

*Musical Leaders vs. Trend Followers in Commercial Music
From James Brown to Prince*

By Jennifer Amaya

Popular musicians can be artists or products, originals or copies, true to themselves or true to their musical influences. What makes a popular musician great (or, “authentic”) is the ability to discern between influence and self-identity. Further, a great musician creates a balance in their music that is more heavily-weighted toward their true self, or innate talent, rather than their influences. Allowing influence (whether it be from previously-recorded musicians or record companies) to take over one’s identity in the music business creates a product void of raw talent -- and it is raw talent that makes someone truly original.

James Brown is a popular musician who always stayed true to himself. His biggest influence was the gospel church. He played harmonica and piano when he was young, and he had a desire to perfect boogie-woogie¹, which he practiced religiously on the piano in Trinity Baptist Church before Service. Brown grew up as poor as poor can be, his mother left him when he was just four years-old, and his father was rarely home; thus, he spent a lot of time alone, finding and getting to know himself. He says, “Being alone...gave me my own mind.”²

Brown’s credibility as a musician comes from his street experience and the necessity to use his raw talent in order to survive. He danced and sang for soldiers and others in the streets in order to make money for rent. By doing this, he found solace in music -- music became a part of his soul.

¹ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, prod. and dir. Jeremy Marre, 90 min., Educational Broadcasting Corporation and Isis Productions Ltd., 2003, DVD.

² *Ibid.*

Brown was often in trouble with the law. While serving his first sentence for petty theft (what he calls “stealing from the rich to give to the poor”), he started a gospel group in prison, where, besides learning to be a musical leader, he learned “the different parts [of gospel music] and how to put them together.”³ After an early release in 1952, Brown joined an acquaintance, Bobby Byrd, in a music group called “The Avons,” which eventually became “The Famous Flames,” playing music described as “secular rhythm and blues.”⁴ Byrd says of Brown, “He had that determination that he would be the best.” The drive for the “best” included signing a deal with a record label and becoming the leader of Byrd’s group, which was properly re-named, “James Brown *with* the Famous Flames.”⁵

And it was with the Famous Flames that Brown began developing his unique, percussive vocal style. His arrangements began including more “prominent horn instrumentation and a fast, highly accented rhythm track.”⁶ Brown explains, “I was still called a soul singer, but musically I’d gone off in a different direction... My strength was in the rhythm. I was hearing all the instruments like they were drums.”⁷ Slowly, a “James Brown sound” developed, and a new genre of music, “funk,” emerged.

Brown was always told that his music was “wrong.” His musicians have said things like, “Mr. Brown violates musical rules in all areas,” “You cannot count that, you cannot write that because it violates all musical rules,” and, “Things as simple as 1-2-3-4, if it doesn’t work with what he’s doing, then he may go 1-2-3 and a half.”⁸ Brown’s argument in favor of breaking musical rules was always that it *sounds good*, and that you can’t argue with God’s ears. His musicians have said, “He can hear things that we can’t hear,” and, “...he had a lot of talented musicians who could interpret what he would say to them.” “There’s no musical formula for it, there’s no musical theory for it, [it] just is... and it works.”⁹

³ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, DVD.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Brown, 5/8/06.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Brown, 5/8/06.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Brown, 5/8/06.


⁷ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, DVD.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

His musicians must have stayed with him because of his new and innovative musical ideas, and certainly not because he was a “nice guy.” Sure, at times Brown could be generous and tolerant, but more often than not he was a demanding tyrant. He wanted complete and total control of his enterprise, as he says, “I wanted to be the complete thing -- Business man, entrepreneur, and artist.” His bandsmen have said, “The main rule when you play with James Brown is [to] watch him... Go with him, whatever he does.”¹⁰ His musicians had to keep their eyes on him during performances or they’d be fined five-dollars for every infraction. (Brown can be seen giving his musicians a hand signal during performances, which was not a generous compliment to their playing, but rather was his five-dollar fine indication.) And nobody argued with Brown, either. One of his background singers said what all of his musicians knew and didn’t question: “You belonged to him and his entourage.”¹¹

A final part of Brown’s character that affected his music and helped to establish his originality was how he embraced his blackness. During the mid-1960s, Brown’s music became more openly political in regards to race. Black people needed Brown, and when his songs began to have messages for them, they listened. At a time when black identity was still up for grabs, Brown made his people stand tall with tunes such as “Say It Loud -- I’m Black and I’m Proud.” No other artist had ever done anything like that before.¹² Even so, Brown’s idea was not to segregate his people by preaching black pride, but, rather, to bring people together. He’d often fight blacks to have whites in his band.

