

Willie Mays and the Burden of History

Willie Mays certainly had opinions about the strange and eventful history that unfolded around him, and he cared deeply about the social issues of his day. His focus, however, rarely if ever strayed from the ball park. He was simply a man who did his work well, and his work was baseball.

By Avery Hurt

True fans have always known, and casual students have long suspected, that there is more to baseball than sport. The game of baseball is so well-documented, so laden with facts and statistics, that a book about the history of baseball, with its charts and footnotes and citations, resembles not so much the story of a sport as an academic paper. At the same time, however, any story of baseball is bound to be so strewn with anecdote and oft-told tales (both entertaining and cautionary) that the game approaches fable if not faith, ritual if not religion. To baseball's true faithful, "the shot heard round the world" has nothing to do with the American Revolution, and phrases such as "Say it ain't so, Joe" need no explanation. Any baseball fan worth his scorecard can tell you, not only reams of batting averages and slugging percentages, but the significance of the reserve clause and why the 1927 New York Yankees batting order was called "murderer's row."

Stories of baseball careen wildly from hard data to sentimental fluff because baseball itself is both a documentation of who we are (and who we have been) and an idealization of who we aspire to be.

When attended by the faithful, the story of baseball, like a text being

examined by scholars, can be read as a history of class struggle in America, or as a treatise on race relations, or labor relations, or even, if you read carefully enough, gender relations. The story of baseball can be (and I assure you, has been) used to psychoanalyze the nation, or in recent years, to deconstruct it. But however you choose to read it, whether you are one of baseball's faithful or merely an interested student of history, the story of America's favorite pastime cannot be disentangled from the story of our nation, and ultimately, the story of ourselves.

WILLIE MAYS AND WILLIE SHAKESPEARE

Emerson told us that "there is properly no history, only biography." And indeed to the faithful, the names of the fathers of baseball roll off the tongue as easily as Washington and Jefferson and Madison off the tongues of patriots. Cy Young, Walter Johnson, Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, Sandy Koufax. But any list of the greats of baseball must include Willie Mays. That Willie Mays was one of the greatest players ever

to take the field is indisputable. In 22 seasons, he scored 2,062 times and batted in 1,903 runners. In his best season, his batting average was .345. During his career, he hit 660 home runs. If he had not lost two seasons to the Korean War, it is likely that he would have broken Babe Ruth's lifetime home run record before Hank Aaron. Many believe him to be the greatest all-around player ever. However you crunch the numbers, he is firmly carved in the Mount Rushmore of baseball.

When you leave the realm of data and move into the realm of myth, he is still the greatest. Tallulah Bankhead once said that "there have been only two geniuses in the world. Willie Mays and Willie Shakespeare." And like most geniuses, Mays made his work sound easy: "They throw the ball, I hit it. They hit the ball, I catch it." A simple enough formula it seems, but in the hands of Mays it was magic and grace and wonder, and to anyone who saw him glide back in centerfield to make an awe-inspiring over-the-shoulder catch in the opening game of the 1954 World Series (or has seen the much-replayed film), it does indeed seem that if Shakespeare were the Swan of Avon, Willie Mays was the Swan of the Polo Grounds.



A teenage Willie Mays
(second from left, back row)
celebrates with the Black
Barons after winning the
1948 Negro American League
Championship

THIS STRANGE AND EVENTFUL HISTORY

But what makes Willie Mays a great baseball player, perhaps the greatest of all time, is as much his timing in history as his timing at the plate. Willie Mays stands firmly astride the traditional era and the modern era in baseball. As a result of both temperament and timing, Willie Mays was the last of the great historical baseball players.

Mays grew up in Birmingham, and he grew up playing baseball. He never seriously considered doing anything else. He likes to tell of the one night he worked at a job other than baseball. When he was a teenager, he helped a friend wash dishes at a restaurant. Mays didn't get home until 6 a.m. His father wasn't pleased, and besides, the schedule didn't leave time for baseball. "Working wasn't for me," Mays quickly concluded.

