

MELLO YELLO

The Incredible Life Story of

JACK THE RAPPER

As told to **Walker Smith**

Foreword by Nelson George

Star Maker
and Pioneer of
Black Radio



"I am a ghetto man who made good. I never forgot where I came from and who put me on top--God and Jack the Rapper."

~James Brown

MELLO YELLO – The Incredible Life Story of Jack the Rapper

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Chapter 8

We Shall Overcome ...

The Civil Rights Movement was beginning to rumble in the fifties, at the same time I was at WERD. I didn't know it at the time, but I was sitting smack in the middle of history. Well, one floor up, to be exact. WERD had moved up the street from 274½ Auburn Avenue to 330 Auburn Avenue, or Sweet Auburn Avenue, as we called it. We shared the building with the newly-formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The bottom floor was theirs and we occupied the upstairs space.

There was always some kind of bustling activity going on downstairs—strategy meetings, plans for boycotts, speech writing and the training of new volunteers. So all the WERD employees were getting all the breaking news first. And what we didn't hear about at the office, we found out over a big plate of ribs, because we all ate down the street at “Ben Reed's Houston Street Rib Shack.” Ain't that a killer? There we were, greasin' down with Dr. King while he strategized, and not one of us had an inkling that what he was doing would change the world.

Dr. King traveled a lot during that time, but when I knew he was in his office, I'd take a break from my program and say, “And now, here's a word from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.” Then I'd dangle the microphone down through an open window to his office window, and he'd grab it and say something inspirational to the listeners. We were short on budget, but long on imagination, because we found all kinds of ways to keep ourselves going through those tough times.

In 1957 the SCLC was just getting started and one of the first things Dr. King did as its president was to take a large contingent to Washington, D.C. for the “Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom.” Since it was held on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, it turned out to be a preview of Dr. King's biggest triumph—the March on Washington, which would occur six years later. The 1957 gathering drew over thirty thousand people, and I think it was really the birth of the unity we all found in the Civil Rights Movement. The Rosa Parks incident was still fresh in everybody's minds, we were still fighting segregation, and voting rights was a big issue, so Dr. King's speech that day was right on time. It was called “Give Us the Ballot,” and it was the inspirational highlight of the day.

J. B. Blayton, Jr. and I went along to cover the event on a remote for WERD, and we found ourselves in distinguished company. I remember that Mr. A. Philip Randolph was at the center of things, just like he'd been since the twenties, and Mahalia Jackson sang. Roy Wilkins was there, Adam Clayton Powell, Bayard Rustin and all the others who were in the forefront of the Movement at that time. There was a big crowd in attendance, and a number of black celebrities were on the scene to show their support: Sammy Davis Jr., Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte and Ruby Dee, who were always around for anything Dr. King did. When Dr. King shouted out those four words, "Give...us...the...ballot!" that crowd just hollered. The Civil Rights Movement was now officially rolling.

When all the real work was done, J. B. and I rewarded ourselves by hanging out at the big Guardsmen festivities that were coincidentally being held in Washington that same night. Since anything the Guardsmen did was usually a fancy bourgeois affair, I couldn't help but notice the irony of my day in Washington. From hanging out with Dr. King, who was all about looking out for the poor and oppressed, to rubbing elbows with social-climbers, who were mainly concerned with number one. We still had such a long way to go.

* * *

Looking back, I think jazz was a great integrator on the arts scene, just like Dr. King was the great integrator on the political scene. Although jazz was predominantly a black art form, there were many white jazz artists playing with those great black musicians—Bird had Red Rodney blowing trumpet with his band and I remember Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Zoot Sims, Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich, to name a few others. All those cats were legitimate jazz artists, not just some white flashes in the pan. And they all played together, black and white, with mutual respect and admiration. The rest of America could have taken a lesson from them.

But it was different offstage. I remember many theaters had to be segregated, no matter what color the performer was. Jazz wasn't just catching on among the black audience, there were a number of white students at those Atlanta colleges that were crazy for it too. So we began to see white faces popping up at the Wallahajee. Now the theaters were supposed to be divided up into a White section and a Negro section so the races wouldn't do any mixing while the show was going on. Well, we were accustomed to black audiences, so we weren't prepared for segregating the audience. The white kids didn't seem to mind, so everybody just partied together.

But that all came to an end one night when one of the musicians from the stage hollered, “Put out the lights!” Well, from his vantage point, the musician had seen the Sheriff and a gang of police officers with the Chief of Police heading up the center aisle.

