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Kill 'Em And Leave: Searching For James Brown And The American Soul



Synopsis

National Book Award winner James McBride goes in search of the “real” James Brown after receiving a tip that promises to uncover the man behind the myth. His surprising journey illuminates not only our understanding of this immensely troubled, misunderstood, and complicated soul genius but the ways in which our cultural heritage has been shaped by Brown’s legacy. NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY NPR LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE FINALIST *Kill Em and Leave* is more than a book about James Brown. Brown’s rough-and-tumble life, through McBride’s lens, is an unsettling metaphor for American life: the tension between North and South, black and white, rich and poor. McBride’s travels take him to forgotten corners of Brown’s never-before-revealed history: the country town where Brown’s family and thousands of others were displaced by America’s largest nuclear power bomb-making facility; a South Carolina field where a long-forgotten cousin recounts, in the dead of night, a fuller history of Brown’s sharecropping childhood, which until now has been a mystery. McBride seeks out the American expatriate in England who co-created the James Brown sound, visits the trusted right-hand manager who worked with Brown for forty-one years, and interviews Brown’s most influential nonmusical creation, his “adopted son,” the Reverend Al Sharpton. He describes the stirring visit of Michael Jackson to the Augusta, Georgia, funeral home where the King of Pop sat up all night with the body of his musical godfather, spends hours talking with Brown’s first wife, and lays bare the Dickensian legal contest over James Brown’s estate, a fight that has consumed careers; prevented any money from reaching the poor schoolchildren in Georgia and South Carolina, as instructed in his will; cost Brown’s estate millions in legal fees; and left James Brown’s body to lie for more than eight years in a gilded coffin in his daughter’s yard in South Carolina. James McBride is one of the most distinctive and electric literary voices in America today, and a part of the pleasure of his narrative is being in his presence, coming to understand Brown through McBride’s own insights as a black musician with Southern roots. *Kill Em and Leave* is a song unearthing and celebrating James Brown’s great legacy: the cultural landscape of America today. Praise for *Kill Em and Leave* “Thoughtful and probing . . . with great warmth, insight and frequent wit.” —Rick Moody, *The New York Times Book Review* “[McBride] turns out to also be the biographer of James Brown we’ve all been waiting for. . . . McBride’s true subject is race and poverty in a country that doesn’t want to hear about it, unless compelled by a voice that demands to be heard.” —Boris Kachka,

New York Times – "The definitive look at one of the greatest, most important entertainers, The Godfather, Da Number One Soul Brother, Mr. Please, Please Himself" – JAMES BROWN. – Spike Lee – "A feat of intrepid journalistic fortitude." – USA Today – "This is an important book about an important figure in American musical history and about American culture. . . . You won't leave this hypnotic book without feeling that James Brown is still out there, howling." – The Boston Globe – "Illuminating . . . engaging." – The Washington Post

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Spiegel & Grau; Reprint edition (November 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812983734

ISBN-13: 978-0812983739

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 150 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #206,079 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #45 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Soul #48 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music >

Biographies > Rhythm & Blues #574 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National >

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Customer Reviews

An Best Book of April 2016: National Book Award winner James McBride has written a book about an essentially unknowable man, one so twisted up in myth (self-made and otherwise) and (often poorly understood) tabloid-ready disasters that a traditional biography might well become worthlessly, untruthfully lurid. Instead, *Kill 'Em and Leave* is less concerned with the biographical minutiae of Brown's life than it is with Brown's world; he is the central figure of the book, but rarely is he at its center. Like an astronomer might look for an invisible planet by observing the movements of its celestial neighbors, McBride takes an oblique approach, traveling deep into Brown's past to interview bandmates, managers, family members, and friends, applying his unique, propulsive voice and insight as a musician to illustrate the world stacked against "The Godfather of Soul" and the ways it changed in his wake. --Jon Foro --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

