

GLENN, DANDRICK SHENOD. D.M.A. FRED WESLEY (b. 1943): LEGENDARY FUNK TROMBONE PIONEER. (2024).

Directed by Dr. Randy Kohlenberg, 29 pp.

- I. Solo Recital: Monday, April 12, 2022, 7:30 p.m., Organ Recital Hall. Romance for Bass Trombone and Piano (Carl Maria Von Weber, arr. Martin McCain); Concerto (Robert Spillman); On Your Own Now (Steven Verhelst); Let Us Break Bread Together (Traditional, arr. Chad Hughes): New Orleans (Eugene Bozza).
- II. Solo Recital: Friday, November 4, 2022, 7:30 p.m., Organ Recital Hall. Sonata for Bass Trombone and Piano (Alonzo Malik Pirio); Romance (William Grant Still, arr. Douglas Yeo); Mr. Trombonology (Nathaniel Davis); Concertino (David Wilborn); Every Time I Feel the Spirit (Traditional, arr. Chad Hughes).
- III. Solo Recital: Sunday, April 23, 2023, 12:00 p.m., Organ Recital Hall. Sonatine für Posaune und Klavier (Erhard Ragwitz); The Lone Caller (Alonzo Malik Pirio); Summertime (George Gershwin, arr. Tom Doherty); Concert Allegro (Alexey K. Lebedev); Fancy Free (Clay Smith, arr. Blair Bollinger); Deux Danses (Jean-Michel Defaye)
- IV. D.M.A. Research Project. FRED WESLEY (b. 1943): FUNK TROMBONE PIONEER (2024). Fred Wesley at age 24 joined James Brown's popular funk and rhythm and blues (R&B) band in 1968. The experience defined him as a funk legend, but it did not limit the rest of his career. Later as a member of the Count Basie Orchestra, he followed saxophonist Maceo Parker through George Clinton's various iterations of Parliament-Funkadelic and was in Parker's bands as a featured trombonist through the mid-1990s. Wesley in 1996 formed his group, The New JBs, and continued even at age 80 to perform with them. Wesley also taught as an adjunct professor in the School of Music at the University of

North Carolina at Greensboro, as well as being a visiting artist at Columbia College in Chicago, the Berklee College of Music, and other institutions. On July 4, 2023, Wesley celebrated his 80th birthday.

The purpose of this project was to document and amplify the significance of Fred Wesley's career. Following a brief introduction and biographical sketch of Wesley, ideas about how Wesley was able to earn his livelihood as a musician after growing up as an African American during the Jim Crow South. He later became one of the most influential jazz and funk musicians in the Twentieth Century. A complete biography was beyond the scope of this project partially because Wesley wrote his autobiography. A component of the document is an interview with Wesley conducted in his home in Manning, South Carolina. The information presented in interview format is intended to supplement Wesley's autobiography and other sources that reinforce his significance as one of the most influential Twentieth-Century musicians and renowned funk trombonist.

FRED WESLEY (B. 1943): LEGENDARY FUNK TROMBONE PIONEER

by

Dandrick Shenod Glenn

A Dissertation  
Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Musical Arts

Greensboro

2024

Approved by

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Randy Kohlenberg  
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Dandrick Shenod Glenn has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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March 19, 2024  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Dr. Sherri-Marcia Damon, the first African American female to earn a Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in Trombone Performance in the United States from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She provided positive feedback to me as a high school trombonist who suggested that I had great potential. I have intended to measure up to her kind words in my career. Dr. H. Keith Jackson was the first African American trombonist I ever met who held a doctoral degree. His friendship and mentorship have inspired my career. Michael Kris, a Professor of Trombone at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, believed I could achieve more than just playing the bass trombone and supported me to become a major in music and embark on my musical journey. These individuals have inspired me to become a trombonist, scholar, and teacher.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing the doctoral degree would have been impossible without the valuable assistance and guidance from the faculty at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The Doctoral Advisory Committee members provided excellent mentoring and suggestions throughout the degree program. Appreciation is expressed to Dr. Jonathan Caldwell and Dr. Daniel Rice for their suggestions and support throughout the progress of this project. Gratitude is expressed to Dr. Randy Kohlenberg for his oversight during the progress of this degree. His leadership, knowledge, and mentoring have been invaluable. Many colleagues and graduate students at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro offered encouragement and motivation throughout the degree program. My wife, Shamiika Queen-Glenn, has been fundamental to the success of this project and throughout the degree program.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Fred Wesley (b. 1943) is recognized as a trombonist and a funk, soul, and jazz musician. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he performed with James Brown (1933-2006) and became the leader of Brown's band, Fred Wesley and the JBs. As the band's music director, arranger, trombonist, and composer, Wesley, along with Brown, is considered to be one of the original architects of funk music (Pace, 2021). Funk as a slang term was used initially to describe an unpredictable style and attitude but became popular in music with its rhythm-driven style in the 1970s and 1980s. Vincent (2024) wrote:

The development of the terms *funk* and *funky* evolved through the vernacular of jazz improvisation in the 1950s as a reference to a performance style that was a passionate reflection of the Black experience. The words signified an association with harsh realities—unpleasant odours, tales of tragedy and violence, erratic relationships, crushed aspirations, racial strife—and flights of imagination that expressed unsettling yet undeniable truths about life.

Funk is characterized by prominent syncopated bass lines and drumbeats involving "any number of instruments involved in rhythmic counterplay, all working toward a *groove* (Vincent, 2024)."

