

James Brown, one of the greats of post-war American popular music

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Last month saw the passing of James Brown, a giant of American rhythm and blues and a key initiator of the soul, funk and rap music genres. Brown was admitted to an Atlanta hospital on December 24 and died, aged 73, on Christmas morning from congestive heart failure caused by pneumonia.

Brown had various self-titled nicknames—"The Godfather of Soul," "The Hardest Working Man in Show Business" and "Mr Dynamite"—and legions of fans in North America and throughout the world. Up to 10,000 paid their respects at Harlem's Apollo Theatre where his body lay in state on December 28, and more than 8,500 attended a memorial service two days later in Augusta, Georgia.

While some may cite Ray Charles, Bobby Bland or Sam Cooke as equally important figures in the early development of soul music, there are few who would deny Brown's overall impact on contemporary music in the past 50 years.

Brown's performances were charismatic and flamboyant. Along with hard-driving rhythms and tightly choreographed movements by his musicians and backup singers, were Brown's feverish, gospel call-and-response audience interaction and his electric dance routines. At his peak, he seemed to move effortlessly through a series of dance steps—the camel walk, the mashed potato, the popcorn—sliding from one side of the stage to the other. One minute he'd be singing on his knees, the next he'd be leaping from the piano to do the splits—a self-confident explosion of pent-up energy, emotion and raw musical power.

His shows generally concluded with a feigned fainting attack in which Brown would collapse, be draped in a satin cape and helped off stage by other band members only to return within seconds to continue the song with even greater passion.

Larger-than-life figures like Brown—his egocentric showmanship, pompadour hairstyles and flashy costumes—are hardly new in the world of popular entertainment. Brown's persona, however, was shaped by his deeply oppressed and poverty-stricken early life, the demands of the burgeoning but cut-throat popular music industry and the social and political changes that gripped America in the 1950s and 1960s.

Born in a tiny one-room shack in Barnwell, South Carolina, during the Depression, Brown was raised by his aunt from the age of six after his poverty-stricken father moved to Georgia for work in local turpentine camps. Brown's aunt ran a brothel in Twigg Street, Augusta, and the young boy was expected to help raise money to keep the establishment going.

Such was the poverty that Brown was sent home from school on one occasion for wearing recycled potato sacks. Brown hinted at his harsh upbringing in "Papa Don't Take No Mess"—"Papa didn't cuss, he didn't raise a whole lot of fuss/But when we did wrong, Papa beat the hell out of us."

Brown picked cotton, polished shoes and even street-danced for soldiers for money at an early age. Not surprisingly, his hustling led him to petty crime, and he was sentenced to eight years in a Georgia juvenile detention

centre for burglary. During this time, he formed a gospel singing group and met young musician Bobby Byrd, whose family helped get him an early release in 1952.

Brown tried his hand at professional boxing and baseball before joining The Gospel Starlighters, a singing group, and then Bobby Byrd's secular rhythm and blues group, the Avons. It later became the Famous Flames, with Brown as its featured performer and Byrd on piano.

Brown's early influences were rich and varied—from firebrand preachers, minstrel shows and circus entertainers to gospel music and big-band jazz. Rhythm and blues musicians such as Louis Jordan, Big Joe Turner, the Moonglows and Hank Ballard had an obvious impact. In fact, Brown immersed himself in the rich and varied popular music scene, which began to develop new forms and new audiences in the post-World War II boom years.

Prior to the mid-1950s, most Southern rhythm and blues musicians were largely unknown to most Americans and were forced to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence on the "chitlin circuit." Some of the better performers had deals with small local recording companies, but distribution of this extraordinary music was limited. The explosion of rock-n-roll and the mass youth music industry, which followed, changed all this. For the first time in a generation, or perhaps ever, millions of young people from the working class in the early 1950s had spare cash for records and were looking for music that expressed their growing self-confidence and aspirations.

Brown's group mainly performed songs popular with Southern black audiences—rhythm and blues by Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters, the Clovers and others—along with material by rock-n-rollers such as Little Richard.

Brown, who never learned to read music, began developing his own unique and electrifying style, aiming to break out of the Southern club circuits and reach black audience in America's industrial north. As he later commented, "Where I grew up there was no way out, no avenue of escape, so you had to make a way. Mine was to create JAMES BROWN."

His 1956 recording "Please, Please, Please" [1] was virtually a one-worrier, but Brown's vocal delivery—crying, begging, shouting, screaming about his lost love—had an extraordinary intensity. The song climbed to number 5 on the rhythm and blues charts and eventually sold a million copies.

