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Introduction

GIVE THE DRUMMER SOME

It was the slaves' day off. About twenty of them got things rolling on Sunday, September 9, 1739, breaking into a warehouse less than twenty miles south of Charlestown, South Carolina, grabbing guns and powder, and shooting sentries who got in their way. They were African born, with memories of life in the Kingdom of Kongo (modern Angola, Cabinda, and the Republic of the Congo). Many were former Angolan soldiers. Now they were soldiers once more.

They marched from the Stono River heading south for Spanish Florida, where other escaped slaves had been granted freedom. Along the way they gathered guns and drums. The cadence they beat on those drums drew more to their ranks, as did their songs and the banners they carried. They shot whites as they found them, spared a tavern owner who had been good to his slaves, and burned plantations. The rebels could not, however, kill all of their tormentors. The lieutenant governor escaped their onslaught and returned with a brigade of planters and militiamen. Outnumbered and having lost the element of surprise, the rebels were defeated by the following Sunday. More than forty blacks and twenty whites were killed in what was called the Stono Rebellion. Stono was the largest slave revolt to shock the colonies in the eighteenth century.

After it was over, the governor of colonial Georgia, expressing his concern over the insurrection next door, filed a formal report to a representative of the Crown:

On the 9th day of September last being Sunday which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, Some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty. . . . Several Negroes joyned them, they calling out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating, pursuing all the white people they met with, and killing Man Woman and Child. . . . They increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field, and set to Dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them, thinking they were now victorious over the whole Province, having marched ten miles & burnt all before them without opposition . . .

Dancing, Singing and beating Drums: a unity expressed in performance. The drums communicated beyond the reach of the voice, and beyond sight. They moved bodies to join in brotherhood.

After the Stono Rebellion, South Carolina stopped importing African-born slaves. Too unmanageable. The hiatus lasted ten years, and when the colony again ventured into the trade, it avoided slaves from the Congo-Angolan region. Colonial legislators frantically passed the Slave Code of 1740, banning chattel from using or even owning drums. The overall law forbade drums and swords alike, making clear how South Carolina viewed the instrument: as a weapon.

That was how white colonials valued the drum. They had their own tradition of military percussion, and drawing on it, they understood the slave music as a call to war.

But to black Carolinians, the rhythms of Stono meant war and more. Drumming was a way of representing yourself as an imposing force, a way of demanding respect. As historian Richard Cullen Rath puts it, “The [Congolese] court tradition, which man-

ifested itself in the drumming and dancing that so intimidated planters, was a means of directly representing and displaying power. . . . [It was] perhaps the original form of broadcasting.”

South Carolina’s ban on drums stayed on the books for over a century, all the way to the Emancipation Proclamation. But, failing to understand the African use of the instrument, the colonial legislature achieved a meaningless goal. The cadence continued by alternate means. One legacy of the Slave Code was that bondsmen found other ways to keep rhythms alive without a drum: Writers of the time record a skill amongst slaves for tapping with different parts of their bodies, hitting the floor and walls with sticks, clicking, banging, and most of all, dancing. That patting, tapping, dancing all flowed into the body as surely as it flowed from it; it was absorbed and passed on to new arrivals. There was a kind of underground flowering after 1740, a sharing of skills that made the drum unnecessary at the same time that it made drumming ubiquitous. Rhythm created community. It brought the news.

It happened again and again, in various places.

Almost eighty years after Stono, the slaves came marching across the Savannah River, heading to Augusta, Georgia. They came from South Carolina, beating on drums and carrying wooden sticks on their shoulders that made it look like they were bearing muskets. It was 1817, and though they had been outlawed, here again were the drums.

From a distance, it must have looked like trouble. Though it was (wink wink) illegal to bring slaves from another state for sale in Georgia, here they came, under the gaze of a slave trader, with “all the pomp and circumstance of illegal triumph,” as a letter writer described it in the *Augusta Chronicle*.

