

# Quincey Jones

## Foreword from the book Against All Odds

By

**Quincey Jones**

**as told to Kuwana Haulsey**

*Known as one of the greatest living legends of the music industry, Quincy Jones is a record producer, musical arranger and film composer with more than 25 Grammys to his credit. In the course of his sixty year career, he's worked with everyone from Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra to Miles Davis and The Beatles. But Quincy Jones is perhaps best known for producing two of the biggest selling records of all time: "Thriller" by Michael Jackson and "We Are The World."*

When I was thirteen years old, I used to play hooky from school and go down to the Palomar Theater and see all the greats come through. You know, Billy Eckstine and Billy Holiday and all those people. One day while I was down there, I met Count Basie. I guess he decided to kind of adopt me, become my mentor or big brother, whatever you want to call it. This was way back in 1947 or 48.

The first thing he said was, "Youngblood, sit down. Let me tell you what's going on. Here's the way it is, especially in the Black music business. There're two things: hills and valleys. Anyone can handle hills. But in the valleys, that's when you find out what you're made of. It's important to develop the foundation to survive the valleys."

And boy was he right. You see, it's in life's valley that you learn the greatest lessons and discover whether or not you have what it takes to make it, as this book says, against all odds.

Each of us has that power, that brilliance, inside of us waiting to break out. But usually, it's not until we're walking alone through the valley that we realize who we truly are, what we're capable of, and how much we have to give the world.

At thirteen, I already knew more than I should have about life's valleys. I didn't have much of a childhood. I came from Chicago, in the biggest ghetto in America. We'd moved there during the Depression, and left when I was ten years old to go to an almost all-White area in Washington. It was an amazing test for me. I think my brothers and I were the only three Black kids in Bremerton back then. We had to figure out who we were real quick because we didn't know who to follow. We were kind of thugs, you know, probably because being a thug was something we could control. Coming from Chicago, we had a good background in that area 'cause that's where the best gangsters, black and white, came from. Machine guns, ice picks, switch blades—that's what we were used to seeing everyday.

I will never forget the day when, at the age of eleven, we broke into this armory in Sinclair Heights to steal some pie. After we got through with that, we decided to break into some o ces too. The country was in the middle of the World War II and the armory, which was our recreation center, was right next to an army camp. I broke into the o ce of a woman named Miss Aires who worked for the superintendent. She was a real sweet lady but, you know, thugs don't care about stu like that.

As I opened one of the doors, I saw a piano and a spinet inside the room. I almost closed the door but something made me walk in there and go over to that piano. I hit one note. Just one note. Right then, I felt in every cell in my body that this would be the rest of my life. I just knew it.

That's when I started playing.

During those early days, I made it a habit to just watch and listen. I know I talk a lot now, but back then I used to shut up and listen. It's very important to have that kind of situation going on in your life, where you've got mentors you respect and you're smart enough to shut up and listen to them. Young singers come up to me today and they say, "What do you think—what advice could you give me as a young singer starting out?" I tell them to imitate. Find the five or ten people you just admire, the ones who really crumble your cookie and all that, and copy everything they do. The young singers don't understand this. They say, "But everybody tells me I'm supposed to be original." I say, "You don't even know how to be mediocre yet, much less be original. But if you walk in the shoes of giants, then you've got something to work with."

Clark Terry used to tell me, "You must imitate, then assimilate. This will ultimately lead you to be able to innovate." And it's so true. You walk in enough of those shoes, and it taps the mind of your own originality. But you've got to listen to the people you think are the very best in any field. I don't care what it is—movie director, trumpet player, singer, whatever it is. I think apprenticeship is the most powerful form of teaching on the planet. It's an amazingly fast way to get to an advanced state rather than sit around and try to recreate the scale or something like that. A lot of people that I meet think they're going to re-invent music.

But they can forget it. There's only 12 notes, baby. If it's a diatonic situation, there's only seven. However, if you walk in the shoes of giants, you discover an incredible way to succeed, not only as an artist but as a human being. It builds your character.

In part, that's what this book is about. You might call it an apprenticeship to greatness. Every person in this book has found a way to access the best that is within them. Through their lessons, both the heartbreaks and the triumphs, we all gain the opportunity to come closer to the greatness inside us. Because in the final analysis, we're all called to excellence. We're all driven to give the world the best that we have to offer.

You see, God's gift to the artist, or to any human being, is their talent. Some might say it's your passion or your calling. And your gift back to God is your development of that talent and your commitment to taking it to its highest. You have to be obsessed, I think. It's all just step by step—a lot of giant steps and a lot of small steps too. You just keep making sure your feet are going forward. You must feed the flame inside that says, "I don't care what anybody says, nobody's gonna stop me."

Knotty Belanche used to tell me, "Your music can never be any more or less than you are as a human being." You have to live your life in a way that allows you to have something to say. You have to make sure you have a well-rounded emotional palate, so to speak.

Personally, I had a lot to work from, the number one thing being desperation. I desperately wanted to get out of the situation I was in at home. There were eight kids and a stepmother and my daddy who was making fifty-five dollars a week to support ten people. So for me, the transfer of the darkness to light was through the love of music. You have to turn toward something greater because if you turn on yourself, you get bitter. We all have so many things to deal with. I dealt with poverty, bigotry—all kinds of stuff.

There were times I remember being in a band and driving all night because we couldn't stop in white towns. There were times we slept in funeral parlors. There was a time I remember waking up at sun rise as we were driving through a small Texas town and seeing a church steeple glowing in the light of dawn with a black dummy hanging from a rope at the top of the steeple. I will never forget these things. And I wouldn't want to. From these incidents, I came to understand that nothing external had the power to stop me.

How you process things is very important because it's your experiences that create the music of your life. You begin to realize that you're just a terminal. The higher power is in total control. It's like when Michelangelo said David was always there, he just had to get the rock out of the way. It's true.

You must let whatever it is that you're called to do come through you without judgment. Just let it pour like a water faucet. That way, you don't sit there and get all hung up and constipated—emotionally constipated—with judging yourself. You just keep letting it roll because what you're doing is opening up to a much higher power, which is where your gifts originate from anyway. Sometimes you turn on the water and it gets too hot or too cold or you just get it lukewarm. But you keep letting it come. It's all part of who you are. Sometimes,

especially when you're struggling, you have to go deep inside to find out who you really are. I did. And that faith and determination has brought me to places that I could never have imagined.

These days, people often call me an ambassador of peace. I simply see myself as a man who stood in the shoes, and on the shoulders, of giants.

The giants that walked through my life are very much like the giants whose stories you'll read in the pages of this book. They are committed to hope, creativity, love, peace, excellence and truth. They are committed to seeing a better world take shape through their efforts and faith.

So let's just sit down and sample the best of what life has to offer—the crème of the menu that's already out there. By now you understand what's up and you know, or will know, to reach a little higher. So sit back and relax. You're learning from the greatest who ever did it on the planet.

My favorite quote is: Not one drop of my self-worth depends on your acceptance of me.



