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THE LAND OF SOMEWHERE ELSE: REFIGURING JAMES BROWN IN SEVENTIES DISCO

Alice Echols

This article is an orphan. Originally conceived as the opening chapter of my forthcoming book, *Upside Down: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, it was meant to position James Brown as a foundational figure in the prehistory of disco.¹ From the beginning I knew that a genealogy of disco that pivoted, however briefly, on James Brown might be something of a hard sell. After all, most people associate disco with Donna Summer, ABBA, the Village People, and the Bee Gees' wall of falsetto, not with the soul man whose sonic audaciousness led to the creation of funk, which in turn helped to underwrite hip-hop.² No, I suspected that both disco partisans and Brown loyalists would find such a Brown-centric genealogy of disco deeply unappealing. As for Brown, despite his Hummer-sized ego and his fondness for titles (the Godfather of Soul, Soul Brother Number One, the Father of Funk, the Hardest-Working Man in Show Business), well, very likely he, too, would have resisted the claim that he was in any substantial way implicated in disco's paternity. Even though Brown cut quite a few disco tracks, he often spoke dismissively of the genre, which he accused of bowdlerizing his pioneering funk, capturing only its "repetitious part." In his 2005 memoir he described disco as "just about the opposite of everything I had come to stand for in music."³ However, long before I started to actively worry about how fans and reviewers alike might evaluate my effort to write Brown into the history of disco, my editor, sensing precisely these problems, ordered me back to the drawing board for a new opening chapter, which is how this article came to be without a home.

For many people, be they diehard disco fans, Brown enthusiasts, or just casual listeners, disco conjures up a distinctly non-Brownian universe. Disco was not a Man's Man's Man's World—at least not as Brown had imagined it—but a "nightworld" that ran the gamut from downtown to white suburban, and whose denizens included gay men tricked out in

macho drag, Studio 54 glitterati, and white working-class kids sporting polyester and platforms.⁴ In this glitter-ball universe, gay men and the “ladies,” either as vocalists or as much-sought-after objects of desire, held sway against an aural backdrop that featured that relentless four-on-the-floor THUMP. What could any of this have to do with the heteronormative macho funk of James Brown, Mr. “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine”? Indeed, many critics have said quite emphatically, “Nothing.” For example, in his provocative book *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, Nelson George distinguished authentically black soul music, such as James Brown’s, from disco’s hopelessly whitened soul. And the incisive cultural critic Greg Tate wrote disparagingly of disco as “DisCOINTELPRO.” Tate believed that disco represented nothing short of a “form of record industry sabotage” that destroyed the “self-supporting black band movement” out of which black funk experimentation had grown, in much the way that the FBI’s COINTELPRO program of infiltrating and disrupting radical black activist groups had undermined the black freedom movement. Chuck D of Public Enemy called disco “the most artificial shit I ever heard,” music that was “sophisticated, anti-black, anti-feel,” not to mention gay, and upwardly mobile.⁵

The shape and texture of Brown’s music *were* in many respects a time zone apart from those of disco. A good deal of sixties soul music, from the Four Tops’ “Standing in the Shadows of Love” and Martha and the Vandellas’ “Heat Wave” to Wilson Pickett’s “Midnight Hour” and Brown’s “Mother Popcorn,” has an urgent quality absent from the “lush fluidity” that characterizes some disco, be it Silver Convention’s “Fly, Robin, Fly” or the Love Unlimited Orchestra’s “Love’s Theme.” With his remarkable bands, Brown constructed a tense, staccato funk whose unpredictable breaks and bridges gave the music a ruptural quality substantially different from the plush, tightly seamed, 4/4 steamroller that was disco. Indeed, whenever Brown tried to make himself over into a disco star—and he tried more than once—his music barely registered on the dance floor. There’s no getting around the fact that James Brown’s twitchy, anticipatory music does not operate in the same fashion as disco, which functions like the aural equivalent of “big barroom fans that sweep the air around you as you dance.”⁶ Brown’s funk, with its heavy accenting of the first beat (“on the One”) was at odds with disco’s emerging preference for straight sixteenths with accents on the main beats.⁷ I was working as a DJ in those days, and I don’t remember hearing Brown’s music in discos, even in Detroit’s predominantly black clubs, whose DJs preferred the popularizers of Brown’s funk—the Ohio Players; the Commodores; Earth, Wind, and Fire; and Kool and the Gang—to Mr. Dynamite. When I was working as a DJ in Ann Arbor, Michigan,

from 1979 until 1981, the two times that I played Brown's 1979 disco track "Too Funky in Here," it cleared the floor.

In recent years, as the prejudice against disco has diminished and the gulf between dance and rock music has narrowed, some journalists, critics, and bloggers (many of them, one suspects, too young to remember the disco wars) have taken to noting that Brown helped to establish the aural foundation for disco. Wikipedia goes so far as to contend that Brown anticipated disco. Online reviews of Brown's oeuvre on Amazon and iTunes suggest another shift—that listeners today are not much interested in discriminating between Brown's hard-core funk and his more disco-flavored work. In the immediate years before his death, even Brown's views of disco mellowed somewhat as he occasionally added disco to the many genres of music that he fathered.⁸

Although discophobia is not nearly so pronounced today, Brown continues to garner only modest attention within the emerging field of disco studies. For example, in Tim Lawrence's impressive study *Love Saves the Day*, the singer/producer is noteworthy solely for his 1969 track, "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose," a DJ favorite in the days before disco became Disco. But James Brown and his music deserve more than a footnote or a mere mention in chronicles of disco, no matter his own ambivalence about the genre. With his first band, the Famous Flames, and his next band, the J.B.'s, Brown cut tracks that galvanized dancers from the mid-sixties through much of the seventies. But the comparisons to disco go deeper than this. Like the disco that displaced him, Brown emphasized the instrumental. He used many of the instruments featured in disco—strings, winds, and harp—albeit differently from the ways they were deployed by disco producers and artists. Most important, in his privileging of the rhythmic, and his audacious stretching out of songs into jam-band length (often with parts 1 and 2), he blazed a trail for disco's pioneers. However, Brown's signal achievement was in transforming our notion of what constitutes a song. Brown's funk turn was so revolutionary that as veteran R&B producer Jerry Wexler recalls, for a while "it just freaked out" other soul artists who could not "get a handle on what to do next." And while Brown remains the iconic soul man of the sixties—funky, hardworking, and ready to give it up—he was also drawn to sophistication, a stance and a style he longed to embody. More than anything it was Brown's fraught relationship to sophistication, a style that to many seems distinctly at odds with that of the Godfather of Soul, that helps explain his conflicted relationship to disco.

That said, James Brown isn't the Father, Godfather, or even the Stepfather of Disco. Disco's Godfather is Berry Gordy; its immediate Fathers are the Motown founder's followers—among them, Kenneth Gamble and

Leon Huff of Philadelphia International Records, and their inestimable house band, MFSB. Others include Isaac Hayes, Curtis Mayfield, Burt Bacharach, and, yes, Barry White. However, that doesn't mean Brown is not germane to the history of disco. Think of it this way: disco is James Brown's illegitimate child, a rebellious kid with whom he was embroiled in a messy cycle of disavowal, rapprochement, and repudiation.

