

# James Brown Is Alive!

MATT STAUFFER



**WRITER'S COMMENT:** *On the first day of class Seth asked us what kind of music we like. I've always been a huge James Brown fan (anyone who can list what he had for dinner and call it a song is all right by me). That he had recently died helped me decide that I would find some way to write about him. But explaining his importance to poetry and orality was difficult. It was a case of knowing James Brown is an important figure, but not knowing how to explain it. The solution was simply to listen to music, and hear James Brown's influence, and hear what his influences were. People like Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Wilson Pickett, Heavy D and a bunch of others came up, and from there it was just a matter of searching out the right information to help connect those dots. Also, I'm a big fan of the word "eschew."*



—Matt Stauffer

**INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT:** *My most immediate reaction to Matt Stauffer's work in this essay was admiration for his ability to bridge disciplines, bringing together African American history, musicology, literary history, and close reading. As his instructor for English 4, I can see the way he integrates his reading in sound poetry and the theories of Walter Ong and Roland Barthes with his long-standing interest in funk, soul and hip-hop, the truly popular poetics of our era since the 1960s. His willingness to take seriously the 'get back'-s and 'hit me'-s of James Brown—sounds we usually hear but do not listen to—indeed enlivens our experience of the Godfather of Soul. Like his ideas, Matt's writing, it is important to note, is sophisticated. Matt's prose is always comfortable and presents deftly a wide range of information and analysis.*

—Seth J. Forrest, English Department



LONG BEFORE THE INTERNET, television, radio or even the printed word, societies existed orally. Information was transmitted not by digital packets, electronic signals or pigment-on-parchment, but by the voice. Since anything from grocery lists to battle plans had to be communicated orally, societies needed to devise a way for the information to stay memorable so the receiver of the voice would not forget what was said. For this purpose, simple rhymes and rhythms were implemented, and thus poetry in its simplest and most functional form was born. But once the written word was developed, oral societies evolved into literate ones, and the influence of the spoken word waned. Poetry remained, however, as an art rather than a necessity. For centuries, it existed on the printed page not as a tool but as entertainment. Poets aimed to please the mind and the eye through stylistic devices such as structure, assonance, alliteration, metaphor, diction, and imagery. Not until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did poets eschew what had become known as “traditional” poetry for more vocally-centered verse that accommodated or even focused on the spoken performance of a poem, rather than on the written version. Leading the charge in this return to orality—while certainly not the first to do so—was James Brown. Known primarily for his immeasurable influence on 20<sup>th</sup>-century music from soul and funk to rock and rap, Brown nevertheless had a major impact on orality and the vocal performance of language, synthesizing earlier jazz and Beat traditions as well as thousands-year-old African traditions into a unique sound that influenced both his peers and his successors.

A plethora of African American traditions—descended from ancient tribal cultures—can be found in the southern black church, with the building itself perpetuating the African American value of community and spirituality. Brown was no stranger to the church, as he writes in his autobiography that he went to “all the different churches” in rural Georgia where he grew up. In describing his experience at church Brown writes, “At the churches there was a lot of singing and handclapping and usually an organ and tambourines, and then the preacher would really get down. I liked that even more than the music” (152). Brown describes not just gospel music—which was certainly a huge influence on his own—but an entire experience. And this experience of “getting down” entailed, according to Brown, “screaming and yelling and stomping his foot and then he dropped to his knees. The people got into it with him, answering

him and shouting and clapping time” (152). This scene certainly corroborates the African American value of community, as everyone in church “got into it” with the preacher, so that those involved became equals and participants, rather than passive observers. This harks back thousands of years to West African griots—oral poets, storytellers, and musicians who performed for tribal audiences. An addition to this African tradition is the idea of call-and-response, a performance technique whereby the performer calls out to the audience, which then responds back, creating a symbiotic relationship that deconstructs the traditional notion of performer and observer, allowing all observers to become performers as well, and vice-versa.

Brown adopted the call-and-response technique and made extensive use of it throughout his career, certainly in live acts such as the seminal *Live at the Apollo* where he commands the audience, “Don’t just say ‘ow.’ Say ‘OW!’” to which the audience happily obliges. These instances of audience participation unfortunately cannot be done justice to on this page, but one would be wise to believe that Brown’s live performances were, not coincidentally, reminiscent of Southern black church services. But perhaps more peculiarly, Brown uses this call-and-response technique even on his recorded material. On the 1974 track “Doing It To Death,” Brown repeatedly gives commands and cues to his band while in the studio. In fact, the entire song is little more than Brown having a conversation with his bandmates, interrupted occasionally with the refrain “We’re gonna have a funky good time / We gotta take ya higher.” Brown seems to have taken the idea of call-and-response and, rather than use it to combine performer and audience, he has used it to create a dialogue among the performers—in this case, the band. Brown asks Fred to “take us higher. Fred! Fred! Fred!” and Fred Wesley dutifully responds by launching into a memorable trumpet solo.

