

## **JAMES BROWN: GODFATHER OF DANCE**

*by Brenda Dixon Gottschild*

With a unique voice underscoring a music that pulses with the insistence of its African roots, James Brown holds unquestioned right to his title, “The Godfather of Soul.” But to those who have seen Brown on videos of hits like “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” and “Please, Please, Please”—or, best of all, in person at one of his thousands of shows over a half-century career—his drop-dead dancing is, without a doubt, a dazzling, vivid, essential part of his performance.

Brown possesses a dancing style as thoroughly extraordinary and influential as that of Master Juba, the legendary minstrel of the 1800s. Brown is a wellspring of inspiration for artists and amateurs, not only on the dance floor and the popular stage but also in the clubs of the hip-hop generation and the concert performance venues of postmodern dance. In *The Blues Brothers*, the hit 1980 Dan Aykroyd-John Belushi movie, Brown appears briefly as a singing, dancing preacher, the perfect role for him. He’s at the center of a crucial dance scene in the film, not so much the dancer but the reason for the dance, a function he’s filled in real life.

Singing as distinctively as another pioneer, Louis Armstrong, Brown cut his eyeteeth on swing. He particularly admired Louis Jordan and his band. (Like the singing, dancing Cab Calloway, Jordan was one of the celebrated “dancing bandleaders” of the 1930s and 1940s.) Jordan’s flair, Count Basie’s precision and a host of other gospel, jazz and blues influences that he soaked up were spun into the new forms of music and dance that have become part of his legacy.

Born May 3, 1933 (by his own reckoning; accounts differ), in a one-room shanty in Barnwell, South Carolina, Brown has been performing professionally since he was 19. Early on, boxing, baseball and social dancing were part of the no-frills education of this small, sinewy, tough kid. Quick to learn the value of moving fast and hitting hard, he was able to translate these real-world survival skills into the performance patterns that became his trademark. The boxer’s lightness and the base runner’s speed are embedded in his sly stepping.

His performance consists of a calculated combination of tightly rehearsed routines relieved by improvisation. He evolved his now-legendary style in that school of hard knocks, the black clubs and dance halls of the South in the Jim Crow era of segregation. Rather than compete with the sophisticated doo-wop groups (male singing groups of the 1950s whose routines were based on vocal harmony and smooth, synchronized choreography), Brown’s group, the Famous Flames, went in the opposite direction: Instead of suave and cool, they were unapologetically rough and hot. By the late 1960s, Brown had invented funk--a raw, sweaty, gritty, blatantly rhythmic style. The wild, sexy, “in-your-face” performance of rock, punk and hip-hop artists would not be with us today were it not for James Brown’s radical innovations.

He wore makeup; his brightly colored, outrageously cut suits were really costumes; and he dramatized his songs with brilliant dancing and extravagant play-acting. The classic example of his style is the cape routine for “Please, Please, Please,” his earliest hit (1956). Using his feet as percussion instruments to keep the beat (the same means used by rhythm tap dancers, but for a different end), Brown understood that rhythm was his basic strength. He danced faster--and harder--than anything anyone had ever seen before. Even standing in place, he worked his feet—and sometimes his head and buttocks--to accompany the beats in his deceptively simple music. Keeping abreast of the many fad dances created in the black communities, he incorporated them

into his act and developed them into his own image, creating a dance that is so uniquely his own that it is simply called “The James Brown.” It is an indescribably fast and furious combination of the slide, slop, funky chicken, mashed potato, camel walk, shimmy, applejack and quiver. Nearly 70 years old, Brown in the year 2000 is a considerably subdued performer in comparison to his heyday. Still, it is thrilling to see him in concert. His shows exude more energy and verve than those of comparable artists half his age. Appropriated by many, his work has become public domain.

A famous—or infamous—dance practice of Brown’s: directing and correcting his band by dancing in front of them, doing the slide across the stage with his back to the audience, while flashing hand signals to the musicians. The audience assumed it was all part of the act, but Brown resorted to this tactic when he heard a wrong note or noticed unshined shoes. The hand signals with splayed fingers that pulsed to the beat were not to keep rhythm, but to alert the particular band member to a five-dollar fine for each pulse of Brown’s hand: five pulses, twenty-five dollars!