“What the hell are you people doin’ in here?” the Chief wanted to know.

“Well, we’re just puttin’ on a show, Chief,” I answered.

“Don’t gimme that! Just look at that audience! White folks and niggers all mixin’ together! You’ in Atlanta, Georgia, boy! And we don’t have that kind’a stuff down here. You understand? And another thing ...”

When he finally finished his speech on the evils of race mixing, the Chief sent one of his officers out to the car to fetch a long length of rope. When he returned, they proceeded to run that rope right down the middle of the theater. When they finished, the Chief called out, “Now I want all you niggas to get up and go sit on my left side, and all you white kids go sit on the right.”

Well, everybody wanted the show to go on, so up they got. Once everybody was nice and segregated, the Chief made one last announcement. “Now. That’s better. This is the way it’s gonna be from now on if y’all want this here club to stay open for business, y’all hear?”

Everybody, white and black, nodded and “yes-sirred” accordingly until the Chief and his men left.

What happened next would have made the Chief mad at us, but would have made Dr. King smile. Because after a few minutes of that hot jazz those musicians were laying down, that crowd was integrated and partying together, rope or no rope.

* * *

Another big problem during those years was the danger faced by artists traveling through the South. Sometimes it was just plain harassment, but other times things got deadly. I’ll give you an example of each.

One time I had Louis Jordan on my show after emceeding one of his local shows in Atlanta. Louis had a band called The Tympani Five, and they did a lot of comical numbers like

“Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens” and “Saturday Night Fish Fry.” He had a left-handed guitar player named Lloyd Smith and a drummer everybody called Crazy Chris Columbus. That name sure fit him too. Part of his crazy reputation stemmed from his movements on stage. Behind his drums Chris had rigged up a seat that was like no other drummer had, believe me. It was a motorcycle seat, complete with springs. So when Chris got to really swingin’ on a number, he’d start bouncing up and down real high on that motorcycle seat and the audience would just fall out laughing. So Louis Jordan’s shows were always fun—a big musical laugh-fest. As you might imagine, my on-air interview with this batch of nuts was pretty unpredictable, and I guess I must’ve gotten caught up in all the fun because I heard myself announcing to my listening audience that I was getting one of my ideas. “Hey, now Atlanta, what do you think about the Jockey goin’ out on the road with The Tympani Five for a couple of days and then I’ll give y’all a report on what really goes on with these wild fellas!” The band was all for it and I had a couple of off-days coming up so the next thing I knew, I was on the bus with Louis and the band.

I think we were somewhere just outside Alabama when the bus was pulled over by the most typical southern cracker sheriff I had ever seen. He shined his light on the driver (a white man), then on me, then on a few of the other fellas, who were asleep. Well, in that bad light, the sheriff must have made that same old mistake about me, because he called me sir. “These your niggas, sir?”

My survival instinct kicked in and I claimed the band as my personal “niggas” without hesitation.

“Well, where y’all headed and what kind’a work they do for ya?” he asked.

“Oh, they’re musicians,” I explained, motioning behind my back for the fellas to stop grumbling and cussing about being roused from their naps. “I’m taking them to a few towns to do some one-nighters.”

A shit-eatin’ grin suddenly appeared on the sheriff’s face. “Well, tell ’em to get on out here and let me hear ’em.”

“Uh, well...sure,” I said. I paused for only a few seconds before it hit me that this crazy cracker was really serious. By the time I headed back to break the news to a very sleepy and

grouchy Louis, the sheriff was leaning on his car, waiting expectantly. “Hey, man,” I hissed at Louis. “The man wants the band to come on out and serenade him.”

“What?” Louis exploded. “Man, you must be out’cho gotdamn mind! I ain’t serenadin’ no ’Bama cracker at no four in the mornin’!”

“I don’t think you heard me, Louis. I said THE MAN. Not just any ol’ ’Bama cracker. This one’s got himself a badge. So if we want to keep this bus rollin’, I think we better get our asses out on the highway—and y’all play him a little number.”

Well, I don’t remember what number the band played, but all Chris dragged outside was his snare drum, and he played standing up. By the expression on his face, I don’t think he was in any kind of mood to be bouncin’ around on his motorcycle seat anyway. When they finished their half-hearted song, the sheriff waved us on and we all climbed back on the bus in a funk. Nobody talked much and believe me, nobody thought it was the least bit funny, with the possible exception of that sheriff. He was probably rolling down the highway radioing his buddies how he got one over on a bunch of “niggras.” Only something tells me he wouldn’t have used that word.