Upon arrival in downtown Augusta, the slaves scattered. Somebody reminded the slaver that importing bondsmen was illegal, and he played it deadpan, shocked that anybody thought he was

trafficking. The drums, however, did not lie. They scattered, too, going everywhere slave bodies went.

Pass it on: It's 1843, and the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, William Cullen Bryant, is visiting Barnwell, South Carolina. He attends a Negro corn shucking, a merriment conducted by plantation slaves. A bonfire built of longleaf pine logs oozes pitch that makes the flames burst into the air. A pile of corn is gathered in one spot, where slaves will strip the husks as they gather and sing songs that Bryant reports are "probably of African origin."

After work is done, the party moves to an expansive kitchen. Bryant describes that, "One of them took his place as musician, whistling, and beating time with two sticks upon the floor. Several of the men came forward and executed various dances, capering, prancing and drumming with heel and toe upon the floor with astonishing agility and perseverance, though all of them had performed their daily tasks and had worked all the evening."

The corn shuckers then commenced a loopy military parade around the room and performed comic speeches that mocked the oratory of white Southerners. It was whimsy that masked something behind it, something the marchers, dancers, and the tappers were perhaps aware of. Or maybe they were just caught up in the fun of the moment. All the same, the fun and the music represented something, a custom had been passed down over generations to get to this kitchen.

I'm not gonna show you the secret, James Brown would tell people who asked about the One, *but . . .* Then he would start talking.

Brown refused to reveal the mystery because the One was a trade secret. It would remain a puzzle because the more mystique it had, the more mystique *he* had, and mystique was good for business.

The One was a way to find yourself in the music, it was a means for drummers to come together with one another. It was a small element in a life's work, but like the drip was to Jackson Pollock or the footnote to David Foster Wallace, for Brown the One was bigger than it first appeared, a trifling that embodied the world he made.

Maybe most of all, for James Brown, the One was an anchor, an upbeat that put him in touch with his past and who he had become.

As he once explained it: "The 'One' is derived from the Earth itself, the soil, the pine trees of my youth. And most important, it's on the upbeat—ONE two THREE four—not the downbeat, one TWO three FOUR, that most blues are written. Hey, I know what I'm talking about! I was born to the downbeat, and I can tell you without question there is no pride in it. The upbeat is rich, the downbeat is poor. Stepping up proud only happens on the aggressive 'One,' not the passive Two, and never on lowdownbeat. In the end, it's not about music—it's about life."

To Brown it was a heartbeat that connected him to the dancers and singers and timekeepers who came before him. The One put him on a timeline, though the way he talked about the beat, it put him at the end of the line: the ultimate expression of a heritage.

He wasn't gonna show you the secret. But if you listened . . .

Chapter One

A CERTAIN ELEMENTAL WILDNESS

Barnwell, South Carolina, where Bryant viewed the raucous corn shucking, was James Brown's birthplace. The country surrounding Barnwell, in the nineteenth century called the Barnwell District, once grew cotton and vegetables, though both crops were pretty much exhausted by the time Brown came around. There were ponds in the area, and at one of them, euphemistically called the Red Sea, African Americans gathered from all around. They took off their shoes and kicked up the muck from the bottom of the pond. "Muddying for fish," it was called, and as they kicked, they would walk in concentric circles, ever tighter, until the little pond was muddied up, all but the center. There, the stompers finished their work, catching with their hands the fish crowding to the middle. It's a very old practice, which some say points back to Africa.

James Brown's family ripples out from this region in ever larger circles. His father was named Joe Gardner but took *Brown* from a woman who raised him. He was from Elko, ten miles from Barnwell. His family, Joe said, had musicians in it, including an uncle who won a fiddle contest in North Carolina.

James Brown's mother, Susie Behling, was from Fishpond, an area no longer on the map but once about ten miles south of the city

of Bamberg. There are many black and white Behlings living in Bamberg and Barnwell, as well as Colleton, Williston, and Smoaks, all small towns in the area. Some whites here trace their roots to a landowning German family from Hanover headed by Lüder Friedrich Behling, born in 1815. Behling inherited the Bella Vista Plantation in Goose Creek, South Carolina, from his wife's family; Bella Vista had twelve slaves. It's possible Susie Behling's family took its name from slave-owning Behlings in the area, but nobody knows for sure.

