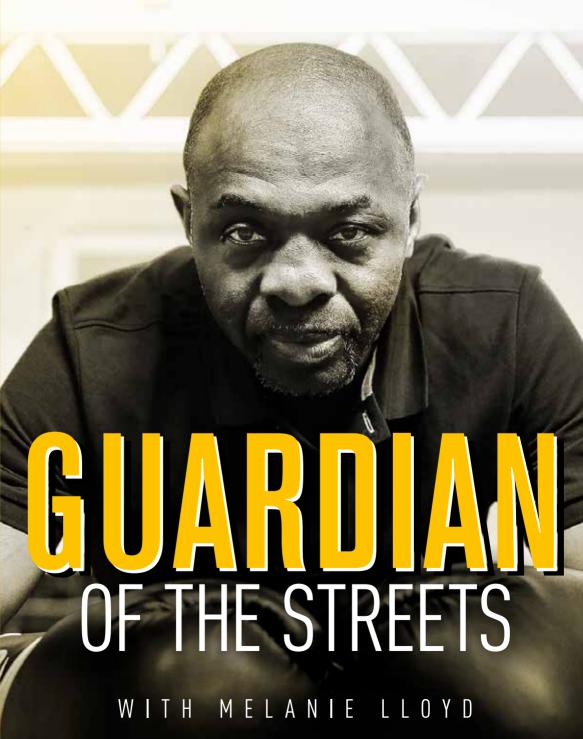
JAMES COOK MBE

MY STORY



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WITH MELANIE LLOYD



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INTRODUCTION by MELANIE LLOYD

ALKING around the streets of Lower Clapton in Hackney with James Cook MBE is an uplifting experience indeed. James seems to know everybody, and everybody seems to know James. Whether they be male or female, young or old, black, white or brown, huge smiles and vibrant greetings are enthusiastically exchanged with passers-by wherever he goes. In fact, the high esteem that James commands from within his local community is so apparent that you could almost reach out and touch it. They say that true respect has to be earned, and James has spent the best part of the past 60 years putting in the hard graft, although he will tell you that it has all been a labour of love.

James Cook was born in Jamaica in 1959 and, when he was still a baby, his parents entrusted him to the care of his grandparents so that they could travel to England in search of a better life for their family. When he was nine years old, James's mother travelled to Jamaica to collect her firstborn son and bring him home. The sunny days of a childhood

spent climbing trees and playing cricket were replaced with an adolescence roaming the bleak and inhospitable streets of south-east London, the labyrinth of walkways on the North Peckham Estate often providing a handy escape route from the police or the local skinheads.

James was a teenager when he first discovered boxing, and the noble art has remained at the centre of his existence ever since. He started working with the youth when he was still an amateur boxer and little more than a boy himself, and the enjoyment he derives from making people smile and spreading happiness and peace is as strong in his heart now as it ever was. When he was 17 years old, he moved to Hackney, where he still lives today with his wife, Carmen, who was his childhood sweetheart back in Jamaica.

James spent 12 years in the professional boxing ring, and he was the type of fighter who learned very quickly to expect no special favours from the establishment. Against the odds, he captured the British and European super-middleweight titles. All the while he was exchanging blows in the toughest of sports, he never lost his focus on a very different kind of battle, the struggle against the crime, deprivation and delinquency that runs riot in our inner-city areas. When James wasn't pounding the streets doing his roadwork, he was striding the pavements as an outreach worker, his main objective being to get the local youth involved in sport, education, employment and an altogether more positive way of life.

When the time came for James to hang up his own gloves for good, he decided to become a trainer so that he could pass

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on the knowledge he had gained to help other fighters, fighters like he had been, fighters who were written off as having no chance. He relished the thrill of seeing many of his pugilistic pupils winning titles, but he also took an interest in their personal lives, and the loyalty that James engendered in the hearts of many of the fighters he trained remains evident to this day. Several of those boxers who passed through his most capable hands are still by his side, supporting him in his youth work in any way that they can.

