

#### How did you first meet James Brown?

Okay, let me go way back. When I was a kid, I used to go to the jam session at the Kings Club in Mobile, Alabama. One day, I went there and a trumpet player was there named Waymon Reed, who was in Mobile with the Paul A. Miller Circus. On Sundays, he would come out to do the jam session, and we became good friends. He stayed there for a couple of weeks. I even played with the circus for a little bit. He went away, and I didn't know where he was or what he was doing, but the next time I saw him, he was playing with James Brown. I was in the Army at that time. He was the trumpet player for James Brown, and I was surprised that he would be playing a gig with the James Brown Orchestra. The James Brown gig back then was like a whoop-de-do kind of gig. Waymon Reed was a *fine* jazz trumpet player. After that, I didn't see him again for a long time. Then, he called me and asked me if I wanted a gig with James Brown. I was studying jazz, and I wanted to do a gig with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Horace Silver, even Ray Charles would've been a pretty good gig. But he asked me if I wanted a gig with James Brown. I said, "Well, yeah. I guess since you're playing with James Brown, I can play with James Brown."

So I took the gig. And I had met [saxophonists] Pee Wee Ellis and Maceo Parker. John "Jabo" Starks was the drummer for James, and I knew him because he was from Mobile; and Bernard Odum was the bass player for James, and I knew him too. I never thought I would be playing with James Brown, but now I'm on the gig with James Brown! So, Waymon carried me in to meet James Brown, and he was sitting down, and, of course, he was looking in the mirror. [laughs] His back was toward me, and he turned around and looked at me. He saw that I was a little bit overweight, and

he asked me, "Can you dance?" I said, "Yes, sir. I can dance." Because I had played with Ike and Tina Turner, and we performed dancing routines. He said, "You're on trial. Stay around and maybe you'll make the gig." Of course, I made the gig and the longer I stayed around, the more I liked it because he had a dynamic show. I was really happy to be on a show like that.

#### What made you choose to play the trombone?

When I was coming up as a kid, I played everything. I played the bass, piano, drums, and trumpet. I was studying the trumpet when I got to the trombone. My father had a big band. He came home with a trombone one time and he said, "If you learn how to play this, I'll put you in the band." I'd wanted to play in my father's band. It was sort of a jazz, swing band that played tunes like Count Basie's "April in Paris" and Duke Ellington's "Satin Doll" and songs like that. So he told me if I learned how to play it, I could play in his band. So that following summer, I spent all my time studying the trombone. I became pretty good at it, and he let me play in his band. It has stuck with me ever since.

Since I was twelve or thirteen years old, I've been playing the trombone. Of course, I had a different style in the same way I'd play the saxophone, trumpet, piano, or bass. I was able to get a funky sound on the trombone. I don't look at it as a trombone; I just look at it as an instrument to impart the funk on the people.

#### What is the backstory to the name of the J.B.'s?

When I joined the band, it was known as the James Brown Orchestra. James Brown had the Famous Flames and that was a little before me. By that time, the band was known as the James Brown Orchestra, but we still

had the Famous Flames. They were four guys: Bobby Byrd, Johnny Terry, Baby Lloyd Stallworth, and Bobby Bennett. They were the Flames, but the band was [saxophonist] Maceo Parker, [saxophonist] Pee Wee Ellis, [guitarist] Jimmy Nolen, [drummer] Clyde Stubblefield, and all the other guys in the band. Back then, I was just a guy in the band. As time went on, I left the band in 1969. Bootsy [Collins] came in and took over the band during that time because Maceo had took the whole band with him and left and formed a band called Maceo Parker & All the King's Men. Bootsy came in and took over the James Brown band and that was the band that was called the J.B.'s. James Brown gave them the name the J.B.'s. Then Bootsy left the band, and I came back to the band as the bandleader. We cut tunes like "Pass the Peas," "Gimme Some More," and all those songs. The original J.B.'s were Bootsy Collins and his band mates, which were his brother Catfish Collins, Chicken Gunnells, Robert McCollough, Jasaaan Sanford, and Hassan Jamison. They were the original J.B.'s, but when they left, the band kept the name the J.B.'s and gave it to me. Eventually, it became Fred Wesley and the J.B.'s.

