The Man From Jet
Simeon Booker not only covered a tumultuous era, he lived it

By Wil Haygood Sunday, July 15, 2007

Excerpt from article about renowned journalist, Simeon Booker.

"Boookuuuuuhhhh . . ."

The other reporters would spot him sitting in front of the Sumner courthouse in Tallahatchie County, Miss. He'd be plotting how to get his interviews, where to find a bed, how he might fuel up the car -- and keep himself safe. Or they'd spot him coming out of Daisy Bates's home in Little Rock, a cold Co-Cola (as they pronounced the soft drink) in his hand, and they'd cackle about how he seemed to have doggone contacts everywhere. Daisy was a newspaperwoman who served as a kind of mother hen counselor to the kids, the kids Little Rock officials didn't want to integrate their schools.

Arkansas was scary, but not as scary as Mississippi. In Mississippi, you could end up in a coffin just trying to scribble in your notebook.

"Boookuuuuuhhhh . . ."

They'd greet him before they reached him, before one palm shook the other palm.

He smoked in those days -- Kent cigarettes -- and there always seemed to be one hanging from his lips. All bow-tied up, in his horn-rimmed glasses and elegant suit, he looked like some background musician in Dizzy's or Count Basie's band. He looked like a bebopper.

Actually, he was the man from Ebony and Jet magazines, which meant, in a symbolic manner, beginning in the 1950s, he was the man from Negro and black America with a press pass. He was all over the South -- before it became a beat and a newspaper cause -- writing up his stories, getting them printed. When it was happening, when history was rolling like some kind of grainy as-yet-unseen newsreel, he didn't think about it much at all. "You just did the job," he says.

. . . Then came the murder of that 14-year-old.

His name still haunts the way the name Anne Frank haunts. A wide-eyed child scooped up into horror, not a soul around to come to his rescue.

In late August 1955, Emmett Till, in Mississippi visiting from Chicago, walked into a little grocery store in Money. Money was really just a sliver of roadside, cotton fields stretching into the Delta distance. A white woman, Carolyn Bryant, was inside the store. He either whistled or winked at her. Bryant got word of the insult to her husband, Roy. Roy Bryant and another man,
J.W. Milam, plucked the unsuspecting Till from the home of Moses Wright. He was found days later, a bullet through his skull, in the Tallahatchie River. Booker had, like many, heard the first reports of the missing child over the radio. He leaped into action. "When he was kidnapped, I called his momma," says Booker.

He went to her Chicago home. He sweet-talked her into giving him some photographs. "Being slick in those days," he says, "I knew to keep the pictures to myself beyond the deadlines of the other newspapers." It didn't seem to matter that other reporters came knocking on her door; Booker had established a confidential relationship with her.

When the body first arrived at the funeral home -- before the funeral itself -- Booker was standing right there with Mamie Bradley. The mother instructed the funeral director to open the casket. Everyone said no: They expressed concerns about the boy's head, how the look of it might shock her; no embalmer could pretty him up. But Emmett Till's momma insisted. Booker had dragged a photographer along with him. As the casket opened, Booker felt his legs weaken at the awful sight inside; he helped hold Mamie Bradley up so she wouldn't collapse. Booker's photographer clicked. And as awful and shattering as the moment happened to be, Simeon Booker knew he had a story. He told Ebony and Jet that this was their story -- actually his story - - and that they must spare no expense or effort.

Mamie Bradley said she wanted the world to see what Mississippi had done to her Emmett. So the casket was open on the day of the funeral, and as the chubby-faced Emmett lay down to sleep, the world awoke. Jet splashed the photos all over the pages of its next issue. Booker was orchestrating the Jet coverage. The mainstream -- white -- press did not completely ignore the story, but Jet's hold on the psyche of black America was so powerful, so complete, that black folks looked upon the little magazine as gospel. Other news outlets began referring to Jet's coverage. Stores were selling out of Jet. It peeked from the jacket of shoeshine men in Harlem; teens gawked at it in the libraries that carried it. There was page after page of narrative inside, a defiant mother and grim photos. "We suddenly had to print thousands more copies of Jet," says Booker.

He told the Jet editors what they were going to do next. "I said to them, 'We're gonna cover the trial."

This would be on-the-scene reporting. It wasn't the type of thing Ebony and Jet did. "It was unheard of in those days," says Booker.

He made his way to Memphis before heading into Mississippi. He was looking for sources and contacts. And trying to get the lay of the land. Reporters were prone to be attacked covering civil rights events. Sometimes Booker would carry a Bible and affect the severe gait of a minister when asking for directions. He feared being attacked or being followed out of town if his true identity were revealed. He also did not wish to get stopped and find himself riding beside some sheriff's deputy on his way to some unknown lockup.

He was in his late 30s -- pushing 40 -- and on his first big story. Not a thing would stop him.
At the Till trial -- the black reporters were separated from the white reporters -- he wrote every day. He sat next to Mamie Bradley. Ebony and Jet didn't publish every day, of course. It didn't matter. "Stockpiling stories," Booker says. Over the upcoming weeks, the stories would appear: There were stories about prominent blacks in the area, stories about Till's relatives, stories about the black physician who operated the little motel in Mound Bayou, Miss., where Booker stayed while covering the trial. (Mound Bayou was notable for being founded by ex-slaves, for delicious sweet potatoes, and for the growing reputation of a former insurance salesman and resident by the name of Medgar Evers, who had the courage to crusade for civil rights in the heart of segregation.)

Being in Mississippi, writing, sweating under the armpits, checking to see if he were being followed on the dark road back over to Mound Bayou, thinking about the arc of the paragraphs that he would write, was everything he had wanted. He knew it was a story that needed to reach the eyes of the world. Never mind that the evidence was overwhelming against Till's murderers. Both men were acquitted.