Wesley crafted the horn section arrangements for Parliament-Funkadelic, a group active beginning in the 1960s, Bootsy's Rubber Band, active beginning in 1975, and led the band, Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns. His signature horn arrangements for the Parliament-Funkadelic mix "made funk music even funkier (Savey 2026)." Wesley's distinctive sound continued to reverberate through rap and hip-hop. His trombone playing evolved through stints with the Ike and Tina Turner Revue, the 55<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army Band, Hank Ballard (1927-2003), and Count Basie's (1914-1984) Band. Also, Wesley was successful in the music business as a producer and in his work in Los Angeles recording sessions (Wesley, 2002). Later in his career, he launched his

teaching career when he taught at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and presented clinics and master classes at other institutions (Savey, 2006).

### Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to document and amplify the career of Fred Wesley. A brief biographical sketch documented his early life and education followed by his background and professional career as a trombonist, composer, arranger, and educator. Although not a major focus of the document, how Wesley grew up in the Jim Crow South as an African American musician to become one of the most influential jazz and funk musicians in the Twentieth Century was addressed. Because Wesley wrote an autobiography, a complete biography is beyond the scope of this project. Although other interviews and articles are located online, an extensive interview with Wesley around the time of his birthday in 2023 at his home in Manning, SC, has been included in the document. This interview presents a recollection of his life, career, and philosophy in his own words. Additional information in the interview, not included in the autobiography nor written in earlier interviews, provides a unique perspective about how Wesley has influenced trombone performers around the world.

### Organization of the Document

The document is organized beginning with Chapter I, an introduction and purpose. The second chapter is a brief biographical sketch of Wesley. Chapter III includes highlights of Wesley's career as a performer, composer/arranger, and recording artist. The fourth chapter is a discussion in an interview format conducted with Wesley at his home in Manning, SC. Chapter V is a summary of the project, conclusions, and suggestions for further study. Insight into Wesley's early life and career follows with a brief biographical sketch in Chapter II.

## CHAPTER II: BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF FRED WESLEY

Frederic Alonzo Wesley, Jr., was born on July 4, 1943, to parents Fred Wesley, Sr. (1916-1990) and Vetta Slaton Wesley (1916-1992) in Columbus, Georgia. His father, Fred Wesley, Sr. (d. 1990) was a music educator in Columbus, Georgia. The family in 1947 moved to Mobile, Alabama, where Wesley, Sr., taught for the Mobile County [AL] Board of Education at E.B. Coleman High School. He was a WW II veteran, and as a big band leader, was a popular club entertainer. Wesley, Sr., later chaired the music department at Mobile Central High School. He also was the choir director for over 35 years at the Hope Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church in Mobile (Montgomery Advertiser, 1990).

At age 3, Wesley, Jr., studied classical piano with his grandmother, also a music teacher, but preferred the big-band music played by his father. Wesley continued to play the piano through middle school but began to play the trumpet and later switched to the trombone. When asked about his love for playing the trombone (Wesley 2024) recalled:

The trombone came about as an accident. My father needed a trombone in his band. He always saw me as a perfect utility player, the go-to guy. Any time he needed someone to sing a different part in the choir he'll get me to sing it. . . . He wanted me to march in the band, I played the cymbals in the band, I played a little drums, anything he wanted me to do.

Wesley excelled in his school band and began to play regularly in local venues and realized that he was skilled in being able to improvise. Wesley “. . . fell in love with bebop and the sound of his idol, J.J. Johnson (jazz.com, 2024).” He graduated from Central High School in Mobile. AL.

Upon completing high school, Wesley recalled that he enrolled at Alabama State University in Mobile to earn an associate degree in 1962 (jazz.com, 2024). Wesley, however,

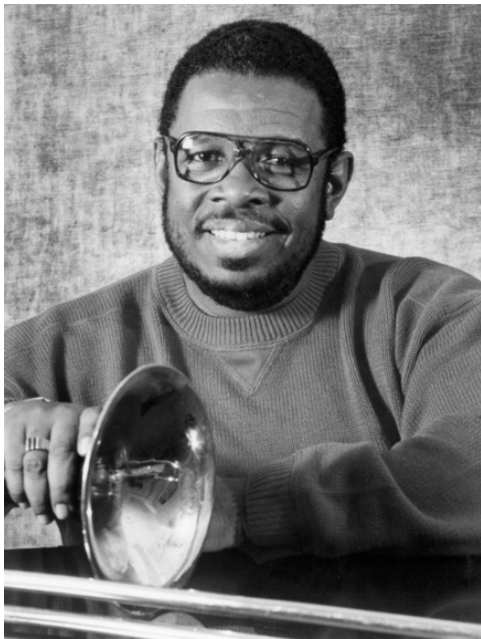
stated that he did not complete the degree because he joined Ike and Tina Turner's Band in 1960 and never returned to finish his program. After completing the tour with Ike and Tina Turner and a brief time playing in the Hank Ballard Band in Atlanta, GA, Wesley returned to Mobile (Wesley, 2024).

Wesley returned to live with his grandmother in Mobile and led a jazz sextet called New Sounds. He preferred to play only jazz and bebop with this group and refused to play popular music by James Brown despite audience requests. Wesley's work during this time, however, was sporadic, and he decided to further his music education by enlisting in 1964 in the Army School of Music in Little Creek, VA, (jazz.com, 2024). Wesley credited his primary music education to the time when he joined the United States Army. He revealed that he could read music, but he learned how to play in a concert band and a big band (Wesley, 2024).

Wesley was stationed at Redstone Arsenal near Huntsville, Alabama, where the commanding general, Bob Edmonds, was a passionate fan of jazz. He asked Wesley to play in the base's big band where Wesley made strong friendships in the band. He considered the music-making to be of a high caliber during his time at Redstone. Playing in the big band at Redstone was Wesley's first experience playing jazz regularly with white musicians. During that time, Wesley married but the Vietnam War was escalating, and Wesley decided not to re-enlist. He was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in 1967. Although Wesley remembered that he could make his band sound good while in high school and could read music, he did not believe he was a professional musician until he left the Army. "When I got out of the Army, I was a professional musician (Wesley, 2024)."

