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Buck O'Neil's "Right on Time"

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Sports Column
By Karl Lindholm

"Waste no tears for me. I wasn't born too early. I was born right on time."

I've always thought there was a hint of defiance in these famous words by Buck O'Neil.

The conventional view of ballplayers in the Negro leagues during the dark years of segregation in America was that they were born too soon. They toiled in relative obscurity from the late 1880s until 1946, when Jackie Robinson pulled on the uniform of the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers Triple-A farm team.

African-American ballplayers barnstormed the country, taking on all comers, played in Latin America in the winter, against and alongside white major leaguers, and competed in their own, often unstable, leagues in the summers. One historian has described black baseball during segregation as an "Atlantis," a lost world.

As a former ballplayer, manager, coach, and scout, and Board Chairman of the Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City, Buck O'Neil was the Ambassador to this lost world, the history of which has been uncovered and written in recent decades.

Buck O'Neil died last month, on October 6, at age 94.

In August Wilson's stirring play, *Fences*, the main character Troy Maxim, fumes when it is suggested he was born too soon. "There ought not never have been no time called too early! . . . if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play."

Wilson's character speaks for all those Negro leaguers deprived of their rightful place in the game, symbolizing the depredations of prejudice and the deprivation of opportunity imposed by segregation.

Buck O'Neil wouldn't allow bitterness to consume him, as it does Troy in *Fences.* He knew that bitterness corrodes, and he didn't have time for that. He gloried in the changes in America he saw, and lived.

I have always felt, however, the white world too readily embraced Buck's optimistic perspective and forgiving nature. His refusal to be defined by his victimization does not diminish the outrage of segregation. "I Was Right on Time" is the title of his autobiography, published when he was 85, in which he details the abundant hardships of his life as a ball player.

He describes the backbreaking work of his youth in the celery fields around his home in Sarasota, Florida, unable to attend high school because there was no black school. He goes on to describe the struggles of making a living as a ballplayer, hopping freights to get home when he was broke, being denied service in restaurants and hotels when he did have money.

He didn't want our pity: "I had a beautiful life," he affirmed. "I played with the greatest ballplayers in the world and against the best ballplayers in the world." Buck knew he had lived a rich and varied life, a baseball adventure, despite the extraordinary challenges of the journey.

This past summer, Baseball's Hall of Fame inducted posthumously seventeen new members from the Negro leagues. A group of a dozen scholars of black baseball evaluated the credentials of 39 Negro league figures for entry into baseball's shrine. Buck didn't make it. The word is that he came up one vote short.

It's true that Buck was a very good player, a smooth-fielding first-baseman, an all-star in the Negro leagues, but perhaps not a great one (think Buckner, Hodges, Santo). He managed the Kansas City Monarchs from 1948-55; he was the first black coach in the Major Leagues, instructing Cubs players in 1962. He worked for the Cubs for more than three decades: as a Cubs' scout, he signed Ernie Banks and Lou Brock. Since the day it first opened in 1997, Buck was the heart and soul of the Negro Leagues Museum.

If there were a Hall of Fame for character, Buck O'Neil would be its first inductee.

For Buck's many admirers, his exclusion from baseball's Hall of Fame was disappointing and confounding. Not so for Buck. He was overjoyed for those finally being acknowledged. He spoke at the July 30th ceremony in Cooperstown, saying there was no place "I'd rather be (than) right here right now representing these people that helped build a bridge across the chasm of prejudice."

Buck's positive outlook and engaging personality were on full view in Ken Burns' eighteen and a half hour "Baseball" documentary in 1994. Of all the talking heads

in the video, 81- year old Buck was the star. Compelled by baseball's civil rights drama, Burns called Buck "one of the most remarkable men the game or the country has produced."

At Buck's 94th birthday earlier this year, Hall of Famer Lou Brock said of his mentor and friend, "Buck is a man God chose for this time. He has seen it all. He saw the transformation of people, of society, of a country. Somebody's got to be around to tell that story. I think he has been preserved for that purpose."

Buck's voice is now stilled; he has set "his fleet foot on the sill of shade," as all athletes must. If black baseball in the first half of the 20th century is no longer a lost world, an untold story, no small thanks are due John "Buck" O'Neil.