



THE SONG AND THE SILENCE

A Story about Family, Race, and What Was Revealed in a Small Town in the Mississippi Delta While Searching for Booker Wright

by [Yvette Johnson](#)

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“The only thing I felt certain about was how little progress I was making in understanding my grandfather”—a searching quest for roots in the African-American heartland.

Raised in Southern California, marked by “proper English and love of Phil Collins,” film producer Johnson was deemed “too white” by her black schoolmates and decidedly black by her white ones. She admits to a certain discomfort with other black people, a sense that at least some of her kin were “trying to make life sound harder than it really was in order to justify their own complacency.” Much of that sense of privilege melts away in the face of her on-the-ground experiences in her family’s old hometown of Greenwood, Mississippi, where her grandfather Booker was murdered in 1973. The circumstances of his death, at the hands of a black patron of his restaurant, speak to untold complexities of race and class. As Johnson writes, Booker was “a difficult man to know.” Though he was reserved, he was blessed with a business acumen that had a “Midas touch” element to it but that also brought him into conflict with members of both the white and black communities; he was generous with some, stingy with others, and “so indecipherable that even those who worked by his side for years could only describe him from a relative distance, as if he weren’t a real person but rather a well-crafted representation of one.” At ground zero of the civil rights movement in the South, Greenwood proved a difficult place for one seeking to be left alone, resented by poor whites and blacks alike for his success; Booker apparently returned the favor, winning enemies as well as admirers. Johnson’s story is highly personal, but it folds easily into the larger story of African-Americans striving for economic and political betterment.

A timely story of fragmentation and division and of picking one’s way through the minefield that was—and is—the racially riven South.