



(Note: Cover art commissioned and provided by the writer; artist: Caesar Nash, Instagram: @thisisntmeoryou)

### **"CAN'T BREATHE" by James "SoSoon" Gant**

*Reflection: 2017*

*The song and lyrics to "Can't Breathe" were primarily inspired by the assassination of Eric Garner. It was a Saturday morning when I found out about Garner's death. I was sitting on the couch in my partner's apartment in Hell's Kitchen, preparing to do some research for school, when she asked me if I heard about his death. I heard many people talking about it—about the fact that there was camera phone footage to document his demise—but I had not yet seen it at this point.*

*My partner and I have completely different approaches to reading and processing news, that could be considered by some, traumatizing. While I often do not read or watch the news—whether it be via social media, print media or television—she on the other hand can easily spend an hour straight-thumbing through current events. For me, avoiding the news has often been a form of self care. Although I did not have this language at the time, now I know it was what I was doing.*

*I was aware of the fact that news is often synonymous with negative stories. Often stories of black and brown people killing or being killed - hurting or being hurt.*

*As a teenager evolving into a young adult, my mother's constant reminders to "be safe," "be home before it gets dark" and "watch your surroundings" reinforced how dangerous it was, and still is, to be Black and male in New York City. Injury or death of Black men by the hands of the police was something I became slowly aware of while growing up. Abner Louima was beaten and sodomized with a broomstick IN A POLICE PRECINCT in 1996. Amadou Diallo was shot 41 TIMES outside his home in 1999 which preceded the 50 BULLETS Sean Bell received from the alleged protectors of our safety the night before his wedding in 2006. I was hyper-aware of these incidents while simultaneously ignorant of the fact that I too could be a victim of police brutality. I would often think to myself "I'm a good person with a clean track record. I have nothing to worry about."*

*There is something to be said about watching a man lose his life. While I can't speak for those who watched Eric Garner get choked to death by Daniel Pantaleo in real time, I will never forget the experience of watching the camera phone footage that Saturday morning. My partner placed her iPhone in my hands with the video cued up and pressed play. I silently watched as Garner express frustration for the harassment he continued to receive from the police. I watched him put his hands in the air - a gesture that is universally recognized as a sign of submission or surrender. I watched Pantaleo and the other officers surround and restrain him. I listened to him repeat the now infamous phrase: "I can't breathe."*

*The video ended. It was in that moment that I realized that I am no more safe than a Black man with multiple felonies. I realized that I too was not safe from the threat of police brutality, regardless of the fact that I was a 31 year old Black man with no criminal record, currently completing my bachelor's degree, and actively working with "at risk" youth of color to help them become productive citizens in society.*

*Days later, my white supervisor, who by all accounts was a good woman—dare I say "woke"—asked me and some of my Black colleagues to hold a community meeting for our youth to process their feelings. I informed her that I had not yet processed my own. Nonetheless, she insisted. I remember the anger I felt, and the tears I held back.*

*That same evening is when I wrote "Can't Breathe."*

*Reflecting on this song years after I wrote it, I continue to look at my life trajectory, up to this point. I am thankful that I have not seen the same fate that individuals like Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley and countless other Black men and women have experienced. However I*

*still walk the streets—New York, around the world, and everywhere—with a fear of the unknown. A fear that white people will never understand.*

*I hate having to worry about cops killing me instead of protecting me. I hate being hyper aware of what I say and do—how I say and do it—when I’m in public. This has become second nature to me for as long as I can remember. If it’s not the cops that I have to worry about, it’s a white person—“woke” and not—who can potentially look at me and see a criminal. And all it takes is a 911 call and a false accusation.*

*I am afraid of false accusations of stealing when I’m in a store so I STILL keep my hands out of my pockets.<sup>1</sup> I am afraid that overreacting in public spaces will cause a white person to report me as being violent. I’ve barely just rid myself of the fear of being harassed by truancy, who could mistake me for a high school student because of my young looking face. Cause all it takes is a 911 call and a false accusation.*

