



# The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O'Neil's America

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When Legendary Negro League player Buck O'Neil asked sports columnist Joe Posnanski how he fell in love with baseball, Posnanski had to think about it. From that question was born the idea behind **BASEBALL AND JAZZ**. Posnanski and the 94 year old O'Neil decided to spend the 2005 baseball season touring the country in hopes of stirring up the love that first drew them to the game. This book is just as much the story of Buck O'Neil as it is the story of baseball. In a time when disillusioned, steroid-shooting, money hungry athletes define the sport, Buck O'Neil stands out as a man that truly played for the love of the game. Posnanski writes about that love and the one thing that O'Neil loved almost as much as baseball: jazz. **BASEBALL AND JAZZ** is an endearing step back in time to the days when the crack of a bat and the smoky notes of a midnight jam session were the sounds that brought the most joy to a man's heart.

## **The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O'Neil's America Details**

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Joe Posnanski**

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## From Reader Review The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O'Neil's America for online ebook

### Andre says

Now that I've finished reading it, I can't really classify *The Soul of Baseball*. It's not really a baseball book. It's certainly not a biography. I can't even say it's a portrait of a man. *The Soul of Baseball* is so much more than any of that. I guess that, more than anything, I can call it a gift. A gift. Yes. I like that.

*The Soul of Baseball* is the result of sportswriter Joe Posnanski spending a little more than a year traveling the United States with Buck O'Neil. Buck, a man I've never met but felt like I've known my whole life, was widely known as America's ambassador to baseball and, especially, the Negro Leagues. Although he never played in the Major Leagues, Buck O'Neil was the first Black man to coach at that level. He was also a longtime scout. More importantly, though, he was a fun, charismatic, and loveable guy who made you laugh, cry, and think.

At the book begins, Buck is 93 going on 94, and still maintaining a full schedule of promotions, interviews, public appearances, and campaigning on behalf of other former Negro League players for induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Posnanski does an excellent job of weaving poignant stories from O'Neil's past into the present day's story. There are also references to past stars like Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, Ernie Banks, and others. And it all seems natural—because it is all natural.

Posnanski shows Buck to be an example of how free and easy a man can live when he doesn't hold onto the negatives in life. By painting the portrait of O'Neil that we see in *The Soul of Baseball*, we readers can see how much our burdens bring us down. And Buck shows us that we don't have to be that way.

Going in, I knew how the story would end. Still, *The Soul of Baseball* made me feel good. Buck O'Neil's words and life are good life lessons that come across in an impactful way without the slightest bit of preaching. The further I read, I kept thinking that I want to have that man's disposition when I get that old.

*The Soul of Baseball* was an excellent, excellent read. I'm pretty sure I'll reread this one every couple of years for the rest of my life. You should, too.

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### Matt B. says

The best sports book I've ever read that's not actually about sports. Its a quasi-biography about Buck O'Neil, a former Negro League player and manager, who even at 94 toured the country to spread awareness about the Negro Leagues' impact on baseball. A very quick read. Also, I'm not ashamed to admit it got a little dusty in my living room when reading the last 20 pages.

If you like American history, you will like this book.

If you like good people, you will like this book.

If you like books, you will like this book.

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## Bill says

Kansas City sports writer follows Negro Leagues legend, Buck O'Neil, for a year across the country. It's a fabulous, bittersweet biography of sorts of O'Neil and the League itself. The bitterness comes from the reader as you read all the hardships and slights that black players endured to simply play the game. However, O'Neil is nothing but a gut-bucket Zen philosopher throughout the entire journey. So, while parts of it will definitely anger you, O'Neil's spirit is nothing short of awe-inspiring. You really can't help but be touched by the experience of reading this book. I really wish I would've gotten to meet him while he was still alive.

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## Stephanie Griffin says

I recently watched the 10-disc Ken Burns series "Baseball" on DVD. In this series, my favorite interview person was Buck O'Neil. His enthusiasm was contagious, so I was thrilled to come across "The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O'Neil's America". It was written by the sports columnist Joe Posnanski, who followed O'Neil in his travels throughout the 2005 Major League Baseball season. O'Neil, at 94, was one of the last players left from the Negro Baseball League. He was also the first African-American coach in the MLB. The Negro league flourished in the 1930's and 1940's, but petered out after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier when he signed with the Dodgers in 1946.

O'Neil's mission was to spread the word of how the Negro League really was. He believed the books written so far were too sterile, that the real players were not only some of the greatest athletes ever, but just as full of personality as any superstar MLB player today. Through over 200 event appearances a year, he promoted the induction of those players into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Baseball aficionados will love the reminiscences of games past and learn stories they've not heard before.

O'Neil had a remarkable memory, and passed on many wonderful stories of his playing and coaching days.

He tells of the racism and hard times the players endured, but never asks for pity.

Posnanski captures the real O'Neil: his humor, heartaches, and wisdom.

This is a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of a time long past. With the passing of O'Neil in 2006, we may never have this chance again.

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## Grace says

This is a really important book about keeping the memory and history of the Negro Leagues alive, but instead of trying to recap the book or Buck O'Neil's stories, I'll leave you with two quotes in O'Neil's own words:

Before Jackie Robinson, there were men who played baseball. And we were good... People who saw us, man, we could play. We made a difference in this world.