Writing Brown back into the history of disco requires renarrativizing it. It entails calling into question the presumed disco-funk disconnect, the still-prevalent view that disco was bourgeois and funk street, that disco represented an attenuated version of "black" music and funk was its authentic expression. These claims continue to be made, but they never rise above the level of sheer assertion.¹⁰ Indeed, they are rather like the unsubstantiated claims made about the classic women's blues of the 1920s, which until the recent intervention of blues historians Elijah Wald and Marybeth Hamilton were often considered more commercially driven (and tainted) than the country blues of male musicians such as Robert Johnson.¹¹ One also hears in such claims an echo of the hierarchizing of soul music that dismisses Motown as so much polished pop while elevating as authentic the gritty music of Stax Records.¹² As a dedicated listener of black-oriented Detroit radio stations in the seventies, and as a DJ who frequented a variety of Detroit discos as well as the storefront record store owned by the brother of ex-Temptations member Eddie Kendricks, I can say that there was precious little evidence of such a divide at the time. To pit disco and funk as antagonists denies the way they rubbed up against each other on the dance floor and in the recording studio. To treat funk as more authentically "black" also ignores the variety of black musical taste, which, as Robin Kelley argues, has always included a fondness for the sweet.¹³ This is to say that the title of Arthur Conley's hit record "Sweet Soul Music" is no oxymoron.

Especially in its early years, disco—by which I mean what was popular on America's varied disco dance floors—was nothing if not capacious. It encompassed everything from "Fame," David Bowie's excursion into J.B. territory; to the Ohio Players' languorous slab of funk, "Fire"; and Marvin Gaye's infectious "Got to Give It Up."¹⁴ Admittedly, the sonics of disco shifted with the ascendance of Eurodisco, which often was decidedly un-funky. As disco historian Peter Shapiro so memorably puts it, Eurodisco is what you might get if "the Germans were the drummers, the Belgians were the bassists, the Swedes were the singers, the French and Italians were the producers, and everyone but the British wrote the English-language lyrics."¹⁵ One hears this rhythmically Teutonic sound beginning to take shape in Donna Summer's compelling, futuristic 1977 hit, "I Feel Love," but it reached a nadir of determined funklessness with the Euro-influenced

Hi-NRG that became so popular in white gay male clubs by the end of the seventies. (This trend continued in certain strands of house music, most notably in the LA Styles' 1991 cut, the aptly titled "James Brown Is Dead.")

As disco grew into a commercial juggernaut and moved further from its roots in R&B, some musicians did knock it as monotonous and repetitive. Funk impresario George Clinton was a confirmed disco-hater. He disparagingly referred to Funkadelic's 1978 disco hit, "One Nation Under a Groove," as "P-Funk for passives," a record he claimed he released solely because the band needed a hit and, given disco's popularity, one that would work on the dance floor.¹⁶ But "One Nation" proved so prodigiously popular in black communities that the widely read *Jet* magazine named it the song of the year, suggesting that whatever Clinton's intentions, for plenty of African Americans the record successfully worked the overlapping territory of funk and disco. Similarly, literary critic Houston Baker has written dismissively that Johnnie Taylor's megahit "Disco Lady" was one of the first R&B singles to be marketed to a white audience. However, the record topped both the pop and the R&B charts, perhaps because its sinewy sound owed a lot to the musicians playing on it—members of Clinton's P-Funk empire, including Bootsy Collins and Bernie Worrell.¹⁷ Like so many disco records, these tracks were massively popular, and not just among rhythm-challenged whites and the upper stratum of black America, thus underscoring jazz and funk musician Fred Wesley's wry observation that "disco music is funk with a bow tie."¹⁸

It would be hard to overstate James Brown's influence on American music and culture. At a time when the sweet soul music of Motown dominated the R&B charts and gave the Beatles and the Beach Boys a run for their money, Brown and his band hijacked soul music, taking it, in the words of funkmeister George Clinton, "totally deep" into the territory of the rhythmic. With his 1965 chartbuster "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," Brown, who up to this point had found himself largely confined to black radio, where he was the "scream at the end of the dial," as journalist Albert Goldman put it, enacted an unlikely crossover to the pop world.¹⁹ His ascent was unlikely because "Brand New Bag" made no concessions to the white majority. In contrast to Motown's songwriters, most of whom aimed to be "universal," Brown instead chose to revel in the particulars of black experience. Unlike others chasing pop success, Brown didn't strain to make himself legible. He was audacious, incorporating black street lingo and playing jazz-wise funk unfamiliar to most whites. Writing in 1989, critic Dave Marsh claimed that "Brand New Bag" represented a radical intervention in the world of pop music. At a moment when the Motown hit-making

machine made “comparatively ornate records seem the wave of the future,” Brown, he wrote, “invented the rhythmic future in which we live today.”²⁰ After its release, Brown admitted that the song “is a little beyond me right now . . . It’s—it’s—it’s just *out there*.”²¹

What put “Brand New Bag” in the territory of “out-thereness” was its radical demotion of melody and chord changes, to such an extent that, in the words of musicologist Robert Palmer, the “rhythmic elements *became* the song.” Every voice and every instrument were deployed for their percussive effect.²² “The horns played single-note bursts that were often sprung against downbeats,” writes Palmer. “The bass lines were broken into choppy two- or three-note patterns,” which, as Palmer notes, was hardly a novelty in Latin music, but was unusual in R&B. And then his rhythm guitarist “choked his guitar strings against the instrument’s neck so hard that his playing began to sound like a jagged tin can being scraped with a pocketknife.”²³ The other critical quality in Brown’s sound was repetition. There was no missing the main groove in a J.B. song. It was called groove music for a reason. Repetition characterized Brown’s music from his early days as the lead singer of the Flames, when he began to acquire a name for himself by “crawling the floor and crying out the one essential word of their hit song, ‘Please, Please, Please,’ over and over again.”²⁴ Once Brown made the rhythmic turn, his vocal contributions sometimes consisted of little more than *uhn’s*, *huh’s*, and falsetto “*eeaaaayowwws*.” Although Brown’s voice was hardly ancillary, it was very much in service to the overall rhythmic assault, with the result that Brown sometimes sounded like little more than percussive punctuation.

