

# Get On Up: The James Brown story

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*Directed by Tate Taylor; screenplay by Jez and John-Henry Butterworth*

“I started shining shoes at 3 cents, then went up to 5 cents, then 6 cents. I never did get up to a dime. I was 9 years old before I got a pair of underwear from a real store; all my clothes were made from sacks and things like that. But I knew I had to make it. I had the determination to go on, and my determination was to be somebody.”

With unfaltering ambition and energy, American pop singer James Brown (1933-2006) became one of the architects of soul music, pioneering the passage from early rhythm and blues to funk. Beginning in the 1950s, he performed relentlessly for six decades, at his peak playing up to 350 shows a year that showcased his many hits. His performance style was virtually unique: a pent-up explosion of emotion, dance moves and raw musical power. His many nicknames included “The Godfather of Soul,” “The Hardest Working Man in Show Business” and “Mr. Dynamite.”

Co-produced by Mick Jagger, Tate Taylor’s (*The Help*, 2011) biopic, *Get on Up*, attempts with considerable success to penetrate the James Brown phenomenon. As the singer, Chadwick Boseman (42) is mesmerizing.

The movie begins in 1988 when a very stoned, gun-toting Brown threatens a group of insurance agents renting a space in one of his buildings. It ends with the consequence of the episode: a reckless, high-speed chase of the singer by police across Georgia and South Carolina.

Seeking to locate Brown’s indefatigable drive and eventual rise to stardom in his deprived childhood, the filmmakers cut numerous times to scenes from his formative years. Brown was born in rural Barnwell, South Carolina, at the height of the Great Depression, in extreme poverty.

At an early age, Brown’s mother Susie (Viola Davis) is forced against her will to abandon her son. After that, his Aunt Honey (Octavia Spencer), who runs a brothel, raises him in Augusta, Georgia, where his abusive father Joe (Lennie James) had moved to work local turpentine

camp. Joe is later drafted during World War II. The young James is expected to help raise money to keep Aunt Honey’s establishment going by hustling soldiers.

As an escape from his harsh reality, James turns to the drama of evangelism and Pentecostal gospel music. At the age of 16, he is arrested for stealing a suit and sentenced to 3 to 15 years in prison. (In a 2003 documentary film entitled *Soul Survivor: The James Brown Story*, Brown says, “I stole from the rich to give to the poor and me.”)

While incarcerated, Brown meets Bobby Byrd, an aspiring R&B singer and pianist, forming a friendship and musical partnership that proves to be the most important of his life. Another Georgian and a local celebrity, Little Richard (Brandon Smith), before his truly flamboyant days, persuades James to make a demo record. The recording brings his group, the “Famous Flames,” to the attention of Ben Bart (the flat-as-a-pancake Dan Aykroyd) and earns them a contract with Federal Records.

When “Please, Please, Please” is released as a single in 1956, the group’s name is changed from the “Famous Flames” to “James Brown and His Famous Flames,” which does not go down well with the other band members. The song is virtually a one-worder, but Brown’s delivery is unvarnished and disturbing.

As Brown’s fame and fortune soar, he comes into conflict with his musicians, and sometimes, with an iron fist, his women. (“I take it and I flip it. I go forward.”) In one scene, Brown tells his group that he hears all instruments like they are drums. The sax is a drum. The keyboard’s a drum. James Brown is a drum. (In the documentary, Brown states, “My music was keeping pace with the changes in society. We were demanding our rights now, civil rights and human rights.”)

Many of Brown’s most famed performances are spectacularly recreated in *Get On Up*: at the Apollo in 1962, which became a hit album; the 1964 T.A.M.I. show in Santa Monica, in which his legendary dance moves and dynamism blew the Rolling Stones—who followed his performance—out of the water; and the 1971 Paris concert, featuring three blockbuster numbers—“Get Up (I Feel Like

Being a Sex Machine,” “Super Bad,” and “Soul Power”). For examples of Brown’s performances, see: T.A.M.I Show, 1964; Ed Sullivan Show, 1966; Paris, 1967.

At the Apollo concert, James encounters his down-and-out mother Susie. It’s a moving scene, as the musician tightly reins in his emotions and responds to Susie’s tears: “There ain’t nothing to cry about. I’m James Brown.” After she leaves, James tells Bobby to make sure her needs are met.

The filmmakers also treat the April 1968 Boston Garden concert, in the immediate aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. When Mayor Kevin White (Jason Davis) wants to cancel the show, Brown refuses. As fans are mauled by police for jumping on stage, Brown tells the cops to back off. Rioting took place across the country and the authorities are acutely aware, as one official notes, that “anyone [like Brown] who can stop a riot can start one.”

(One account of the event claims that “[f]ollowing a long night of riots and fires in the predominantly black Roxbury and South End sections of the city, Boston’s young mayor, Kevin White, gave serious consideration to canceling an event that some feared would bring the same kind of violence into the city’s center. The racial component of those fears was very much on the surface of a city in which school integration and mandatory busing had played a major role in the recent mayoral election. Mayor White faced a politically impossible choice: anger black Bostonians by canceling Brown’s concert over transparently racial fears, or antagonize the law-and-order crowd by simply ignoring those fears.”)

At the core of *Get On Up* are Brown’s musical talents and untamed performance style. “You wanna know how hardworking I am?,” the film’s co-producer, Brian Grazer, remembers Brown saying. “Then he told me a story about how once he was dancing and he stepped on a nail on stage. The nail went right through his foot, bled through his shoe and he kept on going.”

Although the film is a bit messy and confusing in its transitions, a tremendous feeling for and appreciation of the singer animates the work, its cast and crew. The presentation of Brown’s early life, while indispensable in comprehending what drove the artist, is somewhat simplistically rendered, as is the portrayal of Brown’s USO-sponsored Vietnam tour. Certain events are rushed through, as though they might interrupt the film’s main focus—James Brown, transcendental performer.

In *Get On Up*, a great deal depends on the lead actor Boseman, who ably captures something important about

Brown’s outer *and* inner being. He eschews imitation. Physically, he is aided by choreographer Aakomon Jones—the fast-moving, gliding feet, the splits, the non-stop motion and jarring theatrics. Boseman’s look, with his “hair rising up to the Lord,” although not superficially resembling Brown’s, is convincing because the actor thoroughly inhabits his subject.

Without the self-consciousness that might hinder a more established star, Boseman plunges into his role and into the man, who claimed that his signature, primal “Ow!” scream was an expression of mental and physical pain, and whose recordings were described as [social] “movements” impacting both white and black audiences.

Brown was a product of the rural South, which witnessed some of the most abominable conditions during the Great Depression. Like numerous other white and black performers in the US who came from genuine poverty and made successes of themselves apparently by their own efforts, Brown developed a social outlook involving a form of intense individualism, allied to the claim that anyone could make it in America if he or she tried. In 1968, he campaigned for Richard Nixon for US president and performed at the latter’s inauguration. Brown embraced the slogan of “black capitalism” in one form or another. The US State Department wrote glowingly about his tours abroad (“He is living proof of what opportunity can do”).

Nonetheless, his persona and the strength of his performances gave expression to pain and outrage over the social conditions imposed on millions, as well as resilience and resistance. Brown’s stratospheric rise (“To the rafters, Mr. Brown, to the rafters”) in the music industry and his artistic innovation and irrepressible self-confidence, *whatever he made of them*, were intimately bound up with the rapidly changing social and political situation in the US in the late 1950s and into the 1960s—the mass struggle for civil rights, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the ongoing militancy of the working class. *Get On Up* grapples seriously with this larger-than-life personality.



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