

Foreword

Rickey Vincent

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Well, here it is, the definitive take on the life of a jazz musician who can play The Funk. But not just any jazz musician. Fred Wesley is easily the greatest trombonist alive today. If you judge him by his definitive swanging jazz-funk soloing style; his chart-topping recording accomplishments; the body of legendary music he has arranged, produced, and recorded; the depth, breadth, and range of his touring and performing background; or his pure longevity, Fred Wesley is one of the world's Master Musicians.

While Fred Wesley is a unique and uniquely enduring character in black music, his life encompasses the struggles and aspirations of generations of black musicians. What you hold in your hand is the archetypal story of every black musician of the past forty years. Yet these forty years have undergone wave after wave of revolutionary change, from the rhythmic foundations of funk to the changing racial composition of soul and jazz to the technological innovations of synthesizers and samplers, all of which make up the music we live with today—and Fred Wesley was there in the engine room making that revolution happen.

So much of black music has taken from the Fred Wesley sound. As bandleader for James Brown for most of 1970–75, Fred was responsible for some of the greatest funk tracks ever recorded: “The Payback,” “Papa Don’t Take No Mess,” “Get on the Good Foot,” “Pass the Peas,” and “Doin’ it to Death,” among so many others.

In response to the brilliance of the JBs, in the early 1970s many other acts—such as Kool & the Gang, Tower of Power, the Average White Band,

FOREWORD

War, and Earth, Wind & Fire—developed their own “big band” sound with jazzy horns and funky grooves. At its peak during the Mothership Connection days, George Clinton’s P-Funk Empire was driven by the outrageous and undeniable sounds of Fred Wesley’s horn arrangements. Nowadays everyone in hip-hop, from Dr Dre to D’Angelo, is looping or snooping around Fred Wesley’s funky tones to get that “sweet and tangy” lick into their sound.

The career of Fred Wesley covers the entire revolution in music: from be-bop jazz to the high energy rhythm and blues of Ike and Tina Turner, two hellacious stints with the Godfather of Soul James Brown, an outrageous excursion on the P-Funk Mothership, a dreamy tour with the serendipitous Count Basie band, and all kinds of adventures as a session producer in and around the Los Angeles music scene.

But *Hit Me, Fred* is so much more than a musician’s memoir. It is that story that has needed to be told ever since the myth of Motown in the 1960s manufactured for America that Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story of integration in popular music. As a black music memoir, *Hit Me, Fred* has more in common with Charles Mingus’s outrageous *Beneath the Underdog* and Miles Davis’s *The Autobiography* than with James Brown’s comparatively polite autobiography *The Godfather of Soul*.

The life of a black musician in America is fraught with private glories and public disappointments. The tedium of practice and the seemingly unresolvable conflicts between personal growth and personal success with your instrument is vividly explained by Fred. Fred Wesley explores with style and sass the essential elements of life as a modern musician: the generosity and wisdom of musical elders that helped him to learn his craft and become the most recognizable trombone player in the world; those bitter yet necessary trials of starving on the road with act after sorry act in the 1960s, reliving those horror stories and folktales for a generation of soul brothas and sistas who have “paid their dues”; those fleeting moments of glory, whether on record, on stage, or, as occasionally happens, in contact with true respect and acknowledgment of a lifetime of work; and that ever-so-sad cycle of anonymity and humiliation afforded to great black musicians of this generation. Fred combines a gracious tolerance with a feisty bitterness that brings all these emotions into focus.

While it’s bad enough for once-proud bandleaders to suffer the indignities of obscurity, the extremes tolerated by sidemen are truly dramatic, and Fred speaks volumes for every struggling musician, from those who have enjoyed moments of glory and fame to those who never will, yet

FOREWORD

who will never waver from their life's calling—to play. At the same time, Fred knows intimately what it takes to become a “star” in this business, and anyone with aspirations to success needs to bear witness to Fred's attitude, humor, and expertise.

Fred has been through it all in black music. The trials and tribulations he experienced during his early efforts as an Army Band performer, a rhythm and blues sideman, and a frustrated jazz musician reveal as much about our culture as does his tenure with superstars Ike and Tina Turner, James Brown, George Clinton, or Bootsy Collins. *Every* person he recounts is important to his narrative, for a great musician is the sum of all of his or her influences, and Fred Wesley's sound and style is a combination of all the characters and committed artists he has ever worked with and learned from.

Hit Me, Fred also explores the status of black musicians within black working- and middle-class family life. The precarious relationship between entertainment and art, and the difficult line between playing and making a living are universal torments that Fred brings to life ever so vividly in these pages.

Fred's passion for jazz is utterly delicious, the yin and yang of his commitment to The Funk is fascinating, and his love-hate relationship with James Brown is simply hysterical. The Godfather will never be seen in the same light again. Yet, as harsh as Fred's words for James Brown are, the greatness of Soul Brother Number One continues to resonate through Fred's book and through black music in general. It is essential to understand the incredible operation James Brown amassed—an operation that pulled Brown himself along with dozens of other obscure yet driven black artists to the pinnacle of success and global celebrity—surely, one of Black America's greatest achievements. However, to fully understand the power involved, one must delve beyond the myth-making and examine the often ruthless methods of a man known around the world as the “Hardest-Working Man in Show Business.”

Fred Wesley is there in every way. He is a tagalong musician, learning from the masters, Alfred “Pee Wee” Ellis and Maceo Parker; he is a team player, finding his place among the luminaries in the James Brown band; he wins the confidence of Mr. Brown and becomes bandleader himself, participating in some of the most important black music ever recorded. All the while, Fred Wesley navigates his role as sideman to a superstar, often backing up Mr. Brown even when he doesn't think Brown deserves it.

FOREWORD

This story goes far beyond the contrived accolades of outsiders. It is an inside story of life with James Brown that every fan of black music should know and understand. Fred Wesley exposes for all time the levels of pain and sacrifice needed to make “Star Time” sparkle worldwide. Of course as a card-carrying funkateer, I’m also thrilled to read about Fred’s exploits with George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and the P-Funk mob, where he characterizes himself as the only earthling among a band of funky spacemen who were just visiting from the “Chocolate Milky Way.”

What black folks have needed for at least a generation is a bold, incisive discussion of our music, of what motivates us to generate such powerful sounds, and of what keeps us so maligned and “forever suffering.” *Hit Me, Fred* is that window into the workings of a subculture that has taught the world to dance. Most importantly, this book tells the story of Fred Wesley Jr., son of a music teacher, who grew up in southern Alabama and made an indelible mark on the music of our era. With *Hit Me, Fred*, the world’s greatest sideman finally gets his just desserts.