Brown is a perfectionist who demands the same of his band. Like other artists who spent their lives on the road, from Duke Ellington to the Rolling Stones, Brown honed his craft by keeping his work in the public eye. Since the 1950s, he has influenced three generations of artists. Mick Jagger, Michael Jackson and Prince, avid fans and shrewd observers, based their dance acts on Brown’s initiatives. Brown’s famous one-liner sums up his take on all this: “I taught ‘em everything they know but not everything I know!”

Biographer Bruce Tucker asserts that Brown is situated “at that crossroads where the fascinating and the fascinated interchange between black and white cultures takes place.” Likewise, Brown rides the intersection between music and dance without short-changing either, embracing both to the fullest. Besides “The Godfather of Soul,” “The Hardest Working Man in Show Business,” and “Soul Brother Number One,” James Brown has earned yet another title: “The Keeper of the Dance.”

***Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Artistic Director, Urban Bush Women***

Good God! Passion, drama, church and funk. When I first saw James Brown “live,” I was about 10 years old. The venue was the Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City, Missouri, and I was completely taken ... (When gun battles would break out, I would duck under a seat and, when all was clear, we would all be back hitting it on the one.) The dancing, dancing hard, the music, sanctified funk, the drama of his famous “Please, Please, Please.” Begging on his knees, sweat dripping, not worrying about being pretty but being REAL! Begging for love, falling to his knees, the draping of the red cape. No, the show’s not over. He is back to begging, on his knees, keeping it real. So now, I am trying hard to keep it real, not pretty ... dancing hard and keeping it real.

***Jane Goldberg, Tap Artist***

I love James Brown. He’s an individualist. He did what he wanted to do and didn’t let anyone get in his way to express himself.

***Bill Shannon, Hip Hop Artist***

I discovered James Brown through an album called Unity recorded with Afrika Bambaataa in 1984... It was only much later that I saw him live. The biggest impact he had on me was his sheer rawness....

***Rennie Harris, Hip Hop Artist and Director of Rennie Harris Puremovement***

If you were to pick up any hip-hop rap album, there would be a 99.9 percent chance that samples of Brown's break beats [deriving from the drummer's solo] would be found in a mix of a so-called original rap recording. In the late '60s, early '70s, the beginnings of b-boying started by way of a dance called the "good foot," named after Brown's song "Get on the Good Foot." It makes sense to me that he began a dance that was passed on and yet defined for another generation. James Brown, without a doubt, is the fiber, the godfather of hip-hop, from his walk to his talk, his dance to his stance.

***Doug Elkins, Choreographer and Artistic Director of the Doug Elkins Dance Company***

James Brown as an entity is a natural force, just barely contained by the perfect amount of form. He is a conduit, the essential chromosome for the DNA that contains the genetics of funk!

***Ralph Lemon, Choreographer***

My last dance opened with my screaming, "1,2, 1,2,3, uh!" All I dared use, 'cause the rest was so familiar. "James Brown meets Orestes," that's what I would call my experience in the "Geography" of Africa. [Africa is the first part of Lemon's trilogy "Geography".] Orestes 'cause he was so out of control, cold sweating. James Brown, more hard core than Sam and Dave, James Brown 'cause he represents the school of "hit it and quit it," [which is] how I think about my work these days....

***Bill T. Jones, Artistic Director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company***

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, a member of one of the few black families in this predominantly German/Italian farming community, culture came through the television set. Watching *The Ed Sullivan Show* one Sunday night, witnessing James Brown scream "like a woman," my father said, [and] fall down in paroxysms of erotic despair, wailing, "I lost someone," was a bonding ritual like no other for my beleaguered family. In my debut in the high school production of *The Music Man*, I was denied a dance partner because of the racial politics and instead was encouraged to take a solo. I brought the house down singing "Shapoopie," strutting, mugging and crashing to my knees like the Godfather of Soul, James Brown.

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon, "JAMES BROWN: Godfather of Dance," *Dance Magazine*, 2000. Reprinted by permission.

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