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Billy "the Hill" and the Jump Hook

Billy McGill

Eric Brach

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and the Jump Hook:

The Autobiography of
a Forgotten Basketball Legend

Billy McGill and Eric Brach

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved coach, Jack Gardner, and all the Ute fans and citizens of Los Angeles who never stopped believing in me.

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Preface

Without a doubt Billy McGill is one of the most interesting people I've ever had the pleasure to meet. Of any person of I've ever grown close to, he's certainly the most different from me; between us stands forty-plus years of age difference, a foot of height, and wide disparities in our upbringings. I was not raised under the sad shadow of pre-Civil Rights Act American segregation, nor affected by the chilling ripple effects thereof. If I had the power to go back in time and remove these obstacles from a younger Billy's path, I would.

This work is the fruit of research and over two years of conversations and interviews, not only with Billy but also with his teammates, contemporaries, and fans. That's the first question everyone asks when they hear about this project: how did we do it? How did Billy use me to help find his voice? The answer is simple: we talked. I asked questions, and Billy unearthed dusty memories not regarded for fifty or sixty years in order to provide the material for this book. I recorded our meetings and crafted his story in the best way I could.

The second question is always about what Billy is like. People want to know: is Billy sad or angry that he didn't make it big in the NBA after such a great youth and college career? The answer is: well, of course. I've watched hours of game footage, and it's clear to me that Billy was one of the cleanest, purest scorers the game of basketball has ever seen. That he didn't make it in the NBA is attributable to a combination of factors, surely: the fact that the league was tiny and struggling during his time is certainly one of them. In Billy's day the league boasted only nine teams and drew an aver-

age of only six thousand to seven thousand fans to each game. There were no endorsements; there were no TV contracts. In those days teams had to keep their payrolls as small as possible to stave off bankruptcy. He had the bad luck to enter the league when seven out of the nine teams had future Hall-of-Famer centers (Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Walt Bellamy, Bob Pettit, Willis Reed, Nate Thurmond, and Jerry Lucas)—literally, there was just nowhere for him to play. And, of course, there was always the issue of the knee.

One of Billy's near-constant refrains since I've known him is, "Man, if it weren't for this knee, I'd be living up on the hill. I'd be in the Hall and I'd be famous, instead of where I am." And maybe that's true. In fact, it almost definitely is. If times had been different, Billy could have reached the highest heights. If Billy's family had stayed together and his father could have looked out for him, or if medical technology was then where it is today, or even if there weren't such stigmas at the time against black players suffering injuries, inducing Billy to hide his trouble rather than get the healing care he needed—if any of these corrective factors had been in place, Billy wouldn't be only an LA blacktop legend or a Utah favorite son. He'd be a household name.

Let's be clear: this is no Cinderella story. Though Billy was unstoppable, a machine, the first and still the only Los Angeles player ever to be taken with the number one pick of the NBA draft, his name has never been sung from the rooftops—and sadly, it may never be. Even though he invented a shot that's now a staple of every big man from Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to Yao Ming, even though the University of Utah dissolved its own color line to allow Billy to integrate the team, even though he smashed every NCAA scoring record for centers ever established . . . when he dies a piece of an amazing story may forever die with him.

And that's not right.

Every year tens of thousands of kids just like Billy flood into high school gyms with one goal on their minds: the NBA. And yet of these kids, just a few hundred get major college scholarships. Only a few dozen of those ever make it to the pros. And far fewer of them ever truly reach their dreams.

Even for the ones who do—even after all the groundwork laid by guys like George Mikan and Billy McGill, guys who got paid pennies playing through the '50s, '60s, and '70s before the NBA got rich with TV money—there are still great hardships. Even with the enormous contracts of today, players are still going broke, unprepared for the lives that lie in wait for them after their days playing the game wind down. Quick: what do Derrick Coleman, Latrell Sprewell, Allen Iverson, and Scottie Pippen have in common? The answer? Even though they made twenty-three All-Star Game appearances and made 450 million dollars in NBA salary money between them—that's *half a billion* dollars between four guys—they all still ended up broke just a few years after they retired. Just like Billy.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Stories of champions are time and again retold. But what happens to those players—even right at the pinnacle, just inches from that brass ring—who get winnowed out along the way? What happens to the guys who fight their way to the tops of the peaks only to fall, and fall hard? Stories like that are more often than not forgotten. And that's a real disservice, not only because this is a hard truth, one that all high school athletes and sports phenoms should understand and accept before they force themselves through that wringer, but because this story, both as an archetype and as the life that Billy actually lived, is—as much as it hurts—a damned good one.