Brown’s prioritizing of the rhythmic required the diminishment of his own vocals. Brown’s rhythmic mandate was connected to the centrality of physical movement in his music. Take his cut “There Was a Time.” Originally the song grew out of a stretched-out jam that he performed in concert so that he could run through a variety of dances while his band played behind him. After all, dancing—physically demanding and bruising dancing—defined a James Brown concert. Finally, Brown’s approach to music making, his creation of a funk conglomerate, anticipated the way many disco producers worked. Writing about Brown, critic Simon Reynolds imagines him as the “CEO and public trademark of a funk corporation, an early-seventies polyrhythm factory churning out backbeats, B-lines, horn stabs and rhythm guitar tics—quality components of . . . machine-tooled durability.”²⁵ Critics (and Brown himself) have often contrasted Brown’s supposedly naturalistic funk to the soullessness of mechanistic disco, and yet the Father of Funk was not techno-averse. As Brian Ward points out, before releasing “Brand New Bag,” Brown remastered and sped up

the original recording to give it more kick. The resulting track was, Ward maintains, the product of “inspiration, contemplation, and technological manipulation.”²⁶

So disco built upon Brown’s prioritizing of the rhythmic, his fondness for repetition, his embrace of Latin music, his deployment of machine-tooled precision, and his openness to the technological, at least some of which troubled the “normal order” of American pop. “Brand New Bag” marked the moment that Brown began to change our understanding of what constitutes a song. In his hands, a song became a track. All the charges that disco was mindless, repetitious, prefabricated, mechanical—well, Brown laid the foundation. If the connection between “Make It Funky” and “Fly Robin Fly” seems like a stretch, the relationship between Brown’s track and Chic’s “Chic Cheer” is demonstrable.

And yet in other respects Brown’s style was antithetical to disco. In contrast to the disco stars who followed him—particularly Barry White, who barely worked up a sweat on stage, Brown was the quintessential soul shouter, a true house-wrecker. He didn’t so much sing as explode—shouting, rapping, and shrieking his way through a song, all the while executing breathtaking twists, splits, drops, and pivots. Brown, who toured incessantly, owed much of his early success to his incendiary live performances in front of largely black audiences. For many fans, including guitarist Nile Rodgers, who would later form the disco group Chic, it was Brown’s very lack of restraint, his embrace of “His Bad Self” that proved appealing, even life-changing. “I was a kid who went to church and our services were in Latin; very peaceful and restrained and reserved at best,” recalls Rodgers. “The first concert I ever saw was James Brown, with the cape and the spirit and all that—it was powerful stuff.”²⁷ Brown’s energy was otherworldly, his moves the template for Michael Jackson’s future dance steps, and his music—anchored by “the motion of the ocean groove” of his drummers and rhythm section—both evoked and took listeners to the Land of Somewhere Else.²⁸

For many listeners, Brown’s intensity and his rhythmic complexity suggested his deep connectedness not just to black America, but also to Africa. No matter that Brown claimed that when he went to Africa, he “didn’t recognize anything that [he] had gotten from there”; others felt differently.²⁹ Writer Thulani Davis believed “JB was proof that . . . [r]hythmically and tonally blacks had to be from somewhere else. Proof that Africa was really over there for those of us who had never seen it.”³⁰ Brown’s popularity with his black fans (and no doubt with some white ones, too) derived in part from this “somewhere else” sound and his seeming indifference to white reception. It is Brown’s apparent lack of concern about how he came across

to white audiences that in his prime made him seem barely assimilable to the pop mainstream and to disco's crossover aesthetic.³¹ Take his first televised performance, the moment that James Brown mash-potatoed his way onto middle America's cultural radar.

A little more than a year had passed after his recording of "Brand New Bag" when Brown appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in May 1966. Sullivan's weekly variety show was an unmissable weekly event for most Americans with access to a television set. For Brown, who wanted to break out of the chitlin' circuit of black theaters and clubs, Sullivan's show was his chance at the brass ring.³² Brown was not the kind of black entertainer usually featured on prime-time television. There was no mistaking the tough-looking James Brown with his streetwise swagger for the Temptations, whose dance steps were taken from the street but who possessed the sort of supper-club sheen characteristic of crossover black entertainers.³³ According to *Ed Sullivan's Rock 'n' Roll Classics*, Brown performed two songs—his first R&B hit, 1959's "Please, Please, Please," and his latest chart-topper, "It's a Man's Man's Man's World."³⁴ Brown was riveting as always, with his falsetto shouts and squeals, and his dramatic knee drops. He thrilled fans with the well-known routine in which his male backup singers threw a wrestler's cape around the singer's shoulders and tried to coax him offstage, as if to prevent his complete breakdown, only to have Brown throw off the cape and fight his way back to the mike.³⁵ Somehow the hokum of his "collapse-and-resurrection" performance never undermined what felt like the authenticity of Brown's passion.

Brown's set was quite the spectacle—perhaps the first time on prime-time TV that white audiences witnessed a black cultural production in which they seemed to figure so little. James Brown wanted to cross over, but in contrast to Motown's founder, Berry Gordy, or R&B star Sam Cooke, who, upon realizing that whites "liked the abstraction of him" on their TV screens, reportedly "worked at composing his public surface into an abstraction of the qualities he thought they liked," Brown wasn't second-guessing white America.³⁶ Were his dancers' dresses too short, his hair too big, his voice too raw? Was it all too *out there*? Brown may have contemplated such questions, but you would not have known it from his performance. Black activist Donald Warden claims that he encouraged Brown in his TV performances to "talk to the race," and in contrast to leaders such as Martin Luther King "to assume no white people exist."³⁷ Whatever the combination of reasons, Brown wasn't tailoring his act to fit the expectations of white America any more than Stokely Carmichael and other movement activists were when they debuted "Black Power" weeks later in Mississippi on the Meredith March.³⁸ When the camera panned the

studio audience at the end of Brown's segment, his black fans had a look of ecstatic incredulosity, as if they could not quite believe what he had just pulled off. For his black male fans, Brown's Sullivan show performances were perhaps especially significant. Brown advanced a hip masculinity rooted in the streets that, as one fan recalls, "hooked most black men (including me) to the James Brown culture."³⁹ The hook, as activist Al Sharpton Jr. suggests, was that Brown modeled black masculinity. "We look at James Brown," writes Sharpton, "and we say, 'Hey, *that's* how I'm gonna be a man."⁴⁰

Brown's performances seem so unfettered, so possessed, so uncompromising, and they left audiences so "completely fucked up," as his trombonist and arranger Fred Wesley Jr. puts it, that it's easy to miss that Brown did not just let it all hang out. He used discipline and precision—what Wesley calls a military-style "spit and polish"—to craft a look, a sound, and an act.⁴¹ Indeed, Brown was intent upon presenting himself as a model of black masculine sophistication. That night on the Sullivan show he was, as always, impeccably, if flashily, dressed—decked out in a stunning floral-print gold tuxedo, snugly tailored shiny black pants, and expensive black boots. As usual, his hair had been painstakingly coiffed into a nearly frozen pompadour hairdo. Brown invested an enormous amount of time, money, and energy into his look, traveling with his hairdresser, portable beauty-salon-size hair dryer, and a wardrobe mistress to manage his enormous wardrobe.