In 2003, due to a lack of funds, the local council made the decision to shut down the Pedro Youth Club, which is situated just around the corner from where James lives. The Pedro was then, and still remains, the only youth club nestled between three colossal housing estates in an area that the *Daily Telegraph* once described as being 'more dangerous than Soweto'. On the day the council turned up to close the doors of the Pedro for good, James entered the building and took charge of the official documents. He made some phone calls and rapidly set up a management committee, thereby ensuring that this most important place would be allowed to carry on serving the community as it had been doing since 1929.

James is still the driving force at the Pedro, but he is quick to acknowledge all the dedicated people who work with him on a voluntary basis to ensure the club continues to thrive. He is also eternally grateful to the silent wall of individuals who slip him a cheque or an envelope of cash on a regular basis, many of whom approach him on the quiet at the London Ex

Boxers Association, where James has become a highly regarded goodwill ambassador.

In 2007, James received the MBE for services to youth justice in Hackney, and he fell in love with the Queen in the process. In some ways, it could be said that he has become a victim of his own success. Since he was named in the Honours List, the demands on his time have become endless. It is not unusual for James to receive 150 messages in one day and he does his best to respond to them all, especially when there is a hint that some desperately needed donations may be on the horizon. The Pedro receives no financial contribution from the government and, without the kindness of friends and strangers alike, the club would be unable to continue functioning.

In the meantime, James Cook continues to cut a formidable figure as he strolls down the road dressed in his street garb, overseeing all of the action that is going down on his manor. Sometimes, he looks quite stern as he exchanges banter with the youths that benefit from his care and devotion, but he seldom manages to keep a straight face for long. When his features transpose into the sunniest of smiles, he puts one in mind of an urban warrior who is on the side of everything that is right. To the young people he looks out for, James is their guardian angel. In their lives, which in many cases are destined to be uncertain and ever-changing, they know that James Cook is always there for them, always dependable, always the same.

The first time I ever interviewed James was over 20 years ago, when he was kind enough to take part in my first volume

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of *Sweet Fighting Man*. I can still remember that wet and wintery Sunday afternoon when he picked me up from the steps of York Hall in Bethnal Green. He took me back to his warm and comfortable home, where Carmen had rustled up a fantastic lunch, and I will never forget how she welcomed me in as if I was the most important visitor who had ever stepped across her threshold.

James was my first ever Caribbean boxer and, in my introduction to his chapter, I wrote about how his 'strong Jamaican accent remained softly soothing'. My second volume of *Sweet Fighting Man* came out just as James was about to receive his MBE, so he had 'The Last Word' in that book. That was when he told me in no uncertain terms, 'Mel, from now on, I want to be in every single book you ever *write*!' It certainly seems to have worked out that way, because James provided the foreword for *Ring of Truth*, the final part of the *Sweet Fighting Man* trilogy, and now I have had the honour and privilege of working with him on his autobiography.

Over the years, James has proved to be an excellent friend, and I have often benefited from his sound advice and solid wisdom. I still find his strong Jamaican accent softly soothing and, what is more, having made approximately 40 hours of recordings with James for this book, I can't help noticing that I have picked up a slight Caribbean lilt myself!

To my mind, one of the wonders of this world is the fact that, no matter how bad things get, there are always those special people who are willing to give so much of themselves in order to help others, people who spread light where there

is darkness, compassion where there is destitution, warmth where there is need. The Pedro Youth Club is the beating heart of the Lower Clapton community. Some of the parents who take their children there nowadays used to go to the club when they were youngsters themselves, and they never forgot the strong and positive influence that James had on their lives. The Pedro Youth Club truly is an oasis of hope, and long may it live on so that future generations are able to reap the invaluable benefits that it provides. God bless you, James Cook MBE, and everything that you stand for.

JAMAICA

WAS born on 17 May 1959 in a place called Runaway Bay in Saint Ann Parish, Jamaica. I don't think I was born in a hospital. To be honest, it is not something that I ever asked my mum about, but I'm pretty sure that I was born at home. There was a lady who was the local midwife in our area and, believe it or not, I ended up marrying her granddaughter, who is named Carmen. So, as far as I know, Carmen's granny was the lady who delivered me into this world.

