

Marcus Mabry: A Trentonian in Paris Straddling two worlds

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

At 28, Marcus Mabry has made good. Raised in poverty in Trenton, he's held the prestigious position, of Paris correspondent at Newsweek for two and a half years, and last month a major publisher shipped his provocative memoir, *White Bucks and Black-Eyed Peas*, to bookstores.

But the complex storyline of Mabry's life is nothing out of Horatio Alger. *White Bucks* tells of the many transitions he's made in his life — from scraping by in a fatherless family, to not quite fitting in at a bastion of privilege, the Lawrenceville School, to immersing himself in the identity politics of Stanford University, and to learning, firsthand, about media depictions of African Americans.

For more than a dozen years Mabry has teetered between the worlds of inner-city black America and the white overclass, inextricably part of both communities but, somehow, alienated from each. The title of his book addresses that dual allegiance. "I took two icons from my personal heritage, which is based firmly in the poor black family and

**WHITE BUCKS AND
BLACK-EYED PEAS**

By Marcus Mabry
Scribner, 303 pp., \$23

firmly in that WASP culture that I became a part of at Lawrenceville," Mabry says. "White bucks are those shoes that Pat Boone wore in the 1950s and that WASPs wear at prep schools — though, they don't know about Pat Boone; they just know they're the shoes their grandfathers and fathers wore. And black-eyed peas are a staple of soul food. Some people my age read other things into the title — like a play on 'black bucks' or something to do with money — but the baby boomers get it right off."

MABRY TALKS by phone from a hotel room in Philadelphia, where he's attending the annual conference of the National Association of Black Journalists. He speaks congenially but firmly, with determination and self-assurance. He's in the United States for only a few weeks, to check in with Newsweek's New York office and to tour Washington, Atlanta, and San Francisco promot-



Donald Graham

Marcus Mabry

ing *White Bucks*. Then it's back to Paris for three months — before heading off to Johannesburg. "I just came back from Bosnia, where I got shelled for the first time in my life," he says. "It's not much fun being shot at. I have to tell you: Newsweek is not worth dying for."

The beginnings of Mabry's memoir, a first-person piece called "Deadbeat Dads," appeared in the magazine. "An editor at a publishing house in New York saw the article and suggested to an agent that I write a book," he says. "When the agent called me, I was taken aback. I thought, yes, I had something to say on these issues, I'd like to make my

• see MABRY, CC3

Mabry

• continued from CC1

voice heard, but I didn't expect to write a book until I was 50. On the other hand, I couldn't think of a single reason not to do it.

"What finally convinced me to write it is that I feel we are at a crossroads in America in dealing with issues of race and opportunity. We're deciding what kind of society we want to be and whether we're going to work on going about making our society more fair. A lot of the old ways from the Great Society, like affirmative action, are about to be dumped. I think I have something in particular to bring to the debate about what kind of country we want to be."

And so, at the advanced age of 25, Mabry found himself penning his autobiography. "Sure I was worried. How do I go about saying 'what does it all mean' when I'm only 25? I don't have all the answers!" he says. "But I realized that I could lay out some of what it means, some of the answers. I can sum up what I've experienced. This is not a life story; this is the story of the beginning of a life. This is part of a process, not a resolution."

THE PROCESS has moved fast; Paris is a long way from the more downtrodden corners of New Jersey. "I grew up in White City, the part of Hamilton that borders Trenton," Mabry says. "It's very weird when you go away from home and come back only periodically. Instead of seeing the evolution of Trenton, I saw snapshots of my community every three or six months. And the snapshots I saw just seemed to get sadder and sadder. I got the sense that my neighborhood was drying up and blowing away. Little kids were not tossing balls on the side-

"Instead of seeing the evolution of Trenton, I saw snapshots of my community every three or six months. And the snapshots I saw just seemed to get sadder and sadder. I got the sense that my neighborhood was drying up and blowing away."

Marcus Mabry

walk anymore; you just had clusters of young men hiding in alleyways and people running up to them to get their drugs. It was like a ghost town. And it all happened amazingly quickly: Crack moved in like an epidemic."

Mabry was able to flourish even in the midst of this environment; his brother Charles was less successful. Near the end of *White Bucks*, Mabry describes Charles' troubles with employment and alcohol. "One reason he and I turned out differently," he says, "is that my brother had learning disabilities and I didn't. The other thing is that I was such a poor athlete; the fact that I could not play ball meant that I had to find something else to do with my time. A lot of young black men get distracted by sports, but I couldn't. Also, in the community it's not cool to be smart, to get good grades. But I was a nerd, and I didn't have a choice about it."

Not unexpectedly, some in "the community" who have read drafts of *White Bucks* have been put off by Mabry's not entirely sympathetic depictions of Trenton. He reveals this in an unusual epilogue that looks back on the manuscript and judges it harshly; Mabry was sur-

prised, in hindsight, to find the book more humorless and pessimistic than he feels he actually is.

White friends, as well as family members, have complaints as well, Mabry says. "No one who's read the book is happy with his portrayal. Some black friends have read it and say I go too easy on white people, and some white people have read it and say I go too hard on them. I don't mind that. In journalism, if you make both sides angry you've done a good job. But while I want to make people angry, I don't want them to be so angry that they won't talk. I want to encourage dialogue; my life has been about dialogue between black and white. My worry is that instead of making people talk I'll turn everybody off. But I won't give easy answers."

IN FACT, Mabry feels that, given the way he has lived, he is in a position to, is in fact *obliged* to, help people to understand that there that there are no easy answers to the questions of race in America, no one true path for those who straddle the color line.

"My grandma was really worried about me writing this book and telling my family's business to the world," he says. "We talked about it a lot. And she said if this book could help someone in the position I was in — caught in two different worlds, between white and black — then that would turn out to be my greatest reward. And it is my greatest hope for the book — that it will make those kids in a similar position, whether in public or private school, junior high or high school, feel better about themselves.

"I'd like it to be a sort of ambassadorship between black and white worlds."

Matthew Budman, who lives in Highland Park, writes and edits for a Manhattan business monthly.