to my mind) the most beautiful sound in jazz, wanted nothing more than to sound like Louis. Jack Teagarden tried to play him on the trombone (and succeeded). Even harbingers of modernity like Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, who were offended by what they saw as Armstrong's Uncle Tom antics on stage, admitted that Armstrong was The One. A virtue of Teachout's fine book is to place Armstrong's on-stage antics and off-stage persona in context. Armstrong was by temperament, especially while performing, a sunny person, who enjoyed performing and did not draw a line between clowning and serious music making. (That's not quite accurate. Music making was the thing he cared about most in the world -even over home and his much beloved wife Lucille--and he was deadly serious about his music, but he didn't find it incongruous to perform well, to appeal to the audience. In short, as Teachout eloquently explains, Armstrong, like many performers of his generation, saw himself as an entertainer as well as and complementary to a musician. He wanted to do well in both guises, and did. Teachout also does the reader a favor by his sympathetic and wise assessment of Louis's later performances and recordings, from the 1930s on. This is a body of work that many critics dismiss as the wreckage left over after Louis's artistic vision left him. (Even so savvy a critic as Gunther Schuller dismissed Louis's later work as uninspired.) Teachout does not argue for virtues that aren't there in Louis's often dreary big band recordings from the thirties, but he does point to individual recordings of excellence, and I found his assessment of the small group Louis led from 1947 on, the Louis Armstrong All-Stars, convincing. (Like me, Teachout finds Russ Garcia's arrangements for Louis in the late fifties an embarrassment, and, like me, wishes that Ellington and Armstrong had made more out of their one outing together, when all that happened was that Ellington sat in on piano with Louis's All-Stars.) I have decided! It's time for me to listen to more of the Louis of the thirties and forties. I've been missing out on a potential treat! I bought my first jazz record sixty years ago, when I was thirteen. It's time for me to listen to ALL of Louis, not just cherry pick across the decades.

Louis Armstrong stands as one of the legends of twentieth century music. During five decades as a performer he thrilled audiences with his cornet and trumpet virtuosity, while his gravelly voice made him one of the most popular and recognizable singers of his day. Such a career became the stuff of legend, making it difficult to discern the truth underneath. In this book, Terry Teachout undertakes the difficult task to sift through the legend to discover the man underneath. In this he is aided by Armstrong, who left behind two autobiographies and numerous audio recordings. From them we learn a man unashamed of his impoverished beginnings in the "black Storyville" neighborhood of New Orleans. The musical scene of the town's brothels and clubs provided the young Armstrong with both his early musical education and his first employment. Teachout goes on to describe his journey during the 1920s from promising young cornet player into the headlining talent he became by the end of the decade. Teachout rightly gives this period, one that saw some of his most innovative music, considerable attention, but he challenges critics such as Gunther Schuller who dismiss Armstrong's work with the big bands of the 1930s and 1940s. These decades dominate the biography, taking up eight of the book's twelve chapters. The final chapters chronicle the established entertainer who faced the twin challenges of aging and the disdainful attitude of the younger generation of musicians who followed in his giant footsteps. In examining Armstrong's life, Teachout brings to bear his skills as detective and storyteller. He succeeds in depicting a very human yet enormously gifted performer, a talented musician who was also a superb entertainer. His book easily supersedes earlier biographies of Armstrong in its thoroughness and readability, yet it remains frustratingly incomplete by itself. For while Teachout does an admirable job of describing Armstrong's music, the book really is best enjoyed when accompanied by the songs Teachout describes. Though the author identified thirty songs in an appendix that can be downloaded by the reader, the sheer amount of music he describes warrants more comprehensive collections, such as *The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* and *Louis Armstrong: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings*. It is only when listening to them in conjunction with Teachout's book that the degree of Armstrong's achievement is best understood.

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