



HOT PANTS MAKE YOU SURE OF YOURSELF!

by Guthrie Ramsey

“Let’s keep it real!” At face value, those words, taken from the lyrics of James Brown’s 1971 hit single “Hot Pants,” make little political or practical sense. Yet I seemed to focus in on them when, after learning of Brown’s passing on Christmas morning 2006, I decided to marinate in a CD collection of his greatest hits throughout the night. Not that the man couldn’t be lyrically profound; “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” became the anthem for social equities across the board and around the globe, yet he was equally known for good-time lyrics that simply celebrated life. But truly, it was his music—pared down ostinato bass patterns, syncopated guitars, and interlocking horn lines that worked as the mortar in the soundscape—that captivated our minds and our dancing feet. Add in a scream, a shout, or other oral nonsensical declamations like neck bones, candied yams, and a camel walk, and you have the

recipe for a funk revolution. For legions of listeners, this was how good music was supposed to be.

At times, his music made a real difference. Mid-1960s America was a kettle, and its contents were on a high boil. On the one hand, black performers were defining the very essence of American popular music, enjoying unprecedented prestige, influence, and financial rewards. But on the other hand, America was still living the nightmare of its quasi-apartheid state: many African Americans were stuck in low-paying jobs and living segregated existences in schools, churches, and neighborhoods. There was a general sense that America had come to a crossroads, and that change had better come—and soon. On April 4, 1968, when a gunshot ended the life of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, it silenced one of the most audible proponents of that change, and the kettle finally blew its top. Civil unrest swept like a tidal wave across the land: Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., all experienced the force of raw frustrations that had been simmering for years. Inner-city neighborhoods burned, businesses were destroyed, and lives were lost.

The day after King’s assassination, on April 5, James Brown was scheduled to play a concert in Boston, which city officials were threatening to cancel for fear of the type of violent outbreaks ravaging other cities. Boston had already seen hints of unrest as teenagers had roamed the streets of Roxbury that evening in protest for the slain leader. But a greater fear was that if the concert were canceled, the city could go up like tinder, and the already palpable racial tension could turn into violence. Mayor Kevin White and his advisors had to act fast. After meeting with Brown, they decided that not only would the show go on, but it would be televised as well.

The plan worked.

Although the Boston Garden's capacity was 14,000, only 2,000 loyal revelers attended, and many more could view the show at home on WGBH. The evening began with Mayor White greeting the crowd and his city, and then Brown, who had already earned the title "The Hardest Working Brother in Show Business," came on stage and gave the performance of a lifetime. He was in his most rare form that night, giving what one witness called a "million-watt performance." Existing grainy black-and-white footage shows the entertainer wooing and subduing his audience with the genius of his many talents.

It was, indeed, a spectacle. Decker out in a tailored suit, Brown's hair flipped dramatically from side-to-side, his arms, legs, and torso performed a litany of dance steps from "the James Brown" to the mashed potato and the camel walk, one of many African American social dances that mimicked the movements of animals. (Some of his protégé Michael Jackson's dance moves, in particular the "moonwalk," owed a strong debt to Brown's camel walk.) The crowd roared its approval as the band played the

smash hit "There Was a Time," and Brown chanted line after line of call-and-response with his band mates and the cheering crowd. Even when enthusiasm threatened to escalate into unruly behavior, Brown was able to get the party back on track, on the "good foot" as one of his songs suggests. This was sanctified theater, indeed.

That night, Brown showed why he was affectionately known as "The Godfather of Soul." As one of the most important American musicians of the late twentieth century, he used his considerable power to influence the country's political and civil life, not just that evening, but on many other occasions. Part preacher and teacher, part magician and shaman, that night James Brown taught America that "the funk" could cure all ills.

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