Baseball, however, was something he was willing to work at. Mays' father played in Birmingham's Industrial League, and the young Willie tagged along to games and practices, picking up tips and strategy and learning to love the game. By the time he was 16, Mays was playing for the Birmingham Black Barons. Before his 20th birthday, only three years after Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier, he had been signed by the New York Giants—just in time to play a few seasons in New York before the team moved to San Francisco. That historic move was only one of many transitions in baseball that Mays was a part of.

Mays played his first world series against Joe DiMaggio in DiMaggio's last. In the same series, it was while chasing a fly ball hit by Mays that Mickey Mantle suffered his first knee injury. Mays was playing for the Giants when Curt Flood took the reserve clause to court. When Mays

retired in 1973, Hank Aaron was the only player left in Major League baseball who had also played in the Negro Leagues. Willie Mays' career in the white major leagues spanned 22 years and at some point in his career he shared baseball's stage with not only DiMaggio and Mantle, but with Yogi Berra and Stan Musial and Ted Williams and Satchel Paige, and also with modern greats such as Johnny Bench, Reggie Jackson and Pete Rose.

Willie Mays kept hitting and catching and stealing bases as baseball changed and the world changed. Mays certainly had opinions about the strange and eventful history that was unfolding around him, and he cared deeply about the social issues of his day. Occasionally he made statements or gestures to that effect, such as refusing to travel to Japan in 1970 for a pre-season tour when he was needed in San Francisco for a Martin Luther King memorial. His focus, however, rarely if ever strayed from the ball park.

But if Mays was no Jackie Robinson, no Curt Flood, he was certainly no Uncle Tom. He was simply a man who did his work well, and his work was baseball. Had his work been plumbing or auto repair, no one would demand to know why he never stepped up to the podium, never got more involved with the social issues of his day. He would have been entitled to the privacy of his opinions, his right to keep his silence.

But whatever he said or didn't say, did or didn't do, Willie Mays' role in history is most clearly understood in light of his comments about Jackie Robinson. Mays obviously had tremendous respect for Robinson and was deeply grateful to him. But in his autobiography *Say Hey*, he explains why Robinson could never have been the idol of his youth: "My father had always been that." History, as always, is personal.

Personal or not, we from his hometown cannot ask Mays how he feels about the burden of history and his

role in it, because he declines to be interviewed by the Birmingham press. He doesn't say why. But his refusal leaves in my mind the image of Willie Mays (in this particular mental image he is still young, still beautiful and graceful) standing in the huge misshapen outfield of the Polo Grounds shouting, in an odd cross-racial echo, the words of William Faulkner's character Quentin Compson, "I don't hate the South, I don't hate it, I don't hate it, I don't hate it."

That is, of course, an unredeemably romantic image. Mays probably has other, better (or perhaps more trivial) reasons for not wanting to talk. He's probably just tired of all the retrospectives. It probably has nothing to do with us, nothing to do with Birmingham, his fellow southerners, or with our particular burden of history. In any case, it is his right to keep his counsel. And we, his fans, students of his time in history, are probably the better off for his reticence. He has given us so much. What more could he possibly owe us?

Baseball fans around the country struggle to make sense of history as it is told by baseball. They fuss over the Black Sox scandal and wonder if Shoeless Joe Jackson was treated fairly. They question the motives of Branch Rickey even as they praise his deeds. They worry endlessly if baseball will survive the plunge into the modern era. They are, in short, grappling with the burden of history as it is imposed on a sport that is so much a part of us.

I suspect that Willie Mays could explain it for them. But he doesn't have to. The fictional Quentin Compson already has. When asked about the South, Compson's particular burden of history, he replied, "you can't understand it. You would have to be born there." Maybe the same is true of baseball, and if it is true, no one knows that better than Willie Mays. 