



# *funk soul brother*

With a new James Brown biopic on the horizon, AIR looks at how the soul sensation made his name in the 1950s and '60s

Words: LARA BRUNT

**G**odfather of Soul, inventor of funk, grandfather of hip hop. In a career spanning six decades, James Brown acquired all these monikers and more. “In some respects he was the black Elvis because of his absolutely unparalleled popularity in the black community,” says Dr John Scannell, lecturer in media and music at Macquarie University in Sydney and author of *Icons of Pop: James Brown*.

Like Presley, Brown was a three-figure hitmaker, with 114 entries on Billboard’s R&B singles charts. Known as the hardest-working man in show business, he amassed 800 songs and toured relentlessly right up until his death on Christmas Day in 2006, aged 73. In the process, he became one of the greatest musical innovators of the 20th century. “The emphatic groove that emerged through funk really laid the foundations for what would become dance music,” says Scannell. “He is by far the most sampled artist in hip hop and dance music and I think he will remain so because his music was so danceable and so tight, emphatic and urgent.”

An undeniable legend, Brown was also a complicated, and often dangerous, man. “Brown’s whole life was marked by violence,” says Scannell. “Not to be an apologist, but he had such a rough upbringing; he was marked by that and it extended to most of his relationships.” He treated his band badly and his women even worse. As he himself once admitted: “I’ve got the Lord in one hand and the devil in the other. You never know where it’s going to come from.”

Born in South Carolina in 1933, Brown grew up during segregation and the Great Depression. “The local industry was mostly cotton and everybody worked in the fields,” says Fergus Mason, author of *Get Up: The Life of James Brown*. “His father scraped a living for a few years, but eventually decided to try

and get work in the cities.” Brown went to live with his great-aunt who ran a brothel near a railway in Augusta, Georgia. “I suppose that’s where you could say he started his entertainment career,” says Mason. With the onset of WWII, GIs were mobilised across the country. “There was a big craze for buck dancing [a foot-stomping folk dance]. Brown would dance beside the railway track and soldiers would throw coins out the train window at him.”

By the time he was 13, Brown had dropped out of school to pick cotton, shine shoes and do whatever he could to bring in some much-needed money. “Hustling was probably the best word for it,” says Mason. “It was a tough area, rapidly industrialising, with lots of transient labour coming in looking for entertainment, bars and probably his aunt’s brothel.”

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From quite a young age he was very charming and made money guiding customers to the local establishments.”

In 1949, aged 16, Brown landed himself in juvenile prison. “He was sentenced to four counts of two to four years consecutively for breaking into parked cars. He was lucky though, as the prison was aiming to rehabilitate offenders so they were allowed out sometimes to play sports, mostly baseball, against local high school teams,” says Mason. It was on one of these outings that he met Bobby Byrd, who would become a long-time collaborator. Byrd’s family helped secure Brown’s early release in 1952 and he joined his friend’s gospel group, the Gospel Starlighters, and began singing in and around Toccoa, Georgia.

“I think it was really gospel that had a tremendous influence on

Brown and his music,” says Scannell. “At the time, there was a divide in black music between the secular and the sacred.” Increasingly influenced by the secular hits of Hank Ballard and Fats Domino, outside of church the group was known as the Avons and eventually, the Famous Flames. Performing to black audiences in nightclubs in Georgia and South Carolina, they became a tightly knit ensemble and Brown honed his skills as a performer, incorporating spins, drops and theatrics into his act. “Lots of stage acts at the time were very conventional, basically standing in front of the microphones and bopping around a bit, whereas Brown was very flamboyant,” says Mason.

In 1955, the Flames recorded a demo of the song that would become *Please, Please, Please*, a gospel-tinged reworking of the old blues standard *Baby Please Don’t Go*. Their manager, Clint Brantley – who’d also managed Little Richard – circulated the recording to various labels. The group was signed with King Records, despite the objections of owner Syd Nathan, with whom Brown would have a prickly relationship over the years. *Please Please Please* was recut for official release in March 1956 and became a Top 10 R&B hit. Reflecting the speed with which Brown had asserted himself as the frontman, it was released as *James Brown & the Famous Flames*, much to the shock of his bandmates.

