

James Brown #*GetOnUp*: There's More to Being Brown and Black than Meets the Eye

Originally Published by *B. K. Nation.org* on August 3, 2014

by C. Liegh McInnis*

I just arrived home from viewing *Get on Up*. Of course, I went with high expectations, but the most I can give the film is a “B” rating. The acting is solid to good, but a seeming lack of budget and the non-linear narrative keeps me from giving the film an “A” rating. There are a few moments where the film feels more like a “made for TV movie” than made for the big screen, and that lessens the appeal for me. There are just some scenes that seem as if more money is needed to create more authenticity or ambiance. Also, I understand that they are aiming more for a “thematic” feel rather than a chronological narrative, but the back and forth—jumping ahead and then jumping to the past—causes the film to feel a bit choppy, fragmented, or incoherent. Thus, one does not get to see Brown’s career grow and explode. Yes, the audience does get those three or four seminal and career-defining moments, but they seem to lose power/intensity by not being provided chronologically. Yet, even with a “B” rating, I plan to view the film again, partly because of my love for James Brown, partly because it is a good—not great—film, and partly because I like noticing the scenes shot in and around Jackson, Mississippi. I know that last reason doesn’t factor into rating the film, but I was whispering to my wife, Monica, “that’s the Standard Life Building” throughout the film.

Two excellent aspects of *Get on Up* are the accurate and stylish cinematography and that it is unflinching in its truth-telling regarding all aspects of Brown’s life, following what Brown, himself, shares in his bio, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul*, and in a video documentary, *James Brown: Soul Survivor*. The film does not try to whitewash or “sugarcoat” Brown’s flaws nor does it turn Brown into a metaphor of black dysfunction. The film portrays Brown as a duality or complexity of the individual waging war with one’s negative circumstance. It is not quite a naturalistic or existential text because Brown is portrayed as one who believes in a higher, moral power; yet, Brown is also portrayed as one who is able to reconcile/minimize/justify his flaws with the notion that the flesh does what the flesh does and God provides forgiveness and understanding. My point is not to debate or justify this position but to show that the film does not create Brown as a sweeping stereotype or as a flat, one-dimensional caricature. Along with being supremely talented, Brown is shown to be extremely determined, loving, humble, egotistical, selfish, and violent: a human being. While some critics assert that the film minimizes Brown’s abuse of women. With only two scenes *Get on Up* shows how evil, irrational, and ego-driven domestic abuse is and that domestic abuse is a learned behavior, showing Brown engaging in the identical behavior as his father. Furthermore, one scene perfectly combines the issue of race with domestic abuse, showing that for a lot of men like James Brown domestic abuse was an irrational and egotistical response to feeling emasculated in a world dominated and controlled by white men even though they lived with and were supported by loving black women. Yet, in both scenes audiences are made well-aware that Brown’s demons regularly caused him to hit women and that he was a flawed human being for doing so.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is that *Get on Up* uses Little Richard to address and provide the most insightful statement regarding the economic and social racism that Brown and all African people experienced during the time. (To be clear, the film tells the truth that Little Richard not only dropped economic and social racism knowledge on James Brown,

