

**ASALH - AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY -
FRONT and CENTER: "The Great James Baldwin"
By Jacqueline Hubbard**

Without doubt, James Baldwin was one of the most gifted American writers ever published. He came of age in the midst of 20th century racial turmoil that defined and engulfed generations of African Americans. He was the intellectual voice of his generation and following ones. He was born in Harlem, a black section of New York City, on August 06, 1924. His biological father is unknown, his step father was a store-front preacher, who has been accused of being abusive to him while Baldwin was a child. In 1963, in the midst of the Civil Rights Struggle, Baldwin published, "*The Fire Next Time.*" It was a warning of the violence to come. As he grew into manhood, he was fortunate to study under Harlem Renaissance poet, Countee Cullen. He graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942. Being black in America haunted Baldwin, and in 1948, after being awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, he followed other black artists such as Josephine Baker and Richard Wright; and moved to France. France became his home, where he remained until the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. His language was his own, with his own references and his own intellectual vigor. He was often criticized for not writing in a more simplistic style. He was often compared to the French existentialists, rather than other African American writers. His works required concentration and a fundamental understanding of politics, history, and culture. He was never an easy read. His work was, however, always a beautiful thing to read.

Page 2.

While in France, Baldwin published, “*Go Tell it on the Mountain*”, “*Notes of a Native Son*,” and “*Giovanni’s Room*.” For over twenty years Baldwin wrote with passion about the effects of racism in America. He became a spokesperson for the Civil Rights movement upon his return to America. He became a part of the Freedom Movement and in 1968, after his return, he published, “*Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone*.” This work allowed him to reflect upon whom he had become by positing himself in the character, Leo Proudhammer. In “*Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone*.” Proudhammer states, “The day came when I wished to break my silence and found that I could not speak: the actor could no longer be distinguished from his role.” He became a beloved political activist and continued to both write and speak. He traveled to the southern United States and became known as a peerless public intellectual of profound genius and compassion. He wrote (c1985) in an essay entitled *The Price of the Ticket*: “Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other - male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.”

James Baldwin died of cancer on December 1, 1987, in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, at his home in France. In 2017, the filmmaker, Raoul Peck, completed the documentary about James Baldwin entitled, “*I Am Not Your Negro*.” The film received many accolades. The Guardian proclaimed “*I Am Not Your Negro*” to be “...a striking work of story telling...One of the best movies about the Civil Rights era ever made...This might be the only movie about race relations that adequately explains - with sympathy-the root causes.”

Page 3.

The New York Times called "*I Am Not Your Negro*" "Thrilling...a portrait of one man's confrontation with a country that, murder by murder, as he once put it, 'devastated my universe'...One of the best movies you are likely to see this year."

Indeed, Baldwin's legacy will undoubtedly be his ability to put into words, through 23 novels, the tremendous complexity of race in America. As he stated in the printed version of "*I Am Not Your Negro*"

I Know very well that my ancestors
had no desire to come to this place.
But neither did the ancestors of the people
who became white and who require
of my captivity a song.
Less to celebrate my captivity
than to justify their own...

Finally, a new movie came out in 2018, "*If Beale Street Could Talk*." It is based on Baldwin's book of the same name. Regina King win an Oscar for her performance of the mother in this film. He still yet lives among us. His greatness forever remembered.