If Brown's funk and his politics rather than his concern with sophistication have most interested journalists and critics, it is likely because from the late sixties on his music grew funkier and more overtly political. By the early seventies, Brown's band, many of whose members were jazz players, sounded almost anti-pop. And even earlier, in 1968, Brown became a spokesman for black America when he recorded his landmark anthem of black pride, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud." Band member Fred Wesley remembers his shock at the speed with which black listeners embraced the record. Performing the song in Texas a mere two weeks after the band had recorded it, Wesley was stunned to find that when Brown hit the stage and yelled, "Say it loud," about fifteen thousand people shouted back, "I'm black and I'm proud."⁴² "Black and Proud" had a catalytic effect on African American musicians, too, and with Curtis Mayfield's gentle message music, helped to pave the way for Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Sly Stone to record music that was more attentive to the political issues of the times. It also may have alienated some of his white fans. In Brown's view, "Black and Proud" figured prominently in his seventeen-year exile from the pop top ten.⁴³ However, as 1968 drew to a close, Brown seemed to

have it all—his political bona fides and crossover success. *Cash Box* magazine named him the best pop male vocalist of 1968, a feat that had eluded other black singers, even those whose sound was determinedly crossover.⁴⁴

Critics and historians often consider the “nationalist sounds” of late-sixties soul and funk the result of pervasive black pessimism, but Brown’s groundbreaking “Black and Proud” did not signal his diminished faith in American values.⁴⁵ Brown was angry about the slowness of change, for sure, but he did not intend the record as a nose-thumb to white America. In fact, Brown struggled to be both pro-black and pro-American, to embody both soul *and* apple pie—an unpopular stance among more than a few black activists.⁴⁶ Embracing both was a hard act to pull off, and it led him into what seemed to be flip-flop territory, recording “Black and Proud” just three months after releasing “America Is My Home,” a patriotic song meant to deter another summer of inner-city uprisings.⁴⁷ Brown’s funk may have been “blacker” than any other music on the R&B charts, as is frequently claimed, but he remained a tireless advocate of the American Way. In 1968 he campaigned for Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, whose go-slow approach to civil rights had alienated many radicals and liberals alike. By the time disco was beginning to take shape, Brown had moved even further to the right, endorsing law-and-order Republican Richard Nixon in his 1972 reelection bid and the candidate’s much ballyhooed plan to promote black capitalism.⁴⁸

Brown was similarly paradoxical in his relationship to sophistication, a quality he both disparaged in other performers and yearned to embody. While many critics and writers would agree with Chuck D that sophistication and funk are mutually exclusive, Brown’s own views were much more equivocal. He was undeniably committed to giving up the funk; yet, as his autobiography suggests, he did not want to cede the territory of sophistication to other performers. If pressed, Brown would likely have argued that just as he fought to be both black and American, so he struggled to be both funky and sophisticated. By the time of 1985’s “Living in America,” Brown’s stereographic approach to his racial and national identity had been largely vindicated, but his relationship to sophistication was a different story. The prevailing view of Brown as preternaturally funky and unusually gifted at “transmitting feeling—pure feeling,” rather than as a genius musician, put him at a disadvantage in the struggle to complicate his image.⁴⁹ He was forever cast as a primitive . . . onstage and off.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Brown was determined to be both funky and sophisticated. He waged this battle on two related fronts: musically, by recording smooth standards and hard-driving funk tracks, and sartorially, by outfitting himself in the latest and priciest threads and by maintaining the most meticulously and

elaborately coiffed hair. Indeed, Brown considered one of his greatest achievements to be the role he played in helping the “dark-skinned man” to “become cosmopolitan.”⁵¹

Brown’s use of the word “sophistication,” a word that turns up on several occasions in his autobiography, is, to say the least, confusing, and complicates any effort to flesh out the particular resonances of the term for him. In certain circumstances Brown clearly values sophistication and sees it as a marker of racial pride and advancement, as he did at his landmark 1962 concert at Harlem’s Apollo Theater, a legendary but dingy venue that Brown worked hard to transform into something classier, with ushers and concession workers decked out in tuxedos and uniforms.⁵² However, in other instances, Brown uses “sophistication” as a term of opprobrium, to distinguish (his own) authentic blackness from that of black performers and audiences he judges too ready to sell out their blackness in return for mainstream (white) acceptance.

Despite his efforts to appear sophisticated and cosmopolitan, Brown was less than successful, even within his own camp. According to writer Peter Guralnick, some of his own band members privately referred to him as the “greasy nigger.”⁵³ And while none doubted his showmanship, some of his musicians, particularly those more oriented toward jazz, considered Brown’s music almost embarrassingly simplistic. Fred Wesley, for one, who served as J.B.’s musical director, resented having to translate Brown’s “hums and grunts and groans into music, no matter how stupid I thought it was.”⁵⁴ Brown may not have known how some of his players regarded him, but we know that he did feel as though Polydor, the German-owned record company he joined in 1971, treated him badly. On the one hand, he claimed that its artist promotion division actively resisted his efforts to present himself in a cosmopolitan fashion. “To me, they didn’t want a man of African descent to appear sophisticated. They did not want him to come across as a man.” Brown suspected the company of gender bias, of helping “the female Afro-American artists to look good, but not the men.” On the other hand, he also complained that Polydor wanted to minimize his music’s funk. “They’d take the feeling out of the record. They didn’t want James Brown to be raw. Eventually, they destroyed my sound.”⁵⁵

I do not want to downplay the difficulties black performers have faced in maintaining a style that is simultaneously funky and sophisticated. After all, this is the tension that drives the blockbuster movie *Dreamgirls*, with the Diana Ross figure cast as the sophisticated soon-to-be-famous nightclub singer and the Florence Ballard character as the soulful, gutsy soon-to-be-ex-Supreme.⁵⁶ But much disco music (and some of its stars) managed to successfully combine funk and sophistication. That Brown was unable to

effectively make the disco turn may reflect his difficulty in reconciling sophistication with the sort of black masculinity he wanted to represent.

Brown, as I have emphasized, is an iconic figure of a particular sort of black masculinity, one characterized by what journalist Nelson George calls an “unbridled machismo.”⁵⁷ It’s true that in his heyday, he cut a solidly masculine, unquestionably heterosexual figure. In those years his music was hard and his body harder. In his late forties, Brown appeared onstage “in a red jumpsuit with the word SEX stitched across the front.”⁵⁸ But when Brown first came on the scene, he wasn’t the macho man that he eventually became. He was a Little Richard imitator who favored makeup and a piled-high process hairstyle.⁵⁹ In photographs from this time, Brown doesn’t look effeminate, but his record company slapped a noticeably feminized rendering of him on the cover of his 1959 album, *Try Me*. There he is pictured looking like a Times Square punk, wearing a chest-baring top that looks like a women’s blouse, tight pants cinched at the waist with a gaudy gold belt, and a choker around his neck. In much of his early music—in songs like “Try Me,” “Please, Please, Please,” and “Baby You’re Right”—he played the supplicant, begging for his baby’s love.

