



James Brown  
By Dave Hoekstra  
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AUGUSTA, Ga. Soul is an affirmed attitude that runs as thick as the sweet sap from Georgia pine trees, a calling inspired by the Southern aggregation of perseverance, pride and purity.

While the blues may be playin', soul is sayin', and it's not enough to say that soul still breathes here.

Soul was born here.

A 16-year-old James Brown first stirred up soul in 1949 when he spent four months at the Richmond County Jail here for breaking into cars, and then four years serving out the sentence at a Georgia juvenile institution. Known in the slammer as the Music Box, Brown formed raucous cellblock bands, centered on the primitive one-chord backbeat that personifies so many of the 44 James Brown singles that have since camel-walked through Billboard's Top 40.

In compelling contrast, the Richmond County Jail today is as quiet as Christmas in prison. Located on the near north side of Augusta, the outdated red-brick jail is abandoned, and its prisoners are locked up next door in a high-rise facility that looks like a hospital. Like dotted i's, new dandelions dance through the uncut grass in front of the old jailhouse, in concert for the 16 barred windows evenly spaced across two tiers. A peeling white painted door is wide open in the spring breeze as freedom makes up for lost time.

The 53-year-old Brown is doing the same.

Cresting on the success of his comeback hit, "Living in America," from "Rocky IV," Brown is one very busy Mister Dynamite. He just signed a record deal with Atlanta's Scotti Brothers, where he is putting the finishing touches on a new album; he is in the midst of one of his perennial tours; he is planning a megatour with Fats Domino, and he is more than two hours late for our meeting at his Augusta office.

When Brown arrives, it is in the sweeping style of one of his concert performances.

Wearing a natty silver and gray pinstriped suit (that is nearly color-coordinated with his '86 Olds) and a matching gray scarf, Brown marches up a grassy knoll in front of his office, eating a hot dog with the works while juggling two cans of root beer and a small package of crackers.

"I've got so many jobs going on right now," Brown later says with a moan, still working on the root beer but comfortably camped behind a long executive-style desk in his office. "I've been real busy. When I was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (in January), I knew about Little Richard, I knew Elvis Presley, I knew Sam Cooke, I knew Jerry Lee Lewis, but I was the only one to be on the charts.

"I've been blessed."

Brown doesn't often go back to the less-than-blessed Richmond County Jail, but he remembers making music there. "Jail more or less straightened me," says Brown, taking phone calls during our interview. "I came from a real bad community, and it was quite a help. I got a chance to have clean clothes and be well-fed. I didn't get very much schooling because I was a real go-getter.

"I made my own little instruments in jail. I would make bass fiddles out of cans and played on pocket combs just because they didn't give you much to work with then. My beat came out from that, but the beat was something I had to keep working on and keep working on."

Brown stops and puts on jet-black, mirrored sunglasses with lenses the size of drink coasters, looks at me (I think) and continues, "We took sounds from gospel music and some from jazz and made a cohesive thing out of it." The icing on the musical cake was Brown's recruitment of the late Jimmy Nolen, the chicken-scratch guitarist who offered the gutsy and raw leads that crushed any notion of commercial melody. "We got him from Johnny Otis years back, and he knew how to play my licks," Brown says.

He meshed the crude version of soul music with a feisty attitude born in jail and borrowed from rhythm and blues singer-role model Little Willie John. "I liked some of the stuff he did, but I really liked the guts he had. He told King Records (where Brown recorded after his stint with Federal Records) he was going to sing what he wanted to sing. You gotta sing, you gotta be yourself."

Often taking that attitude to the limit, Brown freaked out an Atlanta advertising agency in the late '60s by sneaking in one of his hallowed 'Good God' grunts into a radio commercial he was cutting for Coca-Cola. "They didn't like me singing 'Good God' and a few other things, but I think today they would be quite affable about it. They didn't understand what I was doing. They didn't know some of the slang. If God is not good, then who is?"

And in 1968, Brown parlayed the same aggressive approach to soul into a hit: "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud," a bold sociological banner that

blankets the challenging tone of 30 years of James Brown music.