This freewheeling, freestyle sensibility by Brown and his band was lifted as much from the jazz and Beat generations as it was from Brown’s Sundays in church. The main tenet of jazz is improvisation, of which Brown has plenty. The idea of improvisation dates back thousands of years, weaving all throughout African cultural history. In ancient African tribes, communities gathered in circles to play music, sing, and dance. These gatherings often developed into improvised dance and music battles, with participants freestyling dance moves, drum beats or vocal chatter. Jazz music extended these traditions into melodic and modal music,

which found their renaissance in the 1940s and '50s with the emergence of bebop. Musicians such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker experimented with improvised musicality.

The stylistic device of repetition is another important characteristic of African-based music, finding its way into the jazz of the '40s and '50s (Rose 30). Jazz of this era would often begin around a common theme, after which different players in a band would delve into improvised solos, only to have the entire band return to the repeated theme at the end. The writers of the Beat generation also appropriated African stylings into their work. Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, for example, made extensive use of repetition and improvisation in their work, most notably in Ginsberg's "Howl," which repeats but offers variation, and to which Ginsberg, in live performances, improvised changes. The Beat writers also had the benefit of using their voices in performance, something many of their instrumental jazz counterparts did not. This allowed them to continue the African aesthetic of using the voice as an instrument. African Studies scholar Tricia Rose quotes fellow cultural critic Mark Dery in her acknowledgement that "a wide range of vocal sounds intimately connected to tonal speech patterns, 'strong differences between the various registers of the voice, even emphasizing the *breaks* between them,' are deliberately cultivated in African and African-influenced musics" (30). Scat singers like Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughn popularized the use of the voice as an instrument in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Brown appropriated this vocal element, as well as the improvisation and repetition, into his work. In fact, Brown was using repetition as a vocal element as early as 1956, with the release of "Please, Please, Please," a recording that "established what was to become a stylistic trademark: insistent repetition of a single phrase (in this case consisting of the song's title) resulting in a kind of ecstatic trance" (Brackett 151). This stylistic trademark is apparent throughout Brown's career, as on "Doing It To Death," "Get Up Offa That Thing," "Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine," and others.

Manthia Diawara writes that "James Brown . . . uses his voice and vital power to imitate the language of his instruments, the trumpet and drums, to make his audiences understand better the appropriate discourse of our modern condition" (257). Brown's grunts, his "heys!" and "uhs!" and even his "alrights!" are more than simple noises with no meaning. They are summoning the ancestors, recalling and perpetuating a

time of African pride, harking back to the African griot storytellers, and accumulating and combining myriad African traditions into a unique sound. Brown's live performances are also notorious for their improvised nature—in Brown's biography, he recounts the recording of *Live at the Apollo* and the potentially detrimental screaming and cursing of an elderly woman beneath the microphone. Her profanity and ill-timed screams caused the audience to laugh during a slower, more serious song, and, fearing this would ruin the feel of the recording, Brown recalls, "[I] thought I had better try to fix it some kind of way so I started preaching . . . I stretched out the song, hoping we could get something we could use" (155). His instincts and improvised reactions saved the record but also changed the performance and undoubtedly gave the record a different feel: had he not stretched that song out in the hopes something useful could be spliced from it, the entire take would never have been used uncut, and consumers and radio listeners would never have been exposed to the epic version of "I Lost Someone" that is synonymous with Brown's stage performance.

James Brown incorporates all of these traditions—the theatrics of the church, the communal effects of call-and-response, the freedom of improvisation and the structure of repetition, the voice as instrument—into his body of work. This unique combination of African aesthetics formed a James Brown sound that catapulted the singer to stardom in the 1950s. In addition to making James Brown a household name and hit maker through the following three decades, it also made Brown a favorite among his peers. Black singers began emulating Brown's unique vocal stylings; as James Brown straddled the line between singing and speaking, on tracks like "It's a Man's Man's Man's World," "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," "Think," and many others, Brown's contemporaries appropriated this style. David Ruffin's 1973 song "Common Man" employs Brown's example of rhymes that are more spoken than sung, over an instrumental track. Isaac Hayes famously incorporated Brown's spoken introduction to "Sex Machine"—"Fellas I'm ready to get up and do my thing. I wanna get into it, man, you know like a, like a sex machine, man, movin' and doin' it, you know. Can I count it off?"—with his own eight minute spoken introduction to the song "By The Time I Get To Phoenix." Other artists jumped on Brown's spoken vocal bandwagon: Lou Rawls' "From Now On," the Manhattans' "Kiss And Say Goodbye," and Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes' "Be For Real," which devotes more than half