This is what James Brown wanted us to know about his birth on May 3, 1933: "I wasn't supposed to be alive. You see, I was a stillborn kid." Two aunts delivered the boy in a shack surrounded by pine trees. When he arrived, he was told, he was motionless and quiet. Susie wept, but his aunt Minnie refused to give up, blowing strong breath into his lungs until, after infinite minutes, he came to life.

"I was a stillborn kid." Understand him: James Brown was born dead, and he fought his way into this world. That's a devastating entrance, one that marks him as forever distinct. It is also impossible, because a stillborn infant is dead in the uterus and, by definition, not alive. But Brown *felt* different, and maybe something special did occur at his birth. He saw his stillborn entrance as the moment his specialness first revealed itself.

One good thing about believing you were born dead is you come to feel nothing can kill you. This belief helped keep Brown alive.

The family roots Brown described were conspicuously far-reaching. He claimed he was Cherokee, Japanese, Indian. His daughter, Deanna Brown-Thomas, joked that every time he went to a country and felt the love, he perceived a genetic connection. To a Milwaukee interviewer, he explained, "I'm part Apache and Aztec myself. My daddy's nickname was Coochi, which is called Cochise. And I've got pictures of Geronimo that look identical to all my kids. I didn't pay no attention at first, but that's what it is. I got the head full of hair and I got all that. His [hair] was hangin' down like mine be hangin' down in the mornin'."

Susie told Deanna she had family in Florida. Joe had people in North Carolina and Philadelphia. A few small clues pointing in a few directions. The only recorded lineage, however, never strays from the Barnwell District. It is aunts and uncles and cousins, a web of them, all surrounding the ponds and pines of Barnwell. Brown didn't draw a family tree in his Bible, and he wasn't going to draw one up for his children. "He was a personal person and some things he didn't want out," said Roosevelt Johnson, a longtime personal assistant.

Once, in a relaxed moment, he told a friend who had asked about his ancestors, "I'm not going to ever say what I'm thinking, because it might be disrespectful to my family. Let's just say a long time ago something in the milk may not be clean."

Joe and Susie met in 1929 when she was visiting relatives. Behling was a Baptist, and had long, straight hair that her son said was evidence of her "Geechee" roots. Geechee is how blacks living around the Savannah River referred to their roots in the Gullah culture, a people that flourished on the coastal plain and the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Slave descendants, their cultural and geographical isolation allowed the Gullah to maintain an African identity and traditions far more pervasively than other slave communities. Family lore has it that Susie inherited her straight hair and other features from a Native American bloodline, and James said a great grandmother on Susie's side was mostly Native American.

Joe had a second-grade education, Susie left school in the fifth grade. Together they lived in a wooden shack with a small stove for heat and no plumbing. The windows were open and held no glass; when the wind blew or it rained, Joe leaned old doors against the opening. That made the house dark and frightening to James, who spent as much time outside it as he could. Joe might be gone for days at a time, and James would be alone day and night. For company he had what he called his friends, the insects that lived beneath the shack. A sickly child, James contracted rheumatic fever three times before he was eight. With no doctor in the vicinity, his parents treated the illness with folk remedies like sassafras tea.

Barnwell is on the western edge of South Carolina's inner coastal plain, between the Atlantic to the east and the Piedmont highlands. Geologically it is a vast beach, from which the ocean receded east millions of years ago.

In South Carolina, two cultures prevailed. The lowlands, along the coast, were dominated by Charleston and had been colonized from the sea in the late seventeenth century. The uplands were German and Scots-Irish, and were populated from the north in the early eighteenth century. In the lowlands, they dropped their *r*'s and slurred their words; they erected a facade of white columns and easy living, and believed passionately in the charm and manners that honor them to this day. Those in the Piedmont were restive, marinated in a culture of hard work and brawling. Their way of speaking was streaked with Elizabethan pronunciations and archaic words.