but, truth be told, Richard has spent his entire life dropping this same knowledge on America yet has been ignored and minimized for being the bitter and overly flamboyant gay dude.) In this sense, one understands that the director, Tate Taylor, is seeking to show or focus on the complexity of racism in America and the multiple and complex ways in which African people responded to racism. Brown, himself, is a man with middle-class desires that often grapple with sensibilities developed from being impoverished and undereducated. The scene in which the audience sees young James Brown remove the shoes from a lynched man speaks volumes to the suffocating umbrella of white supremacist terror under which African people lived, and it also shows the type of cold, matter-of-fact, and sometimes inhuman responses that African people were forced to engage for their own, individual survival. Thus, as the film shows, Brown, himself, fluctuated violently between his responsibility to the race and his selfish desires for his own survival, as the film has him say more than once “James Brown takes care of James Brown” while in the same breath discussing the needs of “black folks”. Further, this is indicated well in the scene in which Brown is on an airplane expressing his frustrations of being called a separatist for associating with H. Rap Brown and the Nation of Islam and being called an Uncle Tom for meeting with the President Johnson. (Of course, the film would be more accurate if Brown were discussing his meeting with Nixon rather than with Johnson because his support of Nixon was the root of anger in the African American community.) Yet, many miss this aspect of the film because it is presented, again, in such a quick episodic manner, which should not be a flaw because a film can show only so much in two and a half hours and because people should not expect films to provide their complete history lesson. However, the reality is that many—probably the vast majority of people—who view *Get on Up* will not know this general aspect of American history or the specifics of Brown’s life, but can we fault the film for a viewer’s lack of knowledge?

Another aspect of institutional or racial oppression that the film addresses is the “Battle Royal” scene, which not only connects the film to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Wright’s *Black Boy*, but it also makes vivid the type of self-demeaning and dehumanizing oppression under which African Americans lived as they were systematically forced to attack each other for the reward of crumbs from the American pie. The so-called “crab in the barrel” syndrome, with which African Americans have been labeled, is a result of centuries of being forced to harm other African Americans to survive or gain favor with the white power structure. Additionally, the concept of the Battle Royal can also be read as the metaphor of the manner in which various African-American movements and ideologies have been forced to wage battle for the right to garner the one seat at the American table reserved for the one and only speaker of African Americans. (In fact Ellison’s “Battle Royal” is a spoof of Washington’s speech known as the “Atlanta Compromise” to show the lengths to which many have gone to become embraced by the white power structure as the “speaker of the race”.) Furthermore, the scene also underscores the manner in which the collectivity of the African-American community is relinquished for individual survival, providing more understanding to Brown’s attitude that “James Brown had to take care of James Brown” as it is only natural that everyone must care, first, for themselves, which is also emphasized in a humorous if also uncomfortable manner in the opening scene that replays the moment when Brown is angered about someone using his personal bathroom in the building he owns. The significance of the “Battle Royal” scene can be easily missed as it is presented in a form similar to magic realism as one of the seminal moments when Brown is filled with or understands “the groove” that inhabits him. As such, this is one of those moments that

viewers without a historical understanding of the “Battle Royal” will miss the scene’s significance in the film’s engagement of racism.

One final flaw of the film, if I can call it that, is that, while Chadwick Boseman’s acting is incredible, especially in capturing the general charisma of Brown and coming close to Brown’s stage presence, I never completely forget that there is an actor portraying Brown during the performance scenes. For instance, there is a moment in *Ray* when one forgets that it is Jamie Foxx and thinks that it is Ray Charles, and the same can be said of Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett in *What’s Love Got to Do with It?* But, that never quite happens with Boseman. Of course, that may be unfair given the fact that Brown is considered one of the most electrifying performers ever to take the stage. They didn’t call him Mr. Dynamite for nothing. I saw Brown perform eight times, spanning the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties, and, since the age of seven, I have seen the complete *TAMI Show* (1964) performance more times than I remember. So, for those who truly know how Brown changed the world musically/rhythmically, culturally, and with dance, it would be unfair to expect someone to be able to duplicate that movement in a way that causes one to forget that one is viewing a “portrayal” of Brown. Yet, to its credit, the film fights, or the film, itself, is a fighter. It is filled with great one-liners, and every time I was ready to dislike the film there is a moment that causes me to remember why I did have high expectations for the film. The relationship between Brown and his band, especially Bobby Byrd, is well done. The presentation of Brown as a man who took control of every aspect of his career, especially the “business” aspect, is also well done. The portrayal of how Brown’s dysfunctional childhood gave him his drive is clear and moving. And, Brown as an example that talent needs confidence and hard work can be used as a blueprint for young people pursuing their dreams. To this end, Boseman does a wonderful job humanizing Brown by providing a three-dimensional portrayal of a complicated man.