When I was a small baby, my mum and dad left me in the care of my grandparents, because those were the days when a lot of Jamaican people were coming to England to find work. So, until I was nine years old, Jamaica was my home. Our place was just a normal house on top of a hill, and there was me, my granny and my grandad, my Uncle Frank, my Auntie Gloria, who we called Auntie Lovely, and my cousin, Wesley, who was great fun. We were always out playing together and getting up to stuff.

Uncle Frank was my mum's brother and he was about five years older than me and Wesley, so he was the one who

we wanted to be like because he was the older one. So, when I was growing up, it used to be mainly me, Wesley and Uncle Frank who would be together. Anything Uncle Frank would do, me and Wesley would want to follow, and there were times when Uncle Frank led us into trouble. He used to get us to do his dirty work, and then me and Wesley would usually get the blame for it.

At mealtimes, one of things that me and Wesley used to do was leave the best bit, the chicken or the swordfish or whatever we were eating, until it was the last thing on our plates. We would eat all the rice and things like that, and we'd leave the nicest bit until the end. But, if we weren't quick enough, Uncle Frank would come along and he would grab our bit of chicken or fish, and it would be gone. So we soon learned to wolf down the best bits first. It was survival of the fittest in many ways. But we all had a lot of fun together and I think it was from my Uncle Frank that I got the idea I wanted to be a motor mechanic, because he was interested in cars and he used to bring cars home.

In the next house along from ours, there were six kids around the same age as me and Wesley. There were two girls named Carmen and Sonia, and there were four boys named Carlton, Lenbert, Everoy and Danny. Me and Wesley used to go out with them and we all used to do things together. Carmen and I used to be together quite a lot. She was very pretty and I liked her very much. We always used to ride this little donkey called Daisy together. I used to put Carmen in front of me, and I would be holding her from behind. We could

see each other's houses and we could see what each other was doing, and Carmen was definitely my childhood sweetheart.

My granny was great. The years that I spent living with her were good times. I was her first grandson and Wesley was her second, and I still remember certain things she used to teach us and the words she used to say to me. She used to tell me, 'What's yours is yours. What you pay for is yours. When you die, they are not going to bury you with all your money and the things that you have. You can't take any of that with you.' From a very early age, granny used to teach us respect and manners. You couldn't go down the road and pass one of her friends and not say hello because, if that friend ever came back and told our granny 'I passed your grandson down the road and he didn't say hello to me,' trust me, granny would be waiting for you when you got home. She would tell you off, but she wasn't the sort of granny who would bully you or beat you.

My grandad was okay. Grandad was grandad. He was just there. Grandad would go out and pick his fruit and do his farming. Grandad was like my dad, very placid, very quiet. Granny was in charge. Anything granny said, grandad would go along with it. Sometimes our grandad would look at us and nod his head as if to give us a hint and say, 'If you don't behave, your granny is coming.' But grandad was all right.

My upbringing was quite strict, in the sense that I couldn't have gone off and done certain things that my granny didn't like, and I always had to do my chores around the house. If I did do something wrong, my granny would make sure that I would go to bed early and not play out. I would have to stay

in the house and do extra washing up, or something like that. But my grandparents weren't strict in the sense that I couldn't speak to them. On the whole, when I hear stories about other people's grandparents, I reckon mine were pretty cool.

I was raised as a Christian and church was a must, but it was okay because they used to have the kids in one part and the adults in a different part. Then, when church was finished, there was a big field outside and all of us kids would be out there playing a game of cricket until the adults were ready to go home. They were happy times, all of us running around in the sunshine on Sunday afternoons.

