James Brown
(James Joseph Brown)
Heart Failure

“Please, Please, Please” (1956) became the first of my Top 10 R&B hits in the United States. “Night Train” upped the tempo, reflecting the performances that made Brown and his band a sensation. “When I saw him move, I was mesmerized,” said Michael Jackson. “I knew that’s what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, because of James Brown.”

Fittingly, the work that brought the Famous Flames mainstream recognition was Live At The Apollo (1962). King Records boss Syd Nathan—who judged “Please, Please, Please” a “piece of shit”—was unconvinced by the prospect of a live album, obliging Brown to finance it himself. The result reached No. 2 in Billboard and remained on the chart for a year. “He didn’t cross over,” noted the Reverend Jesse Jackson, “Whites crossed over to him.”

Ensuing hits found Brown and his band stretching R&B’s limits to create funk. Beginning with 1965’s playful “Papa’s Got A Brand New Bag,” they stripped it to the bone for 1967’s “Cold Sweat.” From the dance floor drama of R&B to the mechanical beats of electronica, its impact still reverberates today.

Brown utilized his success to become a powerful advocate of black equality. “For him to sing ‘I’m Black And I’m Proud’ at that time,” said Jesse Jackson, “was an act of defiance that became part of our culture.”

The revolution continued into the 1970s with—thanks to teenage prodigy Bootsy Collins—added bass. “Mr Brown is the godfather of pure rhythm, who lived in a land of pure groove,” said Bootsy, later a similarly pivotal influence with George Clinton. “I’m nobody...
but his son along with countless other musicians. “Those musicians included Aerosmith, who covered 1969’s “Mother Popcorn (You Got To Have A Mother For Me),” and everyone who heard 1970’s “Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine.”

Alongside Sly Stone and Curtis Mayfield, Brown used funk to express the energy and rage of Black America in the 1970s. Hits like “Get Up, Get Into It, Get Involved,” “Soul Power,” “King Heroin,” “Talking Loud And Saying Nothing,” and “Funky President (People It’s Bad),” and albums like 1975’s Back To Caïsar and 1976’s The Payback, paved the way for hip hop. “He was not only the godfather of soul,” said Ice Cube, “but the godfather of funk and rap.”

In the mid-1970s, though, his position wavered. Overwhelmed by disco, dabbling with the drugs he had always warned against, and pursued by tax authorities, Brown had his last Top 10 hit for almost a decade with 1976’s “Get Up Offa That Thing.”

He remained a formidable live attraction, notorious for fining his band for anything from missed cues to badly shined shoes. In 1985, he returned to the Top 10 with “Living In America” and capitalized on the burgeoning hip hop scene with 1986’s much-sampled “In The Jungle Groove.”

Unfortunately, he became equally well-known for drug-fueled skirmishes with the police and domestic strife, leading to further time behind bars. “If you’re going to be big and popular,” he conceded, “You’re going to have to take the fall if there is a fall to be taken.” These activities, coupled with unceasing touring, took their toll. “He hates doctors,” said his manager after Brown confirmed he had diabetes. In 2002, he started in the short film Beat The Devil, in which he negotiated with the Devil (Gary Oldman) to beat the aging process.

Nonetheless, Brown refused to retire. “What would I do?” he asked after treatment for cancer. “I made my name as a person that is helping. I’m like the Moses in the music business.” However, hospitalized for pneumonia in 2006, he succumbed to congestive heart failure on December 25, “I am Brown’s family and friends,” said President Bush, “in our thoughts and prayers this Christmas.” Brown was seventy-three.

Driven from his Georgia home by activist Al Sharpton, Brown’s body was brought to the Apollo Theater in Harlem—scene of his 1962 triumph—in a horse-drawn carriage. Thousands paid their respects, as they did at another service in Augusta. At the James Brown Arena, Michael Jackson paid tribute: “Words cannot adequately express the love and respect that I will always have for Mr. Brown. There has not been, and will never be, another like him.” But family disputes kept him above ground in a gold casket for several months until his resting place in South Carolina was finally decided.

“I want to be remembered,” he told Rolling Stone in 1998, “as a man that... lived so well. Sometimes it looked like in the early days I was madness. It was just concern... If they’re human beings, people will make mistakes. I’ve been there.”

“Was a work of art,” said Aretha Franklin. “He was as valuable and as rare as any Rembrandt or Picasso.”

ABOVE James Brown lying in repose during a public viewing at the Apollo Theater on December 28, 2006, in New York City.


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