

Rhythm as a Counter-cultural Political Instrument of Empowerment in James Brown’s ‘Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud’

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“Where words fail, music speaks.” Hans Christian Anderson

Abstract

Like other art forms, the tensely-rhythmical genre of funk music has often been touted as a powerful weapon to counter race-based regimes and carry overt political messages during the tension-filled period of the civil rights movement in America. More particularly, at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, funk music, which evolved from Rhythm and Blues, jazz and soul music, inspired the African American community to break free from the fetters of institutional racial segregation and give voice to the downtrodden black race. Funk music is typified by its powerfully-rhythmical tones which echo much dynamism and energy. The song’s strong bass lines, drumbeats, syncopated beats and the recurrent refrain all along the song: “Say it Loud, I’m Black and Proud” create rhythmic patterns that awaken black consciousness and emphasize black pride. Accordingly, that rhythm is a carrier of power is the quintessence of the present paper. It is a medium of expression that conveys life-changing thoughts. In this song, rhythm is featured as an effective strategy to re-construct the new Black identity and chart a new life wherein racial equity prevails. Brown’s rhythm-driven patterns are a prelude to a new life African Americans have long been waiting for.

Keywords: rhythm, funk music, blacks, pride, empowerment, culture

1 Introduction

“The objective of African music is ... to translate everyday experiences into living sound ... to depict life, nature, or the supernatural”. Frances Bebey

Art has often been touted as a weapon of empowerment. In *Art as Therapy* (2013), Alain De Botton and John Armstrong declare that “[l]ike other tools, art has the power to extend our capacities beyond those that nature has originally endowed us with. Art compensates us for certain inborn weaknesses, in this case of the mind rather than the body, weaknesses that we can refer to as psychological frailties” (p. 5). Literature, as an art form, has often operated not only as an effectual means of expression but also as an influential tool of resistance throughout history. Words are, indeed, as powerful as swords in opposing race-based regimes.

Nonetheless, words may sometimes fail to express a certain message. Accordingly, other art forms, most specifically, music can be used to lay bare the effects of the unjust regimes and lay the ground for a more equitable society. Four months or so after the assassination of Martin Luther King, “The Godfather of Soul”, James Brown released his 1968 song “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” which typically fuses multiple vocal styles. In funk music, in particular, rhythm is a powerful element that reflects the ailments of the African-American community. Accordingly, an intermixture of music and language can only create monumental effects as is the case in James Brown’s ground-breaking 1968 song “Say it Loud, I’m Black and Proud” which was written by Alfred Ellis, his bandleader.

2 Literature Review

The power of rhythm may sometimes exceed and go beyond the power of words. The tensely rhythmic “Say it Loud, I’m Black and Proud” has a paramount role in raising black pride and capsizing the inhumane social parameters of the African-American community. Music is, indeed, an art form that is no less significant than other means of resistance. Black music is a tool of expression and an effective way to denounce the inequities of the past and pave the way for a more equitable future. Several studies have been conducted on Brown’s song.

In this context, “Black musicians are the village griots, the revisionist historians, and the voice of a people” as declares Kesha M. Morant in “Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post-Civil Rights Movement Counterculture” (Morant, 2011, p. 71). The ferocious rhythm of funk entails a call into action. In “Say it Loud”, Brown gives voice to the black consciousness and shapes afresh the black identity. Musicians, chief among them James Brown, tried to invent patterns that echoed much energy and dynamism.

With his band The Famous Flames, Brown gives birth to a powerful song that fights for the rights of the African-American community. Brown’s song aims to inspire blacks to break free from the shackles of the race-based ancient regime. It also counters the mainstream belief that blacks are second-class citizens. Through the powerfully rhythmical patterns, Brown tries to show that blackness is a source of pride, beauty, and integrity. Therefore, the tensely rhythmical song puts blackness on a high pedestal as is reflected in the recurrent refrain “I’m Black and Proud”. Through a merger of various musical instruments like drums, the trumpet, the bass, and the guitar, Brown produces highly rhythmic sounds that endow the song with much force. In “Groove Theory: A Vamp on the Epistemology of Funk” (2013), Tony Bolden states that:

Brown's tour manager, Alan Leeds, came to a similar conclusion after watching old videotapes, pointing out that a lot of Brown's movements "were code[s] for the drummers—a certain hand signal, a certain move of the foot. Every move of the foot demanded a rim shot. Or a kick. And there are certain moves of the hand that said, I want a hit here; I wanna break this down." (pp. 13-14)

Thus, a characteristic of James Brown's music is the rhythm-driven style of funk. By changing from the upbeat to the downbeat, Brown produces unprecedented yet appealing sounds. Added to the powerful polyrhythms archetypal of funk music, the empowering lyrics of his song are "no less telling than his music" as argues Matthew P. Brown in *Funk Music as Genre: Black Aesthetics, Apocalyptic Thinking and Urban Protest in Post-1965* (2006, p. 484). Combined, words and rhythm create one perfect whole to lay the ground for the creation of a desegregated society. What funk requires is social engagement, "its ability to 'stir people up and involve' em" (p. 485). The power of funk lies in its rhythmical structures and influential lyrics.

"Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" has received considerable attention from critics and scholars regarding its many peculiar aspects. Yet, the power of rhythm as a counter-cultural weapon of empowerment is still under-researched. Therefore, this paper aims to show that the aggressive rhythm of funk music bespeaks Brown's fierce dedication to cut ties with the strictures of race and color and establish a new culture wherein blacks vocally express their pride and gain political visibility.

3 Analysis

3.1 *Rhythm speaks out in "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud"*

The tensely-rhythmical music genre of funk originated in the African-American communities where it sprang up from the black Rhythm and Blues, soul, and jazz in the mid-1960s. In *The Encyclopedia of African American Music* (2010), funk is defined as "rhythmic, groove-oriented music that emphasizes the one beat, and is characterized by horns and electric instrumentation, especially bass, keyboard, and guitar. [It is] an amalgam of the gospel, soul, jazz fusion, rhythm and blues, and black rock" (Prince III et al. 2010, p. 337). Typically an African product, funk was released to incite blacks to feel prouder of their origin and celebrate their African heritage. In black music, sounds emanate from the African past and are, therefore, adjusted to the very African specificities. Rhythm in funk imitates the African lifestyle and is fashioned in a way that echoes the idiosyncratic African experience. The harshness of rhythm and the aggressive timbre of singing bespeak the brutalities of the past and the unprecedented readiness to counter the social, political, cultural, and ethnic parameters of America as succinctly stated in "The Moan within the Tone: African Retentions in Rhythm and Blues Saxophone Style in Afro-American Popular Music" (1995) by D. Miller:

In Africa and throughout the diaspora, black musicians produce an array of unique sounds many of which imitate those of nature, animals, spirits and speech ... [by] ... the manipulation of timbre, texture and shading in ways uncommon to Western practice. Hence the human voice plays such a central role in African music and is utilised in all manner of ways to achieve a wide range of timbres and nuances. (Miller, 1995, p. 161)

That said, in "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud", for example, rhythm is used in a way that reflects the intensity of the African experience. The use of high-pitched sounds along with the fierce timbre of Brown's voice echoes much force and nigh rage. This forceful song ultimately aims to resist the narrow classifications of the past and arouse feelings of pride and

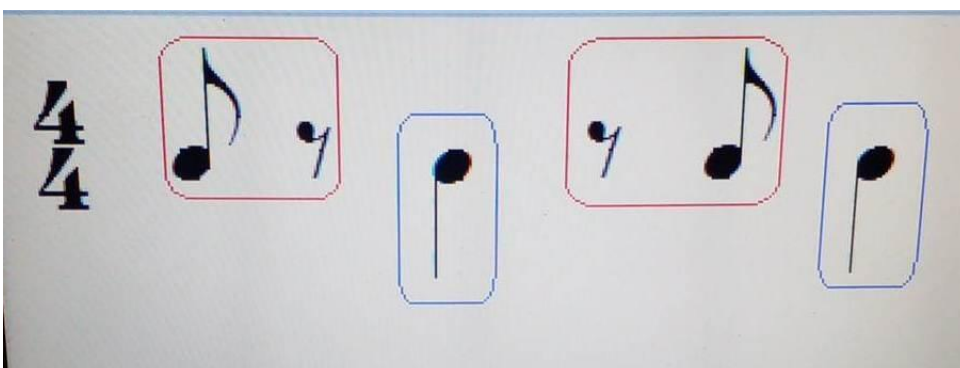
dignity, ultimately. Black African-American music is “a collection of stories told by individuals through the phenomenon of sound and the tools of melody, harmony, rhythm, and a few additional spices” (Prince III et al. p. xxxii). Funk music is typified by its ferocious tones as well as a few other elements like moans, cries, and loud groans. Rhythm is a way to whip blacks to a frenzy with high-pitched screams that can but reverberate the brutalities of racial segregation on the one hand and the burning desire to fashion a new sense of black pride on the other hand.

