

FRED WESLEY, JR.

Fred Wesley, Jr. was raised in Mobile, Alabama, where both his grandmother and father were music teachers. He studied piano and tried the trumpet, before switching to trombone. His father, Fred Wesley, Sr., led a popular local big band, in addition to directing the music department at Mobile Central High School. With these strong and immediate influences, Wesley was a working musician by the age of twelve.

Wesley is best and rightly known as the master of funk trombone. Certainly that attribution would be hard to contest. If Wesley's work with the proto funky James Brown music machines did not establish him as such, his labors with "His Ultra Funkiness", George Clinton, and his merrily zany constellation of Funksters sealed the deal.

Before joining James Brown in 1968 Wesley toured with Ike and Tina Turner, as well as Hank Ballard and The Midnighters. Wesley had also earned an Associate Degree in Music from Alabama State University and graduated from the Army School of Music. He was the featured soloist with the 55th Army Band at the Redstone Arsenal, just as he would become the lead soloist for the world famous JB's during his second tour of duty with Brown from in the 70s.

Wesley's contributions to Brown were many, and they were critical to the progression of Brown from the Godfather of Soul to the Prophet of Funk. From his playing on "*Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud*" to his writing of *Papa Don't Take No Mess*," Wesley helped to inaugurate a new and historically resonant rhythm and blues. In the 1990's, Wesley joined with Maceo Parker and Pee Wee Ellis, as the JB Horns, to reprise the spirit of his years with Brown



Wesley's decision to join George was a natural evolution. Musically, he has reunited with another funk innovator and James Brown refugee, bassist William "Bootsy" Collins. More importantly, Wesley found a freedom he had never before experienced. Clinton pushed the rhythm and blues envelop as no producer in that genre had ever done, creating the equivalent in Funk (musically and theatrically) to what Sun Ra was doing in Jazz.

No complete assessment of Fred Wesley Jr. as trombonist, arranger, and bandleader should begin or end with the idiom of Funk. **Full Circle: From Bebop To Hip Hop**, the title of a compilation collection, first issued in 1995, accurately reflects Wesley's scope. Uniquely and with few equals, Wesley has developed and applied his craft across the continuum of modern black vernacular music.

In his autobiography **Hit Me Fred: Recollections of a Sideman** (Duke University Press), Wesley makes it clear that Jazz has been a life long interest. In 1978, Wesley made his first major foray into Jazz, replacing the great Al Grey in the Count Basie Orchestra. He has followed with several recording projects that mix modern jazz and even free jazz elements with his signature funk grooves. Thus reincarnated, Fred Wesley Jr. has had considerable success on the European jazz festival circuit.

As Wesley reinvented himself musically and reached for new audiences, Hip Hop artists have repeatedly sampled his treasure trove of horn licks. Prominent examples are Janet Jackson's "*That's the Way Love Goes*" and Nas' "*Nastradamus*." According to Wesley he has "a whole new career today due to sampling!" His funky horn lines have become the gift that keeps on giving.

Among the other important artists Wesley has performed with, produced and arranged for over five decades are Cameo, Ray Charles, Randy Crawford, De La Soul, Lionel Hampton, Whitney Houston, Dr. John, Curtis Mayfield, The SOS Band and Vanessa Williams. In addition to performing and producing, Wesley is active as a consultant, clinician, lecturer and musicologist.

By W.A. Brower © 2007