Twenty years later a new artist emerged who was not quite so true to himself. Prince allowed the music of nearly every popular genre to affect his musical output, and he (and his name) also became the product of a large record company, Warner Brothers. When he realized that he had become a product, rather than a human being and true-to-himself musician, Prince was so bothered by this that he changed his name to , a

¹⁰ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, DVD.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

symbol that cannot even be pronounced, until his contract with Warner Brothers ended. Unfortunately, what Prince hadn't realized was that it was because of Warner Brothers that he and his music had been successful. After his break-up with Warner Brothers, Prince began using his name again, and made attempts at self-publishing and distribution. Most of his attempts were near-failures, and only when he hooked back up with large record companies did he see new commercial gain and success.

Prince's father was a jazz musician, and is credited for buying Prince his first guitar, and for exposing him to the piano. His parents gradually split up, and Prince eventually moved in with a neighborhood family, the Andersons. In junior high school, Prince and one of the Anderson boys, Andre, put together a band called "Grand Central," an instrumental band that played clubs and parties in the Minneapolis area.¹³ Like James Brown, Prince eventually took control of the band, writing arrangements for them, and becoming the band's leader. Prince began working on a demo tape, was promoted by a local producer (who labeled him as the "star of the future"), and was eventually picked up by Warner Brothers Records. Prince says that he got into music "to hear what it sounded like."¹⁴

Prince's credibility as a musician comes from his knowledge of music, styles, and instruments. He has always been praised for his musicianship and his ability to play all of the parts on all of the instruments in his band. His music was *different*, yet could always be traced back to its roots, with marked influences from Sly Stone and James Brown. Hence, his balance was more heavily-weighted toward influence than pure, raw talent.

Prince's music evolved out of funk, disco, rock, and soul. He was lucky and his timing was just right, being a bassist in the late 70s and early 80s, after Brown had made the bass into an important part of popular music. Prince was also lucky to be able to embrace the new technologies developing in the 80s, mainly of the MIDI revolution, to

¹³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_\(artist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_(artist)), 5/8/06.

¹⁴ *In Concert: Prince Rave Un2 the Year 2000*, prod. Prince, dir. Geoff Wonfor, 113 mins., Paisley Park

create new sounds. Prince was one of the first to use a drum machine which, by most musician's standards, is the most unmusical instrument ever made. Regardless, the truth is that without those new sounds, his music was just a hybrid of styles and things that had already been done before.

Like Brown, Prince was a demanding spirit. He had a reputation of "being difficult to work with, and for being highly protective and controlling of his music."¹⁵ Rather than embracing the business aspect of music as Brown had, Prince routinely evaded it, and is quoted as saying, "Money and art don't mix."¹⁶ Even so, untrue to himself, he learned the importance of the business and fell into its evils on several different occasions, especially after breaking free from Warner Brothers, when he learned quickly that his music was not good enough to make it on its own. As much as he'd like to say that he's being authentic and true to his music, in order to succeed in the commercial world, Prince had to mix business with pleasure, create marketing schemes (such as he did with his album *Musicology*), and give the public what they wanted, which did not include his authentic musical ideas.

Prince also did not embrace his black identity as James Brown had. As another marketing scheme, he tricked people into believing his mom was white and his dad was black. He has been convicted of aiding "those who saw blackness as a hindrance in the commercial marketplace by running from it."¹⁷ His band members were white and black, but not with the same intentions as Brown. Where Brown wanted to pull people together for the good of music, Prince's intention was to commercialize his band: "Prince intentionally enlisted a multi-racial, mixed-gender group, much like the backing band of one of Prince's most salient influences, Sly Stone."¹⁸ (Once again, an influence outweighed his originality.)

Enterprises Inc., 1999, DVD.

¹⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_\(artist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_(artist)), 5/8/06.

¹⁶ *In Concert: Prince Rave Un2 the Year 2000*, DVD.

¹⁷ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_\(artist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_(artist)), 5/8/06.

