

2009

Brown, James

Monica Berger

CUNY New York City College of Technology

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Berger, Monica. "Brown, James." Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. Oxford African American Studies Center, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0005/e0182> (accessed Thu Oct 01 18:26:04 EDT 2015).

This Book Chapter or Section is brought to you for free and open access by the New York City College of Technology at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Citation:

Berger, Monica. "Brown, James." *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Ed. Paul Finkelman. Oxford African American Studies Center, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/article/opr/t0005/e0182> (accessed Thu Oct 01 18:26:04 EDT 2015).

Brown, James

By: Berger, Monica

(b. 3 May 1933; d. 25 December 2006),

singer, songwriter, and bandleader. Born in Barnwell, South Carolina, to Joe Brown (né Gardner), a turpentine worker, and Susan Behlings, James Brown experienced extreme poverty in early childhood. His mother left the family when Brown was four. When he was six, he was sent to Augusta, Georgia, to live with an aunt who ran a brothel. In addition to picking cotton and shining shoes, the young Brown earned money by tap-dancing for World War II troops and by singing in talent contests.

As a teenager Brown broke into a car to steal a coat and was sentenced to eight to sixteen years in prison. He served three years and was released in 1953. He then sang in a doo-wop and gospel ensemble headed by Bobby Byrd. Brown soon emerged as the lead singer, and the band, the Fabulous Flames, wowed audiences with their dancing, theatrics, and flawless performances. Brown maintained martial-style control over his bands throughout his career.

Brown's first success in recorded music was "Please, Please, Please" in 1956, and the band signed a contract with the Federal label of King Records. Syd Nathan, the owner of King, was skeptical about Brown's music but was consistently proven wrong. Brown's stage theatrics grew wilder and wilder. When Brown appeared close to collapse, an accompanist would cover him with a cape, an inspiration from the flamboyant wrestler Gorgeous George. Known widely as the "hardest-working man in show business," Brown cared deeply about his audiences. "Try Me" in 1958 was his first genuine hit. Lacking support from King Records, he paid for and oversaw the recording of *Live at the Apollo*. Released in 1963, it became one of the first albums by an African American to cross over and sell appreciably well to white audiences, and Brown experienced success performing before desegregated audiences.

Turning a new musical corner in 1965, the year of Malcolm X's assassination and the Watts Riot, Brown virtually invented what came to be known as "funk." The revolutionary song "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" had almost no chord changes, and the instruments and vocals focused entirely on rhythm. Brown employed grunts, moans, and screeches. The downbeat was on the first note ("on the one") to increase tension with other elements, such as scratchy guitar riffs. The hits of 1965 catapulted Brown to stardom.

In the evolution of Brown's political awareness, 1966 was a watershed year. He went public with his concerns for civil rights and came to be perceived as a leader in the black community. That year Brown welcomed Roy O. Wilkins of the NAACP onstage at the Apollo in Harlem. Brown visited the civil rights activist James Meredith after Meredith was attacked and performed a show for Meredith's supporters, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).



James Brown. R&B singer James Brown in performance.

Photofest

Ultimately, however, tensions arose between the moderates and the radicals in the civil rights movement, and Brown fell into the moderate camp. He was a black entrepreneur who owned a production company and three black-oriented radio stations. The following year he met with the radical H. Rap Brown, then head of SNCC. The two men could not see eye to eye. Nevertheless in 1968 James Brown publicly contributed to H. Rap Brown's defense fund. Brown's music became increasingly socially relevant. "Don't Be a Drop Out" highlighted a stay-in-school campaign that won Brown kudos from Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

On 4 April 1968, King was assassinated. The following day, on live television, Brown went onstage with the Boston mayor Kevin White to urge nonviolence. Brown then went to Washington, D.C., to quell rioting and was invited to the White House in appreciation. In June 1968, Brown toured Vietnam and wrote "America Is My Home," a patriotic song. Under pressure to take a more radical stand, Brown was accused of being an Uncle Tom. Yet in the same year he released "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," which has been described as an anthem for the Black Power movement and represented a radical shift in Brown's lyrics. In 1969 the title of an article in *Look* magazine asked, "Is This the Most Important Black Man in America?" Although "Say It Loud" gave Brown even greater importance in the black community, this bitter song may have cost him his white audience. He did not have another Top Ten hit until 1986.

Brown took several trips to Africa. In 1970 he met the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti. Brown had influenced Fela, who in turn influenced Brown's drummer Clyde Stubblefield and his bassist Bootsy Collins. Collins and other members of Brown's band achieved great success in the funk ensemble Parliament Funkadelic. Brown could not, however, consciously identify how African music became embedded in his own music.

Brown released "Get on the Good Foot" in 1972. The hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa contends that this was the first song that people break-danced to. The same year Brown endorsed Richard Nixon, whom Brown perceived as pro-black business, for president. Brown continued to have a string of hits from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, including "Get Up (I Feel like Being a) Sex Machine" (1970) and "Hot Pants" (1971), but he did not have another hit until "Living in America," from the movie *Rocky IV*, in 1986. His career, in other words, hardly recovered from the Nixon endorsement, and he had run-ins with the law, including a three-year term in jail.

Brown's performance style and dancing influenced Michael Jackson, Prince, and Mick Jagger. Sly and the Family Stone, the Temptations, and other soul groups incorporated funk, as did Miles Davis in fusion jazz. Hip hop and rap endlessly sampled Brown, and Kool Herc, widely considered the inventor of hip hop, credits Brown with providing the genre's foundation. "Funky Drummer" (1970) may be the most widely sampled beat in hip hop.

After Brown's son Teddy died in 1973, he took on the Reverend Al Sharpton as a protégé. When Brown died on Christmas Day 2006, Sharpton officiated at public and private memorial services, which celebrities and thousands of fans attended. Sharpton described Brown as an enigmatic figure. Driven by his ambitions, Brown saw himself as a "solo man," independent of others and uncompromising in his control of his image and his career.

[See also Hip Hop; Music; Rhythm and Blues; Soul Music; and *biographical entries on figures mentioned in this article.*]

Bibliography

Brown, James, with Bruce Tucker. *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002. One of three memoirs by Brown; the other two repeat much of the same narrative.

George, Nelson. *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989. A definitive text on the history of the black music industry.

Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. New York: Harper and Row, 1986. This book was reissued in 1999 and is considered a core text on the topic, connecting history to music; includes extensive bibliographic references.

Hirshey, Gerri. "Funk's Founding Father." *Rolling Stone*, 25 January 2007, pp. 40–44. A heartfelt obituary by a music journalist who knew Brown well.

Ramsey, Guthrie P., Jr. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. Music of the African Diaspora, vol. 7. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. An excellent book on the social history of black music. Ramsey offers many fresh insights and includes extensive bibliographic notes.

Vincent, Rickey. *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996. Focusing chiefly on music, rather than on African American history, Vincent writes in detail about how Brown was the creator of funk; includes extensive bibliographic references.