"Once we (blacks) were labeled by different names and different ways and they are all different times we went through," he says. "At one time we were called niggers. Another time we were called colored people. Another time we were Negroes, although I never was really called a Negro because I wasn't educated.

"Then in the '60s, we were able to gain a separate identity, which stopped all that other stuff," Brown says. "But today, I don't see a need for being called anything. Just Mr. James Brown. It was ignorance we had to go through, and thank God people were able to outlive that mess. But it's still sad, isn't it? Now we look at South Africa, and we see the same problem.

"But in 30 years, I can say I never have felt color - I never hated a man for color," Brown says. "White, red, yellow, purple, orange or pink, I don't take time to think. It doesn't make any difference to me." He nods proudly to a gold-framed, autographed picture of Ronald and Nancy Reagan on his desk. "I'm like Mr. Reagan. I'm color-blind."

But isn't it true that through the work of white writers and musicians (John Belushi, Talking Heads and now John Cougar Mellencamp), more whites are discovering Brown in 1986 than in 1956?

Brown snapped, "I don't think you're white. You can say that, but do you see yourself as a white man or a man? I don't see myself as a black man - just a man, period, because I wouldn't want to separate you and I."

That is a paradox of Southern soul and a problem of sequestered stardom, for when you walk about the tattoo parlors and shuttered movie palaces around downtown Augusta, you'll still find 70-year-old black men and 20-year-old black men shoulder to shoulder, shining the shoes of white yuppies in three-piece suits at places like Chattanooga's, a storefront shoeshine parlor on Broad Street.

You ask what James Brown means to them, and they can't answer.

"We didn't do much entertaining of any kind in downtown Augusta," says Brown, who once shined shoes on Broad Street. "We had a theater called the Harlem, over on the predominantly Afro-American side of town. That's changed. And we had the Lenox, which they eventually tore down. So when we'd go over to Macon, Ga. That's where I met Little Richard." It was after hearing Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" 30 years ago that Brown was inspired to record "Please, Please, Please (Don't Go)," his first hit.

Brown was pleased with the news of the opening of the New Regal Theater on

Chicago's South Side. "That's great, because the Regal was a very important theater for Chicago, and they need it very badly today," he says. "The Howard should be reopened in Washington, and New York definitely needs the Apollo. My best memory of the Regal was running an amateur hour in the '60s that featured Michael Jackson. We started him at the Regal."

Brown also remembers Chicago for his role in "The Blues Brothers," which in 1980 got him back on the right foot. "To me, that was the opening to a new audience," he says. "And I was very glad to get that audience. To me, John Belushi was a very talented person and when you put him with Dan (Aykroyd), it was like Bud Abbott and Lou Costello.

"I think when people saw my character as a minister in 'The Blues Brothers,' they said, 'What does James Brown do?' but I think it took 'Dr. Detroit' to capitalize on it." A certified gold "Blues Brothers" album is on the wall next to Brown's desk, one of the few records on display in his spacious office.

But now Belushi is as dead as Elvis, who is as dead as Sam Cooke. What keeps Brown going?

After a thoughtful pause, Brown answers, "God."

When Brown comes to the Chicago area he prepared for his nearly religious cape routine that accents his legendary music. In a 1984 interview at Cabaret Metro, Brown's master of ceremonies for 24 years, Danny Ray, told me how the lavender cape bit was born in Baton Rouge, La.: "It really started with a Turkish towel, and I would stand in the door and add a robe when Brown sang 'Please, Please, Please (Don't Go).' He would rip it off and rush back onstage. The crowd came to expect it, so finally we got a cape and decided to work it in the show. No matter where we are, I never forget the moment to bring it. You have to reach back for the power."

In concert Brown will package powerful classics like "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," "Cold Sweat" and "It's a Man's World" between opening and closing send-ups of "Living in America." There will be the tight but ugly jumpsuits (let's hope Mr. Superbad has junked his lime Jolly Green Giant outfit), and the always amazing splits and twirls, and it is all very fine because it is deep soul in action. At some stops during this tour, the mechanical robot Sico (from "Rocky IV") has appeared as the Godfather of Heavy Metal, introducing the Godfather of Soul.

"It's a nice gesture," Brown says, still chowing down crackers and root beer, "but I'm not into robots. I'm into music; I'm into soul."