Wesley became the leader of another band in Huntsville, AL, called Mastersound. When that band broke up, Wesley and his family returned to Mobile. Upon returning to Mobile, to integrate the workforce, Wesley was offered a job to be the city's first African American milkman. Soon after he had settled into his day job, he was offered and accepted the position of the trombone chair in the James Brown Band that at the time was touring in Ocala, FL. Wesley toured and recorded extensively with Brown during the next three years and developed a close musical rapport with saxophonist Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis (1941-2021) in the horn section. Wesley later was promoted to bandleader when Ellis left the band. Disagreements with Brown ultimately led Wesley to leave the band in early 1970, although he did work again later with Brown.

**Figure 1. Wesley in His Youth (n.d.).**



Wesley's accomplishments as a trombonist, his work as a band leader, his recordings, his compositions, and his influence on other musicians is continued in Chapter III that begins with

his move to California. Following his move to California and the subsequent years, Wesley faced the greatest challenges in his personal life and career. Chapter III reveals after those years, he was able to emerge as one of the most renowned trombonists in the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Centuries.

### CHAPTER III: WESLEY'S CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Wesley left the James Brown Band after amassing enough financial security and relocated his family to Los Angeles. He believed he would have more opportunities to build his career in California. Shortly after his relocation, the trombone chair in Art Blakey's *Jazz Messengers* was offered to Wesley. The issue with accepting that position was the frequent and required travel between Los Angeles and New York. For that reason, he did not accept the offer. During the next year, Wesley accepted a freelance job with jazz and rhythm and blues (R&B) bands. At the end of the year, he determined that he did not earn enough salary to continue to live in Los Angeles with his. At that time, he decided to return to James Brown's Band (Rodriguez, 2024).

After his return to Brown's Band and a subsequent departure from that group, Wesley began to write arrangements for Bootsy Collins and George Clinton, founders of the Parliament-Funkadelic groups. Unfortunately, a contract dispute with Clinton resulted in Wesley discontinuing his work with Collins and Clinton. After leaving Parliament-Funkadelic, he learned that Al Grey (1925-2000) had retired from the Count Basie Orchestra. Wesley was hired to be Grey's replacement in 1978 (Ankeny, 2024).

Wesley learned, however, that the salary paid by Basie's orchestra did not provide enough for his family in Los Angeles to live comfortably. In 1979, Wesley returned home to pursue his career as a producer, and he released in 1980, *House Party*, the first album under his name. The first track was a hit single, yet the album itself was never released to a larger audience. At that time in his life, faced with disappointments and addiction, Wesley fell into depression (Rodriguez, 2024).

With the support of his brother Ron, other family members, and friends, Wesley began recovery from his addiction in Denver, Colorado. As a part of his recovery, Wesley was determined to rediscover his jazz “chops” and spent much of his time practicing. In 1990, Wesley released his first solo jazz recording, *New Friends* (Rodriguez, 2024). During the next decade, he was able to record successfully with his former James Brown bandmates. Maceo Parker (b. 1943) and Pee Wee Ellis (1941-1991) including *Life on Planet Groove* and *Roots Revisited*. Produced by Steven Meyner (b. 1956), Those albums were followed on producer Steven Meyner’s (b. 1956) label, *Minor Music*, with Wesley as the band leader in jazz releases that included *Swing & Be Funky* and *Amalgamation* (Ankeny, 2024).

During that time, Wesley also toured and performed with his band, Fred Wesley and the JBs. His group toured and recorded albums with Parker and Ellis. As well,

**Figure 2. Fred Wesley Performing with the New JBs (2016).**



he was a guest artist in appearances with a variety of artists including James Taylor (b. 1948), Dr John (1941-2019), and many others. He also published his autobiography *Hit Me, Fred!*



*Recollections of a Sideman* (Wesley, 2002). Wesley later taught trombone as a Professor of Jazz Studies from 2004 through 2006 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Reflections on his teaching are contained in the interview in Chapter IV.

Not only did Wesley perform extensively in live performance situations, but also he recorded on albums thought to number around 200. An extensive and lengthy discography of Wesley's recordings is beyond the purpose of this document. Extensive listings of his recordings are available on websites too many to name. Yet, Wesley did have specific recordings that were among his favorites. The following listing features many highlights of his recording career. In the following selected listing, the name of the group and artist is followed by the album title and year released.

Wesley's recordings as a solo artist include:

*House Party* (Curtom, 1980)  
*New Friends* (Polygram, 1990)  
*Comme Ci Comme Ca* (Polygram, 1991)  
*Swing & Be Funky* (Minor Music, 1992)  
*Amalgamation* (Minor Music, 1994)  
*To Someone* (Good Hope, 1999)  
*Full Circle: From Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Cleopatra, 1999).

Wesley is heard on the following James Brown recordings:

*Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud* (King, 1969)  
*Sex Machine* (King, 1970)  
*Payback* (Polydor, 1974)  
*Doing It to Death 1970-1973* (Polydor, 1984)  
*Star Time* (Polydor, 1991)  
*Soul Pride: The Instrumentals* (Polydor, 1993)

Recordings as Fred Wesley and the JBs include:

*Food for Thought* (People, 1972)  
*Damn Right I am Somebody* (People, 1974)

*Funky Good Time: The Anthology* (Polydor, 1995)

Recordings of Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns include:

*A Blow for Me, a Toot for You* (Atlantic, 1977)  
*The Final Blow* (AEM, 1994)

Wesley is heard on Parliament recordings:

*Mothership Connection* (Casablanca, 1976)  
*Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (Casablanca, 1976)  
*Trombipulation* (Casablanca, 1980)

With Bootsy's Rubber Band, Wesley is heard on the following:

*Stretchin' Out in Bootsy's Rubber Band* (Warner Bros., 1976)  
*Ultra Wave* (Warner Bros., 1980)

As a member of the Count Basie Band, Wesley is heard on:

*Milt Jackson, Count Basie & The Big Band, Vols. 1-2* (Pablo, 1978).