In the fertile flatness between these realms was a less populated, and less defined, region, slowly breached from the north. A royal proclamation in 1763 drew a line down the back of the Appalachians, and banned settlement on the western side. Pioneers had been pushing west from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, but after the law came down, they instead migrated down the Appalachian valleys, pushing into the unsettled backcountry of the Carolinas and Georgia. This was the empty space between the big cities of Augusta and Savannah, and in those cities, folks were notably dismissive of the recent immigrants. Perhaps because of the sound the newcomers' whips made as they pushed their cattle onward, they were given a name which has stuck ever since: *crackers*. They just naturally set folks off. A representative of the crown thought the newcomers were fixing to do to his beloved Georgia what the Huns had done to Europe. An Anglican missionary passing through the backcountry said the Indians had better manners than this ilk, who were without "the least rudiments of Religion, Learning, Manners of Knowledge (save of Vice) among them."

These are the outsiders who settled the sparsely populated area

around Barnwell. And defined it. As the region grew, it became drenched in violence, a lore that is lamented every bit as much as it is embraced. Among those who embraced it was Ben Robertson. In his 1942 book *Red Hills and Cotton*, Robertson presented his Carolina people to the rest of the country in a tone meant to simultaneously shock and disarm. He explained the impact of all that isolation, an insulated existence marking blacks and whites and characterizing the region where Brown was born.

“We live in the fields among the growing cotton and the green corn, and we are face to face with ourselves, with all of eternity and its problems. We try to explain the wind and the sun and life and death, the here and the hereafter. We cannot explain, so we turn from the natural to the supernatural. In solitude we reach our own conclusions. We have arrived at many things alone. So we are personal, we are emotional, we have learned to dream, we are romantic. And because there is pride within us and a certain elemental wildness, we sometimes fly off the handle. Some of our people, before they know it, have shot, have slashed someone with a knife. We must attempt to control ourselves, we must be on our guard.”

Matters of honor and respect tilted easily to rage. “We do not as a rule shoot people over property matters; when we shoot we do so because of passion,” explained Robertson. “We shoot on the spur of the moment and do not often meditate a murder. Often it is a good way to shoot—to shoot on the spur of the moment; it clears the air like a thunderstorm.”

At the end of the nineteenth century, around the time Brown’s parents were born, one act of violence among the cypress gums could stand for a great many. A thief had broken into St. Michael’s Church. He stole a Bible and, possibly, a piece of furniture. Nobody was charged with the crime, but gradually suspicion fell on Isham Kearse, described in the press as “a young negro of a roving disposition who sought no regular employment, and it is probable that his living was not honestly made.” Some white men of Barnwell clamored for confrontation, and on the night of December 2 they

got their chance. Kearsse, who had been keeping a low profile, was discovered just over the Colleton county line, visiting his mother.

Four Barnwell whites captured him leaving her house, and they tightly bound his hands. Their rope was looped around Kearsse's neck and then tied to the rear of a horse-pulled buggy. Those driving the buggy set off at a fast pace for Broxton Bridge, adjacent to a swamp. Kearsse ran behind the carriage until roots and rocks tripped him up, and then he was dragged. Others from the party were sent to collect Hannah Walker, Kearsse's mother, and his wife, the seventeen-year-old Rosa. For alleged knowledge of the stolen Bible, Rosa was also roped, tied, and dragged across country trails.

At a spot near the Salkehatchie River, the three African Americans were brutally interrogated. Isham Kearsse denied the theft and the women said they knew nothing about it. The prisoners were stripped naked, while the whites drank whiskey; they were beaten with a new buggy trace, a stiff piece of leather used to tether horses to a carriage. Kearsse was tied to a tree and lashed one hundred and fifty times, until he begged the men to shoot him. The women escaped, Walker running into the swamp, Rosa in the other direction. As Isham fell unconscious, the whites put his ragged coat over him and left for their Barnwell homes. His body was found later that morning. Like her son, Walker died from the beating. She was discovered facedown, arms stretched out, resting in a foot of water. Rosa made it home, where she remained barely alive.

