



Photo: Heinrich Butler

Fred Wesley | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

DAMN RIGHT, HE'S SOMEBODY

By Burgin Mathews

In 1967, Fred Wesley Jr. got a call from a friend: James Brown needed a new trombonist and, if Wesley wanted it, the job was his.

He wasn't sure he did. Wesley was above all a jazz man, and he didn't think much of Brown's music: beneath the screaming and squealing and grunting and strutting, there just wasn't any substance or complexity to it. Wesley's own band, The Wesley-Davis Mastersound, had recently fallen apart, in large part thanks to a James Brown tune. His bandmates wanted to add Brown's "Cold Sweat" to their act, but Wesley insisted the music was beneath them, unworthy of the sophisticated thing — that mastersound — they'd been building. The

dispute ended in drunken shouting and curses in the mud and rain outside a Tuscaloosa nightclub. Then the band fizzled out.

Wesley had just accepted another job anyway, a delivery job for Barber's Milk. He had a wife and baby to support, and the milkman gig was security. But he weighed the pros and cons and, in the end, music beat milk.

In hindsight it's hard to believe a milk route might have derailed the storied career that followed. But Vetta Wesley, Fred's mother, was sure he'd made the wrong choice. A devoted civil rights worker, she herself had led the charge for a black milkman, and her son was set

to be Mobile's first. It wasn't just a steady job; it was a community milestone, full of symbolism and honor.

Wesley would soon contribute to the civil rights cause, all the same, even without the milk. His first recording session with Brown produced one of the era's essential anthems, "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud." Other anthems of empowerment followed, like "Damn Right I Am Somebody," released in 1974 by Fred Wesley and the J. B.'s, the group he directed for Brown. Wesley even warmed up to "Cold Sweat," whose relentless groove he came to relish each night onstage.

Over the next few years, he established himself as Brown's bandleader, arranger, and chief composer. He helped oversee the transition from soul to funk, and emerged as one of the essential architects and patron saints of the new sound. He became a star soloist, spurred by Brown's exhortations to "Hit me, Fred!" or "Cook, Fred, cook!" And he laid down his signature sound on cut after cut after cut: "Doing it to Death." "The Payback." "People Get Up and Drive Your Funky Soul."

Wesley had been steeped in music since the moment he entered the world. His grandmother was organist and choir director at Mobile's Metropolitan AME Church, and she'd taught him some rudiments of classical piano. His father directed the high school band and choir, played a mean boogie-woogie piano, and led a swinging big band, the Rhythmic Sensations.

By the time he was seventeen, Fred had played in the school band, in his father's big band, and in a couple of jazz combos, the Sounds and the Esquires. He'd studied with his father's friend and colleague, E. B. Coleman, Mobile's music master. He'd played blues and R&B with a local nightclub act, and even worked a few times with the Excelsior Band, the historic marching ensemble at the heart of the city's Mardi Gras tradition. But it was bandleader Ed Pratt's Sunday night jams at Mobile's Kings Club that truly expanded his universe, introducing him to the bebop that became his deepest love.

This immersive, eclectic training would serve him well. After high school came college at Alabama State, then a stint with Ike and Tina Turner, a season in a world-class, jazz-fueled Army band (based at Huntsville's Redstone Arsenal), and his own first ventures into bandleading. Next came the call from Brown and his rise as a celebrated sideman. From there he graduated into the orbit of George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Parliament-Funkadelic, arranging and directing horns for a run of the funkier, wildest, freest records ever made, beginning with 1976's *Motherhip Connection*.

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He started his own band, the Horny Horns. Then came a seat in the Count Basie Orchestra and a return to his jazz roots.

Since then, Wesley has released numerous solo albums, from dance party classics to straight-ahead jazz. In the 1990s, he reunited with two other James Brown veterans, Maceo Parker and Pee Wee Ellis, to form the acclaimed JB Horns. In 2002, he published one of the great music memoirs, *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman*. He's worked with student musicians in clinics, classes, camps, and colleges across the country. And now, in his eighties, he continues to record, continues to compose, and continues to tour the world with his band The New JBs and his Generations organ trio. One of the most sampled artists on the planet, he's widely embraced not only as a founding father of funk but as a key contributor to the sound and soul of hip hop. He just recorded a solo for Dr. Dre. And he's working, too, on an original funk symphony.

"I could have been just another trombone player," Wesley says today, at his home in Montgomery. "In fact, maybe I would have been just another trombone player if I had gone the jazz way." Instead, he forged a unique and unexpected path, developing a voice that reverberates across the world. "I just have to be thankful," he says, "for whatever it is that guides me — or drags me along with it," he laughs.

The rest of us are thankful, too.

Burgin Mathews is a writer, radio host, and founding director of the Southern Music Research Center, a nonprofit that documents and preserves the many musical histories of the American South. His book, *Magic City: How the Birmingham Jazz Tradition Shaped the Sound of America*, won the 2025 Alabama Library Association Award for nonfiction.