#### Can you talk to me about the process of you leaving and then coming back to become the bandleader for the J.B.'s?

Well, James Brown was dissatisfied with Bootsy, but it wasn't due to his playing or the groove or anything like that. Bootsy was a star also. Bootsy didn't want to knuckle under to James Brown. James Brown needed that knuckle-under thing, so Bootsy refused to do that, although they did cut him some hits like "Super Bad," "Sex Machine," and even when I came back, Bootsy was still in the band and we cut "Soul Power." Bootsy just played his part; he didn't want to say, "Yes, sir, Mr. Brown," and all that kind of

stuff. So James got rid of Bootsy. He knew that if he offered me the bandleader gig and promised me all these things, I'd come back to the band. I was really doing badly in California. I had left the band and moved to Los Angeles, and there wasn't really any work for a trombone player. When I came back to the band, I came back with the agreement that I would be the bandleader, and I would be music director. We did "Mind Power," "Get on the Good Foot," and eventually "The Payback," and I did get a piece of all those songs.

#### And that was a good thing, because the music business back then was known as funny business when it came to the money.

Yes, it was. See, I didn't know anything about all that. I would've come back just for a large salary back then; I never got a salary from him. The most I made with him was five hundred dollars a week. Five hundred dollars a week was my salary from the time I started in the band until the last time I was with the band. It was the most money I made. Before I left the first time, I was only making two hundred fifty dollars a week with him. When Pee Wee Ellis was the bandleader, I found out that James Brown was paying his rent. James Brown never paid my rent. [laughs] But I did get a piece of the songs. The first one was "Soul Power." Then I got a piece for "Hot Pants," "Get on the Good Foot," and all those tunes that I did with James Brown. I still make a lot of money today from those tunes. So it ended up being a good deal for me. But at that time, I used to complain to James all the time by saying, "I only make five hundred dollars a week." James would respond, "No, you're making money in the studio and on those royalties." See, James told me, "A piece of these tunes will give you financial security for the rest of your life." And you know what, he was

correct when he said that to me. I'm very comfortable now, and it's because James Brown gave me a piece of those tunes. Of course, I earned it, but I didn't know to ask for it. He gave that to me. It's the reason why I'm alive and comfortable today.

#### The early 1970s was a plentiful time for James Brown. Leading up to *The Payback*, what type of direction did he want to go in with his sound, and as his bandleader, how did you want to progress his sound?

Well, I followed his lead. He gave me sort of a direction, but he didn't have a definitive direction of where he wanted to go. He just wanted his music to sound different from everyone else. We would be sitting in a room together, and he would give me some ideas by making sounds with his mouth and hands, and I would put it together and make a song from his grunts and groans. It wasn't a real direction, but the thing is, he didn't want his music to sound like the Isley Brothers, Earth, Wind & Fire, or anything he had heard before. So we came up with some new music. Some of the music we came up with, I didn't agree with at all. When we were in the studio, we did "Pass the Peas" instrumental. I didn't like it *at all* because it was so simple. It was almost stupid. "Gimme Some More" was silly to me, but it was cool with James because the beat was there. All he wanted was a good solid beat. What went over the top of it didn't matter too much to him. But the beat had to be there. It had to be danceable, and it had to be something that people could relate to. I don't know how people related to "Pass the Peas," but they did, and "Gimme Some More." "Doing It to Death" was a big hit, and I loved it. Jabo played the "Mobile shuffle" on it. But his direction for the sound of the album was that he wanted to do something that we never heard before.

#### What was your collaboration process with James Brown and the rest of the band for this album?

James would play sounds with his mouth as far as what he wanted to hear from a guitar or drums, and I would make something out of what he said. This is what I would do with the studio band. I would take all his grunts and groans into the studio and write the music out. I would use a studio band in New York or California to do the songs. But if he came into the studio and did some music with his band, which was Maceo Parker and people like that, he would hum things to the band and the band would play what he was humming, and we would make something out of it. Jimmy Nolen was good with the single lines on the guitar and Fred Thomas could play that bass. Sometimes, it would be hard to do; sometimes, it was impossible to do, but we would do something anyways and James would say, "That's it!" And it would turn out to be something. For example, on "The Payback," I wrote the lyrics to the song. James didn't say them, but I wrote them. He looked at the words I had written, and he said something like what I had written. But the groove was Jabo Starks, [guitarist] Jimmy Nolen, [guitarist] Hearlon "Cheese" Martin, and [bassist] "Sweet" Charles Sherrell. Jabo would lay down a funky groove, and it would become the groove for the whole song. Whatever James would say over top of it would be rhythmical, but it wouldn't necessarily make sense. Nobody would ever call him on it, because it was such a good groove. Like, when he said, "I don't know karate, but I know crazy." That doesn't make any sense, you know, but it's the way he said things, and the groove that went along with it that made the tune. The lyric "I don't know karate, but I know crazy," I didn't write that. [laughs] It was something I wrote that caused him to say that, though.