What did I tell you? People say baseball's dead. Baseball doesn't die. People die. Baseball lives on.

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## Andre Beauford says

Great book

## Janine says

this is what it means to really love the game---and america.  
i knew nothing about buck o'neil or the negro leagues and the gradual integration of baseball. now i do.  
however, i learned much more from this book than the historical facts.  
i learned that life is what you make it. well, maybe i already knew that, but i don't think i've ever read  
anything that inspired me to believe it the way this book and buck o'neil the person did.

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## Dan says

A fascinating story about Buck O'Neill the baseball player and arguably the game's greatest ambassador. The book covers Buck's travels around America in support of the Negro League Hall of Fame and anything baseball related. The events take place when O'Neill was 93 and the book's narrative ends a year or so later when Buck dies at 94. The Baseball Hall of Fame posthumously created an annual Buck O'Neill ambassador award.

Posnanski is a award winning KC sportswriter. To write this book, with O'Neill's blessing, he spent more than year traveling with Buck O'Neill to events and speaking engagements.

First off, if you have ever seen Ken Burn's baseball mini series then you know who Buck O'Neill is. Quite simply one of the sunniest and best story tellers around. A man who was an all star in the Negro Leagues for the Kansas City Monarchs, later a manager, scout, ambassador and was instrumental in establishing the Negro League Hall of Fame in KC. An extraordinary person.

Secondly, this book is poignant and as much a story about a very elderly man reminiscing about life, his deceased wife and of course baseball. Posnanski show us how grueling this frenzied schedule was for O'Neill. At 93 as he spent less than two months out of the year at his home and most of the other ten months on the road in hotels. Although this is what O'Neill wanted and he always attempted to brighten others lives, behind the scenes O'Neill often only attend an inning of a game or less than an hour at an event before having to retire to the hotel due to exhaustion. There simply aren't many books about very elderly people who still are in control of their lives and making such huge impacts on others lives.

The tearjerker moment of the book came when O'Neill was told he might be inducted into the hall and a decision on the year's batch of old timer selections was forthcoming at noon the next day. Many hall of famers gathered with Buck to hear the news. The grace with which O'Neill dealt with the disappointment of not being selected was a tribute to his character as he applauded all of his contemporaries that were selected and there were many that year. There was universal outrage in the sports community that Buck was skipped over again. The book more or less ends here aside from an epilogue around his passing and the posthumous award.

I would have rated the book five stars if Posnanski had written a more straight up biography, but he felt that Buck's autobiography already dealt with the early years.

Still one of the more touching books that I have read for the reasons previously mentioned. I don't think one has to be a baseball fan to like this book, although it helps to know who many of the old negro league players

are.

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### **Tony says**

If you're not a baseball fan, know this: this is NOT a baseball book. It's a book about a very, very wise man who happened to play baseball a long time ago. There are a lot of well-known or famous people I would have liked to have met, but now that I've read this I actually regret not having met Buck O'Neil. Five minutes with him probably would have made me feel better about everything for the rest of my life.

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### **Gavin says**

First of all, even though I grew up Canadian, I was raised on baseball. That's the real love. I love reading about baseball, I love the history of it, and I love a good story. Add onto it that Joe Posnanski is one of the best baseball writers out there today and he's writing about the universally beloved Buck O'Neil and you've got all the potential for a winner.

It doesn't disappoint. A man who never got to play in the Majors because of 'his beautiful tan' never held onto bitterness or anger, instead, was one of the greatest ambassadors for baseball, and the force behind the Negro League Hall of Fame. Buck spent most of his time in Kansas City, where Posnanski was a sportswriter for most of his life too. The friendship blossomed, and the 2 toured the country together following all of Buck's activities.

It's a lot like the baseball version of Tuesdays with Morrie, philosophy of life from an old man with a passion for life, baseball and jazz. I first became aware of Buck from watching Ken Burns' baseball documentary when I was a kid, and he always stuck out as such an important person, yet this is the first book I've read about him...

I so very much enjoyed this book that I read it all in one sitting. I highly recommend this to baseball fans firstly, then people interested in the Civil Rights movement, and even people looking to be inspired. It's all these things and more.

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### **Valerie says**

I had never heard of Buck O'Neil, and most of the other players mentioned in this book, because they played in the Negro League. Their nicknames, their stats, their teammates, are lost to history as old age takes them.

This glimpse into the life, baseball career, and gentle activism of a man pushing for recognition in the face of racism, was a beautiful, bittersweet memoir of an era in baseball that I wish I knew more about.

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### **Sean Gibson says**

This is an absolutely phenomenal book--Posnanski is a masterful writer. I reviewed this for Kirkus when it came out: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-re...>

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## Todd Stockslager says

Review title: Yes, I cried

Buck O'Neil was the real narrator of the Ken Burns Baseball documentary series, his story winding through and around the history of the game he wasn't allowed to play on its biggest stage. It was the first introduction for most Americans to this Negro League legend, who because of his soft spoken positive demeanor and Sarasota, Florida upbringing reminded so much of my grandfather who lived 50 years of his life in the same Gulf Coast town and spoke with the same accent and cadence. It was those defining characteristics, not the superficial difference of skin color, that made me smile with joy whenever he was on the screen.

