

# Foreword

## **the Buzz**

**T**he statue sits smack in the middle of downtown Augusta, Georgia, face high, because the old man never wanted to be standing above anybody else. He wanted to be down with the people. And as you stand before it on this deserted stretch of cheap stores and old theaters on a hot August afternoon, you say to yourself, “This is what they don’t teach you in journalism school”: to walk through the carcass of a ruined, destroyed life—this broken life and the one behind it, and the one behind that—to navigate the maze of savage lawyers who lined up to feed at the carcass; to listen to the stories of the broke musicians who traveled the world in glory only to come home with a pocket full of nothing; to make sense of the so-called music experts who helped themselves to a guy’s guts and history trying to make a dollar change pockets. Everybody’s got a hustle in this world. Meanwhile the guy who made the show, he’s deader than yesterday’s beer, his legacy scattered everywhere but where he wanted it.

*James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, America's greatest soul singer, left most of his wealth, conservatively estimated at \$100 million, to educate poor children in South Carolina and Georgia. Ten years after his death on December 25, 2006, not a dime of it had reached a single kid. Untold millions have been frittered away by lawyers and politicians who have been loosed on one another by various factions of his destroyed family.*

*It's a sad end to an extraordinary yet tragic life, though you figure with thousands of poor kids in South Carolina and Georgia needing a good education, somebody would have the integrity to figure the whole thing out. But that's a long shot these days because, in part, that would mean we've figured out James Brown. And that's impossible. Because to figure him out, we'd have to figure ourselves out. And that's like giving an aspirin to a two-headed baby.*

*It's an odd thing. They're big on him here in Augusta, his adopted hometown. They named an arena after him and a street, held a James Brown Day, all of that tribute jazz. But the truth is, other than this weird statue, there's not a wisp of James Brown in this place. There's no feeling of him here. He's a vapor now, just another tragic black tale, his story bought and sold and bought again, just like the slaves that were once sold at the Haunted Pillar just two blocks from where his statue stands. Brown's saga is an industrial-strength story, a big-box store of a life filled with cheap goods for any writing hack looking for the equivalent of the mandatory five-minute gospel moment you see in just about every Broadway show these days. Lousy story, great music. And everybody's an expert: a documentary here, a book there, a major motion picture, all produced by folks who "knew" and "loved" him, as if that were possible. The fact is, it really doesn't matter whether they knew him or not, or loved him or hated his guts and hoped somebody would tie him to a pickup truck and drag his body across the quit line. The worst has already happened. The guy is finished. Gone. Perfect dead. Paying him homage now doesn't cost anyone a thing. He's like John Coltrane, or Charlie Parker, or Louis Jordan, or any other of the dozens of black artists whose music is immortalized while*

*the communities that produced them continue to suffer. James Brown is forgotten in Augusta, really. The town is falling apart, just like his memory. He's history. Safely dead.*

*But over in Barnwell County, just across the state line in South Carolina, the place where Brown was born and was living when he died, there's no uncertainty about who James Brown is. He is not a vapor there, but rather a living, breathing thing.*

*There used to be an old black-run soul food joint on Allen Street in the town of Barnwell, not far from James Brown's birthplace, called Brooker's. Every time I would go to that town to pick around the bones of James Brown's story—what's left of it—I would head to Brooker's and eat pork and grits and collards and whatever else Miss Lola and her sister Miss Perry Lee were serving. I had a lot of fun goofing off in that joint. I'd sit at a table and watch the people come in—young, old, some quiet as bedbugs, others talkative and friendly, a few suspicious, folks of all types: small businessmen, local workers, farmers, an undertaker, hairdressers. I'd always leave the place laughing and saying to myself, "They don't teach you this in journalism school either"—to stand in somebody's hometown and still hear the laughter and the pride. They love James Brown in Barnwell. They don't see his broken life; they don't care about the bottom-feeder lawyers who lined up to pick at his bones, or his children fighting over the millions Brown left to the poor instead of them. They've seen enough evil in their own lives, going back generations, to fill their own book of sad tales. So why talk about it? Laugh and be happy in the Lord! James Brown died on top. The white man can say whatever he wants. Put that down in your little old notebook, kid: We don't care. We know who James Brown was. He was one of us. He sleeps with the Lord now. In good hands! Now, here, have some more pie.*

*They laugh and smile and make you feel good. But behind the laughter, the pie, the howdies, and the second helpings, behind the huge chicken dinners and the easy chuckles, there's a silent buzz. If you put your ear to a table, you can almost hear it; it's a churning kind of grind, a rumble, a growl, and when you close your eyes and listen,*

