‘Wonderful World’ weighs in on Armstrong’s music, stance on civil rights

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In an article in the New York Times, published a month after Louis Armstrong died, Craig McGregor lamented that such a jazz genius had had to sacrifice his art to commerce.

In the ensuing decades, critics piled on. Gerald Early, a Black essayist, recalled his “sense of shame, rage, and despair” as he watched Satchmo on television in the 1960s, rolling his eyes and wiping his brow with a handkerchief, “a silly Uncle Tom, pathetically vulnerable,” patronized by White talk-show hosts, but reveling in the limelight.

To a generation of African-Americans, Early concluded, “Armstrong’s greatness, if he ever had any, occurred in such a remote, antediluvian time,” bearing virtually no relationship to modern American music or modern American culture.

Criticized for ‘coon carnival’

Things have changed a bit, according to Ricky Riccardi, a jazz pianist and the author of a Louis Armstrong blog. In the last two decades, Armstrong has been featured on a postage stamp, praised in “Jazz,” Ken Burns’ documentary, and celebrated in a “Satchmo Summerfest” in New Orleans. But in many circles he is still regarded as a buffoon, who pandered to audiences in concerts that recycled old tunes and seldom rose "above the plane of a coon carnival, complete with comedy spits and other vulgarities."

In “What A Wonderful World,” Riccardi seeks to shatter these “wrong-headed assumptions.” From 1947-1971, the last quarter century of his life, he argues, Armstrong remained not only an icon of entertainment, but a creative musician, often at the top of his game, and a civil rights pioneer.

Insight on habits and relationships

Drawing on an avalanche of material, including interviews and candid contemporaneous comments dictated into a tape recorder, "What A Wonderful World" provides a delightfully detailed account of these years, including fascinating insights into Armstrong’s complicated relationship with Joe Glaser, his manager; his rivalry with Benny Goodman; his recording sessions with Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, and Ella Fitzgerald; his travels to Africa as a "goodwill ambassador;" his mania about marijuana; and his love-affair with laxatives.

Riccardi works hard to demonstrate that Armstrong didn’t rest on his artistic laurels in the decades following the end of World War II. "Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy" (1954), he claims, was the greatest album Satchmo ever recorded.

His recording of "When You’re Smiling" two years later was even better than the 1929 rendition, with an ebullient vocal and a mind-blowing trumpet solo. And his version of "They Say I Look Like God," completed in 1961, which Brubeck intended as a satire, Riccardi writes, was "the most emotionally-wrenching" of Armstrong’s career.

Pioneer despite ‘plantation image’

Despite these examples, "What A Wonderful World" adds ammunition to the arsenal already available to Armstrong’s detractors. Riccardi acknowledges that Armstrong often did rely on the same repertoire; that he could be by turns petulant and defensive about modern jazz; and that by the ’60s his “chops” were not what they had been.

And let’s face it: the staples of his later years -- "Blueberry Hill," "C’est Si Bon," "Hello Dolly," "When You Wish Upon A Star," and even "Mack The Knife" – didn’t really challenge Armstrong, his band, or his audience.

Even less persuasive is Riccardi’s assertion that Armstrong was a civil rights pioneer. Lambasted by Dizzy Gillespie, among others, for his “plantation image,” Armstrong never really understood why so me Blacks were offended by his zeal to become "King of the Zulu Parade," and by his reluctance to remove the word "darkies" from his theme song, "When It’s Sleepy Time Down South."

Backtracked on civil rights stance

To be sure, Armstrong did denounce President Eisenhower as "two-faced" when he refused, at first, to use federal troops to desegregate the Little Rock Arkansas schools in 1957. "It’s getting so bad," he told a reporter, that "a colored man hasn’t got any country." And he then gave an impromptu version of "The Star Spangled Banner" with obscenity laced lyrics.

But this outburst was an aberration. Armstrong backtracked quickly, praising the president for doing "as much as Lincoln did" for Blacks. And in the 1960s, as they civil rights movement gathered steam, he indicated that he had no grievances against the South, where he had always "been treated fine" and numbered White people among his greatest friends.

Gerald Early, in fact, had it about right. Armstrong lost Black fans, Early suggested, because he continued to act "as if social and cultural history in America had stopped in 1930."

In the end, though, it makes little sense for admirers or antagonists to use race as a litmus test for judging Louis Armstrong as a performer and jazz pioneer.

Even if he was a crowd pleaser, and even if he did go for the greensbacks, especially at the end of his career, Armstrong deserves to be acclaimed as one of the most influential performers in the history of jazz, a virtuosic trumpet player who gave his music a whole new vocabulary, a singer with a signature style, an inimitable and infectious, once-in-a-lifetime entertainer.
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