Posnanski followed O'Neil, 94 at the time, for a year as he traveled around the country promoting the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum (in Kansas City) and talking about the real stories and lives of Negro League players, and he captures that voice and cadence on paper by writing some of his conversation formatted as song lyrics. Talking to a young white fan walking through a traveling exhibit from the museum, O'Neil described racism this way:

*Funny,  
You look back,  
Didn't make no sense.  
Racism.  
No sense  
What people do to each other  
'Cause of something dark  
In their hearts.*

(p. 158)

Racism as a darkness of the heart not of the skin had a powerful impact on me because of the separation of the words on those last two lines. Racism is something dark, not on the skin, but in the heart.

Like my grandfather, of the same voice and temperament despite the difference in skin color, Buck O'Neil was also unable to say bad things about another person. After football coach Mike Ditka, a huge celebrity in Chicago, gave a hurried speech in nearby Gary, Indiana because he had a tee time to make, Buck said "There's a lot of wisdom in what Mike Ditka said. You just had to listen real quick." (p. 169). Time after time, Posnanski describes O'Neil putting a positive spin on seemingly negative situations.

He also documents long and exhausting days when in the heat of summer and after numerous interviews and autographs O'Neil would be fading fast and showing his age, only to be revived by an encounter with a young fan. A positive moment, a hug from a fan, a stirred memory would have magical powers to restore a youthful energy in a body long old.

But in the end, Posnanski and Buck O'Neil left me in tears I wasn't expecting and couldn't stop. Baseball's hallowed Hall of Fame, to try to provide some corrections to decades of injustice, put together a special committee to select worthy Negro League players, owners and others for whom O'Neil had spent his last years campaigning. While never touting his own modest credentials as a player, more creditable status as the

first black coach in the Majors and a scout who found some of the best of the next generation, and his most important merit as founder and promoter of the Negro League Baseball Museum, O'Neil hoped for selection along with his peers. Waiting expectantly with friends and visitors at the Museum, in between media calls asking for comments on the selection that was widely expected, he regaled those present with stories and questions to others about their best memories of baseball, waiting for the call from the Hall that never came.

Posnanski, now so familiar with O'Neil, not just as a writer but as a friend and "son" (as he identified Posnanski to someone who asked who the "white boy" was who always followed him), could see the hurt and pain in the slight in small seconds-long signals that others would not have noticed. But Buck remained positive and upbeat and rejoiced for the 17 selected, and even agreed to speak at the induction ceremony. Through it all he never lost his dignity and pride. Months later, he died of cancer. Remembering my grandfather's quiet dignity and last days and that voice that so reminded me of Buck O'Neil, I wept tears of sorrow--and joy. O'Neil was indeed baseball's soul.

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### **Sam Bauman says**

I bought this book a while ago. I really enjoy Posnanski's blog but I hadn't gotten around to reading the book. Well, I had kept it at work and was working late on an upgrade with some time to kill in the middle and it captured me so I had to read the whole thing pretty quickly.

The book is really just Joe following Buck O'Neil around for a while before Buck's death. But in the course of this he paints a wonderful picture of Buck O'Neil and what a good attitude he had despite what he went through. I'm sure Joe took some license with Buck as a character but if he was half as wonderful of a human being that he is portrayed as in the book he was still better than most. It was really hard not to get emotional reading about the stories and what Buck had been through even before I got to the ending I knew was coming. Knowing the end didn't make it easier, though.

I think if you have a heart you will enjoy this book. I'm sure that if you love baseball though, it will triple (Buck's favorite hit) your enjoyment of it. I would recommend it whole heartily to any baseball fan.

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### **Grace says**

To begin with: if you are a fan of baseball, you should read this book.

If you are a fan of Civil Rights, you should probably read this book.

This book made me smile on one page and cry on the next. It made me completely indignant about all of the injustices in the world, all of the unspeakably horrible things that happen in the tiniest actions (or inactions), and yet it left me unable to be truly angry about them - because that is the lesson of Buck O'Neil: How not to be bitter.

This book is incredibly well-written, and I am surprised I haven't heard (more?) about it before now. I have to applaud Joe Posnanski for his handling of the subject matter. I found it remarkable that he managed to introduce himself and his purpose at the beginning of the book, and then completely disappear from the narrative. It is essentially omniscient, unbiased journalism (as if such a thing existed; and anyway of course it is skewed in O'Neil's favor). And then at the end he reappears, as he should, representing the feelings of pretty much everyone with his indignation, and closing the book appropriately.

And then there is the seamless way in which Posnanski occasionally incorporates the lyrics of the great jazz

standards into his prose.

(view spoiler)

I am so glad that the New York Times published an article about the Negro Leagues Museum, and that I read it, and that I then planned a weekend (baseball) trip to Kansas City. Not sure when I would have gotten around to this book, if not for the trip. Not even sure I would have heard of it.

This review isn't doing this book any justice. Just read it already.

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