Louis Armstrong, 1944.

How many here can read music?” asks William Youngren. A scattering of hands goes up among the several dozen students in the Lyons Hall classroom. “Now, see, 30 years ago, every hand would have gone up,” says Youngren. “But that’s OK. Don’t worry about not knowing musical notation; it doesn’t matter in this course. Whitney Balliett, my old friend at the New Yorker, I don’t think he can read music very well, but he sure can describe what music sounds like. And that’s what I’m really interested in—how the thing sounds to you and what words you pick to talk about it.”

Youngren began teaching this course in 1989. A music critic who has written extensively for the Atlantic and other magazines, and an ardent fan (and sometime performer) who has followed jazz since the late 1940s, Youngren sees himself as curator of an eclipsed national treasure. “I’m afraid you won’t hear this music if you don’t hear it in this course,” he tells his students. “It’s not around on the radio, and you should hear it, because it’s great music, marvelous music.”

The course opens with Louis Armstrong in the 1920s and will conclude amid the bebop and cool jazz explorations of Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis in the 1950s. Today Youngren frets that he may be packing too much into a semester. “Maybe I’ve been too compulsive about the coverage aspect,” he tells his students, sitting at his desk and leaning heavily on his hands like a man suffering from a headache. “Maybe I should just let up on that. I mean, good heavens, Benny Goodman gets only one class; Duke Ellington, three; Billie Holiday, two. You could do a term on any one of these people.”

Armstrong gets four classes, an hour apiece. The first covers five tunes recorded in Chicago between 1927 and 1930: “Potato Head Blues,” “Put ’em Down Blues,” “No One Else but You,” “Weather Bird” and “Knockin’ a Jug”—a sampling from the zenith of Armstrong’s career. As Youngren wheels a compact-disc player out of the closet and presses the remote to get it going on “Potato Head,” he asks the students to think about the person coming at them through Armstrong’s horn.

The tune begins. Youngren walks distractedly over to an upright piano against the wall and, still standing, lightly presses down some chords. Drifting away from the piano, he jabs a finger in the air as Armstrong punches a note home. “Varying it,” Youngren comments a moment later, sculpting with his hand as Armstrong hops around the theme. Then: “Clarinet.” Then: “Stop-time chorus for Armstrong.” After three minutes, Youngren lifts an eyebrow; he smiles.

“What about that? Impressions? What about Armstrong? Who is he? How does he come across?”

“Strong, but not overbearing,” a student answers.

“Yes—what keeps him from being overbearing?”

“He leaves room for other people in the band to play.”

“Yes. There are holes left for other people, and not only holes—they’re positive breathing spaces.” Youngren points out the supple balance of musical phrases in Armstrong’s playing, with some swooping high, others diving low. “These phrases go together. They concatenate into human speech,” he suggests.

After “Put ’em Down Blues,” which ends with an abrupt blast of Armstrong’s horn, Youngren exclams, “It’s absolutely like dotting i—the extraordinary rhythmic security of that.” Youngren’s smoky personal connections drive and burnish the talk. About Lil Hardin, Armstrong’s second wife, he says, “a marvelous woman, whom I got to know quite well in Chicago.” Regarding a 1926 Jelly Roll Morton cut, he remarks, “I knew a couple of the guys that played on this record.”

—Bruce Morgan