Even with its accomplishments, I wholeheartedly agree that the film is lacking a certain flavor due to the missing nuances not provided by not having any black writers. That may also be why the film has a certain “made for TV” feel to me rather than the intensity and grit that usually can only be produced on the big screen. However, when contemplating how the lack of black writers negatively impacts the film, award-winning screenwriter, Gregory Howard, in his article, “The Whitewashing of James Brown,” published by *Huffington Post.com*, fails to address the manner in which the film excellently utilizes the “Battle Royal” scene to lay the foundation for addressing how America’s institutional racism creates selfishness and chaos in the African-American community, which makes it even more difficult for African people to develop unity and strategy against institutional racism. To this end, Howard seems quite selective in his discussion of the film and misguided in his desires to lay blame regarding the ability of white people to seize, control, and tell black stories. I, however, wish that we (black artists, black critics, and lovers of black art) would do a better job criticizing us (black artists, black critics, and lovers of black art) for not doing a better job telling our own story. I have read a few articles, texts, tweets, and emails criticizing the film for it being another example of white people telling our story. Yet, if anyone wanted to tell James Brown’s story or Jimi Hendrix’s story, all one had to do was purchase the rights to the story. Unfortunately, Negroes purchase cars, houses, and jewelry, but we rarely purchase institutions. When white artists were being controlled and mistreated by white businessmen, they created United Artists (UA) to develop their own institution to make the films they wanted to make and reap the lion’s share of the

profits. At some point, we must start asking African artists what are we/they doing to reclaim control of our artistry, which, of course, means reclaiming control of our stories. The two times anyone was interested in or mentioned the possibility to purchasing the rights to my book of short stories, *Scripts: Sketches and Tales of Urban Mississippi*, it was a white person. (Because I didn't like their focus and emphasis and they didn't like what I would and would not rewrite, the talks never became more than a passing interest.) Yes, it would have been appropriate for the producers of *Get on Up* to hire a few black writers, but the flaws of the film are not just because all the writers are white. Moreover, why are we still standing on the sideline begging someone to allow us to become an active participant in our lives? With that in mind, we (black artists, black critics, and lovers of black art) must put the pressure on those of us (black artists, black critics, and lovers of black art) who have accomplished some level of success—however it is defined—and ask when we (black artists, black critics, and lovers of black art) will stop purchasing trinkets and start purchasing/reclaiming our legacy. The fact that there are no black writers on *Get on Up* is our fault for never—as a mass—embracing Black Nationalism so that we could build the funding and institutions needed to purchase our own stories and tell them how we desire them to be told. Yet, even with all of this, Howard is quite disingenuous in his critique because the film addresses racism in an unflinching manner, especially showing the complexity of racism and how that complexity creates complex beings and responses that are not always positive.

Along with Howard's failure to address the manner in which African-American artists fail to use their resources to construct sovereign institutions, let's not forget the \$10M or whatever the number is that black churches deposit in banks every Monday. I'm not saying that they shouldn't have it. I give to my church because I believe that Jehovah desires me to do so, but if that money was administered properly we wouldn't need the government to come into our communities and give us broken programs; our storehouses would overflow, and we could fund whatever programs and entertainment (entertainment that does not perpetuate our dysfunction) that uplifts us and does not destroy us. But, hey, it's easier to complain about what white folks are doing to us than to accept responsibility for what we are doing to ourselves. And for the people who will say that I'm attacking the church, my point is that African people rarely fund and administer the funding of our institutions in a manner that allow those institutions to become sovereign and meet the needs of our community. The very person who complains about giving to the church is the very person who complains when the air and heat don't work. The very person who complains about donating to the NAACP is the first fool who wants the NAACP to come save that fool from foolishness. Also, the leaders of our socio-political institutions must do a better job creating programs that lead our people from dependency to independence. Jesus did not use the Socratic mode of questioning because He wanted uninformed, dependent Christians. And, let me be clear. I think that the vast majority of white folks—not all of them but most of them—suffer from the virus of white supremacy, but since I think this I know that it is insane to waste time tripping about what they do rather than spending time trying to get African people to be better. The bottom line is that I can't say to a white person, "You are evil; le'me get \$5.00." Once I accept that we (African people) are on our own, then I must embrace the responsibility of self-determination. Any other action is insanity. Just like James Brown had to do for James Brown, African people must do for African people. And, I ain't tripping about anybody purchasing those expensive tickets to see JayZ and B if they got it. Lord knows how much money I've spent over the years on Prince. And, while the pleasure I received was worth