And it deserves to be remembered.

Eric Brach

Prologue

The Shot.

I've already picked up my dribble. I've got nowhere else to go. The only choice is to go straight up with the ball and shoot. But between me and the basket stands seven feet and two inches of perhaps the greatest basketball player who's ever lived: Wilt Chamberlain.

I leap, preparing to unleash my shot, and as I do, my first thought is, "I'm in trouble." This man has built his legend smacking lesser men's jumpers into the stands, and who am I? A sixteen-year-old playing pickup against the greatest of all time. But it's too late to go back now. I've left the ground, and with just a half second until my feet return to the hardwood, I have to get rid of the ball.

Chamberlain's growling, snarling at me, and his fangs are bared. He looks like he's chasing after raw meat, and his eyes make it clear: my shot is the steak.

Like a ballerina I twist in the air, getting my body between Wilt and the ball as my free arm curls away from the basket. Chamberlain launches heavenward as I release.

At the crest of its trajectory, the ball hangs aloft in midair as if held by

angels. Chamberlain's outstretched arm reaches toward it as it soars, rotating slowly, gently, toward the hoop and going up, up, up . . .

1

The Beginning

It's September 1939 when I'm born on a ranch in San Angelo, Texas. "Ranch" isn't quite right; it's a big old house with a shed out back and a little creek running down by its edge. Mama Sadie keeps vegetables in the yard—collard greens and turnip greens and that—and in the shed, Mr. John Henry keeps a couple of animals. All our neighbors keep animals, too. We have to. If we didn't we'd starve.

The ranch belongs to my grandmother, Mama Sadie. When my mother leaves me to make her life in California, I'm left in her care. I'm too young to feel abandoned; this is just how it is. Mother goes, and Mama Sadie raises me with help from my aunt, Gloris Jean.

Besides the animals and the neighbors who live down the street, it's just the three of us and Mama Sadie's husband, Mr. John Henry. Mr. John Henry's not my biological grandfather—what happened to him, I can't say; I just know that by the time I come around, Mama Sadie's living with him. My father, whom I don't know, is in California with my mother.

Without a real dad around, I look up to Mr. John Henry. But he isn't much of a talker, or much of a warm man, either. He does have arms like a pair of sledgehammers, and those arms go to work when he slaughters

pigs, which he does like this: he slams them twice in the forehead with the flat part of the head of an ax. The first shot sends the pig sprawling to the ground, stunned and drooling, and the second one finishes the animal off. Mr. John Henry grew up in the country, and he can wring chickens' necks off with one hard twist of his wrist, too. But these acts are too gruesome for a little kid to aspire to, so I spend most of my time not with Mr. John Henry but with Aunt Gloris Jean.

Gloris Jean is a good bit older than I; she was already in her teens when I was born. She's beautiful—the prettiest person I've ever seen—and so sweet that I take to her instantly, following her everywhere she goes. When she walks into town, I'm at her heels; when she has chores to do, I cling to her ankles and listen to her sing. Gloris Jean fixes my plates at meals. At night, when I'm scared, it's Gloris Jean I run to.

After Mr. John Henry kills a fattened pig, he carries it into the shed and trusses it. Freshly slaughtered pigs are pink and also brown, dirty from having thrashed in the mud and caked with matted blood and hair. Once the pigs are dead, he slits their throats and, hanging them from a hook, bleeds them out into a bucket. The red liquid heat pools and congeals, and as the pigs stare out at the world with ice-dead eyes the hue of skimmed milk, Mr. John Henry slits their bellies and guts them, pulling out their innards onto a low table to sort.

One time I sneak in to watch him working the carcass. I'm so amazed at what I see that I tell a few of the neighbor kids, and when they don't believe me, the next time I bring a few of them along to peek. But Mama Sadie catches me, and she yells for Gloris Jean—Gloris Jean, whose job it is dole out the punishment along with the love; Gloris Jean, who'll catch me and spank me on my bottom with a wooden spoon.

I sprint away from the shed door and Gloris Jean comes running after me, cajoling and yelling. I know what's coming, and I duck and dodge, all the while expecting her to catch up and pay me out the debt I've earned. Only thing is, she doesn't. Somehow she can't catch me; yesterday she could, and now she can't. This is unusual and I know it. I'm a little kid, a child just barely old enough to go to the bathroom alone, but this teenage

girl—this nascent woman already mostly grown—can't snag me. I'm too quick for her.