When I think back to life in Jamaica, Christmas was one of my favourite times, because that was the time of the year when everybody was looking forward to the holidays. We would have time off from school, and it was the time of the year when you would probably get extra food, but also everybody would come together in one big place and all the kids would play together. Basically, you were surrounded by people. We always used to play marbles, and I was a good marble player. I would probably get a present from my parents in London, like a new shirt or a pair of trousers. We didn't have decorations. I think the decoration was more like a gathering of people instead of having a Christmas tree and stuff like that. There are enough damn trees in Jamaica anyway!

Easter is also massive in Jamaica, and we would really be looking forward to that because we knew that we would be getting extra bun and cheese, which is a spicy bun with cheese that the Jamaican people enjoy during the Easter holiday. When it came to the holidays, you would get stuff to eat that you didn't really get every day. Instead of having just a normal cup of tea, we might have a cup of hot chocolate. There would always be loads of extra food and, in a sense, everything seemed to taste sweeter.

Boxing never came up when I was in Jamaica. Back then, cricket was more like the game for us. We used to play a lot of cricket pretty much every day, because all we needed was a bat and a ball, and it wasn't hard to make your own bat, which we would make out of anything we could find when we were walking down the road.

Another thing we used to like was flying kites, and we would always make and fly our own kites. Every year, there used to be a sort of fun day at what we called the Beverly Sports Ground. It was a big open field, like a festival, and lots of people would be flying their kites. There used to be a kite competition and, believe it or not, people used to put razor blades at the end of the tail of their kites. So, if you got too close to the next kite, the razor would cut through the string and your kite would fly away, and that one would be out of the competition. The thing was, if your kite won the contest, you knew that you were going to get some money, so the competition would get pretty fierce.

In Jamaica, every day before we went to school, we had to make sure our hair was combed and our nails were nice and clean. Then you had to wait at the school gate while the teacher ran a comb through your hair. I remember one morning waking up late, and I was rushing about getting dressed for school and I

didn't have time to comb my hair. So, before I left the house, I dipped my head in a basin of water. When I reached the school gate and the teacher ran the comb through my hair, a whole heap of water came flying out. It went all over the teacher and everybody else who was standing nearby, and I got caned for that because school in Jamaica was very strict.

When we would come home after school, sometimes we used to go out picking fruit, like mango and naseberry and all these things, and granny would be following behind us, watching us and telling us what to pick and where not to climb. But, as soon as she was gone, obviously we would go high in the trees and we often used to fall out of the bloody trees, but none of us ever got hurt. The great thing was that we had the freedom of going out and doing that kind of thing, which we obviously took for granted back then.

We used to eat plenty of ackee and saltfish, which is the national dish in Jamaica and is still one of my favourite meals to this day when it's cooked properly, and I am happy to say that Carmen always makes it beautifully. In fact, I have been very lucky in that respect. My granny, my mum, my wife, and now our daughters are all very good cooks. Also, my granny used to cook plenty of red pea soup and rice and peas, although, to tell the truth, I was never a big eater. Even now, I'm not a great eater, and I think that is because I have still got the boxing sort of discipline in me where you only eat so much. Also I don't want to get fat because I have been told that, if I get fat, Carmen is going, so I am still trying to show my six-pack. I'm still doing my press-ups!

1968 was the year I came over to England. I remember the day like it was yesterday when my granny said to me, 'James, your mum is coming for you and she is going to take you back to London with her.' All I knew about England was what people were telling me, that it was cold, that it was always raining or snowing, and things like that, and I couldn't bloody believe it when my granny was saying the words to me. I was thinking to myself, 'I'm not going to London. I don't want to go to London. No way am I going to London!' It was such a big shock to me because, up until that day, I honestly never thought that I would ever have to leave Jamaica.

All I really knew about my mum was that she used to send clothes over for me in a big trunk, and I never really got to wear any of those clothes anyway because my granny always used to tell me that I had to wait until I got bigger before I could wear them bloody clothes, and I bet those clothes are still in that damn trunk to this day! For the first nine years of my life, my granny had been the one who taught me how to wash, how to brush my teeth, how to comb my hair. My granny was the one who fed me, clothed me and guided me. My granny was the one who had corrected me, and she was the one who would bust my arse if I did something wrong.