“Thoughtful and probing . . . with great warmth, insight and frequent wit. The results are partisan and enthusiastic, and they helped this listener think about the work in a new way. . . . James McBride’s welcome elucidation . . . is clear, deeply felt and unmistakable.” —Rick Moody, *The New York Times Book Review*

“The author of the best-selling memoir *The Color of Water* and the National Book Award-winning novel *The Good Lord Bird* turns out to also be the biographer of James Brown we’ve all been waiting for. . . . McBride’s true subject is race and poverty in a country that doesn’t want to hear about it, unless compelled by a voice that demands to be heard.” —Boris Kachka, *New York Times*

“Masterly . . . powerful . . . McBride provides an invaluable service to the history of R&B. . . . In illuminating what James Brown meant to our culture, we’re in good hands with the impassioned McBride: a fellow musician, he knows this world from within, knows what the music did and why it mattered.” —Los Angeles Review of Books

“Kill ’Em and Leave” is a feat of intrepid journalistic fortitude. . . . McBride does not lecture but he does preach. As a result his writing rings out with righteous passion. . . . Readers will be grateful for everything he has exposed here—the good and the bad, much of it hitherto unknown. Somewhere, even James Brown is probably saying thanks.” —USA Today

“This is an important book about an important figure in American musical history and about American culture. . . . You won’t leave this hypnotic book without feeling that James Brown is still out there, howling.” —The Boston Globe

“Illuminating . . . engaging.” —The Washington Post

“A stunningly unorthodox book, indifferent to the conventions of biographical nonfiction . . . McBride provides something lacking in most of the books about James Brown: an intimate feeling for the musician, a veracious if inchoate sense of what it was like to be touched by him. . . . It may be as close [to the real James Brown] as we’ll ever get.” —David Hajdu, *The Nation*

“McBride’s energetic storytelling, his sympathy for his subject and his deeply personal writing tell a sad tale of one of our most influential musicians.” —BookPage

“A gorgeously written piece of reportage that gives us glimpses of Brown’s genius and contradictions.” —O: The Oprah Magazine

“Kill ’Em and Leave is a tight assemblage of reporting, biography, and cultural dissection, held together by McBride’s gutty, jangling, and sometimes smoldering voice. . . . McBride gets us closer than anyone else has—close enough to feel the voltage from twentieth-century music’s most electrifying showman.” —Jonathan Miles, *Garden & Gun*

“The definitive look at one of

the greatest, most important entertainers, The Godfather, Da Number One Soul Brother, Mr. Please, Please Himself

•JAMES BROWN.

•Spike Lee

“Please, please, please: Can anybody tell us who and what was James Brown? At last, the real deal: James McBride on James Brown is the matchup we’ve been waiting for, a musician who came up hard in Brooklyn with JB hooks lodged in his brain, a monster ear for the truth, and the chops to write it. This is no celeb bio but a compelling personal quest

•so very timely, angry, hilarious, and as irresistible as any James Brown beat. It’s a must for anyone, as JB sang it,

“Living in America.

Read it, and your brain won’t sit still.

•Gerri Hirshey, author of *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*

“National Book Award winner McBride dissects the career, legacy, and myth of the Godfather of Soul. One of the most iconic figures in pop music, James Brown is also one of the most unknown and falsely represented figures in American cultural history. . . . An unconventional and fascinating portrait of Soul Brother No. 1 and the significance of his rise and fall in American culture.

•Kirkus Reviews

From the Hardcover edition.