*the noise is not pleasant. It's nothing said, or even seen, for black folks in South Carolina are experts at showing a mask to the white man. They've had generations of practice. The smile goes out before their faces like a radiator grille. When a white customer enters Brooker's, they act happy. When the white man talks, they nod before the man finishes his sentences. They say "yes sir" and "right on" and laugh and joke and say "I declare!" and "Is that right?" and howdy 'em and yes 'em to death. And you stand there dumbfounded, because you're hearing something different, you're hearing that buzz, and you don't know if it's coming from the table or the bottom of your feet, or if it's the speed of so much history passing between the two of them, the black and the white, in that moment when the white man pays for his collard greens with a smile that ties you up, because you can hear the roar of the war still being fought—the big one, the one the northerners call the Civil War and southerners call the War of Northern Aggression, and the more recent war, the war of propaganda, where the black guy in the White House pissed some people off no matter what he did. It's all about race. Everybody knows it. And there's no room to breathe. So you sit there, suffocating, watching this little transaction over your own plate of collard greens, as these two people laugh and small-talk over the chasm that divides them, and you stare in amazement, feeling like you're sitting on a razor blade, waiting for one or the other to pull out a gun and blow the other's face off. You think you're losing your mind as the buzz in your ears grows louder; it morphs into a kind of electricity that builds until it's no longer a buzz but an unseen roar of absolute fury and outrage, marked only by an occasional silent glance of unsaid understanding, one that slips between you and the rest of the blacks in the room like the silent dollar bill that leaves that white customer's hand and slips into Miss Iola's old cash register, which closes with a silent click.*

*If you wait till the white man leaves and ask about that space, the space between white and black folks in South Carolina, the black folks say, "Oh, it ain't nothing. Such-and-so is my friend. I've known him forty years. We all get along here." Only at night, when they get home,*

*when the lights are down and all the churchin' is done and the singing is over and the TV is off and the wine is flowing and tongues are working freely, only within the safety of home and family does the talk change, and then the buzz is no longer a buzz. It's a roaring cyclone of fury laced with distaste and four hundred years of pent-up bitterness.*

*There is not a single marker for James Brown in this place, they say. No spot to commemorate his birth, no building named after him, no school, no library, no statue, no nothing. And even when they do name something after him, or celebrate him in the state legislature or some such thing, it doesn't matter. They smile about it during the day, but at night they cuss that thing so hard it'll curl up on its own and crawl away like a snake. There's not even a marker at the spot where the greatest soul singer this country ever knew came from. Why would they put one there? They hate him. There was a sign at the state line, but after Brown got arrested the last time, they did away with it. The white man in this state will forgive his own sin a million times. He will write history any way he wants to down here. And when it's all over, them witches in suits down at the courthouse will rob every cent Mr. Brown earned, you'll see. Poor folks ain't got a chance with them, no matter what their color, and any fool 'round here stupid enough to stand up and open their mouth on that subject, they'll bust down on them so hard, pus will come out their ears.*

*That whole thing came crashing down on me one hot afternoon when I was sitting inside Brooker's, joking around with Miss Perry Lee, and a big fella I'd met named Joe Louis Thomas wandered in. Joe is a well-built, handsome, brown-skinned man who worked in New York as a professional wrestler. Tired of being told to throw matches intentionally for a few dollars, he returned home to Blackville, South Carolina, got married, sent two of his three kids to college—one of whom, Joe Thomas, Jr., joined the Green Bay Packers in 2014. Then Joe went back to college himself at South Carolina State University and joined the track and football team—at age fifty-one. He'd grown up hauling cotton off a white man's field in Blackville with all eleven of his siblings. For most of his life, he was considered deaf. Only his*

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*outstanding skill as a football player—he ran a 40-yard dash in 4.35 seconds in high school—kept him in school. One day when he was seventeen, a doctor stuck a probe in Joe’s ear. The doc pulled out seventeen years’ worth of trash: cotton, junk, dirt. Now that Joe Thomas could hear again, he heard things he’d never heard before. He saw things he’d never seen before.*

*Joe sat down across from me. Miss Perry Lee said, “Hey Joe, your buddy’s back.”*

*Joe looked at me. “You still working on that book?” he asked.*

*I said I was. I gave him the whole deal: Having a hard time telling the real story. Terrible court case. A lot of fighting. Got a bunch of questions with no answers, trying to get to the bottom of things, blah, blah, blah.*

*Joe listened silently, holding his fork loosely. It hung in the air as I spoke. When I was done, he still held his fork over his plate of liver and collards.*

*“You watch yourself out here,” he said softly.*

*“I haven’t done anything wrong,” I said. “It’s just a book.”*

*He looked at me, steady, silent. He pointed his fork at me and said, “You watch yourself out here, young man.”*