There was no mystery as to the four perpetrators; everybody knew their names and they did not deny the abduction. In two trials, one for each murder, the defendants were found innocent of all charges. A jury in Colleton bought the defense argument that Walker died from drowning, an act she caused herself by falling into the swamp.

A triple lynching was unusual, but not extraordinary. Barnwell

had an octuple lynching in 1889; though the victims were taken from the Barnwell jail, they were hanged just outside of town, so the mayor could say the crime wasn't his problem.

That this was a region of astonishing violence is accepted by many who have studied the region, but *why* it was has puzzled historians. Some have scrutinized the particularly high number of lynchings along the Georgia-South Carolina border, as if geography could kill. Others suggest that in places like Barnwell, the mingling of the hell-raising Protestant Piedmont folks and the cavalier, coastal Baptists in the middle of the state created an explosive culture clash. The most likely theory, however, is that racial violence coincided with organized efforts by whites to turn back Negro gains made by Emancipation. If anti-Republican forces were going to succeed in South Carolina, African Americans would have to lose political rights and be beaten into submission.

They couldn't have done it without Barnwell. Republican voters there were chased from polling places, and the few blacks appointed to political office were shot at and otherwise harassed. The same year that Isham Kearsse and Hannah Walker were murdered in the swamp, South Carolina passed a revised state constitution, a blueprint for rebuilding white power. Crucial to the new order was a poll tax levied on all registered voters. Registrants had to read and write a paragraph from the Constitution, an effort meant to disenfranchise black majorities. From the constitution of 1895, it was a short sprint to white voting majorities all over South Carolina, and then passage of a spectrum of laws that, together, constructed segregation.

When James was four, he heard his parents fighting. "Take your child," said Joe, fixing Susie with the responsibility. "You keep him, Joe, 'cause I can't *work* for him," she answered. Then she left.

James had few memories of his mother from his early years. After she left, Joe and James moved around the immediate area, as

Joe found and lost work. When he did road work or picked vegetables on a farm, James stayed with aunts or one of Joe's girlfriends. Later, James would talk about his solitude in the sand hills and piney swamps of the area as almost a gift. Most people, he explained, are taught early on what not to do—he was out in the woods by himself, and he missed that lesson. He learned to listen to his own instincts and trust his own reasoning.

In the early 1930s, Joe was a turpentine man, harvesting the gum from longleaf and slash pines. This was especially harsh work, dating back to the colonial era, when pitch was used to waterproof sailing ships. It broke down hands, knees, backs; its methods unchanged since before the Civil War. Overwhelmingly, it was black men's toil. "Turpentine Negroes," polite whites called them. A worker was charged with a "drift" of trees, some five thousand or so; as a chipper, Joe probably used an axe to scrape the bark off the pines.

Workers were assigned to camps, primitive enclaves of wooden shacks, dogtrot houses, and lean-tos that sheltered up to several hundred men. Camp life followed its own rules, which were looked down on by black city dwellers. Turpentine men burned scars into the trees with acid that would also eat away their fingerprints, and in this and other ways, these men were blunt-force individualists who set themselves apart from society. Self-sufficient and unfree, they carried a swagger and a desperation; they displayed a revelry that was earned. Historian I. A. Newby wrote that segregation in South Carolina was so thoroughly destructive that "black communities in the state were never organized. In fact, they were not communities in the true sense of the word." This was not quite so true in the turpentine camps, where a sense of identity lifted up its head.

The men built cooperages, stables, and blacksmith sheds in the camps. There was church for those that wanted it. "Those that believed in worship service, they would meet around each other's house, sat and talk the bible or stuff," recalled Anthony Green, a turpentine man. "The others that didn't, if they were drinking moonshine, they got together and drank the moonshine. They shot

dice, they done the gambling and all that kind of thing.” There was usually a piano around, and guitars, and wandering blues musicians who traveled the region en route to paying gigs and would play for loose change.