With Maceo Parker, Wesley is recorded on:

*Roots Revisited* (Verve, 1990)  
*Mo' Roots* (Verve, 1991)  
*Life on Planet Groove* (Verve, 1992)  
*Southern Exposure* (Verve, 1993)  
*Funk Overload* (Verve, 1998)

**Figure 3. Wesley at Age 80 (2023).**



Wesley is legendary as a funk and jazz trombonist recognized by many as the first to create that distinctive sound on the trombone. Ankeny (2024) wrote:

As the longtime musical director for soul legend James Brown's renowned backup unit, the J.B.'s, trombonist Fred Wesley was the world's most famous sideman, orchestrating the sinuous grooves and contributing the bold, surgically precise solos that defined the language of funk.

Wesley's long career has continued as a trombonist, teacher, and role model through his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Chapter IV presents an extensive interview with Wesley near the time of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2023. That interview provides a glimpse of his accurate memory of past events and how he has continued to perform.

## CHAPTER IV: INTERVIEW WITH WESLEY

Fred Wesley is known for his role as a trombonist in recognized bands and as a recorded soloist who was a pioneer playing in a funk and R&B style. Although previous interviews with Wesley have been published and Wesley wrote an autobiography that was published and widely distributed, this interview is included to offer a perspective of Wesley who at 80 years of age continues the flourish and perform. This interview was recorded in Manning, SC. Some statements in the interview will verify the information presented in other chapters yet the text provides a glimpse of Wesley's personality and what has made him the legend he has become. Rather than editing the interview into prose, this presentation is in the style of a question and answer without extensive editing. The letters *DG* signify the author of the document, Dandrick Glenn, and the letters *FW* represent Fred Wesley's responses. Statements not relevant to the topic of the document were omitted. The text of the interview is presented in Wesley's style of speaking.

DG—It is amazing that I'm here talking with you. And the first thing I want to say is seeing you and hearing you play a couple of months ago, you look great! So, what is your regimen?

FW—Thank you! My, daughter Joya—yes, the food expert—she's really into plant-based or vegetarian food. She has me on a plant-based diet, you know. And I take vitamins. Thank you for noticing that. Don't tell her, but I backslide sometimes.

DG—Speaking of longevity, how do you maintain yourself on the horn because you've been doing this for many years? Do you have a specific routine?

FW—Not really. I do practice as much as possible. But you know, I'm 80 years old, and these muscles seem to do well with me. I know some guys who've been playing for years and keep their chops up. But this is weak [pointing to the corners of his mouth], very weak. And I can only play for a little while, maybe 30 minutes. And if I play straight or if I do a jam session, I can play maybe four or five tunes with me building a solo with everybody else. And then they [his embouchure] start to get weak. And that's when I

stop. I had stopped playing before my wife died because I took care of her the whole time. I didn't play at all. And then after she died, I didn't play at all for a while after that.

Then I went to a party up here in Summerton, and Fred Thomas asked me to play "Pass the Peas." That's it. So, I happened to have my trombone because I hadn't moved it out of the car for a long time. When I tried to play "Pass the Peas," I couldn't do it. Because I played it, but it sounded terrible. I just couldn't do it. So right then I started practicing every day. I do long tones and lip slurs, and I play some tunes from the Real Book. That's what I do to keep my chops up. And I do that every day.

DG—I know you said in different interviews and your book, that when you went into the Army, you really learned how to play.

FW—And I didn't know I did not play correctly. I still don't play correctly. Because [when] you play, you push the air through the horn. But I didn't learn like that. I just got sound out of the horn however I could, and then I just played it. I got really good at it. I could play fast. I could play slow, and I could play ballads and stuff. But then in the Army, Joe Phillips was my teacher. He was the Navy Chief, he taught me how to play at the music school in Virginia. And he told me to push the air through the horn. I still don't do it exactly, but that's where I learned how to read, play, and stay comfortable. He played out the side of his mouth, more like this here [Wesley demonstrated with the mouthpiece to the side}. He had a big nice tone, and he could play fast and slow. That's where I learned to play.

DG—Were there any books or anything like that that you used while you were being trained?

FW—I learned the first few pages of Arban's method book. I didn't go through all the etudes—just the first. They all used books up there, a whole lot [at the School of Music]. The Arban's is a big book.

DG—When you were in the Army, did you do a lot of military ceremonies?

FW—Oh yeah, we did. I used to know all the anthems of all countries. If we had people from all the countries come over here, we had to play their national anthem. So yeah, we did all of those.

DG—Speaking of how you play, what are some of your influences as far as improvisation, and what is your approach to harmony?

FW—I've got an amazing ear. But I don't understand a lot of things about chords and stuff. Give me the C-Minor chord, and I could do that, and even the G-Major seven, I can do that. But when you get into the real complicated chords, I can hear, but I don't know what they are.

I shouldn't even be a jazz player, but I know all those chords. I know most people can play them on the piano. They can play the piano really good. But I can't do that. I have to

pick out what I hear. But I can hear those chords, play those chords, and hear those progressions.

DG—This goes back to your upbringing. I know your dad was a bandmaster. Your grandmother was a pianist and also worked in the church as a musician. I remember reading in your book that you learned to play the piano first, and then you sang a lot. Do you think that was a key to having a great ear?