As tensions rose, Brown assembled a new set of musicians and backup singers. After a number of flops, Brown finally had another hit on his hands in 1959 with *Try Me*, which topped the R&B chart. A few months later, Brown and his new-look Flames debuted at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, New York. “To some extent, Brown had still been confined to the southern club circuit, as that’s where the people who were buying his records were. His reputation was leaking out beyond that area, but he was still a southern club singer – not at heart



but in practice. The Apollo made him national,” says Mason.

Billed as a place “where stars are born and legends are made”, the Apollo became famous in the mid-1930s for launching the careers of artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and later Billie Holiday, Diana Ross & The Supremes, and Marvin Gaye. “The Apollo was probably the centre of black music in America at the time, although the jazz scene was centred down south,” says Mason. “Brown knew his career would need to either crash or take off by that point – it couldn’t just carry along on the same track.” A string of hits followed, including Think, Night Train, Lost Someone, and Prisoner of Love.

Performing five or six nights a week, Brown’s soulful singing, exuberant dancing and pure showmanship left audiences in raptures. His saxophonist, Pee Wee Ellis, once said, “When you heard James Brown was coming to town, you stopped what you were doing and started saving your money.” “I think the intensity of his stage act was one of the reasons he wanted to release a live album,” says Scannell. “The way the songs segued into one another, the way he directed the dynamics of the performance, and his relationship with the audience just couldn’t be captured by singles.”

His record company, however, had other ideas. “Syd Nathan was one of the old independent record guys who were capitalising on the black market. They were important facilitators of getting the music out to a broader audience, but the relationships between these small labels and their artists were often pretty inequitable,” says Scannell. “I think Nathan had his idea of what would sell and Brown had his. Most black artists at the time were releasing singles because the fans could really only afford singles, so albums weren’t a consideration.”

Undeterred, on a single night – October 24, 1962 – Brown recorded a live concert album at the Apollo, which he financed himself. The



album, Live at the Apollo, proved Brown’s greatest commercial success yet, spending 66 weeks on the Billboard Top Pop Albums chart and peaking at number two. Record stores struggled to keep up with demand and radio DJs often played the album in its entirety. “It was one of the first albums that was played as a single performance and some radio stations just played it over and over again,” says Scannell. The album also firmly established Brown’s mainstream appeal. “Brown’s deepest desire was to be a crossover success,” he adds.

Brown cemented his popularity with a scorching performance in the TAMI Show, a live concert in Santa Monica that was released as a film in December 1964, famously upstaging the headline act, The Rolling Stones. Keith Richards later admitted that going onstage after Brown was the worst decision of their career.

The following year, Brown

ambiguous. As race riots enveloped the country following Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination in April 1968, he famously gave a televised concert in Boston the day after to calm things down – but only after haggling over his fee. A few months later, after pressure from activists to take a bigger stance on black issues, he recorded Say It Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud. Then in 1972, he surprised many by endorsing Republican politician Richard Nixon. “I think who he chose to get involved with politically was down to how much exposure he would get,” Scannell says.

Throughout the 1970s, Brown recorded several more hits, most notably Sex Machine and Get Up Offa That Thing, although the rise of disco saw his popularity wane. “I think a lot of the soul artists of the ‘60s were considered anachronistic in a way. By time it got the late ‘70s, early ‘80s, Brown still had his

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released Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag, often cited as the birth of funk. “In some respects this was the major mainstream indication of funk’s emergence, but you can hear elements of this in his earlier music,” says Scannell. “Having that emphatic drive on the first beat of the bar, when most popular music at the time emphasised the back beat, set up a new propulsive, urgent kind of rhythm that characterised funk.” The song won him his first Grammy and he followed up with Cold Sweat, often called the first true funk song.

Brown also began devoting more energy to social causes. In 1966, he recorded Don’t Be a Dropout, aimed at persuading the young black community to stay in school. His relationship with the Civil Rights movement was a bit more

entrenched long-term fans, but he was having a difficult period,” says Scannell. After becoming one of the first musicians inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986, he slowly descended into drug addiction and violence, eventually ending up back in prison. After being released on parole in 1991, he returned to the only thing he knew: the stage, touring intermittently for the rest of his life.

Since his passing, the soul icon’s legacy has continued to grow - and the upcoming biopic about his life promises to shed even more light on this most complicated of men. Directed by Tate Taylor, and starring Chadwick Boseman, the movie follows Brown through his turbulent childhood and his even more turbulent career.