

James Brown

Articles

James Brown Takes "The Next Step"

First new album in four years due this spring

With over four decades and ninety-eight Top Forty appearances on *Billboard's* R&B charts, James Brown has amassed enough of a legacy to last another lifetime. But these days the Godfather of Soul is more interested in creating something new.

Not only did his new bride give birth to his sixth child (James Joseph Brown II) last June, he also recently completed recording his first album of new material since 1998's *I'm Back*. Due out this spring, *The Next Step* -- recorded in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia -- is a new installment of funk that relies on Brown's power of invention rather than the trend of guest appearances by younger stars. "They wouldn't know what to do," Brown states seriously. "It's the *next step*, and they wouldn't fit."

"When I made 'Papa's Bag' I changed [the accented beats in a given measure] from 2 and 4 to 1 and 3," Brown explains. "Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Strauss, Bach, Chopin, all of 'em, they were playin' 2 and 4. I changed it once, and I'll change it again." So where is *The Next Step* going to take funk? "It's a continuance of 1 and 3, but it's something else," he says. "It's totally different, but it's still funky. It's James Brown yesterday and today and tomorrow."

The sound may be reaching back and ahead, but, as it often has been for Brown, the subject matter is very much in the socially conscious now. "Let the Sun Shine in Your Heart," for example, deals with the tragedy of September 11th.

"Extra! Extra! Have you heard the news?/Innocent people died/Sad, but it's true/Someone tell me what this world is comin' to," Brown says, quoting the song's lyrics. "That sounds more like a gospel song, but it's really inspirational. Funky, but it tells the truth."

Brown decided to put together a whole new batch of songs only after writing the album's first single, "Killing Is Out, School Is In." "The album came about because of the songs that I made," he says. "I was just fed up with the fact that we had kids getting killed in school."

Listening to the record in its entirety before his gig at B.B. King Blues Club in New York City Saturday night, Brown makes no secret of his pride in the project, often stopping mid-sentence to play a little air guitar, mouth a few words or do a subtle dance. When it was show time, however, "Killing Is Out" was the only new song to appear publicly. The two-hour performance -- which hit many of the major bases, including "Cold Sweat," "I Got the Feeling," "Living in America," "Soul Power," "It's a Man's World," "Papa Don't Take No Mess," "I Feel Good," and "Sex Machine" -- wasn't short on surprises, though.

Brown juxtaposed oldies like "I'll Go Crazy" and "Try Me" with funkified interludes of "Who Let the Dogs Out?" and "Whoomp! There It Is." A long ladies' spotlight, featuring Brown's five background singers, the Bitter Sweets, evolved into a drawn-out solo by wife/former lead Bitter Sweet Tomi Rae, who sang a strong Joplin-like "Try," a heartfelt version of Etta James' "At Last," and a duet medley of Sam Cooke's "You Send Me," Nat King Cole's "(I Love You For) Sentimental Reasons," and Crystal Gayle's "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue."

But it was an appearance by Al Sharpton that really got everyone's attention. "There are only four B's in music," he declared, "Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and Brown." It wasn't all speech-making for the Reverend, who pulled off an impressive James Brown dance, rapping to the crowd "I'm a preacher, but I get around/One thing I've found/If you want to get down/You better find James Brown."

Brown plans to make it a bit easier for fans to find him in the near future. He's got two remaining live shows scheduled -- Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, on February 23rd and the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., on February 25th -- and more dates planned for after the album hits the streets. Also look for him in two upcoming movies -- *Undercover Brother*, with Eddie Griffin, and *The Tuxedo*, with Jackie Chan. "It's about a tuxedo that reacts and has a life of its own," Brown says. "I didn't get a chance to get the whole program, but my thing is I'm a sex machine . . . and we dance together."

The sixty-eight-year-old doesn't quite dance like he used to and his show doesn't deliver quite the same sonic assault it once did, but his voice is everything it's always been and his presence is as powerful as ever. In fact, James Brown is still determined to live up to his "Hardest Working Man in Show Business" title, in part because he doesn't see much in modern music to keep funk going.

"Young people got caught with canned music," he says. "They don't know how to play. Now I feel sorry, you know. I'm not happy, because I'd like for the legacy to keep on. We're drivin'. We're doin' it right now. But pretty soon we ain't gonna be doin' it. And it's gonna be gone."

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Feelin' good