FW—My father, usually anything he didn't have, would look around and say you [meaning the younger Wesley] do it. And if he didn't have someone in the choir, or if he had a group and wanted me to sing, because he was my high school teacher, he would let me do it. I was his utility man, but all the time I couldn't read it. I was hearing. And I think that's what the key was to how we played. On the trombone, I played Blues and R&B with bands around town from day one. And I didn't know what I was doing. But I was doing my part. That's how I learned how to play and play jazz. I just pretended and used my ear.

DG—It is interesting that you saw a parallel between R&B bands and how you sang in the church.

FW—That is right and the harmony part. I have to hear the harmony that he sang. Sing the one part I knew what the other part was. And I would sing it, and he said everybody said I was good at doing that. So, I didn't bother to learn how to read well. I still don't read real fast right now. You give anything to my trumpet player, and he'll play it immediately. But I have to look at it. He can read it faster than I can write. I mean I could write some music, and he'll read it. But. I still have this ear, and that's what gets me over.

DG—With that being said, who were the trombone players that you listened to? Maybe your dad's Basie records or your Ellington records? Were there any trombone players or anyone specific that you listened to or gravitated toward as you were learning how to play?

FW—J.J. Johnson [1921-2011] was my main influence. And then I discovered Curtis Fuller [1924-2021]. He was like J.J. Johnson, and he played both funk and jazz. Those two players influenced me a whole lot.

DG—That makes a lot of sense. I was listening to your *To Someone* album. In the tune *Autumn Leaves* and others, I hear similarities, particularly in how you have interesting approaches as far as how you articulate. I believe you're remarkably similar to Curtis and J.J.

FW—I think I was combining the two styles when I think I came out with the monster style that's better than both of them. At least, I think so. And I have the funk with the Curtis and the articulation and the flow. That's the same with J.J. because I think trombone players play rough and don't play smooth. And J.J. always played smooth. He's

a smooth player, and I have a friend in Saint Louis who introduced me to J.J.'s wife, Hazel, and got an appointment to see her as soon as I could. Wow. Wow.

Anyway, she told me a lot of stuff about J.J. that I didn't know. But he was practicing until the end and got weak. I heard him about two or three years before he died in Seattle. I could tell he wasn't the same.

**Figure 4. Wesley and Glenn at ColaJazz Festival Columbia, SC (2023).**



DG—There's a reason why certain people like LeBron [James], who like Father Time, are undefeated.

FW—But he stayed in shape all the way, and he didn't have a break. And I had that two-year break. And because I did not play at all during that time, I couldn't play at all. If you don't stop, then I think you will be good. I believe you could continue to have chops.

DG—In addition, you referred to J.J. Johnson and Curtis Fuller, but I am going to ask about other trombone players. I know you replaced Al Grey [1925-2000] who you replaced in the Basie Band.

FW—He played more smoothly than J.J. and Curtis. But he could play humorous things on the trombone. He was really good at playing with humor. But he could also do some really nice things on the trombone without the humor.

DG—I'm going to pivot slightly to ask you about when you were in the Count Basie Orchestra. Were you there with Clarence Banks [b. 1952] who is still with the band now?

FW—I know Clarence, but he wasn't in the group when I was with them. Yes, he is still with the band. And I know Dennis Wilson [b. 1952] and knew Bill Hughes [1930-1958].

And Grover Mitchell [1930-2003], told me when I asked for help—"He said do this, do that, and never do that." He helped but he did have a funny style, but he helped me to acclimate myself to that band. He was my good friend who died. A lot of those people died. And then there was Bill Hughes who led the whole band with just his bass trombone.

DG—Around the time your book came out, Barney E. Smart [1941-2004] arranged *Doing it to Death* for Al Davis [Alfred L. Davis, Jr.] from Hampton University. It featured you and your iconic solo with the trombone section. You were going to play it for the halftime show, but it rained.

FW—I was there.

DG—I think Smart was a huge James Brown [1933-2006] fan and played a lot of his music. Speaking of James Brown, this might be the only James Brown question that I'm going to ask.

FW: Thank God! [and laughs]

DG—You were a part of *Say it loud. I'm black and I'm Proud!* So obviously, it was written during the civil rights movement. How does that resonate with you in 2023 and going into 2024?

FW—It's still just a song to me, and I didn't even know much about it. They were going to say it out loud, "I'm black and I'm proud." I just thought it was just a riff that people were putting together just for practice, you know? But James called us when we were in the hotel in California and said he wanted the band to come out to the box studio. He brought a bunch of kids with him, and they said, "I'm Black. I'm Proud." That's how this all happened. You know, I did not know that it was going to be recorded *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm proud*. I just knew it was a nice little riff that the people had put together.

DG—Speaking of riffs and arranging, where did that come from for you? And has that evolved?

FW—Well James Brown gave me authority to do his music at that point. I got to go somewhere with James Brown. Brown signed a contract with Polydor Records where he had to deliver 5 albums a year. Five albums a year were a lot, and so the band had to record a lot. Also, we were on the road a lot. So, Brown had a guy in New York named Dave Matthews [b. 1942] who was doing his music, but he wanted somebody else—Black, I guess. And Dave Matthews was white. And that was that. But he loved Dave, but he wanted me to be over Dave recording in the studio in New York. So, Matthews showed me things that took him years to learn. He said "Now you can do this. I like horns to do this and this thing." And I learned how to write music.

Some in the group thought it was not really good, but I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know who was in the band, but I had the greatest musicians in New York playing during this session. Matthews and his partner, Emile Charlap [1918-2015], had the music



copies. They helped me to do it since James put me in charge, and then I let them tell me what to do. I used to stay up all night writing charts including *Down and Out in New York City*. That was a great thing for me. I did arrange many tunes on many albums. Look, where I did the writing for Brown, some of it was unorthodox—really unauthorized and stupid stuff—but they put his name on it. It came out great. We sold a lot of albums. That's where I learned how to record and write music.

