



Prologue

Come back with me to Watts, California, in August 1965: the Watts riots.

I'm in bed early. I have to wake up to do my morning soul-music radio show on KGFJ, 1230 on the AM dial. Got to keep burning the way I've been burning since I hit L.A. in February and took over the Negro neighborhoods. I'm falling asleep in my home in Brentwood, fifteen miles and a universe away from the madness, when all of a sudden I hear that chant on the TV news.

"Burn, baby! BURN!"

Wait a minute. That's *mine!* The rioters are screaming it? They can't do that! They can't steal what I invented. They can't twist it around, make it sound like what it's not.

"Burn, baby! BURN!"

This is crazy. I'd been screaming "Burn, baby! Burn! on the radio for two years—'63 in New York and '64 in Chicago. I'd slap a record I loved on the turntable, let it kick in, and

shout into the mike: “Burn, baby! Burn! Kids would call up, shouting it back at me. But they weren’t talking about rioting. These rioters, they’ve got it all wrong, and I can feel something terrible in my bones: everybody else is gonna get it all wrong too.

The next day I see TV pictures of the destruction that will eventually take three dozen lives and turn Watts into a moonscape forever captioned with my signature.

I don’t know it yet, but “Burn, baby! Burn!” is going to become institutionalized as a radical chant and a political rant—not a tribute to a piece of music that moves your soul. All of a sudden I’m going to be painted not simply as an exciter but as an inciter! An agitator. Now don’t get me wrong. Everywhere I’d gone in the sixties and before, I’d been the hottest voice on Negro radio, and nowhere was I hotter than L.A. in ’65. I owned that place precisely because I *did* burn. I *did* incite. Hell, yes! I incited my listeners to put their hands on the radio and touch my heart. I incited ’em by holding a fire-and-brimstone church service in which I was the Lord, R&B music was the Old Testament, and the kids were the disciples. You could hear it when they called in on the “Burn, baby! Burn!” line every morning before school: that urgency in their voices, that pride of being part of something so strong.

I’d been working toward this for nearly twenty years, toward that fusion with the audience. Hustled my ass off from nowhere to achieve it. Invented a pack of audacious on-the-air routines that made your jaw drop. Hell, I wanted a riot! But I wanted a riot on the airwaves. I wanted my listeners’ hearts to burn, not their homes.

And now some of those very listeners are burning out on the street, and L.A. authorities are asking me to stop shouting my slogan. And I’m trying to figure out how to explain to men like the mayor of L.A., Sam Yorty—old white men—what “Burn, baby! Burn!” means. And I can’t find the words, because “Burn, baby! Burn!” is too big for words. It’s the essence of everything I’ve done, learned, believed, preached, absorbed. All the records I’ve heard, played, produced, promoted. All the history books and artifacts I’ve collected. All the singers I’ve bullshitted with. All the times I’ve

wanted to rear back and hurl my soul through the radio at my listeners. All the triumph, all the hurt—rising above all that, celebrating a moment of pure musical perfection that you can't describe but must simply bow to—that's what I mean when I yell "Burn, baby! Burn!" How can I explain to these men where "Burn, baby! Burn!" comes from?

I couldn't back then. I would've had to explain my life to those men, and there was simply no way back then for a black man to explain the duality of a life like mine, a life with one foot in the world of rhythm and blues and the other in the world of collecting black history—two worlds equally alien and unbelievable to those men, who wanted to shut me up.

But I can explain it now.

I must.

I have finally, at seventy-five, found the words.

I recognize at long last, after a quarter-century on the air and forty years of collecting African American historical memorabilia, that something unique and wondrous happened in my life.

You see, I chased history. And all the while, history was chasing me.

I touched and was touched by almost every social and musical and historical current of the last half-century. And all the while I was too busy to notice. Too busy hustling, surviving, supporting my family.

"Burn, baby! Burn!" was just a piece of it.

I've chased down more than six thousand books, paintings, films, toys, pamphlets, letters, and slave documents, all of it to tell the story of three hundred years of the African American experience. Armed with less than a high school diploma, I've chased history into rare-book shops, manuscript dealers' showrooms, antique stores, and rummage sales. Chased it across the ocean to Europe. History has tormented me and terrified me and humbled me and left me trembling with joy—yet I never realized I was a part of it. But now I understand.