*I envy the privilege and carefree nature that comes with whiteness.*

*For me, the only true good that comes from the loss of Black men and women at the hands of the police is half decent art that perhaps a few people will read or listen to and perhaps reflect upon. Hopefully the vast majority of those people are white.*

*And hopefully, from this art, other Black men and women can find the air to breathe.*

*Song and Lyrics:* 2014

[Click here to listen to #CantBreathe](#)

*Note to the Reader: Characters and punctuation marks in the song lyrics are original marks that the songwriter uses to remember his “flow” or how he recites the lyrics aloud.*

*Key:*

- (‘) Use of a grave accent signals where the first note of the beat (often referred to as “the one”) is in correlation to where I have to begin rapping a line.
- (-) Use of a hyphen signals an extended pause when reading or reciting the song.
- (,) Use of a comma signals a short pause before the next word or phrase.

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<sup>1</sup> Many American Black and/or Latino men are taught to keep their hands out of their pockets when they are young because “you don’t want people to think you are stealing.”

(^) Use of a caret signals a pauseless flow of lyrics when reading or reciting the song.  
() Use of parenthesis inform me that a phrase either needs to be addlibed or doubled, which refers to any word or phrase that is repeated twice during the recording of the song. Doubles are often used in Hip-Hop music for emphasis.

Vs 1

Yo, I ain't 'never been shot, I ain't never been locked  
Even though I get stopped, I never go through a lot  
But where I go when I shop, they think I've stolen the stock  
Even in my best dressed with my bow in a knot<sup>2</sup>

And I'm 'withholding a lot, from when they've stolen the plots<sup>3</sup>  
They reaping souls like the reaper, but ain't sowed not a crop  
And they still 'reaping (they still reaping), from the gold and the cop-per<sup>^</sup>  
And I'm shook because I know<sup>^</sup>if<sup>^</sup>a<sup>^</sup>patrolman<sup>^</sup>or<sup>^</sup>copper<sup>^</sup>happens<sup>^</sup>to

'Stroll on my block, and unload from his glock,  
They'll let him go like no stop, while my soul's in a box  
(Cause the block is hot, block is hot, ha...)<sup>4</sup>  
And this beat is all good, but I know that it's not<sup>5</sup>

It's the 'knocks of a hard life<sup>6</sup>, the shots from a hard white<sup>7</sup>  
The sticks, stones<sup>^</sup>and<sup>^</sup>the<sup>^</sup>words, none of it's alright  
I'm withholding this stress, and I don't wanna protest<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This opening stanza is sort of a twisted celebration where I acknowledge successful avoidance of the “typical” circumstances of young black and brown men (being shot or being locked). Despite never having dealt with the aforementioned I still find myself hyper aware of how people look at me when I’m shopping in stores, eating in restaurants, or even walking in certain neighborhoods.

<sup>3</sup> This line refers to the post traumatic stress that I internalize as an American born descendant of African captives.

<sup>4</sup> *The Block is Hot* is the title track off of Lil Wayne’s debut album released in 1999. I mimick Lil Wayne’s cadence in my delivery of this line.

<sup>5</sup> The beat (background music) I used for *Can’t Breathe* was originally used for a song called *All Good* written by Illa J and produced by his older brother, the late J Dilla. In this particular line I’m suggesting that the beat that I’m rapping to is all good, but it (the conditions of black and brown people in America) is not all good.

<sup>6</sup> A play on the name of Jay-Z’s song *Hard Knock Life*.

<sup>7</sup> During the 90s hard white was a popular colloquialism for cocaine. This double meaning suggests that hard(core) white police negatively impact black and brown communities the same way crack cocaine did in the 80s, which had a residual effect on black communities in America considering the number of black American children raised in the 90s without their fathers, and the number of black American men still in prison for drug charges they received in the 80s and early 90s.