DG—Were you also involved in the mixing process?

FW—We did not mix things. We just let it go however it was. Dave and I put Bob [Weir, b. 1947], who was an engineer at that time, in the position of head engineer. Bob didn't know what he was doing. So, me and Bob, whoever the engineer was, maybe David Baker [1931-2016]—they were all engineers, and they were great engineers. They helped. They said that it looked like we kind of mixed stuff together because we knew we had to have it mixed. When James came in and heard it, he just left it. He didn't believe in mixing stuff. I know that's ridiculous, but he said, put it out just like it is if you like it. So, that was a learning process with me.

DG—In reading your books and hearing you speak, you like latitude with things at the moment with other people that you work with. With Brown or George Clinton, were some things structured?

FW—What structure? It was, whatever it turned out to be, with how we made it. We liked George Clinton [b. 1941]. I don't care what it is, you know what is bad and when something is good. And so, I would write anything and stretch it out and do anything that I thought would sound good. One time at the studio I wrote something really silly. I said, “How do you like that?” Someone replied, “Did you mean that?” I said, “Yeah I meant that.” Well, it's cool, but he did put it on the album. He would call it quietly patrol. He would take it in and put out whatever he wanted, you know, but we spent all kinds of time in the studio. Clinton told me to do anything I wanted to do. He would use it or not. And I can see in turn I just played my part. I just learned how to dance and play the trombone at the same time.

DG—What was it like working with Ike [1931-2007] and Tina [1939-2023] Turner earlier in your career?

FW—I was learning. Like I said, I learned how to dance and play at the same time and watch Tina in one eye. I just caught Ike Turner in the other corner of my eye. He played guitar, and I just had to play my part and do my dance.

DG—Can you talk about the time spent at colleges?

FW—I graduated from the branch of Alabama State. They had a junior college that was a branch of Alabama State in Mobile. And I graduated from the Alabama State branch that went to Montgomery. That's where the real college was and I stayed there for maybe two months, Then I went out with Ike and Tina Turner.

DG—In your book, you wrote about the marching band at Tennessee State. Can you tell me a little about that experience at Tennessee State?

FW—Tennessee State was a very short experience for me. I went to band practice every day, and the head band director was a trumpet player. Anyway, he told me, “I understand you got a good ear. You play good jazz. Like we play jazz,” he said. “But you’ve got to read and play it correctly, blah blah blah. Then I’m sending you home.” So, wow. So, I did not stay that long.

DG—You brought up the good ear and playing jazz. You also said that having connected the ear to everything is what is what works. Is that like Clark Terry's [1920-2015] idea to emulate and assimilate before you innovate?

FW—I understand what you mean. Like *Stablemates*. I can't play them. but I won't tell everybody. I can't play those tunes because they can't be such different changes. I love those songs, and I could play the melody, but Bennett Golson's [b. 1929] tunes assume the changes can be read. *I Remember Clifford* is the same way. Any tunes that go straight from the beginning to the ending works, but if they've got fancy chords—silly chords—when I know a good melody, I cannot put my head into it no matter how hard I practice on them. If I knew chords and how chords move together, I probably could learn how to play. But I never took the time to put those chords together.

DG—When you hear a gospel tune, you hear certain progressions and there's some consistency in that. In some of the more contemporary gospel works, you do hear the turnarounds.

FW—You are right.

DG—Going back to your *To Someone* album, one aspect about it is that people can tap even when you are playing some bebop language.

FW—Everybody who heard that album mentioned *Autumn Leaves* is the only tune they mentioned. But nobody said anything about *Tippin*. *Tippin* is the one that has the rhythm changes. That's the one I really love, and it is a Joe Barnes tune.

DG—When spoke about your bandmates, Pee Wee Ellis and Maceo Parker, you said that they listened to a lot of R&B and a lot of a lot of other music. Does that shape your approach to melody? Is rhythm more important than line, or is the line more important?

FW—That depends on the tune you are talking about. In some tunes, the rhythm is more important. In some tunes, the line is more important. In other tunes, the chord progression is the best part. You have to have interesting chord progressions and Pee Wee is the one who did the intellectual stuff you. And then me and Maceo did the funky stuff. You know I played enough to make sure I did some of the intellectual.

Some of those funky stuff takes we did, I was in between them, but together we had a strong horn section. We never rehearsed. We always talked to each other, and some of it came out perfectly. We all had monster ears.

Maceo was the master at audience participation. He would do anything to get the audience's attention. He's a master. He could get them to do anything because he always got people to come up on stage.

We had to follow him [Maceo] all around, and we hated to do that. But he was the one who could do it, and people loved it. But then the music would always be put together by Pee Wee, who was put together anyway. And we were playing because we all had good ears, and we had that James Brown experience so we wouldn't have to rehearse. We knew how to play certain things just right then. It was the James Brown experience that kept us together and that was what made us have a strong heart. It was a great horn section.

DG—Speaking of approaches, what is your approach to one-chord vamp tunes?

FW—You've got to make a melody a one-chord thing. Then you make a melody and hope the band is strong enough to give you something to make the melody on their own. If it's one chord, then play that one chord like you want to play it strong. That's another reason why that Maceo and Pee Wee thing works so well. We had a strong rhythm section with Rodney Jones [b. 1956], Larry Goldings [b. 1968], and Bill Stewart [b. 1966]. And so, they were always on. They had monster ears too, and then they would always give us something to play on.

DG—Around the time when you were popular with the rhythm sections and other than the bands that you worked with, could you have functioned in Tower Power or Chicago?

FW—I could play with Tower of Power and Chicago, but they would have to give me time to learn the part. After I got the part and Casandra Wooten [b. 1972, a friend who sang with his late wife, Gwen, in the Ritchie Family, a vocal group based in Philadelphia] said she heard me on the record before Earth, Wind, and Fire. She said she knew that was me because they had that fire. They said they needed that spirit, if they would give me time to learn it, I could play it, and play it like nobody else could play it.