James McBride is such a good writer. He takes you "there", you are in the woods of South Carolina, you are in segregated 1940's Augusta, with a motherless child when fortune shines on him and he develops a friendship with another boy his age and that friendship will sustain him throughout his lifetime. I am a James Brown fan. The first concert I ever attended was his show at the Shrine auditorium in Los Angeles in the sixties. I was mesmerized by the band, the sound, the man, his performance.....(that cape!).. I even met James Brown after the concert at VIP records where he was signing autographs. So my relationship with James goes way back. I loved this book, it was real, it was "deep", it made very astute and insightful observations into the black experience in America which by the way is even more relevant today. The book is as much about James Brown as it is about the music industry, and the legal system which revictimized James Brown and his incredibly stupid, and greedy heirs. I read this book after reading Colson Whitehead "Underground Railroad". That book left an imprint on my soul with its beautiful prose and tragic, incredibly barbaric retelling of the horrors of slavery which tried and failed to destroy the pure joy, intelligence and creativity of black people. This book had me listening to "Night Train" and baking a peach cobbler and being swept away by the telling of the story. James Brown and John Coltrane, James McBride and Colson Whitehead, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison... Barack and Michele Obama.....collard greens and gumbo.... but still we "rise". James McBride and Colson Whitehead should be required reading for everyone who loves the music and life that is the black experience in America.

James Brown was bigger than life. He had a big personality, a big heart, and big troubles. Some were his fault, and others were caused by meddlers. By now, most people recognize that Mr. Brown was a complicated man, or at the very least, misunderstood. He gave so much of himself, and yet demanded so much in return. In his heart of hearts, however, it seems he truly wanted to not only entertain people, but also help those who needed it. With that in mind it's a crying shame it's even disgusting what has happened to his legacy. James McBride digs deep and relays several emotional stories from those who knew Brown personally (though notably missing is Maceo Parker) and sheds much needed light on the quagmire of events that took place after Mr. Brown's death. Particularly enlightening are the interviews with David Cannon and Buddy Dallas. In the aftermath of Brown's death, the media portrayed Cannon and Dallas as blood sucking leeches. Once you read McBride's account you'll see them in a whole different light. After reading the book, all I could do was shake my head in disbelief that so many people stubbornly refuse to do the right thing and honor Mr. Brown's final wishes and help maintain his legacy. The man should be honored for his positive contributions. People are squabbling over his money, control of his estate even his body. From what I've read few people even know where and in what manner the man is buried. His last home should be open like Graceland, and the fans allowed to pay their respects. Prince hasn't been dead a year and they already have his house/studio open to the public! I could not put this book down until I finished reading it. McBride does a fantastic job of describing the local politics and social context of the Augusta area, as well presenting a variety of revealing and moving interviews from those who knew Mr. Brown. True fans might even shed a tear.

In my humble opinion James Brown was one of the most influential musical entertainers of the twentieth century (a point this book advocates as well). His music is instantly recognizable and is part of the fabric of American music. Brown was also a mass of contradictions--not easily categorized or summed up (the recent film biography though fun was not accurate). McBride, a musician himself, tries to unravel Brown, his influence on music, and the effect of racism of his life and career. McBride interviews the last survivors of Brown's band, life time friends and Brown's first wife. Also included is a section on Brown's relationship with Al Sharpton--which is fascinating (Brown was like a father to him). I saw James Brown at the Park West in Chicago in the late seventies and it remains

the best show I have ever seen--by far. Truly the hardest working man in show biz, this is a must read for anyone interested in Brown or the music he created. Even if you're not that interested in him, it's still a great story.

James McBride is an accomplished writer and tackles some of the most difficult topics about America through the prism of James Brown, successfully dealing with so many contradictions and truths about James Brown and race . One need only look at the other books he's written and the acclaim and awards those books have received to expect this to be a profound book and the author delivers. This is one of top books on James Brown, one of the most difficult geniuses to try to understand. His choice of people that he interviews and the questions he asks is in keeping with his insight. He offers a bunch of new insights and information not in other books. This received such good reviews from others educated on the topic, like the author of "Nowhere to Run To". Such a talented writer and original thinker. Its just great he turned his attention to this topic. I've read every credible book on James Brown and this author gets all the facts right and gives a great deal of context and insight that only he could bring. You may want to read the great straight forward biography on Brown first "The One" to get the proper background info to fully appreciate this book.

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