

## AT A CRUCIAL TIME A NEGRO TALKS TOUGH

# 'There's a bill due that has to be paid'

I've been here 350 years but you've never seen me," said the frail, gnomelike Negro of 38. James Baldwin spoke from a New Orleans church pulpit (*right*) but he was talking to a lay audience, mostly white, and he was giving them hell. He spoke both as one Negro and as his race's voice against the rigid attitudes of white men's fears and judgments: "I represent sin, love, death, sex, hell, terror and other things too frightening for you to recognize."

This was a new role for Baldwin, whose main occupation has been writing probing novels (*Go Tell It on the Mountain, Giovanni's Room, Another Country*) and articulate, somewhat specialized essays on the Negro in America. For 10 years his novels sold well, his essays were accorded respectful criticism, and Baldwin swam around fairly anonymously in the intellectual fishbowls of New York and Paris.

Then early this year a searing essay he wrote for *The New Yorker* was combined with a gentle letter to one of his nephews, and became a bestselling book called *The Fire Next Time*. So intuitively does it dissect the nation's explosive race problem that Baldwin found himself a celebrity overnight. He also, reluctantly but doggedly, found himself on a whistle-stop speaking tour. Part of what he saw, and much of what he pungently remarked en route, appear here with an appraisal of the Baldwin appeal by a LIFE reporter who went along (*p. 86B*).

There's a bill that's been due in this country for a long time. Now, with Birmingham, it's come in and it's got to be paid.

The spinelessness of the Administration has had a terrible effect. It's incumbent on Washington now to take a moral position and stop playing politics.

As soon as we are discontent with what you've told us is our "place," we destroy your myth of the happy nigger, the noble savage, the shiftless, watermelon-eating darkie.



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**T**he morning after a talk he gave in Durham, N.C., Baldwin went around paying impromptu visits in Negro homes. This boy, abandoned by his parents, was being looked after by neighbors.

## *'If you say God is white*

● I'm not better because I'm black, but if you say God is white why shouldn't I say he's black? The question isn't whether you're as good as white people but whether you're a man.

White people have no particular belief in God or interest

in love but they do have a fantastic desire to be safe.

Why I should want to marry your daughter, knowing the family as I do, is a curious question—but if she and I wanted to, we'd have every right in the world to do so. Actually I don't want to marry

your daughter. I just want to get you off my back.

White people seem to ask us, if they ask us anything, "Come into my nightmare with me; be like me; have abortions like me instead of illegitimate children." But we don't want to be like you. There is





## *I can say he's black'*

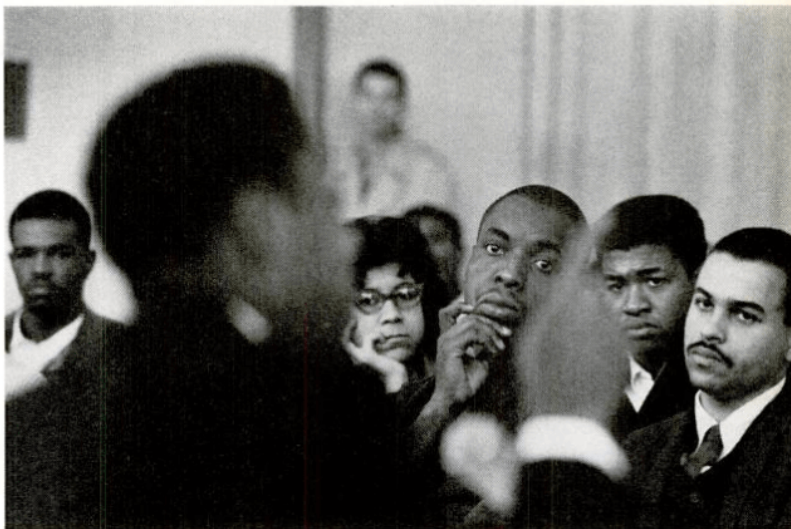
no reason whatever for Negroes to want to enter white society.

Nobody should have voted in the last election: both the candidates should have gone to Hollywood.

I know you didn't own a plantation or rape my

grandmother, but I wasn't bought at auction either and you still treat me as if I had been.

The Black Muslims serve one extremely useful function: they scare white people. Otherwise they are just another racist organization and the only place they can go is to disaster. ♣



*At Xavier University in New Orleans, Baldwin, who prefers young audiences because "they ask real questions," makes one of dozens of addresses he has given since January.*

*At a Manhattan party (below) he waggles a finger at Actress Geraldine Page, sitting with Actor Rip Torn. At bottom, he is told by Negro girl: "You're not my spokesman, James Baldwin!"*



*Photographed for LIFE by STEVE SCHAPIRO*





***'Today our children are drifting toward disaster'***

*In New Orleans, Baldwin pauses to talk with children on Dumaine Street. Below, he visits Emile Armstrong, 7, one of his school's first two integrated children, who shows his workbook and tells Baldwin he wants to be an engineer.*

White and black, most of us have arrived at a point where we don't know what to tell our children. The framework in which we operate weighs almost too heavily to be borne, and it is about to kill us.