DG—I did not know you played with Earth, Wind, and Fire.

FW—I recorded with them. We did a lot of sessions with Earth, Wind, and Fire and Louis Satterfield [1937-2004]. He was a strong player, but if they needed more than one trombone player then they called me. But Wooten said she could tell that it was me, and I don't know what song I'm playing on. We had to go there and record the music. Then later on when it came out, we didn't know what song it was. But she said she could tell when it was me playing because it had kind of a snap and giggle.

DG—Yes, you can tell within the first five notes who the players are.

FW—I can tell who it is, and I can also tell who it is with those white groups. I could give it a different lift and a different kind of a fire thing.

DG—You were in a Smithsonian video where you spoke about the Albert Pick Motel in Greensboro, NC. What was it like for you when you traveled in those days?

FW—Back in those days you couldn't stay in the major hotels. We stayed in rooms and houses, or we stayed in a Black hotel. Some towns like the Lorraine Motel in Memphis or the Grand Hotel in Mobile accepted Black people. In Chicago, depending on the “weather,” we stayed in some hotels, but we didn't stay in the Holiday Inn—all those big hotels in the town. We had to stay in a rooming house. It's just a house where people set up rooms for the people. This could be a room in a house where you must walk through another bedroom to get to the bathroom. The same people had set up rooming houses for bands and other people when they came into town.

It would just become a regular thing, but later the other people said The Albert Pick [hotel in Greensboro] was the first one in North Carolina, I think in the South, to help open the doors to Black people. But mostly there would be rooming houses and Black hotels where we could stay. In Saint Louis, it was the Belmont Hotel.

DG—Can you talk about the time before you received that phone call to join the James Brown Band and the story about when you were about to become the first African American milkman in Mobile?

FW—My mother was a big civil rights advocate. She worked for voting rights. She wanted the best for Black people. She and my father were into music, but she was into civil rights.

A job came up for a milkman. They said, “You're going to have to take a test to be a milkman.” The test was simple, a general test just to see if we knew how to read and write and how to drive the truck. I was told that I made a better score on the test than the white people did. You knew you had to deliver milk, but it could not be just any milkman. Milk delivery wasn't going to have a Black milkman. My mother had talked to the company into hiring a Black milkman, but others said because the milkman had to go to people's houses and leave milk, only white people could do that. But she wanted to have me.

So, she had set up for me to be the first Black milkman in mobile—not necessarily me but just someone to break the barrier. So, I took the job.

Then James Brown came up with an offer, and I had to make the decision. My mother made it sound like I love music more than I love Black people. She asked, “Do you know somebody else Black who can do this? Maybe one of my friends.”

Of course, I chose the music. You know, I didn't want to play with James Brown, but he was going out of town. He was going to New York, and that's what I wanted.

DG—Are you the oldest in your family?

FW—I'm the oldest of three. I have a sister, and my brother died two months ago.

My brother was a music buff too. He owned a radio station, and jazz workshop out of Phoenix, AZ, that broadcasted all over the world. We are still trying to put his collection of records together. My nephew Kenny, my sister's husband, has all the records. He might start the radio station back up again. My brother actually played baritone horn but never got into jazz. But now it is just me and my sister.

My sister, Tianna, played in the churches that gave this girl here (pointing to a family photo on the wall) her main job. She works here with the Ross and Clayton Funeral Home playing the piano for funerals and is on call. And my sister also played for church, but she doesn't play anymore now that she is older. That was her thing, and she was a social worker too.

DG—You played the piano, bass, baritone horn, and trombone because your dad needed a trombone player. What other instruments did you play?

FW—Cymbals. My dad had a band that he directed band around town. So, he had a Lutheran school band. He also needed a triangle player going down the street playing. I stumbled and lay there a little dazed. He just used me for anything he didn't have.

DG—And were there players in his band, because you said in your book that your dad's friends became your friends? Did some of them influence your career?

FW—I learned some good things, and some bad things too, because now I am the only one left.

DG—So, you, you worked together?

FW—All the time. And my dad had a small band. He was with me, at a white club downtown, a burlesque club. I played drums and sang.

DG—It sounds like you have a collection of experiences beginning with your father, working with the many bands, and in recording.

FW—Yeah, well, I can't play anything else now. I can play bass with the baseline.

DG—Speaking of skills that you learned, did you pick up any arranging while you were you were in the Army?

FW—I didn't make any serious arrangements until I got with James Brown.

DG—I think a trombonist you worked with, Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews [b. 1986], took a lot of what you've done and ran with it. Are there any other current trombone players that you like and listen to?

FW—I admire trombone players, for choosing such a difficult instrument, but I can't think of anybody but Trombone Shorty who is the best one out there. I think he's going to blow his brains out really. We also had a guy I knew only as Big Sam Williams (b. 1980).

DG—Big Sam Williams. Jeff Bradshaw [b.1971]?

FW—Jeff Bradshaw. He is another great player. But neither of them don't play as fluently as I would like. But they keep the trombone alive.

DG—They definitely do that.

FW—Most famous players go for the loud thing, and Troy plays high and loud like Wycliffe [Gordon] [b. 1967] who plays high and fast. I enjoy players who play more melodically. I heard him (Wycliffe) play “Cherokee” by himself, and you can hear all the changes. I like to play melodically.

FW—Do you know Robert Trowers [b. 1957]?

DG—Yes.

FW—Yeah, he got Al Grey, Slide Hampton, and me together.

DG—Is there a recording of that group?

FW—Robert put the three of us together. Al Grey, Slide Hampton [1932-2021], and I played on a recording. I am not sure where that recording is.