<sup>8</sup> When the *Black Lives Matter* movement was at the peak of its evolution, my partner, who identifies as Latina went to several protests to show support for me and the larger black community. I told her that I didn’t want to protest because it’s not my preferred show of activism, mainly because I’ve never left a protest with a clear strategy for next steps. This in no way is me suggesting that I don’t support the idea of protesting - it’s just not something I’ve ever actively supported.

For men whose souls are at rest, this whole globe is a mess

Chs

---Can't breathe

Vs 2

Black 'pres in office, still a dead man walking<sup>9</sup>  
The head of the horseman just a head that's talking  
Night of the living dead my bed is a coffin^  
I'm afraid of my own skin never said that often<sup>10</sup>

Dreams of nooses wake to cold sweats coughing<sup>11</sup>  
No clue, how can I prepare these offspring<sup>12</sup>  
When hands up's become a sign for hands up on me<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> When Obama took office I remember having two very specific thoughts: My first was I never envisioned seeing a black president before seeing the New York Knicks win a championship. My other thought was I believed the plight of black and brown people in America would get a little easier. Nine years later, and two months after he has left the White House I feel like he did a lot for all Americans, however I feel more concerned for my life and the lives of my black brothers and sisters more so because I've become more conscious than I was when Obama was elected. Hence the phrase *still a dead man walking*.

<sup>10</sup> In this stanza, I use literature and motion picture references that focus on death to help the listener understand just how often one has to consider his/her mortality when you are black in America. Stories like *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, movies like *Night of the Living Dead*, and shows like *The Walking Dead* all reflect this experience.

<sup>11</sup> I've never actually dreamed of a noose. This line was written as colorful commentary to accent the aforementioned points.

<sup>12</sup> As a black man who has worked with underserved youth of color for over six years, I often find myself concerned for them in the same way a parent would show concern for their child. When Eric Garner was assassinated, my anguish was a combination of fear for myself, my peers and the young men and women I serve on a daily basis, especially those who are already court involved.

<sup>13</sup> This line points out the irony of a gesture that suggests a person is surrendering. This idea inspired a song called *Hands Up* that I co-wrote with an artist named Shea Face. During the chorus I say "*Hands up, hands down, in my pockets, on the ground - cause no matter what you do in the eyes of the oppressor, you pose as a threat, regardless of the gesture.*"

A step away from fighting back whatever the cost is

Whomever your boss is, rebellious lawless  
Could fill this page with words it'll never evolve him<sup>14</sup>  
America the melting pot, hell in the cauldron  
Not much has changed shit is very appalling

No 'excelling and balling from these elegant baldwins  
Instead I've been balling tears, several falling hairs<sup>15</sup>  
Whatever my call is, my celly is on ring^  
Cause my people still dying, and it's very alarming

Chs



James "SoSoon" Gantt is a New York City Hip-Hop artist, producer, scholar and educator. The moniker *SoSoon*, an acronym for Sound Of Something Qut Of Nothing represents the heart of Hip-Hop culture which was developed by people who had no access to outlets for creative expression. James obtained his bachelors of arts in September of 2015 from Goddard College where he unveiled portions of his project *SOONY* (Sound Of Old New York) as part of his senior presentation. According to James, "the goal of *SOONY* is to bring attention to the history of New York and the positive contributions of blacks throughout its development." [SOONY is currently available on all major digital streaming sites and stores.](#) The

album will be supplemented by a book detailing the inspiration, process and meaning behind each of the eleven songs from the album, making for an innovative experience that is rarely seen in music.

<sup>14</sup> This and the previous line is a message to any officers whose commanders believe that force, violence and/or intimidation tactics are good policing tactics. It's also my way of saying that as much as I'd like to believe that art educates and heals people, this is not the case for everyone.

<sup>15</sup> In this stanza, I suggest that I'm spending more time in fear for my life than I spend using my words, or my elegant (James) Baldwin's to help me pursue greatness.

James is currently the After School Program Coordinator at [\*Reel Works Teen Filmmaking\*](#), where his primary goal is helping students obtain 21st Century skills that will directly transfer to their professional career choices after completing school.