

“Live at the Apollo”--James Brown (1963)

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Essay by Xavier Fauthoux (guest post)*



There are artists who are to everybody’s liking, major works that make history, and become timeless. “Live At The Apollo,” 1962, is a legendary record, cult, essential to music history. It is also the first album of a live series which James Brown will record in this mythical venue, which on the day of his death, will give him a vibrant homage: James Brown’s body will be temporarily displayed there.

Recorded on the evening of the 24th of October 1962 (released in 1963), this album lasts 30 minutes and is the first live album to have been published with songs playing one after the other as if in live conditions. From the first note, we are marked by the sound of Brown “live.” We feel as if we are there with him at the Apollo Theatre, in the first row with James Brown and his Famous Flames who, incidentally, are not credited on the record sleeve: Bobby Bird, Bobby Bennett, and Lloyd Stallworth, each perfectly synchronized and at the height of their talent.

This album was, foremost, a crazy bet: paying \$5,700 to cover the recording costs of the concert and the rental of the Apollo Theatre. James Brown said, “Apart from Bobby Byrd, everybody thought that I had gone crazy.”

Effectively, Syd Nathan, the owner of the label King Records, under contract with James Brown, did not believe that a live album could be a success for a single minute. The era up until then was all about “singles.” But, James Brown, helped by his new manager Ben Bart, threw himself into this new adventure.

At the beginning of the sixties, segregation is in full swing; James Brown’s popularity is at its highest, mainly in the eyes of a black public. The “Hardest Working Man in Show Business” is firstly a rhythm and blues singer from the Chitlin’ Circuit, i.e. black Southern Americans. Every evening, the James Brown Revue plays in a different town, and everywhere he goes, the crowd is wild! Brown and Bart are convinced that these stage performances could—should--be recorded on a live record.

James Brown’s ambition is immeasurable; for the preparation of the recording at the Apollo Theatre, he doesn’t leave anything to chance. The entire show will be calculated to the slightest millimeter. For a whole week, Brown gives around 20 concerts and records four shows in a single day just to be certain that the sound recordings are perfect. He checks the microphone angles, the musicians’ costumes, as well as the theatre employees’ uniforms, which must be impeccable.

In the heart of the Cuban Missile Crisis, James Brown will deliver a thermonuclear performance.

“Are you ready for the Startime?”: after a brief introduction, by the book, by Fast Gonder, James Brown opens the concert with the words, “You Know I Feel All Right.” We immediately understand that James Brown is not messing around and that he is going to give us the maximum.

He takes his microphone and opens up with “I’ll Go Crazy,” setting the house on fire. He gets really crazy and so does the crowd. The A side of this album is made up of the soul numbers (“Think,” “Try Me, I’ll Go Crazy”), interspersed with short musical bridges as links. From the very beginning, we are impressed by the energy and precision of the orchestra, which plays non-stop, dressed as they are by “Mister Dynamite.”

The later number “Lost Someone” lasts almost 11 minutes and is breathtaking, and without a doubt, the masterpiece of the record. Originally it was cut into two parts, the second part opening the B side, but later on, it was put on a single cd audio track. (For years, a live rendition of the CD couldn’t be found as the copies were damaged and had been misplaced). A six-minute medley formed a stupefying track (“Please Please Please,” “You’ve Got The Power,” “I Found Someone”...) and closes the concert/album.

From a commercial point of view “Live At The Apollo,” entered the pop charts on the 29th June 1963, and remained there for 14 months, reaching number two and finishing the year at number 32, which was an unprecedented success for an R&B album, and the album became King Records’ biggest ever success.

This album was also an artistic turning point, as in 1962 nobody had ever heard anything like it, which consecrated James Brown as the Number One Soul Brother. It gave James Brown the confidence to affirm himself artistically and gain independence, creating his own label. This was also the beginning of several law suits between Syd Nathan and King Records in order to recuperate the royalties and own the masters. James Brown moved to Queens, which enables him to thrive off of the towns’ artistic melting pot and its music.

But this isn’t all! This album is situated at a key moment in black American music. The Southern Soul music, which up until now had only been listened to by black Americans, gained popularity with the young white public and federates all the country’s communities. A golden age for black American artists begins (Stax, Motown...) and the hope of change comes with the Civil Rights movement.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.