I was as good as my word, and reported everything to my listeners when I returned to Atlanta. I’m sure they were surprised at the tone of my little “on the road” anecdote. Just like me, they had expected it to be a funny story, but it’s hard to sound funny when you’re talking through clenched teeth.

That was just one of the indignities suffered on a daily basis by black folks traveling through the South. But as I said, sometimes things got deadly.

I remember once emceeing a big “Good Will” show with Jackie Wilson and Jesse Belden, among others. Jackie was a big star, but Jesse was right behind him, believe me. He was a very talented balladeer with a bright future who had just recorded his first album on the RCA Victor label.

Right after the show, Jackie and Jesse left for a road trip through the South and reportedly had a run-in with the Ku Klux Klan just outside Nashville. A short time later, they stopped at a little roadside diner for something to eat. While they were inside, a group of white men punctured the tires on both cars, but in a manner that made slow leaks instead of flats. Well,

when Jesse got his car up to top speed, a couple of those tires blew out, and both Jesse and his wife were killed. The only reason Jackie wasn't killed was that the punctures in his tires hadn't been done as well. He didn't even know he had punctures until after he stopped behind Jesse's wrecked car and saw that his own tires were nearly flat. After close inspection, the same kind of punctures were discovered in the tires of both automobiles. Nobody was ever held accountable for killing Jesse and his wife.

Guess there's a whole assortment of ways to lynch black folks in the South.

* * *

By the sixties, all the suffering of the first half of this century got to be too much, and even Dr. King's nonviolent approach wasn't enough for some of our people. In the summer of 1965 an incident occurred in Watts, California that turned all that anger and resentment into fire. You know the story: Young folks sick of being kicked around plus the regular dose of Police brutality equaled the Watts Rebellion, or, as the white folks called it, the "Watts Riots."

Whatever you call it, it was bad. It was a disc jockey named Magnificent Montague who was credited with the anthem that the crowd took up: "Burn, baby, burn!" The minute they heard him say it, all the frustration they felt just seemed to fit with the words. That summer nobody had any peace. We wanted change. And just like Malcolm X once said, if they didn't want to deal with Dr. King's nonviolent approach, then fire was going to be the alternative.

Things went on like that, off and on, for the next few years. But then the Vietnam war got rolling, and women were raising hell for their rights, too. It seemed like everybody was mad, and the music reflected it. Protest songs were all over the radio. And that was black radio *and* white radio. The songs of Marvin Gaye and Bob Dylan were replacing the National Anthem, with young folks, at least. I remember one big record that summed it up best: "War! What Is It Good For?" by Edwin Starr. And I think he was talking about a lot more than just the Vietnam war.

And then there was 1968.

Ironically, when Dr. King was killed, I was in the same state—Tennessee. He was shot at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, and I was in Nashville at the time. Now that was some horrible,

devastating news. I had just turned on the radio, and out came the words. It was what the literary folks call bitter irony. Dr. King, who had won the Nobel Prize for Peace, had met a violent death.

At times like Dr. King's assassination I remember feeling so helpless. But the violent death of such a peaceful man was just too much. I was too enraged to just sit back and take it. I had to find something to do. Some outlet. So I called my buddy Larry Dean, who was doing a show on the Mutual Black Network from Washington, D.C.

“What can I do, Larry? There's got to be something I can do.”

“Tell you what, Jack. You can be a stringer for us.”

Now a “stringer” was somebody who did a local newscast from some other area and it was fed to the network for airing on their show. So Larry sent me to Detroit, a real emotional hot-spot after the news of Dr. King's death, to do a man-on-the-street segment.

When I got to Detroit, the fires were already raging—a graphic depiction of the rage we all felt. I talked to the folks for a few hours until things just got too sticky for somebody with my light complexion. As darkness fell, I received several warnings from neighborhood folks who told me that, from a distance, I looked like “whitey.” Since I could completely identify with the destructive forces around me, I decided it was time to go. I never liked being mistaken for whitey, but especially not on that particular night on that particular street. Once again, the phrase coined by Magnificent Montague during the Watts Rebellion rose up. Burn, baby, burn!

Now, don't you know that all this crossed my mind when the Rodney King verdict stirred up all that anger again in the '90s? I stared at the coverage on my television set and wanted to cry. In thirty years, we tell ourselves we've made change. But have we?