We're taught from grammar school up to accept segregation as a way of life. You lied to me, because you never intended that I should be free, and I lied to you because I pretended that was all right. Small wonder our children are emotionally bankrupt and drifting toward disaster.

Yes, we've progressed. When I was a boy in Harlem, Negroes got drunk and cursed each other out. Now they become junkies and don't say anything.







● James Meredith is very gentle. He's also one of the noblest people I have met. It's no

picnic he's gone through, but he takes it well. He has no rancor. He can laugh at these

people and that can't be easy. I wasn't surprised he decided to stick it out at Mississippi. ●

*In Jackson, Miss., Baldwin and James Meredith, whom he had flown down to see, wait for a taxi.*





*In New Orleans, Baldwin dances the "Hitchhike" with CORE member after lecture.*

## **'Doom and glory of knowing who you are'**

by **JANE  
HOWARD**

**I**n today's literary circles it is a sign of considerable chic to know James Baldwin well enough to refer to him as Jimmy. Baldwin's telephone number, unlisted in the Manhattan directory, is such a badly kept secret that it has to be changed every few months. His phone rings relentlessly even at 3 a.m. when, often as not, five or six people are gathered in his 2½-room walk-up drinking his Scotch and listening to records. "You always go back to Jimmy's after an evening," one of his friends says, "never anybody else's. He's got to hear that music." That music con-

sists largely of Ray Charles, Mahalia Jackson and the Abyssinian Baptist Gospel Choir.

Of the people who surround him and keep his phone busy not many are Baldwin's real friends. Those he really cares for, a group that includes his prolific family, Martin Luther King, Actors Sidney Poitier and Rip Torn, are either too busy or too compassionate to take much of his time. Many of the ones who are around offer him little but confusion. "They don't know," he says, "that to get you have to give, and giving, baby, isn't a day at a bargain counter but a total risk of who you are and what you think you want to be." Baldwin, who calls nearly everyone but old

people and clergymen "baby," reflects that "Fame can lead to just as many disasters as poverty. Since I got to my grits—I mean, since I've had enough to eat—around two years ago, I've been as lonely as I ever was in my life. Now that I'm technically and legally a celebrity, I find that people don't look at me any more than when I was an anonymous cat in Harlem."

**M**aybe as a consequence, Baldwin scrutinizes other people with a shattering intensity. His huge, protruding eyes, usually a little bloodshot, gaze unwaveringly and for record lengths of time into the eyes of whomever he is talking to.



## BALDWIN

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"Eyes," he claims, "are the only way to tell who you can trust." For those who know him it is a point of honor never to avert their eyes from his. It is also a little like being on the losing end of a children's game of who-can-outstare-whom. Rarely does anybody outstare James Baldwin.

On all his small gestures, Baldwin lavishes twice the ordinary amount of nervous energy. He thinks "the question isn't whether you're happy or unhappy but alive or dead." Although he can be dependent or two hours late to an appointment, there's never the slightest doubt that he's alive. When friends leave his apartment, he hugs and kisses them before he calls "Ciao, baby." When he goes into a restaurant or bar, he delays ordering until he has fed a coin to the jukebox. While he talks on the phone he carries it in his hand as far as the cord will allow, into the kitchenette and then halfway across the living room, stopping now and then to pencil a face in his appointment calendar. When he boards a plane, he grabs a handful of plastic-bound magazines as soon as he has shrugged off his fleece-lined Scottish suede coat. He riffls through half of them by the time the "No Smoking" sign dims.

He can't drive a car, but when one he's in gets a flat tire he is

quickly outside and squatting to peer at the calamity as though his forte were not words but hubcaps and jacks. And when he comes across a child anytime, anywhere, he bends over to lift it to his lap. "You can't fool kids," he observes. "A three-year-old boy can tell perfectly well whether he's wanted around the house or not."

**B**aldwin was the eldest of nine children who grew up on 131st Street in Harlem. He was a skinny child with a big gap between his two front teeth. His father told him, "You're the ugliest boy I ever saw." His father worked in a Queens ginger ale factory weekdays and preached on Sundays. Young James was a junior minister in another church for three years, but one Sunday when he was 17 a friend dared him to cut service and go to a matinee of *H.M.S. Pinafore*. He took the dare and has never been a practicing Baptist since.

"I was learning then that the terrible thing about being a writer is that you don't decide to be one, you discover that you are one," he says. He turned down two college scholarships to help support the family by working in restaurant kitchens, writing continually on the side, and getting little sympathy for it. "In this country artists

*In Durham, N.C. he pauses to take notes before local headquarters of Black Muslims.*





aren't recognized until they've earned \$2,000 or won a prize. Until then, if you tell someone you're a writer he says, 'Yeah, well I mean, what do you *do*?' If you're an artist, you're guilty of a crime: not that you're aware, which is bad enough, but that you see things other people don't admit are there.

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive. Only if we face these open wounds in ourselves can we understand them in other people. An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are. He has to tell, because nobody else in the world *can* tell, what it is like to be alive. All I've ever wanted to do is to tell that. I'm not trying to solve anybody's problems, not even my own. I'm just trying to outline what the problems are.