every cent, I don't want to hear Prince, JayZ, B, or any Negro talkin' 'bout they can't get a record or a movie produced 'cause if they can't it just means that they squandered their financial power down the drain of excess. These pseudo-intellectuals and pseudo-militant Negroes criticize Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, but at the end of the day Winfrey and Perry are the few African-American institution builders in the entertainment industry. Now, of course, I don't like much of what they create/produce, but what they do is a lot more creative and constructive than these Negroes who write these bs, blah, blah, blah articles about what white folks are doing to us; yet, these same Negroes will never embrace Black Nationalism. Again, if anyone wanted to produce a James Brown movie, all one needed to do was purchase the rights. It's not rocket science. Howard is an award-winning screenwriter so why didn't he use some of those talents to write an award-winning script about James Brown rather than wasting everybody's time bemoaning the fact that somebody else did? And, furthermore, just because there is one film about Brown does not mean that there can't be another. That's the whole point of art, to engage in the national or international discourse. The reason there are four books in the New Testament on Jesus is to provide four different perspectives, which provides a holistic or well-rounded understanding of who the man was/is. That's why we need several books written about King, and X, and Freedom Summer, and SNCC, etc. And, the same is true of film. We need multiple films on King, and X, and Freedom Summer, and SNCC, and James Brown. That's why I don't have a problem with the new film on Jimi Hendrix. Yet, I'm getting the feeling that the new Hendrix film, starring Andre Benjamin, will suffer from the same missing ingredient that hinders *Get on Up*. (As an aside, I am biased because I love Wood Harris' portrayal of Hendrix, and from what I've seen I don't think that I'll like Benjamin's portrayal as much, especially since the new film does not mention Hendrix's black girlfriend, Faye, at all.) Still, both films along with all the other books and documentaries will merely add to the discussion of Hendrix and his significance. So, I'm at a point in my life where I try to ignore these half-baked positions from these pseudo-militants because, to quote James Brown, most of them "are like a dull knife; they just ain't cutting—talkin' loud and sayin' nothin'."

By the end of the film, the audience is reminded how Little Richard and James Brown "shook up" the world, causing everyone from Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Prince to steal something from them. And, yes, the two scenes that feature Richard and Brown are, alone, worth the popcorn. And while the film does not provide a full sense of Brown's global influence and his continued influence on today's popular music, even with the fragmented presentation, three of the film's messages are clear and impactful: African Americans are the soul of America, just because one is down does not mean that one cannot get on up, and African Americans need to remember/be taught their genius in all aspects of life to demolish this current culture of nihilism. My Uncle Punchie would always say to me, "Man, you don't understand; from 1964 to 1970, James Brown liked to danced us to death." And, my father would always say, "With one song, James Brown changed how the vast majority of Black folks felt about themselves." As such, it may be expecting too much for a film to get it all right, but I do plan to add this one to my collection when it becomes available as a DVD.

*C. Liegh McInnis is the author of seven books, the former editor/publisher of *Black Magnolias Literary Journal*, and an instructor of creative writing at Jackson State University. He can be contacted at www.psychedelicaliterature.com.