



Biography of James Brown From the Chapter Essay by Ricky Vincent

The most important force in the change in black music from blues based to rhythm-based music was James Brown. Brown's 50-plus year career began in 1952 and lasted until his passing on Christmas Day 2006. Brown was known as "Soul Brother Number One" by fans who appreciated his intensely passionate delivery, his professionalism, and his close community connections.

Born in a one-room shack in rural South Carolina, James Brown was raised by his aunts in Augusta, Georgia, who ran a brothel. There Brown learned first hand the nuances and necessities of the hustle, and Brown was soon on the streets of Augusta engaging in odd jobs, and eventually petty crimes and juvenile offenses. At the age of 16 Brown was caught stealing a coat from a car, and was given an *eight year* sentence.

Upon his release in 1952 after only 3 years Brown stayed with the family of local singer Bobby Byrd, and joined Byrd's group the Gospel Starlighters. Shortly after seeing the popularity of secular performance in the region, the group renamed itself the Famous Flames and performed a repertoire of rhythm and blues hits.

Brown developed an appealing raw style that was popular throughout the South at the time. His first recording is now legendary, as the urgently begging ballad "Please, Please, Please" has been a part of his show for 50 years. The James Brown tour became the most celebrated R&B show on the circuit, with a show stopping performance, crisp, clean band and a number of stage antics, giveaways, raffles, and visits from local celebrities.

In October 1962 Brown saw an opportunity to take his popularity nationwide, and put up his own money to record a concert at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Brown's raw display of soul was exactly the type of energy that was appreciated by his audiences and *Live at the Apollo* topped the album charts for most of 1963.

By 1965 James Brown was known as the "Hardest working Man in Show Business" and engineered a new recording deal with King records. Brown's first recording on his own terms was "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," a choppy rhythmic dance machine that worked perfectly with his aggressive, punchy singing style. The jerky rhythm was unfamiliar to most American music fans because Brown was pushing "the one" in the rhythm like no other Western music had. A heavy pulse on the downbeat – "the one" -- was unfamiliar to Western music audiences, and Brown's breakthrough developed the original funk groove. The song elevated Brown's status even further, and accessible yet highly rhythmic singles followed such as "I Got You (I Feel Good)" and "Cold Sweat" shortly afterward.

By this time the Civil Rights Movement was growing more confrontational and bitter, yet Brown did not shy away from it. James Brown was indirectly involved in the first "Black Power" march. In the summer of 1966 James Meredith, the first black person to integrate Mississippi State in 1962

announced his one man “march against fear” across the state. On the second day of his trek, Meredith was shot by a sniper and wounded. The entire apparatus of the Civil Rights Movement came to Meredith’s aid, and vowed to finish the march for him. To begin the march, Brown played a benefit concert in Tupelo, Mississippi, and went to visit Meredith in support of him. The march would become known as the first “Black Power” march, because Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader Stokely Carmichael introduced the phrase to excited marchers along the route.

Shortly afterward, Brown wrote the first of his message songs, “Don’t Be a Dropout,” and followed it with “Get it Together,” and “Money Won’t Change You” within months. The rugged grooves and piercing screams of Brown became a trademark of the urgency and prideful presentation of the black man in full awakening.

James Brown’s concerts were often meeting places for activists and organizers as well as celebrities and hangers on. Brown heard firsthand the issues that were at the forefront of the “Black Revolution” taking place and Brown responded with his same direct talk to the black militants that he gave to his label owners and civic leaders up to and including his connections in the White House.

In 1968 James Brown was at the center of a conflagration that swept the country. On April 4th, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Brown had a scheduled concert the next night at the Boston Garden, and through some tense negotiations agreed to have the concert televised locally to keep blacks from exploding on the streets of downtown Boston. Brown then went across the country speaking on radio and television with pleas to keep the peace and to “learn, don’t burn.”

Brown had the credibility to reach the angry masses on the streets after Dr. King’s death. Unlike most mainstream black celebrities, James Brown was unafraid of the phrase “Black Power.” He saw it as part of a sound business model of self-help, when others feared it would represent black militant aggression. But not everyone understood Brown’s motives. That summer of 1968 Brown volunteered to take his band to Vietnam to perform for the troops. Shunned by the anti-war movement, Brown was undaunted, his patriotism trumping (or defining) his political affiliations.

Upon his return from Vietnam Brown found himself at odds with many of his politically progressive supporters. Brown responded with the boldest statement of black pride ever recorded “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud).” Into the chaos of war protests, assassinations, riots and national soul searching, Brown had emerged triumphant. Recorded in August, and released in September, “Say It Loud” was the number one R&B song on the radio in October when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fist-gloves at the Mexico City Olympic Games.

Like the aftermath for Smith and Carlos, Brown found himself shunned by the mainstream pop apparatus after “Say it Loud.” Despite its uplifting message, the song was also seen as dangerous. His records were no longer heard on pop radio, and he would no longer be invited on pop showcases. “That song cost me a lot of my crossover audience,” Brown recalled. “I don’t regret recording it though... It was badly needed at the time. It helped Afro-Americans in general, and the dark-skinned man in particular. I’m proud of that.” “Say It Loud” would be Brown’s last top 10 pop hit for 18 years (Until “Living In America” in 1986).

Undeterred, Brown developed a stronger approach to the rhythm in his music. His audience was now almost exclusively black, wearing afros and raising their fists to give "Power to the People." Brown's post "Say it Loud" period produced some of the greatest groove music ever recorded: "Ain't It Funky Now," "The Funky Drummer," "Mother Popcorn," "Give it Up or Turn it Loose" were burning up dancefloors worldwide. "I was hearing everything, even the guitars, like they were drums," Brown recalled of that time. James Brown was singlehandedly transforming American popular music from a sound that was *melody* based, into a sound that was *rhythm* based.