"Athletes in the blood," intones Mr. John Henry when he's told the news. "He must have got it from his father." My ears perk up, and when I'm sent off without any supper, I don't care. No one has ever mentioned my father to me, and I'm desperate to learn more about him. Who is he? What did Mr. John Henry mean? All night I lie in bed thinking about what kind of man my father must be.

Come the next day I've made up my mind to ask Gloris Jean about my dad. Unfortunately I never get the chance. Early that morning she says she feels sick and she needs to go lie down. Soon after she gets to lying down quite a bit. Whenever I ask her to come outside—to play, to walk with me into town—she says she can't, she's tired. Soon she's so tired that she stops joining us at the table altogether, and one night, with just three plates at dinner, Mama Sadie leans over and says to Mr. John Henry as though I'm not there, "I think it's time for Dorothy to come get Billy Junior."

Dorothy: my real mother. To me my mother is a concept more than a person. Visions of her in my life are mere shadows: a passing smell, a pair of legs under the table during a holiday visit to the ranch. She finally does come when Gloris Jean leaves us, and I'm too young to be told why—why my mother is now, suddenly, ready for me, and why, just as quickly, Gloris Jean is gone. When they take Gloris Jean away, she's lying down looking peaceful, and I'm glad to see that she's resting comfortably with her eyes closed. I'd hate to see them wide open, staring cloudy and milky blue. I understand that she's dead, but I don't like the thought of Gloris Jean's body trussed and bled, caked with mud as her innards spill out into a bucket.

I'm five years old.

My real mother arrives vibrant and beautiful and like a statue of my aunt expanded to a grander size. She has shiny hair and soft skin, and I quickly find I like to nestle into her.

“You love me, right, Billy?” she asks one day not long after her arrival, and I nod yes.

“Good,” she says, “because you’re going to come with me.”

“Where?” I ask. “To the store?”

“To California,” says my mother. “To Los Angeles.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why, to live!”

When it dawns on me that my mother is leaving again and will be taking me with her, I don’t know if I’m more excited or scared. San Angelo is all I know, and I don’t know what moving means. Can I take my pillow? Will I need to bring a change of socks?

Without fuss Mr. John Henry piles the four of us into his used Model A Ford, and we drive together to the San Angelo bus station. Maybe I should be sad to be leaving, but I’m not; this is the first time I’ve ever ridden in a car, and I marvel at how fast the world seems to speed along. I’d seen it driven—it looked big and ominous—and I’d always longed to ride in it. But finally being inside, feeling stationary while the broad Texas night sky passes above me, is surreal. The hot wind rushes by faster than I’ve ever felt it, even in the fiercest windstorm, and as I stare up into the needlepoint quilt of light above, I can’t fathom how, if we’re moving so fast, those heavenly bodies shining down upon us remain so still. This moment—gazing into the night sky as we hurtle away from the ranch, watching the stars wink down on us in our west Texas valley—fixes itself into my mind. I am now headed irreversibly into the world beyond.

When I lower my gaze for only a moment, I see that Mama Sadie’s face is wet.

In short order we reach the bus depot, and as deeply and quickly as I’d fallen in love with the car, the target of my affections shifts when I spot the gleaming coach.

I leap out of the Model A to sprint toward the bus and Mama Sadie has to pull me back to wrap me in her embrace. She, like Mr. John Henry, has strong, country arms like whole hams, and she hugs me so tightly I can

hardly breathe. I hug her back, or at least try to, then start again inching myself toward the idling beast in the dirt parking lot.

Mama Sadie gives my mother a deep hug of her own, then passes her a bag filled with fried chicken for the long ride ahead. At last, with our tickets in her hand, my mom steers me gently, hand between my shoulder blades, toward the hulking, lumbering bus.

As we board the driver takes one look at us and points toward the very back. We traipse past old, weathered ranchers with skin the color of their straw hats, and then among folks who look like me and my mother, until at last we find a pair of seats in the next-to-last row. As the bus pulls away, my mother and I wave good-bye to San Angelo. Mr. John Henry stands firm, arms crossed, and I can see tears now in my mother's eyes. I rifle through her bag for a flour-dredged drumstick, and she catches my hand and puts my head into her lap.

