

DANIEL STEIN, *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz, Jazz Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2012), 349 pp.

Based on his award-winning dissertation, Daniel Stein's book is a timely and innovative addition to the vast amount of scholarly literature on Louis Armstrong. It is a welcomed intervention into the discourses established by biographies and music or jazz histories: *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz* revolves around the musician's various forms and practices of life writing and situates them within larger socio-cultural constellations and historical contexts. At the same time, it constitutes a methodologically and theoretically ambitious study that presents an inspiring take on autobiography understood as "a writing *practice*" (12) and on intermediality.

Stein discusses Armstrong's "autobiographics" (17) not only on the basis of the musician's two autobiographies (*Swing That Music* and *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*) but also with regard to Armstrong's published and unpublished letters, essays, interviews, recordings, articles, and his performances in e.g. music, film, photography, and stage acting. Stein's approach to this wealth of material from the Armstrong archive as well as secondary sources speaks to both his thorough research and his excellent analytical skills. Armstrong emerges as prolific writer, chronicler of his life, and maybe even "jazz's most productive autobiographer" (8). *Music Is My Life* sets out to understand Armstrong as "transmedial artist" and to trace "the *inter-medial* effects of [his] autobiographical performances" (23).

Stein lays out four goals for his study: to assess Armstrong's role in the creation of his public persona, to contribute to the scholarship on "jazz autobiography" (William Kenney), to analyze jazz as an intermedial phenomenon, and to understand the historical constructions of "blackness" from the minstrel stage into the civil rights era (cf. 26-27). Against the backdrop of these objectives, the six chapters cover different aspects of Armstrong's autobiographics while documenting his career and life writing. Stein starts out (chap. 1) with close readings of Armstrong's reflections on New Orleans jazz traditions and especially "musicking" (Christopher Small), i.e. music making as activity and practice.

He reads Armstrong's personal account of his New Orleans years as intervention into jazz history, as an assertion of his position as cultural icon, and as a template for the public construction of his life narrative.

The following analyses (chap. 2 and 3) focus on the performativity of Armstrong's writing practices and the stylistic features of his texts and musical performances. Stein traces the musician's literary influences and references to various traditions and narratives (e.g. the rags-to-riches formula or African American autobiography). He interrogates the tensions between Armstrong's vernacular style, the editorial practices of his (white) editors and managers, his audiences, and biographers/critics. The analyses reveal the musician's struggle over his public image and, on a different level, indicate how Armstrong's writing strategies, including "versioning," point towards "interfaces between autobiography and music" (107). Regarding its style, Armstrong's writing is shown to capitalize on unconventional typography and orthography, on jive language and word play, and on what Brent H. Edwards has termed "scat aesthetics" (109). Its transmedial impulses and linkages become evident in the analyses of jive language's relation to jazz and of the signifying practices, the provisional style, and the scat aesthetics that characterize Armstrong's writings as well as his music and performances.

Stein's argument then (chap. 4 and 5) turns to Armstrong's position in the history of blackface minstrelsy and to the racial discourses that shape his public perception and self-representation. Minstrelsy, or "an intermedial minstrel poetics" (168), figure prominently in (the cultural contexts of) Armstrong's life. According to Stein, his "minstrel sounding" creates ambiguity by referring to the blackface tradition and simultaneously reflecting his own position (154). Armstrong's Satchmo figure attests to his ambiguous racial politics; yet, he also appears as "a marginalized and postcolonial performer" (186). In analyses informed by historical performance practices and contemporaneous cultural discourses, Stein exposes Armstrong's ambivalent appropriations of black performance traditions, e.g. in his controversial appearance as Zulu King. Finally (chap. 6), Stein scrutinizes Armstrong's cultural politics, particularly in the context of the 1950s and 60s, when the musician was perceived as "submissive Uncle Tom figure" out of touch with the black libera-

tion struggle *and* as “more outspoken Ambassador Satch” in the Cold War era (230). Stein offers a balanced account of the strong apolitical stance of Armstrong’s work and his rather political statements about, for example, racism and discrimination. This account reveals a political dimension to Armstrong’s oeuvre, which is, nonetheless, ambiguous, conflicting, and contradictory.

Overall, *Music Is My Life* pits Armstrong’s individual autobiographic account against dominant historiographies of American jazz. It takes the musician seriously as the author of his own life narrative and follows his autobiographics and its wide-ranging repercussions and resonances. Stein succeeds in connecting Armstrong’s individual life story with larger cultural and political constellations in the US. His readings of Armstrong’s multimedia texts are highly incisive and instructive even though

they include some speculations (e.g. about the musician’s intentions). The structure and argument of this study are compelling and well-organized despite some slight repetitions throughout the chapters. The book comes not only with several illustrations and an index but even provides the readers with a helpful list of carefully selected suggestions for listening and further reading. *Music Is My Life* manages to offer both a complex portrayal of a multi-faceted artist in the socio-cultural contexts of his time *and* an intriguing argument about autobiographical practices across different media. It is an excellent study that is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in American jazz history, autobiography and intermediality, and, of course, Louis Armstrong.

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