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Home Page

About the GBC

Reading List

Previous Selections

New Releases

Coming Soon

Movies

Reading Guides

Black Book Bargains!

Fiction

E-mail Us

The GBC Store

December 2006

James Brown—'Godfather of Soul'—Dies at 73 by Jamie Walker



Atlanta, GA—James Brown, the legendary 'Godfather of Soul,' made his transition at Emory Crawford Long Hospital early Christmas morning after being hospitalized with pneumonia. Brown was rushed to the hospital on Saturday, December 24, 2006. According to his agent, Frank Copsidas of Intrigue Music, Brown died of heart failure. He was 73.

"[Brown] was dramatic to the end—dying on Christmas Day," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a friend of Brown's since 1955. "Almost a dramatic, poetic moment. He'll be all over the news all over the world today. He would have it no other way."

James Joe Brown, Jr. was actually born in Barnwell, South Carolina on May 3rd, 1933. That year was not only the beginning of the decline of the Harlem Renaissance, but it was also a crucial period in American history when millions of families were sent soaring into homelessness and unemployment due to the Great Depression.

James' father, Garner Brown, struggled to raise his son after splitting from James' mother, Susie Behlings Brown, when the child was four. Garner moved his son to Augusta, Georgia to live with

relatives after experiencing economic hardship in South Carolina. Soon after he arrived in Augusta with his son, Garner left James to be raised by family members, and even though James "never lived with his father again," Garner still came around frequently to be in the company of his relatives.

James' younger years were quite troubling after his father left. To escape the monotony (and the sense of "loss" he suffered after his father abandoned him), James channeled his energies into his music. At a very early age, for instance, James learned to play the harmonica, the piano, and drums. In his pre-teens, he started sweeping the floors of Trinity Baptist Church—partly in a quest to practice on the piano and imitate all of the sounds he heard when no one was around.

James won first prize at the Lenox Theater in Augusta, Georgia when he was eleven years old for singing, "So Long." Even in his early years, James possessed a spirit of resistance and was determined to beat the odds by immersing himself in his music.

Brown's teen years, however, were even more troubling, as he began to enter a life of petty crime in a quest to survive the mean streets of his childhood. He spent his sixteenth birthday in jail, after being arrested for breaking and entering into a car.

In an attempt to escape the loneliness and quell his frustrations while in jail, James turned his eye again to music and began to devote seriously to the art form. It was in jail, for instance, that James met gospel singer Bobby Byrd, who is most credited with having launched Brown's musical career.



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Byrd's influence on Brown is monumental. After helping the young teen to get released from prison, Byrd invited Brown to live with him in his own home and inspired Brown to join his gospel group, the Gospel Starlighters.

The Stalighters later changed their name to the Famous Flames in the mid 1950s after sensing that R&B was influencing the musical scene and taking gospel music in an entirely different direction.

It was their soulful R&B hit "Please Please Please" that sent James Brown and the Famous Flames soaring to the top of the charts in 1956.

When Brown experienced his big breakthrough with his 1963 *Live at the Apollo, Vol. 1* collection, everyone knew that a star had been born. James Brown's funky music, hip lyrics, "flashy footwork," and soulful renditions, which protruded from his raspy voice, were unmatched.

It must be noted that James Brown was loved all around the world. From Africa to Japan, he taught us the true meaning of "funk" and what it means to be "super bad."

Brown inspired the likes of such artists as Michael Jackson, Prince, Public Enemy, Mick Jagger, and David Bowie. With songs like "Living in America," "I Feel Good," "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine)," and "The Big Pay Back," Brown inspired millions.

His hits from the late 1960s like "Say It Loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud," which topped the charts during the height of the Civil Rights-Black Arts and Black Power Movements, inspired a generation to resist racism, white supremacy, stereotypes about Black beauty, and to stand tall in the face of adversity. In many ways, "Say It Loud!" became "a Civil Rights anthem," as it was heard from coast to coast, emblazoned on t-shirts and buttons in inner cities throughout the country, and uttered from the lips of young Black brothers and sisters who were leading the movement toward justice and peace.