the track length to a spoken intro. Brown's vocal influence, while obvious in the music business, was also felt in the world of poetry. The Last Poets formed in 1968, a full 12 years after Brown first repeatedly screamed "please, please, please" and several years after many key Brown vocals were first pressed onto vinyl. Gil Scott-Heron—another spoken word poet—also began his career around this time, releasing his first LP in 1970. These two performers were no doubt inspired by Brown's unique blend of music and spoken vocals, as well as by the social consciousness of such Brown records as "Say It Loud (I'm Black And I'm Proud)" and "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door I'll Get It Myself)." Even Miles Davis, an unquestioned musical genius, admittedly owes his 1970s jazz-fusion period to "a little bit of Sly [Stone] and James Brown and the Last Poets" (297).

The poetry of the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron is often seen as a harbinger of rap music, but rap's true roots can be traced to the influence James Brown had on those poets. Of course Brown's *musical* influence on rap is unquestioned—Run-DMC's "frequent use of samples of James Brown's recordings emphasized the linkage between the grooves of rap and those of the Godfather" (Brackett 395). But his vocal influence on rap is quite impressive as well. One can easily hear the early elements of rap in a song like "The Payback," in which most of the lyrics are spoken in a rhythmically similar fashion to rap. Brown's influence is also clear throughout the evolution of rap. Begun as a combination of Jamaican dancehall music and American rhythm and blues, the vocal aspect of rap (the actual rapping) comes almost directly from Brown. In the late 1970s, MCs improvised words over musical backing, much as Brown had been improvising his own lyrics decades earlier. And in a similar fashion, both Brown and rap MCs made use of repetition of words and phrases to excite the crowd and create a relationship—much in the same way that Brown's preachers did before him, and that Brown himself did. Early MCs were known for encouraging the crowd to "throw your hands in the air," and to yell back in response to the MC. This appropriation of improvisation and the call-and-response technique is certainly an African tradition but was also certainly influenced by James Brown. Brown's influence can be felt elsewhere in rap, especially in the social-consciousness of the golden age of hip hop. Songs like Grandmaster Flash's watershed "The Message" echoed the social consciousness of Brown's late '60s and '70s work. Another element of hip hop that Brown left his mark on

is beatboxing—the art of using one’s voice to mimic percussive sounds like drums and record scratches. This element harks directly back to James Brown’s use of the voice as an instrument, with his “uhs!” and “hahs!” And much as rap artists became role models for disillusioned black youth, so too was James Brown twenty years earlier. Diawara writes that “[t]he youth could see themselves more easily in James Brown or in a glossy photograph of a defiant Muhammad Ali than in any other motif of independence at that time” (252). He claims that James Brown “was the dominant symbol for the youth [during the civil rights movement] . . . the link between the new freedom and an African identity that had been repressed by slavery, Islam, and colonialism” (254).

And perhaps this is James Brown’s greatest contribution. The music is unquestioned, and even his role in developing rap musically is well known:

James Brown begat soul. And soul begat George Clinton and the funk movement. And James Brown and George Clinton and others, in combination with cultural forces including jazz, salsa, and reggae (dub and the sound-system style of record playing more than the music itself) begat Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation—in short, the hip hop revolution. (Thompson 212)

But lyrically, James Brown was there as well, taking all he had learned from church, and from jazz, and from the whole of African history, putting it together with a side of camel-walk.

So the real question then is not what begat James Brown, or what James Brown begat, but this: Is there anything that James Brown did not touch and imbue with his heavenly soul? So much of our popular culture is defined by what Brown did, what he culled from African history and his own personal history and synthesized into performance. Brackett notes that “Brown’s lyrics grew increasingly impressionistic, celebrating black vernacular speech (often creating slang in the process) and emphasizing racial pride” (151). So in addition to music, poetry, dance, and race relations, James Brown has also had a hand in shaping our speech patterns. “On the one,” “get on the good foot,” “take it to the bridge” and many others are patented James Brown phrases that have become so popular they are almost parodies of themselves. The same goes for James Brown’s legendary cape routine, his hair, and his dress. Brown’s lyrics and vocal dexterity were just one facet of his African tapestry of work, a body of work that will undoubtedly have scholars and students studying James

Brown alongside Beethoven and Shakespeare many years from now. LA Style was wrong in 1992 when it proclaimed “James Brown Is Dead,” but it is still wrong today, after the Godfather’s actual death. James Brown is not dead. James Brown is God.



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