I understand that my life is the story of "soul," the most power-

ful emotional force in the history of American music, the truest representation of black artistry. Soul music is the bonding of gospel music and rhythm and blues, the sacred and the profane. But soul music is more than music—it's about history, how history shapes a race and how that history trickles down to the way we express ourselves. And that's why I feel as compelled to explain the majesty of the Black Eagle (stay tuned) as to rhapsodize about Sam Cooke.

The name is Montague: *MONT-a-gyew*. It's my last name, the only name I use. When I was on the radio, when I was spreading the music of James Brown, Otis Redding, the Temptations, Aretha Franklin, and Wilson Pickett, listeners knew me as Magnificent Montague. Even today, more than thirty years later, it's not uncommon for them to recognize me. They'll hear my voice, or maybe spot my name on a piece of mail, and suddenly I'll be hearing their reminiscences about being sixteen and listening to my show on a tiny transistor radio on a school bus. And inevitably the question will be asked: Why aren't you back on the *radio*, Magnificent? Lord knows they need you to bring some fire to the air.

And I'll shake my head and smile. For my time on the radio was indeed a time of fire. It was a time when music and society and race and technology all exploded like a bomb, a time when black deejays made R&B erupt from that old marketing niche of "race music" and changed the way young Americans—white as well as black—saw their world. To live in that vortex was to touch America's soul and be touched by it.

I started on the air in 1949, and the hottest year of all was 1965, that year Watts burned, the year Pickett sang about meeting his sweetheart in the "midnight hour," the year Otis demanded "respect." I had arrived at KGFJ, a black-oriented AM station on Melrose Avenue early that year, bringing with me that harsh cry of delight I often shouted during a record I particularly enjoyed. My fans would call in and yell "Burn, baby! Burn!" back at me, the same way Rush Limbaugh's crowd calls up these days to say "Ditto!" only with *soul*—just a way of signifying that rare, glorious, sanctified moment in which a record or anything else had taken its art to a

new level. Out on the playground a young man might make a twisting hang-in-the-air shot, and you'd hear it from the brothers on the sidelines: "*Burn, baby!*"

The phrase infected Los Angeles's Negro lexicon like a virus, and to my horror, when Watts went up in flames that August, when people began setting buildings and cars afire on Imperial Highway and Avalon Boulevard and Main Street, they triumphantly screamed the most evident and analogous and hip thing at hand: "Burn, baby!"

Back then, as the city reeled, I didn't know what to say in response. For the first two days of the riots I kept using "Burn, baby! Burn!" on the air, like I always did. It was my slogan, not the rioters'. Only as the years went by and my hobby of collecting turned into an obsession with black history did it dawn on me that the right rhetorical response to "Burn, baby!" would have been a tired but true cliché.

"Learn, baby."

Learn about the forces that are controlling you. Learn to dominate them. Learn that your people in America have always struggled against oppression and always will. Learn, in ways that will astonish and inspire you, that they have often won despite odds much greater than those you face.

Learn, for example, about that Black Eagle. Come along with me on the chase for him. Feel my adrenaline pump and my goose bumps rise.

There's a manuscript dealer I telephone once in a while. Last time must have been ten years ago. "Anything for me?" I ask. She says, "No, nothing." One morning years back, when I was still living in Los Angeles, I'm doing my daily exercise workout near my apartment—and I see her on the street with another lady.

I call out in mock defeat, "I'm not gonna get anything from you, am I?"

And she answers, "I think I have something for you, but I'm not sure where it is." Her files are like that.

"What is it?" I ask.

“The Black Eagle.”

Well, my heart about stopped.

I had been fascinated with the Black Eagle since I first read about him in the sixties. His name was Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, and you can pick your description of him: soldier of fortune, stunt pilot, diplomat, rum runner, bodyguard, foreign correspondent, mercenary. The crown prince of black aviation. He was born in Trinidad in 1897, was raised in America, and ran into the wall of segregation when he tried to become a military pilot in the thirties. Blacks did not fly for this nation until the 332d Fighter Group—the Tuskegee Airmen—was formed in 1942, a year after the attack on Pearl Harbor. So in 1936 Julian volunteered to fly for Haile Selassie’s Ethiopian forces, which were under attack by Italy. He became a colonel.

