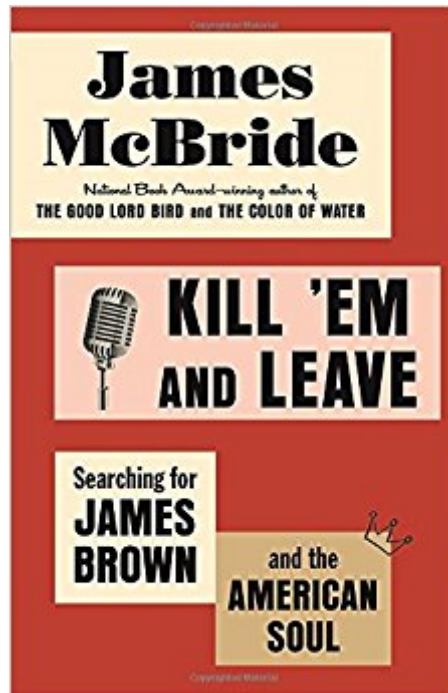


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# Kill 'Em And Leave: Searching For James Brown And The American Soul



## Synopsis

National Book Award winner James McBride goes in search of the "cereal" • James Brown after receiving a tip that promises to uncover the man behind the myth. His surprising journey illuminates not only our understanding of this immensely troubled, misunderstood, and complicated soul genius but the ways in which our cultural heritage has been shaped by Brown's legacy. *Kill Em and Leave* is more than a book about James Brown. Brown's rough-and-tumble life, through McBride's lens, is an unsettling metaphor for American life: the tension between North and South, black and white, rich and poor. McBride's travels take him to forgotten corners of Brown's never-before-revealed history: the country town where Brown's family and thousands of others were displaced by America's largest nuclear power bomb-making facility; a South Carolina field where a long-forgotten cousin recounts, in the dead of night, a fuller history of Brown's sharecropping childhood, which until now has been a mystery. McBride seeks out the American expatriate in England who co-created the James Brown sound, visits the trusted right-hand manager who worked with Brown for forty-one years, and interviews Brown's most influential nonmusical creation, his "adopted son," the Reverend Al Sharpton. He describes the stirring visit of Michael Jackson to the Augusta, Georgia, funeral home where the King of Pop sat up all night with the body of his musical godfather, spends hours talking with Brown's first wife, and lays bare the Dickensian legal contest over James Brown's estate, a fight that has consumed careers; prevented any money from reaching the poor schoolchildren in Georgia and South Carolina, as instructed in his will; cost Brown's estate millions in legal fees; and left James Brown's body to lie for more than eight years in a gilded coffin in his daughter's yard in South Carolina. James McBride is one of the most distinctive and electric literary voices in America today, and "part of the pleasure of his narrative is being in his presence, coming to understand Brown through McBride's own insights as a black musician with Southern roots." *Kill Em and Leave* is a song unearthing and celebrating James Brown's great legacy: the cultural landscape of America today. Praise for *Kill Em and Leave* "Thoughtful and probing . . . with great warmth, insight and frequent wit. The results are partisan and enthusiastic, and they helped this listener think about the work in a new way. . . . James McBride's welcome elucidation . . . is clear, deeply felt and unmistakable." • "Rick Moody, *The New York Times Book Review* " [McBride] turns out to also be the biographer of James Brown we've all been waiting for. . . . McBride's true subject is race and poverty in a country that doesn't want to hear about it, unless compelled by a voice that demands to be heard." • "Boris Kachka, *New York Times* " The definitive look at one of the greatest, most important entertainers, *The Godfather, Da Number One*

Soul Brother, Mr. Please, Please Himself" JAMES BROWN. "Spike Lee & James McBride on James Brown is the matchup we've been waiting for, a musician who came up hard in Brooklyn with JB hooks lodged in his brain, a monster ear for the truth, and the chops to write it. "Gerri Hirshey, author of Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music "An unconventional and fascinating portrait of Soul Brother No. 1 and the significance of his rise and fall in American culture. "Kirkus Reviews

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

McBride is an outstanding writer—he won a National Book Award for his memoir of his mother, *The Color of Water*. As well as a reporter, he's been a jazz musician and he is clearly at home in the bubbling, vibrant musical world of James Brown and his compères. He is also African-American (father African American, mother a Polish Jew), angry about what America and the recording-performing world still do to American blacks. All this makes him a good choice to write about a complicated man, the Father of Soul James Brown. This isn't a regulation biography. At points, it's a rant. The biography parts are liberally spiced with anger: a no-holds-barred condemnation of the straightjacket of race that constrains, thwarts and warps even the most exceptional black performer like Brown --or Michael Jackson, who is a player in the book as well. (Talent is just dessert in the ear-candy business anyway. It's about who can stand the ride.) He contrasts Brown's notorious generosity, his neatness and attention to appearance (he never ventured out with his hair mussed up or raggedly clothes on, and

you could eat off the floor of his kitchen, it was so clean) and his musical perfectionism with his compulsive hoarding, his ramshackle love life, his petty acts of tyranny and meanness (coming out of nowhere at times) toward his musicians (but at other times, there were acts of considerable generosity). Along the way, McBride meets and interviews Brown's prize saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis, the ever loyal Rev. Al Sharpton, Brown's (black) manager Charles Bobbitt and (white) accountant David Cannon. And he keeps cycling back to how Brown's carefully worked out plans for his fortune were torn to pieces by the vultures who descended on his corpse after he died "his not-wife fourth wife, all of the relatives who wanted a bigger chunk of his wealth than he'd left them" "he wanted the bulk of his fortune to spent on educating and raising up poor children black AND white" and the legal vultures who have milked the estate of most of his hard-earned cash for ten years now, with no appreciable end in sight. McBride's prose is sometimes high flown, lyrical-- at other times, it's racy and demotic. But his anger is a rhetorical tool too, persuasive and eloquent in itself. When you have finished this eloquent account, you will understand and appreciate James Brown "James Brown, the man, not just the performer" in ways you didn't before. Highly recommended.

I really wanted to love this book. The subject matter and even the style of writing are right in my wheelhouse. Unfortunately for me, *Kill 'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul* devolves into less of a search for the "real" James Brown and more of a series of rants about the author's world view and experiences. And even that would not necessarily have been a bad thing. But in this case the author presents a story of a journey he never actually takes. This is hearsay and conjecture about James Brown, nothing more. And while there is no doubt that James Brown comes from a place where racial tension and civil rights violations are woven into history, the author seems to blend all the experiences of all people of color into an over-simplified blanket that he hangs over James Brown's life. Make no mistake, the author is an excellent writer. This is a collection of interesting stories. At times some of those stories are very engaging. But when you take a step back from it, it's hard not to notice the small percentage of factual accounts about James Brown's life that actually made their way into this book. There are thankfully some exceptions. The Nafloyd Scott portion of the story offers the kind of account I was really looking for. Yet there are too few of those and there is a complete lack of context when one considers the hyperbole of many of the surrounding chapters. And even the relevant stories seem to offer very little additional depth for those seeking the "real" James Brown the author was searching

for.CONCLUSIONThose who are looking for a book on the process of researching historical people will find a lot of lessons learned here. The author does a lot of things right, and he documents the leg work here. But the finished product has to be more than an account of his search. There has to be an actual story about James Brown at the end of it. And sadly, this book falls far short of achieving that.

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