DG—What a lineup!

**Figure 5. Wesley and Glenn Preparing to Play Together Following Interview (2023).**



DG—When you did teach, what are some things that you think trombonists should know or should be able to do? Did you use technical etude books for your students?

FW—I learned how to play smoothly before I learned how to play correctly. And then I got to the Arban book. I play in all the keys you know.

FW—I teach single tongue. Bill Watrous [1939-2018] showed me how to double and doodle tongue, but I couldn't do it. So, I just developed as fast as a single tongue as I could play.

DG—Outside of the trombone, what does Fred like to do for fun?

FW—Watch football!

DG—How do you want to be remembered?

FW—I would like to be remembered as somebody who played everything but played everything from my heart, and I'd like to be remembered as a nice guy.

DG—I agree with that. I'm going to say this, especially after spending this time with you, you are an amazing human being.

The interview was scheduled for 1.5 hours, but the conversations lasted much longer. Wesley and Glenn then played music on their trombones together. They discussed many friends and common acquaintances, including a former University of North Carolina at Greensboro student, Mark Shoun, who served with the US Air Force Heartland of America Band in Omaha, Nebraska. The interview captured information, but most of all, it revealed Wesley's personality and his generosity with next-generation trombonists.

## CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

### Summary

Fred Wesley at age 24 joined James Brown's popular funk and R&B band in 1968. The experience defined him as a funk legend, but it did not limit the rest of his career. Later as a member of the Count Basie Orchestra, he followed saxophonist Maceo Parker through George Clinton's various iterations of Parliament-Funkadelic and was in Parker's bands as a featured trombonist through the mid-1990s. Wesley in 1996 formed his group, The New JBs, and continued even at age 80 to perform with them. Wesley also taught as an adjunct professor in the School of Music at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, as a visiting artist at Columbia College in Chicago, and at the Berklee College of Music. On July 4, 2023, Wesley celebrated his 80th birthday.

The purpose of this project was to document and amplify the significance of Fred Wesley's career. Following a brief introduction and biographical sketch of Wesley, ideas are presented about how Wesley was able to earn his livelihood as a musician after growing up as an African American during the Jim Crow South. He later became one of the most influential jazz and funk musicians in the Twentieth Century. A complete biography was beyond the scope of this project partially because Wesley wrote his autobiography. A component of this document is an interview with Wesley conducted in his home in Manning, South Carolina. The information presented in an interview format supplements Wesley's autobiography and other sources that reinforce his significance as one of the most influential Twentieth-Century musicians and a renowned funk trombonist.



## Conclusions

Fred Wesley at age 80 is an amazing musician who has continued to perform as a trombonist for enthusiastic audiences. Fans of Wesley consider him to be legendary, but he is humble and modest about what he has accomplished. Not to imply that he is not proud of his accomplishments, but he stated that his goal as a performer was to play from the heart. Wesley also would like to think of himself as a “nice guy” and has demonstrated that throughout his life with his family, friends, and colleagues.

Although Wesley grew up in a musical family that included his grandmother and both parents, he was obligated to play whatever instrument his father suggested. Learning all the instruments required may have impeded his reading skills as he revealed. Yet those experiences molded him into a versatile player who at one time could play just about any instrument. Yet, his love was the trombone and playing in his smooth and melodic style. Growing up in Alabama at the end of the Jim Crow South era, Wesley’s career was not without its bumps and challenges. Yet his drive and his exceptional ability to hear music and play the trombone confirm the fact that he is legendary and has continued to dazzle audiences. Notably he performed in his career with other great artists including Ray Charles, Lionel Hampton, Randy Crawford, Vanessa Williams, the SOS Band, Cameo, Van Morrison, Socalled, the rappers De La Soul, and many others.

Because of Wesley’s pioneering efforts in the funk and jazz world, artists including Troy Andrews, known as Trombone Shorty, and Big Sam Williams, achieved prominent careers in funk, New Orleans, and other commercial styles. Trombonist Robin Eubanks (b. 1955), a renowned American jazz and jazz fusion slide trombonist, recalled that the first trombone solo he

learned was by Wesley. Eubanks became friends with Wesley and recorded with him the tracks, *For the Elders* and *Peace Fugue*, on the album *New Friends* (1990). Wesley composed both of those tunes on the album. Eubanks declared, “Fred is the man!” In his later years, Wesley has not only continued to perform, but also has become a mentor and teacher to aspiring performers. As late as February 2024, Wesley appeared in Charlotte, NC, in a performance for Black History Month with Tyrone Jefferson's (b. 1953) Band, *A Sign of the Times*. Jefferson had performed extensively with the James Brown Band. Most recently in March 2024, Wesley continued his legacy by presenting a masterclass at the University of Hartford, CT. Later in Spring 2024, he began a tour in Europe.

**Figure 6. Wesley at a Trombone Clinic (2023).**



Wesley’s career and life exemplify how perseverance can serve to be a catalyst for following a dream. No matter what the situation or challenge, Wesley managed to continue in his career and continues to play in his inimitable style, as he characterizes it, “from the heart.” Brown (1974) stated on the album *Damn Right I am Somebody*, “To me happiness is Fred

Wesley playing his horn.” Furthermore, his characterization as “being a nice man” is without challenge.

#### Suggestions for Further Study

Although many biographies, discographies, and Wesley's autobiography have focused on his career, trombonists may wish to pursue the idea of transcribing many of the solos found in his albums. A study of the elements of Wesley's solos to determine how he achieves his distinctive style can be a valuable resource. Although Wesley is a titan among trombone performers, many others, some of whom are mentioned in this document, are worthy of intensive study and documentation of their careers. Finally, a study of Black trombonists, many of whom built their careers during the era of the Jim Crow South, could be a valuable addition to the literature.

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