The Black Eagle was a spectacular man. Six feet tall, 200 pounds, striding through life in a derby, cutaway coat, striped trousers, and spats. I had never been able to obtain a shard of the man’s life. But now my friend, the dealer, was offering me a piece.

It was a letter that showed me yet another side of the Black Eagle. Dated September 6, 1940, and written on stationery identifying Julian as a captain in the Finnish Air Force, it described how Finland, which had been attacked by Axis forces five months earlier, had asked Julian to broker the purchase of ten air ambulances. Julian had arranged for a Delaware aircraft company to build the planes and for Finnish pilots to fly them back to their homeland. The Black Eagle would pocket 10 percent of the \$529,000 cost.

I had known none of this. Now I did. I had never been able to touch the Black Eagle. Now I could. And so I slipped him into an acid-free folder and put him to sleep with the rest of the people whose glory and foibles I pursue.

The story I want to tell you is how a young man who wanted nothing more than to run his mouth on the radio turned into an older man who wanted nothing more than to collect every intriguing scrap of black history he could lay his hands on—and, finally, turned into an even older man who has taken stock of his journey, and his collection, and wishes to pass it on. For years I have struggled

to transform my collection—regarded as one of the largest and best privately held collections of African American artifacts in the United States—into a museum. In recent years I have been forced to concede that this will not come to pass. I am now preparing to auction off the collection. So the story I am about to tell is an effort to accomplish, in literature, what my museum might have been.

My transformation from a radio soul shouter to historian was a stumbling-blind, blithe, yet astonishingly rich passage through all the historical forces that would consume me as a collector. Ten years ago I would have laughed at that suggestion, because I lived the kind of life where, if you were to survive, there was no time to look back or inward.

I started collecting in the fifties, rummaging through used-book stores in my free time, and then becoming obsessed in the sixties. Never expected to get interested in black history because I didn't grow up thinking of myself as black. Oh, I was black, but not *black* black. I didn't feel black. I felt like Montague.

The radio business changed that. Going South changed that. Moving to Chicago changed that. Discovering the blues changed that. Being stirred by soul preachers changed that. Hundreds of raw encounters scraped away my naïveté so that, down the road, fans who heard me moan with pained kinship over Ray Charles's "Let's Go Get Stoned" or Otis Redding's "Mister Pitiful" assumed I was a soul brother off the block, blown onto the air from the corner of some mythical ghetto intersection. "Back it up and gimme four more bars!" I'd yell at the end of a record I wanted to promote (either for a kickback or for pure kicks), and then I'd play the last thirty seconds again and moan over it lovingly. If they only knew the truth about where I came from. Decades later, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* would write long flattering articles about my history collection, and readers might well assume I was an educated man. If they only knew where I came from.

Because I couldn't make a decent living just working a microphone, over the years I stuck my fingers into every crevice of the music business. I became a songwriter, a publisher of more than

150 singles and albums, and a record producer. I built my own studios wherever I was a deejay and used them to record new talent. Managed artists, booked shows, got to know people, soaked up a lot, and then one day in Chicago I walked into a used-book store and . . . man, I just got the collecting bug. Working in the racially charged environments of the day, driving through so many cities back when highways still let you see local commerce, and being the kind of person who likes to soak up a variety of influences, I spent more and more time looking for materials defining black history. It was like a private affair at first: there wasn't a lot of competition for memorabilia. Negroes were still relatively invisible in America. And as any collector can tell you, you develop an addictive love of pursuit. You see a fragment, and it fits because of a dozen other seemingly isolated fragments that you've bought over the years. You imagine or crave a certain work, and then one day, out of nowhere, you behold it.

Some of what I own I have never seen another copy of. An example is my thick 1895 book recording all written and spoken tributes after the sudden death of Frederick Douglass, America's leading abolitionist—and that scares me more than it delights. If I hadn't found that book, it might well be consigned to oblivion. Think about it: what happens if *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, written in 1787 by Attobah Cugoano, an African taken to England, is never read? What happens if a tiny, elegant pincushion with an engraving of a black man in chains, called *A Colored Man in the City of New York*, made in 1835 by Patrick Henry Reason, a black artist who worked for abolitionists, is never seen? What happens if Frank Sapp's magnificent 1944 painting of the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture astride a horse, symbolizing the ability of black men and women to throw off colonial chains, is never viewed? (Wherever I've lived, that one has always hung on the most prominent wall.)