It came together on Saturday nights at the juke. These were small venues run by an ambitious camp worker, usually from out of the house he lived in. Fish, hamburgers, and moonshine were for sale, and women might be available. Jukes provided leisure for those who worked fourteen hours a day and were a place to blow off steam. They were also violent places, where men gambled and fought with fists, knives, and guns.

In the camps Joe Brown learned all kinds of ways men can win and lose money with dice, and he would take this knowledge with him when he left. He knew how to make applejack moonshine, which he sold on the side. Joe was good with a knife and was able to play a little harmonica. He sang songs by Sonny Terry and Blind Boy Fuller, North Carolina bluesmen who passed through, and played guitar, perhaps along with Tampa Red, one of the itinerant musicians who frequented the region. A Georgia-born bluesman and one of the great bottleneck guitar players, Red played the camps, and even wrote a song called “Turpentine Blues”:

Turpentine’s all right, provided that wages are good
 Turpentine’s all right, provided that wages are good
 But I can make more money now, by somewhere choppin’
 hardwood

Turpentine business ain’t like it used to be
 Turpentine business ain’t like it used to be
 I can’t make enough money now, to even get on a spree . . .

As Red could see, the Carolina forests were being decimated; the ceaseless hacking and scraping weakened the trees, hastening a need to cut them down and send them to mills.

For turpentine men, the season began in April or May and lasted until November. James Brown was born at the beginning of turpentine season, in May. Soon enough, if things followed their usual course, the son would take a job in the camp beside his father. Except that the naval industry was fading, and the Depression was on.

Barnwell thrived on farming, and farming had provided Brown's family sustenance for generations. But now the land itself was sick. Cotton was an important regional crop, and prices had dropped steeply, from thirty-nine cents a pound in 1919 to ten cents by 1930. Worse, the boll weevil was infesting the cotton fields, savaging the plants. Black farmers were put out of business, and the state did little to assist them. In 1938, the Barnwell County Department of Public Welfare filed a report with the state that bared the county's problems. "Proceeds from farming have decreased for the last ten years. . . . Due to the fact that farming has on the whole been a failure for so many years and due to the fact that our county affords very little industrial employment, we have many needy families."

People ate what they found. Corn was husked, the kernels washed and boiled in lye. After a rinse, the whitened hominy was fried with bacon grease and seasoned to taste. Mush or cripple was made by cooking a hog's head, feet, and maybe a jaw, in a salted broth. Corn was added and the mixture then fried to a thickness. This was once what slaves had been fed on the plantation, but in Depression Era South Carolina, the poor white folks were eating it with relish.

Pellagra was widespread in the district. Country people who relied on a diet of corn pone, fatback, and molasses did not get sufficient vitamins, and the state began distributing yeast to the impoverished as a supplement. As the Depression wore on, however, the anti-pellagra program was reduced to handing out cottonseed meal, to be stirred into soup or hot water and eaten.

To one writer, James said he and his father moved to Augusta,

Georgia, in 1938; to another, he declared it was in the second half of 1939. The crops were dying, resin wasn't running like it had, and Susie was gone. For Joe Brown, it was time to leave for something better. Much later, Joe would put a frame around the big picture. "White folks, some young white folks, run *away* from America. They ashamed. Black folks, they run all over, up North, everywhere, tryin' to get *into* America." Joe and his son were leaving Barnwell by foot, walking to America. But before Joe and the son who started calling him "Pops" could try to get there, they had to enter the twentieth century. That meant leaving the pines. They had to break with all of it—the unchanging rural disenfranchisement and stomping for fish and the slavery by another name that was the turpentine camp.

Back there was a medieval poverty and labor that ground you into sawdust. Up ahead was a background to be proud of, the Aztec empire, Geronimo's throne, the warrior clans of the Cherokee.

There was Joe, James, and Minnie Walker, Joe's aunt, who had been there when James was born. They carried what they had, and walked forty miles to Augusta.