

James Brown showed blacks they didn't have to hide their heritage

by Marc H. Morial

On Christmas Day, the career and life of the "hardest-working man in show business" ended. But his spirit lives on in the legions of fans that weathered rain and cold to bid him farewell. James Brown electrified a generation, an entertainer with so prolific a body of work and so distinctive a genre of style that entertainers for more than four decades have either borrowed from or have been inspired by him.

From the time he first took the stage in the 1950s, James Brown, who died of heart failure at 73, proved to be a cultural tour de force - his own man with his own vision and immense pride in his heritage. In his art, he embraced the blues, gospel and rhythm and blues of his musical predecessors in forging a musical destiny that defied convention and was completely his own.

He was the consummate showman until his last days: He had received clearance one day earlier to perform at a New Year's Eve gig in New York City. The tributes following his untimely death proved the perfect encore for a life that was at times difficult and painful but nevertheless important and exciting. Only the Godfather of Soul himself could make such a dramatic and riveting exit in death.

Brown emerged the "everyman" in the black community, where he forged his strongest bonds. He set aside convention and remained true to himself - warts and all. With hits like "Please, Please, Please," "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag, Part 1" and "I Got You (I Feel Good)," he made an indelible imprint on American culture.

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, he emerged as an icon of black culture - reminding us to rejoice in our heritage and shout out in pride for ourselves. He showed us that we didn't need to conform to the expectations of mainstream America to take their rightful place in society. He made us realize that we are as entitled to the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship as anyone else.

In 1968, Brown's "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" unified and energized the black community in our period of mourning over the death of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who had been assassinated five months earlier. It became one of the most popular black power anthems of the 1960s and also struck a chord with mainstream America, getting to No. 10 on the Top 10 charts.

Through songs like "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)" that chronicled the challenges faced by blacks in the United States at the time, Brown made his activism known in real and straightforward ways.

In addition to being the godfather of various genres of music and dance moves, you could say he was the godfather of economic empowerment and equal opportunity.

While Brown had a different impact than Ray Charles or Sam Cooke on mainstream Americans, he surely struck a nerve among blacks. With 60 songs in the Billboard Top 10 R&B chart, he racked up more hits than any other artist. His success on the Top 10 Pop chart was not as great - less than a dozen hits - not enough to put him in the top 25 artists, something that befuddles music critics given Brown's ability to get on the charts for more than four decades. Despite his penchant for colorful garb and larger-than-life persona, he was hardly a flash in the pan or a one-hit wonder. He continued to persevere in the music industry up until his last days.

Where he had his greatest impact was with the countless artists, many black, he inspired. Brown shines through in the work of his successors - from the guitar licks of Prince to the dance moves of Michael Jackson.

He was not without his admirers among white artists. In the 1960s concert film "The T.A.M.I. Show," he mesmerized Rolling Stones' frontman Mick Jagger, who built much of his own stage persona around Brown's signature style. Rappers have borrowed his beats and funk. And his unforgettable stew of blues, gospel and R&B, unconventional rhythms and captivating live shows spawned a wide range of new musical genres. He was not only the Godfather of Soul, but the godfather of disco, funk, hip-hop - the list goes on.

At the various celebrations of his life - at the Apollo Theater, in his hometown in Georgia and elsewhere - James Brown left this world just the way he led his life: a consummate showman and courageous visionary. He leaves an enduring legacy that will remain forever etched in our memories.

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