From the beginning Brown squealed and shrieked like Little Richard, but sometimes he even used a full-fledged falsetto. Most striking to those familiar only with Brown’s hard-edged funk is his 1962 hit, “Prisoner of Love,” which he sang in a strikingly high falsetto. Given his earlier incarnation it’s not entirely surprising that when trombonist Fred Wesley came to play with Brown, he expected to meet a “little sissy.”⁶⁰ Although Brown cut a very different image from the prevailing “top hat and cane groups” then on the scene, his legendary fastidiousness, immaculate self-presentation, pronounced makeup, and obsessively styled hair meant that his masculinity was more complicated than the “rough-looking macho thing” he claims to have pioneered.⁶¹ In fact, just as Brown was making the funk turn, a rumor even circulated that he was planning to have a sex-change operation so that he could marry longtime band member and friend Bobby Byrd.⁶²

As Brown began pioneering the hard-edged, fractured funk for which he is best known, he put forward a different style of masculinity. In songs like “Brand New Bag,” he offered listeners a reconfiguring of black masculinity as surely as the Black Panthers did in their black berets and leather jackets. Gone was Brown’s old romantic pleading, which had been designed, it seemed, to appeal especially to women. Brown’s funk, which increasingly turned on his musical and sexual prowess, couldn’t have been less romantic. When he tackled the man-woman thing, it wasn’t to sing “Baby, You’re Right,” but to proclaim, “What I like is the way it is,” as he did on “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine.” George Clinton was likely not the only

man whose love of Brown's funk had something to do with the way "it makes your dick hard."⁶³ His music was doubtless a turn-on for plenty of women, too, but Brown's penchant for filling his grooves with guy talk gave it a pool-hall, street-corner feel. And although Brown still peppered his funk with falsetto shrieks, beginning with 1967's "Let Yourself Go" he further masculinized his sound by punctuating his songs with those percussive, guttural *huh*'s and *uhn*'s that became his trademark.

However, even after the rumors of a sex-change operation had long since faded and Brown had succeeded in making himself over into an icon of tough black masculinity, he remained uneasy about how he was being represented as a black man. Much of Brown's uneasiness seems to have stemmed from his own apprehensiveness about the gritty and raw performative style that so defined him. There's no question that Brown prized his status as the leading purveyor of get-down, gritty funk. In his autobiography he criticizes other African Americans' investment in "sophistication," and he makes it clear that while he aimed to cross over, he had no interest in making the sort of high-gloss pop/soul that Detroit was turning out.⁶⁴ Scoey Mitchell of the Apollo Theater believes that from the beginning Brown knew he "would never be a class act," a point corroborated by his friend and hairdresser Leon Austin. When Brown played a gig, he wasn't "gonna come out there and be cool," Austin contends. "He gonna *wallow*. He's gonna just be splittin', dancin', fallin'."⁶⁵ And yet Brown yearned to be more than a shouter. There's no better evidence of this than his 2002 duet of "Man's World" with opera star Luciano Pavarotti, where Brown glows with the pride of an artist who has been vindicated.

Was it his fraught relationship to sophistication that kept him from convincingly making the disco turn? Well, Brown was never able to incorporate sophistication and funk within a single track. Instead he cut either funky tracks (and almost all of his hits were in this vein) or sophisticated, highly orchestrated music, often ballads, that filled out his albums. It had been the genius of the musicians and producers at Motown to meld the sweet and the funky into one song, a model that later disco producers such as Barry White, Kenny Gamble, and Leon Huff elaborated. But Brown kept the funk and the sophistication sequestered, perhaps because he was invested in keeping his public profile undeniably masculine, a stance that for him was best communicated in hard-hitting, unambiguously funky tracks.

The ascendance of disco, in which soul music acquired a more polished look and sound, seems to have only made Brown's relationship to sophistication more fraught. Of course, the new dance music might have provided Brown, as it did some other soul artists, the opportunity to modify his self-presentation and to expand his repertoire. In fact, in the years before

disco took off, Brown did attempt a smoother, disco-flavored sound.⁶⁶ Although many writers cite 1976's *Get Up Offa That Thing* as Brown's first disco outing, he took stabs at disco in 1974 with *Hell*, and the following year with two LPs, *Sex Machine Today* and *Everybody's Doin' the Hustle and Dead on the Double Bump*. *Hell* contained two number one R&B hits—"Papa Don't Take No Mess," a sinewy track that smoldered rather than burned, and a more typical Brown number, "My Thang"—but it was nonetheless not one of his better-selling albums. Perhaps it was the LP's overt political commentary, which had largely come and gone from the R&B charts by 1974. Or maybe his fans were loathe to hear Brown, the apostle of the outta sight, lecturing them to "keep out of sight when you got no rights," and counseling them against "blowing it all by trying to be hard." Brown followed his own advice with this album, which sounds decidedly sweeter than his usual fare as he struggles to update and "discofy" his sound. Instead of his expectable fractured funk, *Hell* often uses the 4/4 thump, most disconcertingly on his unlikely cover of "When the Saints Come Marching In," which starts off like a Gloria Gaynor "Honey Bee" romp. And although the LP has the typical back-and-forth guy talk between Brown and his band members, its disco cuts feature female backing vocals. Perhaps in a misguided effort to appeal to club DJs on the lookout for continuous cuts, Brown decided to connect the tracks with the sound of a ringing gong.

Brown was still trying to capture a piece of the dance-floor action with his "disco soul" album of 1975, *Sex Machine Today*. This time Brown replaced the gong with "Eeaaayowww!! Sex Machine," a move that only underscored the disparity between Brown's vocal intensity and the "languorous funk" of the tracks.⁶⁷ Although Brown claims to be showing the young'uns how to funk, the album wears its influences (Sly Stone and Isaac Hayes among them) on its sleeve. These albums represent a turning point for Brown, who was no longer in the aural vanguard, but in the uncomfortable position of having to adjust his music to the latest trends. Neither Brown's own disco tracks or the J.B.'s "(It's Not the Express) It's the J.B.'s Monaurail," a jazzy slap at the B.T. Express's hit record, went anywhere on the disco or R&B charts.

In his 1986 autobiography, Brown complains that Polydor tried to get him to "soften up" his sound in order to capitalize on the disco craze, although he places those efforts later in the decade.⁶⁸ In his own account of these years, Fred Wesley characterizes Polydor as enormously supportive of Brown's many ventures, and mentions no pressure to discofy the band's sound while he was on board, between 1970 and 1975. Wesley does emphasize how taken both he and Brown became with strings and woodwind

instruments. He recalls the two of them going “harp crazy, trying to put harp on anything and everything.”⁶⁹ Their prettification campaign leads me to think that Brown wasn’t especially hostile to disco as it was taking shape, but that his resistance grew as his own forays into the new dance music tanked and the disco tsunami gathered force. No doubt Brown found it especially galling to see funk outfits like the B.T. Express, Ohio Players, Rufus, and Kool and the Gang, whose music was so obviously indebted to his, penetrate the disco top ten while his own efforts were passed over. Over time, Brown’s view of disco turned overwhelmingly negative. In his 1986 autobiography, he claimed that disco was “a very small part of funk. It’s the end of the song, the repetitious part, like a vamp.”⁷⁰ Disco, he argued, was unsophisticated, repetitive, superficial, and mechanistic, but, then, as critics pointed out, so was Brown’s music very often. Wesley, for example, described Brown’s funk as “strict, regimented,” and compared it unfavorably to that of George Clinton’s P-Funk consortium.⁷¹ What really put Brown at a disadvantage in this new rhythmic order was the intensity, angularity, and non-synthetic quality of his sound. Even when Brown updated his music, the glitter-ball world paid him little mind. Rebuffed by disco, beset by money and tax problems, Brown sought refuge in what he knew best—funky, gritty dance music.