"Try Me," Brown's first number 1 hit, was released in 1958 and was followed by "I'll Go Crazy," "Think," "Bewildered," "I Don't Mind" and numerous other recordings for King Records. These were groundbreaking and constituted key foundations in the emerging soul music genre, influencing figures like Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett.

Brown's record sales soon began reaching global audiences. This occurred primarily through his *Live at the Apollo Vol.1* album, which was recorded on October 24, 1962, at Harlem's Apollo Theatre during the height of the Cuban missile crisis.

King Records wasn't interested and forced Brown, who often clashed with the company, to finance the recording himself. The album, which contains an amazing 11-minute rendition of "Lost Somehow," rose to number 2 on the Billboard album chart and is one of the most exciting live rhythm and blues albums ever made.

Brown's music began to include faster and more complex rhythmic elements, interspersed with brilliant musical punctuation from his bands' brass section and improvised declamations from the singer. In contrast to most other rhythm and blues recordings, his emphasis was on the first and third beats—the ubiquitous "one" that Brown constantly stressed with his musicians came to characterise his distinctive sound.

"Night Train" (1961) was perhaps one of the early examples of this development, which, along with the more developed "Out of Sight" (1964) [2], laid the foundations for "Papa's Gotta Brand New Bag" (1965) [3] and what later became funk music.

Brown's financial success and popularity continued with "I Got You (I Feel Good)" (1965) and "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" (1966) [4], one of the greatest soul ballads and most performed and recorded of all Brown's songs. Other hit singles included "Cold Sweat" (1967), "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nothing" (1972) and "Doing It to Death" (1973).

While Brown's music was a collaborative product—with figures such as Bobby Byrd, Jimmy Nolen, Maceo Parker, Pee Wee Ellis, Fred Wesley and Bootsy Collins playing crucial roles in its evolving sound—the discipline he imposed on his band was legendary. Musicians or back-up singers were fined if they missed a beat or were off-key or when their onstage costumes were not considered up to scratch. Such were the singer's demands—many of them unpredictable—that in 1967 his entire band quit in protest.

Brown was determined never to return to the poverty of his early years and maintained a blistering tour schedule throughout most of his career, performing almost every day for years on end across America and internationally.

Social explosions in the US

Brown's meteoric rise in the music industry and his passion and irrepressible self-confidence were intimately bound up with the rapidly changing social and political situation in the US—the growing civil rights movement, mounting opposition to the Vietnam War and the developing militancy of the American working class.

The infamous bashing of Nat King Cole during a Southern concert gives some indication of the racist hostility that prevailed when Brown began his recording career. Cole was physically assaulted on stage by five men during a performance before a white audience in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1956. One of those behind the attack had publicly denounced jazz and rock-n-roll as an attempt to "mongrelise America" and force "Negro culture" on the South.

While it was the last concert Cole ever performed in his home state, increasing numbers of people—black and white—were not prepared to tolerate these sorts of outrages any longer.

Brown responded with enthusiasm to the growing civil rights movement and was among the first performers to force an end to the segregation of concert audiences in the South. He donated money and held fund-raising benefits for civil rights organisations, including the March Against Fear in 1966 in support of James Meredith who fought to integrate the University of Mississippi and was gunned down by white racists.

Like millions of ordinary Americans, Brown was shocked by the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 and the riots that erupted in its wake. There is little indication, however, that Brown

understood much about the underlying source of racist oppression and the class interests it served. Moreover, as the political and social crisis intensified, Brown offered his assistance to the powers that be, rather than challenging them.

In Boston, Brown had considered cancelling a scheduled show the day after King's murder, but after discussion with city officials decided to go ahead with the concert and have it televised in an effort to help dissipate tensions and prevent the eruption of rioting in the city.

Black radicals denounced Brown's intervention and his appeals for calm, but praised him later that year when he released "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."

The record, which was to become something of a black nationalist anthem, reflected the determination of millions of African-Americans to oppose their treatment as second-class citizens. At the same time, however, it diverted attention away from the fact that the central division in American society was not race but class.

Unravelling the relationship between the development of Brown's music and his political attitudes is a complex business. Brown, after all, was a not a politician but an artist from a deeply deprived background who was responding instinctively to a developing social crisis. It is not clear how much he understood the political events and processes that were taking place around him—his street-wise, pragmatic outlook was simply not equal to the task. His naïve egoism combined with a large degree of wishful thinking and an opportunist streak made him an easy target for a range of politicians—Democrat and Republican alike.

In the aftermath of his Boston intervention, Brown was feted by the Johnson administration. With support from Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey, he toured schools and used his song "Don't Be a Dropout" to promote education and scholarship programmes. The singer was no doubt led to believe that he had influence and was "making a difference." All this appealed to Brown, who regarded himself as a self-made man and believed his own success demonstrated that anyone with enough determination and energy could "make it."

After Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968, Brown, who was purchasing radio stations and expanding other businesses at the time, decided to swing his support behind the Republicans, performing at the presidential inaugural. When the Nixon administration introduced its "affirmative action" policies, which assisted black-owned businesses, in 1969, Brown embraced them wholeheartedly and supported Nixon's reelection campaign in 1972. He was denounced as "James Brown—Nixon's Clown" by former fans outside some of his concerts.

Affirmative action, of course, had nothing to do with ending poverty or racial oppression but was aimed at cultivating a black middle class to defend the status quo. In fact, the Nixon White House openly referred to its programme as "black capitalism."

Brown went on to hire black preacher and nationalist demagogue Al Sharpton as his manager and recorded various songs promoting illusions in black-owned enterprises. Records such as "Funky President" (1974) were typical. It declared, "Let's get together and get some land/Raise our food like the man/Save our money like the Mob/Put up a factory and own the job."

Whether Brown sincerely believed such a perspective would solve the problems facing masses of African-Americans is not clear. Whatever the case, the song had an obvious appeal to aspiring petty bourgeois elements. Al Sharpton summed up their attitudes in his oration at Brown's funeral service. "When he [Brown] started singing, we were sitting in the back of the bus," he declared. "When he stopped singing, we were flying Lear jets."

Sharpton's reference is to his own particular milieu, which, under the banner of black capitalism, has enriched itself over the past 30 years at the direct expense of the overwhelming majority of black Americans.

Later years

The mid-1970s were difficult years for Brown, who confronted a series of artistic, financial and personal problems. In 1973, his 19-year-old son was killed in a car accident and his second wife Dee Dee Jenkins left him, taking their two daughters. The Internal Revenue Service served him with a massive \$4.5 million bill for unpaid taxes, and the singer had to sell his private jets and other embellishments of financial success along with his three radio stations and other businesses.

Brown recorded a number of concerned songs about drug abuse (“King Heroin”) and other social problems but was being sidelined by disco music, which he later denounced as “all electronic sequencers and beats-per-minute.”

“The record companies loved disco because it was producer’s music,” he wrote in his autobiography, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*. “They didn’t have to worry about artists cooperating; machines can’t talk back and, unlike artists, they don’t have to be paid. What disco became was a lawyer’s recording; the attorneys were making records.”

Brown revived his career to some extent in 1980 with a cameo appearance as a soul preacher in *The Blues Brothers* movie, which introduced him to a new generation and led to appearances in the movies *Doctor Detroit* and *Rocky IV*, as well as a hit single, “Living in America.”

In the 1990s, he went on to collaborate with emerging rap and hip-hop artists who were “sampling” musical phrases and lines from his early hits and reconstructing them for their own records. Brown is, in fact, the most sampled figure in contemporary music history.

Personal problems, however, continued to plague Brown during the last two decades of his life. There was drug abuse, brushes with the law and marriage problems, all seized upon by an avaricious media ever ready to scandalise the singer and his troubled life.

These problems no doubt took a psychological toll, yet Brown continued performing wherever he could, constantly making new plans and investing all his energies in each public appearance, right up until his death. Before being admitted to hospital, he was preparing for three scheduled appearances, including a New Year’s Eve performance at B.B King’s Blues Club and Grill in New York.

To the end, Brown never diluted his earthy sound or toned down his public persona. As one music critic remarked last year, Brown’s “trauma, his confusion, his desperation; those are worn on the outside of his art, on the outside of his shivering and crawling and pleading onstage. James Brown, you see, is not only the kid from Twiggs Street [brothel] who wouldn’t go away. He’s the one who wouldn’t pretend he wasn’t from Twiggs Street.”

Not unexpectedly, the film rights to Brown’s remarkable life story have already been sold, with Spike Lee tapped as director and negotiations underway over who should star. If Lee’s previous work and the recent films on Johnny Cash and Ray Charles are anything to go by, the real conditions and social complexities that shaped Brown’s art and personal life are likely to be crudely rendered or glossed over with banalities and political clichés.

Brown remains a major figure in post-war American popular music, and while many have attempted to imitate him, no one has been able to recreate or generate the intense emotional power, energy and raw artistic honesty of his best work.

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For those looking for a selection of Brown’s best recordings, the following provide a good start:

Live at the Apollo Vol 1 (1963), Polydor

Roots of a Revolution (1984), Polydor two-disc compilation

Startime (1991), Polydor four-disc compilation



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