"Don't eat up all the chicken now, Bilbo; it's for later." Those are the last words I hear as I softly drift off to sleep, unaware in my simple youth that I'll never be back to San Angelo again.

When I awaken the next morning, all of my senses are firing. The rumbling of the bus's diesel engine drums deep within my ears. The thick, acrid smell of the chemical toilet just behind us coats my throat. Every five minutes, it seems, another person comes back to use it, and I start to hate the men in their hats who shuffle quickly past only to return, minutes later, trailing malodorous clouds.

But all that unpleasantness is successfully pushed out of my head as I watch the American landscape fly by. Texas was flat land and bunchgrasses as far as the eye could see, but now everything is littered with red rocks and rubble-rabble, little cactuses that poke up out of the ground like a kid's head from a tussle of sheets. I press my face to the glass, pulling it away only to nibble now and again on more fried chicken, transfixed by the sight of the world beyond the window.

While I pass the time with my attentions on life outside the bus, my mother draws the attention of other passengers in it. My mother is beau-

tiful and knows it; she loves to be watched, talked to, paid compliments. She loves—I think the word is—to flirt. We are barely under way on our second day and haven't even pulled over for a rest break before she draws the eye of the man sitting across the aisle.

To me he is a wonder; he's like no man I've ever seen. He isn't black like we are, and he's not white either. He's the color of tobacco or sun tea. Not that white men wouldn't have found my mother attractive, but white men don't look like him, and white men don't sit at the rear of the bus near the toilet.

"What are you?" I ask, interrupting his conversation with my mother, and she shushes me as he grins. They go back to talking, not answering my question, and for the next six hours, I'm left sitting there to wonder: if he's not white and he's not black, then what is he? And which water fountain does he drink out of?

I never get the chance to find out. He and my mother talk to each other in grown-up voices for a long time, and he gets up to leave somewhere before we do, somewhere before the driver rears his head back and calls out, "Next stop, end of the line: Los Angeles's Union Station."

Groggy from the journey, I stumble off the bus, grasping my mother's hem as porters pull bags from the coach. There are more people here than I've ever seen in my entire life.

Amid them all stands one who looks intently in our direction. He's enormous. I wrap my arms around my mother's leg—it's all I can do not to run back on the bus and hide at the sight of this giant. But my mom leans down to me and puts her hand on the small of my back. She points in his direction. "Go on to him," she says.

"Who?"

She points again. "Your father! Malone McGill." Malone. My father. I've never seen him before. "Go on, give your father a hug!" She gives me a little push.

I let go timidly, then, in a rush of confidence, trot forward to inspect him. He is strong, stout, wide. His hair's cropped short and his skin is dark, glistening in the light of the bus station like a film of residue on the

surface of a lake. Finally, I extend my hand to shake as I've been taught. "Pleased to meet you; I'm Billy," I say.

He laughs. "Billy!" His eyes twinkle. And then he lifts me into the air.

My father Malone's biceps are huge, pushing through his shirt. Mama Sadie and Mr. John Henry had strong, powerful arms, too, but my father is no country ranch hand. His iron embrace as he kneels down to catch me feels like being pressed in a woodworking vise. He ensnares me, lifting me up and swinging me through the air like I'm some kind of special prize and kissing me on the cheek as he holds me aloft above the rest of the bus station crowd.

I don't know it, but this hug and kiss will be the only ones I receive from my father in my whole life.

Of course, I *don't* know that, not yet, so when my dad stuffs our suitcases into his Model A Ford—the same kind of car I'd ridden in with Mr. John Henry just days before—I'm bubbling over with excitement. We cruise through the streets of Los Angeles, and I'm beside myself in astonishment at all of these people and all of these houses. It's not like flat old Texas; there's such height here. I've never seen so many humans all at once, and it amazes me.

Still, more than anything, I'm amazed by my parents. My mother is stunning: light skinned, with a creamy complexion, she has a beauty mark right on her chin. (I'd seen back in San Angelo some women who drew one in with eyebrow pencil, but I'm proud to say my mother's isn't painted on.) My father, my mom tells me, is a boxer, and he has the perfect pretty boy image to match his huge arms: hair glossed up and combed back into a conk, a style common to both singers and fighters.

A beauty and a pugilist: my mother and father are the picture-perfect couple. A few days earlier I couldn't break my gaze away from the speeding landscape around me; now I'm reunited with and completely entranced by the seamless sight of my mom and my dad.