Determined to break the disco juggernaut he believed was killing his career, Brown declared war on the mellow dance music sweeping the nation with his 1976 release, “Get Up Offa That Thing.” Brown has said that the song came to him in the middle of a dispiriting gig at a Florida nightspot where the audience seemed determined to sit through his set, “trying to do a sophisticated thing, *listening* to funk.” Frustrated, he began yelling, “Get up offa that thing and dance ’til you feel better.”⁷² The resulting record found the singer throwing down the groove *and* the gauntlet. Mr. Dynamite was on a mission to take back America’s airwaves and dance floors from disco, or what fellow funk artist George Clinton dubbed “the blahs.” The record opens with Brown screaming, “Eeeaaayowww!” and then roaring, “I’m back!”—not once, but four times. Brown was no stranger to message music, and “Get Up Offa That Thing” was protest music as surely as 1968’s anthemic “Black and Proud.” For Brown, the song was about “releasing the pressure” by unleashing the funk that he believed disco was pushing to the margins of popular music. In the liner notes Brown made it clear that he understood that disco had democratized the music scene, pushing aside stars in the process. “It once was me, now it’s the people,” he wrote. But Brown insisted that he knew “this game,” he had conquered dance floors some ten years earlier, and he was out to liberate the hearts, minds, and asses of America once again. As he sang elsewhere on the album, he was “refusing to lose.” “Get

Up Offa That Thing” lacked the sharp-edged quality of Brown’s funk experiments, but that and the way the high-hat articulates the off-beats were Brown’s only concessions to the disco sound. There was nothing smooth, cool, or synthetic about his latest track—no four-on-the-floor, no fluff, just Brown’s boasting, and an especially lively example of the jive talk that usually passed between Brown and the J.B.’s. It is a rousing, hard-edged jam so funky that Brown predicted it would jolt the disco crowd to its feet, and presumably to its senses. “*I can see the disco now, jumping, stomping, shuffling, screaming, roaring, hollering, getting overheated and shacking. Ha!*”⁷³

Brown used the song to take jabs at other performers who were prospering under what must have felt to him like the disco regime. The Ohio Players and the Miami-based KC and the Sunshine Band, who worked with one of Brown’s former producers, came in for slaps, as did Johnnie Taylor and Barry White. Brown was legendarily competitive with other performers, but he was not generally known for calling them out on vinyl. However, by the time Brown released “Get Up Offa That Thing,” it had been a year and a half since one of his tunes had landed in the R&B top ten, and four long years since anything he had recorded had penetrated the pop top twenty. So Brown, likely worried about his own possible obsolescence, about “time taking him out,” got personal. After announcing he was coming after veteran soul singer Johnnie Taylor, whose languid “Disco Lady” had rested magisterially for four full weeks atop the pop charts, he shouted out, “Barry White . . . I’m mad.” “Barry who?” responded a band member, to which another sneered, “Barry White Boy.” In case anyone missed his point, he then boasted of himself, “Here comes the man!” The tension between gritty sixties soul and the velvety new disco displacing it rarely made its way into the grooves in this period, but with Brown’s put-down it percolated to the surface. Soul singers, especially the soul men unable to make the disco transition, usually refrained from overtly commenting on the new dance music, at least while it held sway. Brown, however, was always a one-off, musically and politically, and he wasn’t ceding any territory to these purveyors of what he now judged white-bread disco. Brown may have yearned to be taken for sophisticated, but “Get Up Offa That Thing” found him policing the borders of blackness by reinforcing familiar racial markers of popular music—the association of sweetness with whiteness, always already overrefined, and the connection of rawness with blackness, always already unprocessed. Brown’s notion of authentic blackness, “real” soul, assumed a hierarchicized notion of masculinity with Brown in the penthouse and White on the ground floor—the reversal of what it had been in the pop world when Brown was coming up.

Brown gave it his best shot with “Get Up Offa That Thing,” and while the song climbed to number four on the R&B charts, it barely cracked the disco top twenty, proving that the way Brown liked it was no longer the way it was. It demonstrated that as badly as Brown wanted to turn the clock back to those days when his music dominated the charts, by 1976 the ground underneath him, the ground he had so skillfully negotiated, had shifted. For the next three years Brown was lucky to get any chart action. *Jam 1980s*, which once again announced his “new disco sound,” and *Take a Look at Those Cakes* were disco oriented, and both tanked. Then in 1979, at the very tail end of disco’s reign, his record company made a last-ditch effort to market him as the progenitor of disco. The cover of *The Original Disco Man* shows Brown in a white Bee-Gees-like jumpsuit in the middle of a cavernous, empty disco, a glitter ball above his head and a smile on his face.⁷⁴ In an apparent nod to the sixties, the art director posed the singer in a high-back wicker chair, like the one Black Panther Huey Newton so famously posed in, tricked out in black leather and a beret, a spear in one hand, a shotgun in the other. Brown had no such weapons at his disposal, though he likely wished he did. For the first time in years he was forced to deal with an outsider, veteran R&B producer Brad Shapiro. Although Shapiro had managed to update Wilson Pickett’s sound without losing his intensity and uniqueness, he had no such luck with Brown.⁷⁵ Instead Shapiro junked Brown’s funk in favor of the most clichéd disco—canned-sounding orchestration, the mechanized thump, and female backup singers mixed so loud they often drown him out. The album’s execrable title track, “The Original Disco Man,” a song with all the intensity of a sitcom theme song, transforms Brown into the scream at the back of the disco. “Let the Boogie Do the Rest” starts out as a slow blues number but halfway through does a mystifying disco about-face, in which Brown yells in Jamaican-inflected English, “Get on the banana boat now, brother.” “Star Generation” borrows shamelessly from any number of by-now-tired disco licks, including Sylvester’s “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).” However, on no track does Brown sound less convincing than “Women Are Something Else,” in which he admits a point ably made by the album itself, that “it’s no longer a man’s world”—a shift that he apparently finds so repellent that he undercuts it with the ad-libbed line, “smack ’em on the cheek.” “It’s Too Funky in Here” is easily the record’s most successful track, but the arrangement so obviously hems in Brown that his repeated cry of “gimme some air” seems to underscore the singer’s feelings of claustrophobia rather than the song’s funk. Released as a disco single, “Too Funky” stalled at number fifteen on the R&B charts and at number sixty-five on the disco charts.