Conversely, what happens if you allow people to experience these works, and hundreds like them, in the course of a day? I'll tell

you. You throw your so-called contemporary role models in the trash can. You proclaim that these are our role models.

The more I collected, and the longer I remained a deejay, the more my professional life bled into my fascination with the black experience. At a time when blacks had almost no power base beyond their churches, black deejays played a mystical, powerful social role. Whites owned the stations and the unions. We deejays labored in electronic sweat shops, sweltering studios with noisy electric fans, one microphone and two turntables, and heavy headphones. Your on-air nickname might be Zing Zang, but if you messed up they'd fire you and put another Zing Zang on the air tomorrow, and it would be as though you never existed. Barely up from slavery.

Yet despite these hardships—in fact, because of them—successful black deejays enjoyed astonishingly strong, direct communication with a mass audience, a feeling of solidarity that was unprecedented in commercial broadcasting. We were de facto mayors and weekday preachers, masters of a private universe. We were the equivalent of movie stars, the sole link between listeners and the music. No way that happens today. You've got stations being routinely sold for tens of millions of dollars, programming their music on the basis of demographic and “psychographic” studies. The deejays are along for the ride. In my day radio was a seat-of-the-pants business. You worked by your gut.

Until recently I had forgotten a lot about those days. I'm a stubborn kind of fellow, short and wiry and steel on the inside. I hate losing, and like I said, I hated introspection. After Watts burned, I reluctantly let “Burn, baby! Burn!” slip out of my repertoire. In the hands of protesters and people who hated protesters, it became and remains to this day a slogan and an epithet but nevermore a heartfelt compliment. A song couldn't “burn” anymore, and I hated that. My fascination for being on the air ebbed. Programming gurus were already institutionalizing the Top-40 format, playlists were replacing the instincts of the jocks, FM was replacing AM. I went off and built my own station in Palm Springs, right down to driving my own construction equipment.

Gradually, though, I started to think about what had happened to me, where my life fit. I began to recognize that the black experience wasn't merely something that I'd collected. It was something that I'd lived, something that I'd helped shape. If history was chasing me, maybe I'd let it catch up.

I started thinking about sharing my collection so that stories like mine, and bigger than mine, could be told—hundreds of them, thousands of them. I started thinking about taking my collection out of storage in a warehouse and laying it out in a place where history could leap out at you. Where you could walk the path of my people. Where you could not only hear and read about the pain and the glory but feel it. Where the video screens would roll the images and the speakers would burst forth, and the greats, the Booker T. Washingtons and the Frederick Douglasses, would share the podium with the anonymous strugglers.

I wanted you to hold in your hand the 12 ½-cent pamphlet written in 1850 by the fugitive slave Henry Watson. I wanted you to watch silent movies made in 1916 by the black-owned Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles. I wanted you to sing along to "It Pays to Serve Jesus," by the Pace Jubilee Singers. I wanted to overwhelm you with the power of the contralto Marian Anderson's Negro spirituals and classics. I wanted to bombard you with computerized special effects to make you well up with tears at the sheer brilliance of Dr. George Washington Carver.

We have the technological power now to show the course of a man's life in the span of five minutes: a sickly Alabama slave child, stolen from his mother, repurchased by his owner for the price of a horse, miraculously rising to earn a master's degree in agriculture, inventing the economic miracle of crop rotation by alternating cotton with peanuts, and then developing more than 100 peanut by-products. Behold a replica of Dr. Carver's laboratory, his letters, an original painting he did with peanut oils. Behold this inspiration—inspiration for all Americans.

I wanted that feeling inside my museum. I wanted, also, to tell these stories to reach the youngsters who have the energy and the

intensity to succeed but don't know their history. I wanted to show it to them. These gang members, these hip-hoppers—once they understood their history, there'd be no holding them back. I wanted to give them something more powerful than guns or turntables. I wanted to give them their B.H.D.s, their black history degrees. I wanted to show them how to soar, like the Black Eagle.

But we know not all dreams come true. I know I will not get there. And so I've written the story of how it all came together—the collecting, the music, the wild ride through history in pursuit of history. I used to tell my listeners to put their hands on the radio so I could touch their hearts. Let's do it again: put your hand on this page and turn it, and touch my heart. I don't think you'll be able to stop.

