

It all began with forty acres and mule...a simple desire for one whose personal branch on the tree of life struggled to protect itself from the dangerous branches of lust and greed. But nothing good is simple...as yesterday's windmills turned to today's skyscrapers and farms to parking lots, mind power brought about the turnaround of awareness.

Anger and revenge increased as time ran out, putting politicians and hustlers in the same bag...backstabbin', scrappin' but never rappin'. The message cried to live and let live... "you can take some but leave some." It's hard to give a life away.

There are those men who've done the best they can...never wanted it all...but so often like their

greedy lovers, skeptics took their kindness for weakness. Now skeptics beware, there's always a lull before a storm...it's time for payback, the big payback! It's hard but it's fair, because now it's time for even the godfather to shoot his best shot...and payback is gonna be a mothaf!!
—Alan Leeds, liner notes to *The Payback*

Fred Wesley

is considered to be one of the architects of funk music. Born in Columbus, Georgia, and raised in Mobile, Alabama, Wesley spent his formative years learning the richness of jazz from his father. Early in his life, he knew music was his calling. After displaying proficiency with the piano, bass, drums, and trumpet, he settled on making the trombone his signature instrument. This decision would set the stage for his long-term success as a pioneering musician. Once he reached manhood, the trajectory of his career would change after striking up a friendship with a fellow jazz musician in Alabama. This relationship led to Wesley receiving an offer to join James Brown's band and being introduced to the iconic artist. As a member of his band, he played an integral role in formulating the overall structure for Brown's transformative, enigmatic sound during his first stint with him in the late 1960s. Despite leaving Brown's band in 1969, ultimately, he would return in the early 1970s to become his musical director, bandleader, arranger, and composer.

By the early 1970s, Brown was heavily regarded as one of the world's greatest entertainers, pioneers of funk, and a cultural icon. During this juncture, he was bolstered by a collective of prodigious musicians dubbed by Brown as the J.B.'s, which was simply an abbreviation for the "James Brown band." While Brown's career was resurging, his relationship with King Records had become rocky. As a result, in 1971, he left King Records and signed a recording contract with Polydor Records, which had been spearheading the international distribution of his music since the late 1960s. With the deal, Polydor acquired Brown's new record label, People Records, as well as his extensive recording catalog with King. After delivering for Polydor ten straight hits on *Billboard's* Top 40 R&B and Hot 100 pop charts between 1971 and 1972, he became known as the beloved "Godfather of Soul." For most artists that reach the age of forty, their careers are either over or stalled, but it was a testament to the genius of Brown that he was able to experience a rebirth and achieve unparalleled feats.

Throughout this prolific stretch of musical creativity between Brown, his band, and a studio band of session musicians, all led by Wesley, James Brown released three more studio albums, *Hot Pants* (1971), *There It Is* (1972), and *Get on the Good Foot* (1972); a live album, *Revolution of the Mind* (1971); and two movie scores, *Black Caesar* (1973) and *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off* (1973). These albums would lead to his next triumph, 1973's *The Payback*, originally written for the blaxploitation film *Hell Up in Harlem*, Larry Cohen's sequel to *Black Caesar*. But when Cohen rejected the music, ultimately hiring Edwin Starr instead, Brown was furious and took back the music and released it as his own. Revenge was sweet, as *The Payback* would go gold and become the highest-selling album in Brown's venerable catalog, spawning two hit singles: "Stone to the Bone" and the chart-topping smash "The Payback."

While Brown's lyrics could be thought of as simply influenced by your typical blaxploitation crime drama, which they were originally written for, they were actually speaking to a greater truth, as evidenced by the album cover, which states, "We got a right to the tree of Life." James Brown was always the most vocal proponent of Black Power and Black Pride, and *The Payback* was no exception, but his message of hope and pride would be replaced with anger and forewarning. "You know, we're dealing with a very critical and crucial time—most crucial and critical time that I've ever witnessed," Brown says in the intro of "Mind Power." In his liner notes, JB publicity director and tour manager Alan Leeds writes: "It all began with forty acres and mule...a simple desire for one whose personal branch on the tree of life struggled to protect itself from the dangerous branches of lust and greed"—further explaining how the "big payback" was an analogy for an inevitable backlash from those who could not take oppression any longer.

In an effort to explore the origins of this classic album, we spoke with legendary musician Fred Wesley about his role in its creation.