Critic Robert Christgau nailed it when he wrote that *The Original Disco Man* found Brown “exploring the alien world he founded.”⁷⁶ He could still claim he was the Godfather of Soul, the Father of Funk, and the Hardest Working Man in Show Business, but none of that mattered much in this new environment that valued suavity over sweat and Barry White over James Brown. To make matters worse, Brown had largely forfeited his position within the world of funk by releasing punchless music, much of it embarrassingly and badly discofied. By 1979 George Clinton’s funk empire—Parliament, Funkadelic, Bootsy Collins, the Sweat Band, and the Brides of Funkenstein—had the ear of hip young blacks, who had been Brown’s constituency. Clinton’s groups got limited disco play, but along with those funk artists who specialized in more commercial sounds, they were able to score dance-floor hits—a trend that continued into the mid-eighties with funk artists from Cameo and Rick James to the Gap Band. In 1989, when Dave Marsh argued that with “Brand New Bag” Brown had invented our rhythmic future, it made a whole lot of sense. After all, rappers were falling all over themselves to sample his music. However, during the rhythmic present of the mid-seventies when disco further embellished the already “ornate” sound of Motown Records, Brown found himself yet another soul on ice.

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NOTES

Charles Kronengold edited this essay with such intelligence and such passion that I count myself very lucky. It was Charlie who pointed out the significance of James Brown’s “sequestering” of sophistication from funkiness in distinct tracks. I also benefited from the spot-on criticism of other readers, including Amy Cherry, Carla Kaplan, and Dave Moir, who read parts of this chapter in another form. Finally, in the many times she read this article, Kate Flint caught innumerable missed commas, misspellings, and wrong dates, but more to the point, she brought both her critical acuity and her formidable knowledge of popular culture and music to bear on it.

1. *Upside Down: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, forthcoming).
2. For an example of the way most accounts feature Brown’s contributions to funk and rap, see Jonathan Lethem’s June 2006, *Rolling Stone* feature, www.rollingstone.com/news/story/10533775/being_james_brown/1.
3. James Brown with Marc Eliot, *I Feel Good: A Memoir of a Life of Soul*, rev. ed. (New York: New American Library, 2005), 195. In this same passage he claimed to have written the very first disco record, “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine,” which is not a track usually associated with disco.

4. I have borrowed the term “nightworld” from Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
5. See Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). Greg Tate and Chuck D quoted in Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 24.
6. Quoted in Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 152.
7. See Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 69.
8. See note 3.
9. Jerry Wexler, quoted in Cliff White and Harry Weinger, “Are You Ready for Star Time?” *Star Time* Box Set liner notes, 31.
10. Other writers and scholars have criticized this tendency to privilege as authentically “black” music that is raw and unadorned. See Brian Ward (albeit somewhat inconsistently) in his magisterial *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 262–66; Steve Perry, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover,” in Simon Frith, ed., *Facing the Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995); Ann Powers, “Pop Diva, Soul Sister,” in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 2007; Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; and Alice Echols, “‘Shaky Ground’: Popular Music in the Disco Years,” in *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and Its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor return to this theme again and again in their wonderful *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: Norton, 2007).
11. Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Perseus, 2008).
12. See Ward, *Just My Soul*, 262–66; Powers, “Pop Diva, Soul Sister”; Echols, “Shaky Ground.”
13. On the importance of sweetness to African American pop music, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Sole Response,” *American Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2000): 537. In this essay, a review of Brian Ward’s *Just My Soul Responding*, Kelley argues that Ward’s ready identification of “white styles” and “black styles” of music making runs counter to the author’s explicit critique of racial essentialism in popular music. Kelley is especially critical of Ward’s tendency to associate a “sweeter” vocal tradition with whites and to limit his definition of the “black elements” of pop music to the blues. Kelley contends that the tradition of sweet vocals and instrumentals in the music of African Americans stretches back quite a ways, and is present in the work of Billy Eckstine, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, and Lester Young, to name but a few.
14. For example, in an interview published during the spring of 1978—a time when the backlash against disco was intensifying—Marvin Gaye told an interviewer that funk and disco represented two different styles of dance music. He called his hit “Got to Give It Up” a funk tune because it has a chant to it. Disco, he said, “is more monotonous.”

- See Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 215.
15. Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 99–100.
 16. See Arthur Kempton, *Boogaloo: The Quintessence of American Popular Music* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 405. Although the record was a huge R&B hit, it made it only into the top thirty on the disco charts.
 17. See Houston Baker, “Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s,” in Andrew Ross and Constance Penley, eds., *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 198; Dave Marsh, ed., *For the Record: George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History* (New York: Avon, 1998), 93.
 18. See “Disco music is Funk with a bow tie,” Disco Music.com, www.discomusic.com/forums/disco-music-70s-80s/26199-disco-music-funk-bow-tie-fred.html.
 19. Albert Goldman, quoted in Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 261.
 20. Dave Marsh, *The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made* (New York: Da Capo, 1989), 5.
 21. White and Weinger, “Are You Ready for Star Time?” 27.
 22. Robert Palmer, quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 240. For this particularly incisive quote, Guralnick cites Robert Palmer, “James Brown,” in Jim Miller, ed., *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1980), 168. David Brackett takes issue with Palmer and other writers who have emphasized Brown’s demotion of melody. Brackett argues that critics’ reliance on the “European ideal of a sustained (preferably legato) melodic line” has prevented them from hearing the “subtle nuances and variations of melodic figures” in Brown’s music. See David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 144.
 23. Palmer, “James Brown,” 168.
 24. Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (New York: Back Bay, 2006), 145.
 25. Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 53.
 26. Ward, *Just My Soul*, 265. Interestingly, in contrast to disco producers, however, Brown never really took advantage of the possibilities of remixing his tracks. Conversation with musicologist Charles Kronengold, February 2008.
 27. Nile Rodgers, quoted in Daryl Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco* (London: Helter Skelter, 2004), 29.
 28. Fred Wesley, *Hit Me Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 92.
 29. Brown claimed in his autobiography, “[W]hen I went to Africa, I didn’t recognize anything that I had gotten from there.” James Brown, Bruce Tucker, *Godfather of Soul* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1990), 221.
 30. Thulani Davis, quoted in Guralnick, *Dream Boogie*, 243.
 31. Certainly in 1985, when Brown scored his first top-ten hit in seventeen years with “Living in America” for *Rocky IV*, he had become assimilable, but as something of a throwback.