Now that I am a parent myself, I understand the bond that forms when you raise a child, that special kind of love that you have for that child from the beginning, and there is always going to be that strong feeling between yourself and that child. That was the feeling that I had for my granny. I knew that my mum was there and that she lived very far away. But, back

then, I obviously didn't understand about how people had to travel to England for a better life for their families. All I knew back then was that it was my granny who had brought me up and she was the only person I had ever known who had really looked after me. So, when I knew that my mum was coming over to get me and take me back with her, it was hard at first because that gap in time was there where I hadn't known my mum and she was like a stranger to me.

So, all of a sudden, my mum arrived and she looked just like a younger version of my bloody granny! The first time I actually met her, she says, 'I'm your mum and I have come to take you back to London with me.' I took one look at my mum and I just ran straight out of the damn house. I didn't care about this woman who was saying that she was my mum. I didn't want to leave this lovely place where I had grown up with my cousin and my Uncle Frank. I didn't want to be taken away from Carmen and her brothers and sisters. So, to be honest, I was very hostile to my mum when she first came over. I wasn't happy at all. I thought 'I'm not going with you,' and I picked up some stones and I started to throw them at her.

A funny thing happened on my last day of school before I left for England, or at least I thought it was funny anyway. We had these teachers, a man and his wife named the Teachers Arton, who were very strict. I can't remember what it was that I did now, but on my last day of school one of them caned me. So I said to the boys, 'Right, guys, we are going to stone the Teachers Arton when they come out of school in their car.' The boys followed me and they were all saying, 'Yeah,

James, we will stone their car.' So, as the Teachers Arton came driving out of school, we all pelted their car with stones. We ran off laughing and, when we got back home, my granny was cooking this big meal and the boys were all wondering why granny was cooking this big meal in the middle of the week.

So we were all sitting around the pot and we were all laughing, and the boys were all saying, 'Yeah, we stoned the Teachers Arton.' Then they said to me, 'So, James, what is going to happen when we go back to school tomorrow?' I looked at them and I just shrugged my shoulders, and I said, 'I don't know about *you* guys, but *I'm* going to London tomorrow!' It turned out that, when the boys went back to school the next morning, I got them all caned. I got them caned very hard. But I was okay because I was at the airport!

The last evening before I left for England, Carmen and me were sitting down outside the house. We had just come back from riding the donkey together one last time, and obviously I was holding her tight because I was having to say goodbye to her. She said to me, 'James, when you go to London, you must write to me.' I said, 'Of course I will write to you.' But I have to admit that, once I had settled in London, I forgot about writing to Carmen.

When me and my mum went to the airport, it was the first time I had ever seen an aeroplane that close in my life and it looked so damn big. It was huge, and there were so many people getting on this bloody plane. To me, even the *people* seemed to look big. The people just looked different to any people I had ever seen before, because I had never seen such

a big crowd in my whole life. They were all different shapes and sizes and colours, and I couldn't believe that they were all going to fit inside one plane.

It was a strange experience for me and the whole thing must have tired me out, because I kind of closed my eyes and slept for most of the flight. I remember waking up when the plane was coming in to land. I was sitting next to a window, and I looked down at that moment when a plane is at a certain height, and you can see the buildings and you can see the people but it all looks so tiny. I was thinking, 'Wow! These people are small. Even *I* am bigger than these people.' Then, when the plane landed and we got into the airport terminal and I looked up at all the people around me, I was thinking, 'Damn, where have all those small people gone?'

So, at the end of the day, I left Jamaica when I was nine years old and I never went back there again until I was 47. I was pretty upset when my granny died when I was 11 years old. I honestly believed that I was going to grow up and go back to Jamaica to be with my granny, but I never saw her again. As for my mum, I would never have believed it when she came to take me away, but I *did* grow to love her very, very much. She was a brilliant mum in many ways. My mum was definitely a fighter and, no matter what problems came my way during the rest of her life, she was always in my corner.