"I want to be stretched, shook up, to overreach myself, and to make you feel that way too. I want to be a great artist, not just a very good one."

But as Baldwin's reputation grows, so does the distance between him and his typewriter. He can't write at all in New York City. ("I wish I didn't have to live there. It's the most hostile city I've ever been in, but there's no place else I could possibly be based.") His life has become so chaotic that in order to concentrate he has to flee to Istanbul, Paris, London, Switzerland, or an almost as remote Connecticut retreat. Between writing periods, when he's more or less in residence in Manhattan, Baldwin the Artist becomes Baldwin the Spokesman. In auditoriums he speaks to overflow crowds, the microphone cord draped about his neck, plane tickets in his pocket and telegrams in hand asking if he's free the 17th of next month to talk about *The Essayist* as Novelist, or *The Novelist* as Playwright, or *How Whites Regard Negroes*, or *How Negroes Regard Whites*.

On all these topics Baldwin has outspoken convictions which he can deliver on almost no notice in a dazzling, fluent rhetoric drawn from the stately cadences of the Old Testament, the glib breathlessness of postgraduate cocktail parties and the funky argot of Har-

lem. To hear one James Baldwin talk is by no means to have heard them all. On a hectic two-day speaking tour to New Orleans for the Congress of Racial Equality, he gave five planned and three spontaneous talks. They all ended up dealing with the racial question, but each was in its own language, aimed at its own audience. He spoke one way to anxious white liberals, another way to earnest Negro students who had been hurt in the McComb riots, and in still another vein to English majors at segregated colleges—but he made the same points each time.

He made some people mad but never failed in his expressed aim to "shake them up, disturb the peace, get them to ask real questions." They disturbed him, too, as all his audiences do.

"I was the first Negro to address a senior class at Yale—make of *that* what you will—and of those 1,000 men very few could phrase a sentence. Americans are the most inarticulate, illiterate people I've ever met, totally unlettered in the language of the heart, totally distrustful of whatever cannot be touched.

"Most Americans lead lives they deny, and they find it almost impossible to be coherent on any level. You have to listen very hard to a college president or an elevator operator to find out what it is he's really saying. They are both trapped between the language imposed on them, which is not theirs, and what they really want to say, which they don't trust."

**T**o unwind from the strain of speaking publicly, Baldwin drinks and dances and subjects himself to painful motel-room bouts of introspection. "I know I shouldn't be doing all this speech-making," he says. "I never planned on it. It's much too easy for me. I should be saying what I have to say at a typewriter."

Yet when he accepts an invitation to speak, nothing stops him. In New Orleans recently he overslept on the day he was supposed to fly to Greensboro, N.C. to give a long-promised CORE talk. Eventually he emerged from his room, holding a poetry manuscript a student had asked him to criticize before he left. He was rushed into a rented car that raced to the airport, but it was too late: the plane was gone. There were no more flights that day to Greensboro. Everyone was silent.

"Well, Jimmy," a CORE girl finally sighed, "it's too bad, and they'll be pretty disappointed in

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Carolina, but what can you do? The only way you could get there now would be charter a plane."

"How much?" asked Baldwin. "Go on, find out." He went into the unsegregated part of the airport bar to order a Scotch and criticize the poetry manuscript. The others fanned out all over the airport, buttonholing anybody who knew anything about planes that might be chartered to fly to Greensboro. After a time one reported to Baldwin.

"You're not going to want to do it," she said. "That flight would cost \$680. You could get to Europe and back twice for \$680."

"Charter the plane," said Baldwin. "I said I'd be in Greensboro tonight, and I will be." A few minutes later his two-engine plane was aloft. "My lawyers aren't going to be too delighted with this little extravagance," he admitted, "but what else is there to do? What's money for?"

"I didn't become a writer to earn a Cadillac or a split-level ranch house, and I wouldn't quit writing if you gave them to me. And I didn't become a writer to join the

Cosmos Club—somebody wanted to put me up for that, but I wasn't interested. You know, one of the things I object to most about liberals is the way they take me home to meet their mothers and buy me drinks and say, 'Now really, Jimmy, just between us, what have you got to cry about? You've made it, haven't you?' I want to ask them: 'I've made *what*?'

"Evidence would indicate I come from a long line of what we call field niggers," he said with a smile. "For myself, I'd never have been content with obscurity, but I wasn't aiming at Leonard Lyons' column either, and I'm not going to settle for it. I write because—I don't know why I'm telling you this—because every writer has only one story to tell, really, and I haven't told mine yet.

"I want to do something new, to go places I've never been, and I don't mean just geographically. I'm pushing a whole lot of different buttons to find out which ones. Right now I'm writing a play.

"Most contemporary fiction, like most contemporary theater, is designed to corroborate your fantasies and make you walk out whistling. I don't want you to whistle at *my* stuff, baby. I want you to be sitting on the edge of your chair waiting for nurses to carry you out."

*In kitchen of his New York apartment Baldwin has 3 a.m. phone conversation.*