32. Although he had wowed teens who had glimpsed him on the big screen in Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello's *Ski Party*, and in the rock-and-roll concert movie *The T.A.M.I. Show*, in which Brown famously upstaged the Rolling Stones, when he toured he was still largely limited to black venues.
33. Sullivan and his producers appear to have been anxious about Brown's performance. Journalist Gerri Hirshey writes that some of the show's producers threatened to film Brown from the waist up, just as they had Elvis Presley nine years earlier. See Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*, 285. In *Godfather of Soul*, Brown reports that Sullivan refused to let him perform "Don't Be a Drop-Out," a completely unobjectionable example of message music (163). "He was nice about it," Brown recalled years later, "but he never explained why he didn't want me to sing it." However, later Brown writes that he wrote "Drop-Out" after the Meredith March in June of 1966, a month after his appearance on Sullivan (see 169). Sullivan's introduction to Brown on his May 1, 1966, show suggests that he was nervous about how Brown would come across. He made a point of stressing Brown's work ethic, noting that the singer had labored in cotton fields and coal yards. And he was careful to emphasize that Brown's rhythm and blues had legitimate roots in Southern gospel singing.
34. *Ed Sullivan's Rock 'n' Roll Classics*, vol. 4, "Elvis and Other Rock Greats" (WEA Group, 2003). There is some confusion about the songs that Brown performed in his first appearance on the Sullivan show. In his autobiography, Brown recalls performing "Please" and "Good Good Lovin'." See Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 163. A number of websites seem to confuse his May performance with his September 1966 performance, during which he performed a funk medley of "I Got You" and "Brand New Bag."
35. On other occasions, others, including valet and emcee Danny Ray, would do the honors. See Palmer, "James Brown," 139.
36. For Cooke's relationship to white reception, see Kempton, *Boogaloo*, 112. In his autobiography, *The Godfather of Soul*, Brown reveals that he sometimes did worry about how white audiences would receive him, as he did when he first played Las Vegas (231).
37. Warden, quoted in Ward, *Just My Soul*, 389–90.
38. Brown referenced the "new breed" in "Brand New Bag." It's worth noting that Brown appeared at the march and met with stricken civil rights activist James Meredith, whose shooting inspired it.
39. See comments of Robert G. Raynor Jr. at www.amazon.ca/review/product/B0000IDJF4C?showViewpoints=1.
40. Al Sharpton Jr., quoted in Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*, 277.
41. Wesley, *Hit Me Fred*, 93.
42. *Ibid.*, 109.
43. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 200.
44. This was the first time in its thirty years of publishing that *Cash Box* had selected a black singer for this award. Brown notes that he was surprised to find himself chosen as the "top pop vocalist because I didn't compromise my music and try to go pop." See Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 204.
45. Robin Kelley makes a related argument in his aforementioned review of Brian Ward's book. See Kelley, "Sole Response," 535.

46. Brown's faith in both soul *and* apple pie, as he put it; his advocacy of the bootstraps model of social change; his "It's a Man's World" machismo; and his Republicanism have not endeared him to scholars and serious writers on music. (For Brown's discourse on soul and apple pie, see *Godfather of Soul*, 267.) In *What the Music Said*, Mark Anthony Neal spends remarkably little time on Brown, whose "Black and Proud" he cites only to dismiss it (along with the dashiki and the Afro) as evidence of the unfortunate way that within black America the "articulation of black pride replaced the articulation of real political strategies." See Neal, *What the Music Said* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 61. Similarly, Ruth Feldstein, in her very perceptive article, criticizes Brown's "Black and Proud," which she compares unfavorably to Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" on the grounds that it commercialized the Black Power movement. See Feldstein, "I Don't Trust You Anymore": Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s," in *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005). Even if "Black and Proud" was nothing more than a cynical commercial ploy—and there is nothing to suggest that it was such a ploy—the record reached millions of black Americans who would never have heard, or perhaps cared to listen to, Nina Simone's cabaret-style song. There are plenty of reasons for the decline of the black freedom movement, not the least of them FBI interference, but Brown's risky "Black and Proud" isn't among them. Indeed, no matter how capacious and capricious Brown's understanding of Black Power, plenty of African Americans saw him, much as they did Muhammad Ali, as the embodiment of Black Power. Moreover, neither Brown's bootstraps conservatism nor his sexism was that unusual for "race men" of that era. Think of the wild vacillations of Eldridge Cleaver and Roy Innis. See Guthrie Ramsey Jr.'s incisive *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), particularly his view of Brown as a race man whose views of women were fairly typical of his time (238n12).
47. Brown called the track his "contribution to the 'long cool summer.'" See Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 190.
48. By decade's end he endorsed Ronald Reagan for president. The man whom *Look* magazine in a 1969 feature had suggested was the "most important black man in America," the singer who helped to prevent major rioting in Boston following the assassination of Martin Luther King, had lost a lot of his cultural capital in black communities. Although Brown's Republicanism led some to smear him as an "Uncle Tom" and to boycott his concerts, it did nothing to diminish his success on the R&B charts. See Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 196.
49. The description is that of talent scout Ralph Bass, who is credited with getting Brown his record contract with Syd Nathan. Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 242.
50. Brown's well-publicized run-ins with the law—the domestic violence, the drug busts, and gunplay—which were played up in the press, traded on well-worn tropes of primitive black masculinity.
51. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 124.
52. See Nelson George's recollection in *James Brown Star Time* box set, 5; Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 133. See also Doug Wolk's very useful book from the 33 1/3 series, *Live at the Apollo* (New York: Continuum International, 2004).
53. Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 220.
54. Wesley, *Hit Me Fred*, 158.
55. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 240.

56. *Dreamgirls*, DVD, directed by Bill Condon (DreamWorks SKG, 2006). For a useful rumination on the problem of black representation that focuses on the British case, see Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in Gina Gent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1998).
57. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1989), 104.
58. Palmer, "James Brown," 136.
59. In fact, Brown was such an effective impersonator that for several weeks when Little Richard was in California, Brown was hired to "be" Little Richard in order to fulfill the absent singer's bookings. Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 225.
60. Wesley, *Hit Me Fred*, 90.
61. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 104.
62. *Ibid.*, 160. Brown attributed the rumor to his makeup, but it's been alleged that his manager floated the rumor as a publicity stunt.
63. Kempton, *Boogaloo*, 398.
64. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 123 and 132.
65. Leon Austin, quoted in Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run*, 283. Peter Guralnick points out that Brown played up his "commonness"—for example, by claiming to be the Hardest Working Man in Show Business rather than the King of R&B. Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 233.
66. It's worth mentioning that tracking down Brown's disco past is made difficult by the fact that record companies and collectors alike have privileged his hard-core funk. *Everybody's Doin' the Hustle*, for example, is unavailable for purchase through traditional channels.
67. Robert Christgau, *Christgau's Record Guide* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1981), 62.
68. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 243. He repeats this claim in his 2005 memoir, *I Feel Good*.
69. Wesley, *Hit Me Fred*, 169.
70. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 242.
71. Wesley, *Hit Me Fred*, 120.
72. Brown, *Godfather of Soul*, 245.
73. Liner notes, James Brown, *Get Up Offa That Thing*, 1976, Polydor PD6071.
74. Brown's jumpsuit resembles the one worn by Robin Gibb on the cover photo of the Bee Gees' *Saturday Night Fever* LP.
75. It may have helped that Shapiro took Pickett back to the distinctly non-disco setting of Muscle Shoals to record. Shapiro also produced Millie Jackson's raunchy feminist albums of the 1970s and early '80s.
76. Christgau, *Christgau's Record Guide*, 62.