Funk music is a music “recognized by its syncopated three against four rhythms; thick bass line...; razor-sharp rhythm guitars; chanted or hollered vocals...; strong, rhythm-oriented horn sections; prominent percussion; an upbeat attitude; African tones; dance ability; and strong jazz influences.”¹⁹ Where James Brown is said to have created funk music, Prince is only credited with its further development, a sub-genre called the “Minneapolis sound.” Again, the differences are not nearly strong enough, nor its impact on music large enough, to support an argument that Prince is doing something “new” and “authentic.” Prince is simply adding elements of other genres to the funk music that James Brown created.

In comparing James Brown’s *Superbad* to Prince’s *Housequake*, for example, many similarities and a few minor differences surface. First, both artists address their audience with a controlling order. Brown says, “Watch me!,” and Prince says, “Shut up, already, damn!” With a similar personality, it’s not surprising that both artists would address their audience this way, but Brown did it first (and quite often). Further, both artists introduce their music as it happens within the tune. Brown says, “Bridge,” just before the tune jumps to the bridge, just as Prince says, “Everybody shut up. Listen to the band.” (Again, Brown did this first in his music, followed by others who copied him.)

Rhythmically, both pieces begin with a rhythm that emphasizes beat 1, followed by the “and” of beat 2. This sets up a complex and driving rhythmic feel that is also characteristic of funk. Both pieces have a danceable beat that, in Brown’s words, would “...make your body move.”²⁰ Again, there’s nothing wildly different about Prince’s groove compared to Brown’s, except that Prince’s groove has a more rock-like feel added to it, with emphasis on beats 2 and 4, rather than on 1 and 3, which is a more typical funk pattern. What keeps the music “funky,” however, is not just the drums, but a combination of the other percussive textures within the tunes, like the guitars, for example, which both Prince and Brown utilize.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funk_music, 5/8/06.

²⁰ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, DVD.

The bass is quite prominent in both pieces, playing a short ostinato figure that stays on the home key and is rarely varied. With a static bass part, there is little to no harmonic movement within either of the tunes -- another feature of funk music that stems from the music of Brown, and which Prince has copied.

Next, there are only one or two riffs in each song, and a ton of melodic repetition within the instrumental parts. In fact, it would probably be possible to break both tunes up into about ten small parts each, and it is safe to say that, vocals aside, each song is composed of about twenty measures of material, tops. (Both artists would be classified as minimalists in the classical world, as they're both quite successful at making large works out of a small amount of musical material.)

The instrumentation is very similar in both tunes -- primarily vocals, bass, drums, horns, and guitar, which is typical funk instrumentation. Prince has added some background vocals and a prominent synthesizer part (mostly holding a synth pad sound), which is really his big addition to funk music and the "Minneapolis sound." Brown's horns appear to be much more important and "up front," whereas Prince tends to hide them in the background, or uses a synthesizer to take their place. Regardless, the horn parts are very similar in shape to one another, as simple hits or ostinato riffs that enter and repeat over the rhythmic vamp. Brown allows his horns to take a solo, and Prince introduces a sax solo in his tune.

Each piece has a small contrasting section and an instrumental solo section. The vocals in both tunes are stripped of melody, and delivered in a more speech-like way, with all sorts of grunts and screams. Unfortunately for Prince, the rhythms, grunts, and screams are a direct link from Brown. (And Prince's falsetto vocal, when used, is not original, either, as it comes directly out of the 70s disco era.)

A final word should be mentioned about the artists' showmanship, where Prince can once again be directly linked to Brown. In addition to the wildly-colored costumes and dance moves, Brown was specifically very well-known for using a cape in his

performances, and Prince has historically done the same (or similar, with the use of large jackets that look like capes). Where Brown claims, “The cape comes from wrestling...but I took it a little further,” Prince cannot claim that he took the idea any further than Brown.

So, there are artists that are original and true to themselves, and there are artists who, while they believe that they are remaining true to themselves and their music, are instead influenced by what is going on around them. While their music can be very successful, when making authenticity comparisons, they cannot stand up to the raw talent of those before them, whose original ideas outweigh influences. In Prince’s case, while he was successful at creating a sub-genre of funk, his music is composed of too many other musician’s ideas to really call him original. James Brown, on the other hand, stayed true to himself when he claimed at the beginning of his career: “I’m going to express myself in a raw way.”²¹

²¹ *James Brown: Soul Survivor*, DVD.