With *Ain't It Funky* (1970), *Hot Pants* (1971), *Get on the Good Foot* (1972), *Get Up Offa That Thing* (1976), and countless other albums, James Brown infused within his music a true funkified art form that had folk in project basements, live auditoriums, and living rooms around the world bougalooing to the jerk, the four corners, the skate, and the bump, as they imitated the likes of a genius whose fancy footwork sent their bodies into a passionate, soulful craze.

"[James Brown] made soul music world music," the Rev. Al Sharpton said after learning of the singer's passing. "What James Brown was to music—in terms of soul and hip-hop, rap, all of that—is what Bach was to classical music. This is a guy who literally changed the music industry. He put everybody on a different beat, a different style of music. He pioneered it."

Brown pioneered a prodigious art form, but never lost his roots while doing so. One remembers, for instance, his classic song written to Santa Claus, in which he pleads with Claus to never forget the children in the inner city whose Christmas "in the ghetto" is never quite the same as a Christmas spent in the suburbs.

If one can hardly forget Brown's inspiring message to the youth, they can certainly never forget his stimulating visuals: his tight, 'hot pants,' his sweaty face drenched in make-up, or his permed hair-do that seemed to always remain in place—even while he performed countless dramatic acts on stage.

Who can forget, for instance, James' classic act, whereby he falls to his knees on stage, his microphone still in his hand, as he croons soulful lyrics to his mesmerized audience—all the while sweatin' blues, funk, and soul—while his band members crowded around him, draping a shiny, satin-like cape around his shoulders before he jumped back up to do it all over again?

Brown was a true entertainer, powerful for his ability to evoke a spirited call and response from his audience, and, for this, he was often imitated. Everyone from comedians like Eddie Murphy to U.S. Figure Skaters, who "shadow skated" beautifully to such songs like "This is a Man's World," celebrated the paragon of excellence that was Brown.

"People already know his history," said Brown's friend Charles Bobbit who was present with Brown when he was rushed to the hospital. "But I would like for them to know [that] he was a man who preached love from the stage."

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Bobbitt claims he didn't want to believe Brown, when moments before he drew his last breath, he announced, "I'm going away tonight."

But even though Brown left us in the physical form, his spirit lives on.

Much like legendary singer, Ray Charles, who also died at 73, just two years before 'the Godfather of Soul' made his transition, James Brown's musical and professional career was inspiring, to say the least. More than 100 of his songs topped the R&B Charts, and he received several notable awards, including the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (1992); the Rhythm & Blues Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award (1993); and the Kennedy Center Honor (2003). He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and continued to give sold-out concerts well into his late 60s and early 70s.

Brown's later years, however, began to stumble into a downward spiral, as his arrests for drugs, alcohol, and weapons charges, including domestic violence charges, sent him in and out of jail. Numerous calls to "Free James Brown" ensued after his subsequent arrests.

Coupled with battling diabetes, Brown's "circulations problems" and admittance in and out of jail were detrimental to his health. Indeed, Brown was human, but he was not without his own faults.

A true Taurus, Brown proved that with his over fifty years of innovative and soulful music, he not only was "the hardest working man in show business," but he was also one of the most determined to leave his fans with an unforgettable impression.

"[James Brown] was an emancipator," entertainer Little Richard told MSNBC. "He was an originator. Rap music, all that stuff came from James Brown."

Rapper Chuck D of Public Enemy agrees: "To this day, there has been no one near as funky. No one's coming even close."

James Brown truly inspired and conjured the spirit of displaced Africans around the world, who refused to see themselves as victims or "outsiders" in what author James Baldwin has classified as "a strange land." His music inspired all human beings to triumph over adversity and to get in touch with the living soul that resides deep within them. We thank James Brown for his genius and we also thank him for giving us all a funky good time.

Brown is survived by his fourth wife, Tomi Rae Hynie, one of his backup singers, and at least four children — two daughters and sons Daryl and James Brown II, Copsidas said. Funeral arrangements are pending.

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