At the outset, when delving into the crux of funk music, several identifying traits can be brought forth. Principally, it is typified by syncopation, strong downbeats, and grooves driven by the bass guitar. Syncopation is one of the features that typify funk music. It is about the displacement of the regular accents and placing rhythmic stresses where they are unexpected. The accentuation of beat one consists of emphasizing the weak beats to create a distinguishable rhythmic pattern. Contrary to a traditional rhythm which places stress on the backbeats of the musical measure, funk music stresses the first note, which astonishes the listener and grabs his attention. That is to say, a syncopated beat puts stress where it would not normally be.

Syncopation, which quite simply refers to the displacement of the regular flow of beats by putting the accent on weak beats, may be symbolic of giving voice to the voiceless. More to the point, blacks are given a voice the same way downbeats are accentuated. Syncopation has a major effect which is shocking the listener and grabbing his attention. Thus, rhythm, in funk music, is emphasized over lyrics for it helps convey the main theme of the song. A strong rhythmic groove also creates an enjoyable rhythm that excites the listener. The rhythmical structures ¹keep alternating all along the poem.

It is by dint of rhythmical patterns that Brown captures the attention of the African-American community. **Due to syncopation, the rhythmical patterns are as aggressive as the themes. The forceful interplay of syncopation creates much** tension. Syncopation, thus, enlivens the rhythmical patterns of the song and keeps the listener's body in motion. Accordingly, rhythm is intense as it involves a call to action. The zealous rhythm fosters black nationalism. Brown recalls the spiteful conditions blacks have been subjected to: “[w]e have

¹ This is a simplified version of the rhythmical structures repeated all along the song. Each column represents one beat. The red one refers to the accentuated first beat of the musical measure whereas the blue one refers to the drums. Due to syncopation, the rhythmical patterns are aggressive and quite violent. There is an aggressive interplay of syncopation and drumming.



been buked and we have been scorned. We have been treated badly [SIC] (Say it Loud)". He similarly incites his community to combat the malign practices of the past. He declares that they "won't quit moving until [they] get what [they] deserve". Due to syncopation, the song teems with excitement, force, and energy. Placing emphasis on weak beats and de-emphasizing strong beats creates attention-grabbing sounds. Arguing along similar lines, in *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (1995), Samuel A. Floyd Jr proclaims that "[it] is against the timeline that the other instruments play the multilinear rhythms that yield the exciting interlocking, cross-rhythmic, and polyrhythmic configurations of African music" (p. 28). A violent yet deft interplay of musical instruments creates polyrhythms.

Drumming enlivens Brown's music. "Brown's high level of artistic control", contends Alexander Stewart in "Funky Drummer': New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music" (2000), "enabled him to bring a virtuosic style of drumming to the forefront of his music" (p. 304). The Brownian music style serves to celebrate racial differences and disdain the racialized practices of the past clearly translated in the aggression of its rhythm (*La nervosité du style*). Funk, which is rooted in African traditions, is closely associated with celebrating their ethnicity. Stewart affirms that "[m]usicians and listeners perceived African qualities and, especially during an era of rising black nationalism, the intricate, more 'in-your-face' style of drumming easily became identified as a funky celebratory march of ethnic difference" (Stewart, p. 304). Picking up a group of drummers who rhythmically play on drums creates much excitement:

During the mid-1960s, Brown often carried five or even six drummers on the road. His four-hour extravaganzas and unamplified drums demanded frequent changes of drummers. Although typically only one drummer played at a time, Brown seems to have liked the visual impact of several drum sets on stage. (Stewart, p. 304)

The effect of a number of drums rhythmically tapped on makes the song quite danceable. This fusion of multiple musical instruments reflects Brown's "high level of artistic control (unusual for black artists at that time) that enabled him to foreground this more active, aggressive style of drumming" as Keshia M. Morant states in "Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post-Civil Rights Movement Counterculture" (2011, p. 106). Playing on several drums by the "large bullpen of drummers also enabled [Brown] to make frequent changes [...] if he wanted fresh energy or a different feel" (p. 106). This is inherent in the African tradition clearly visible in "this heightened emphasis on percussion" (p. 106). Brown, thus, bases his song on African qualities that make it a typically African-American product.

Quite ferociously, Brown lets out high-pitched cries to incite blacks to strive to get their rights. "But just as sure as it takes two eyes to make a pair, ha. Brother, we can't quit until we get our share", so he states to express his relentless attempts to resist the hegemonic institutions at that time. The desire to dance may be a way to celebrate the new culture Brown tries hard to diffuse. Quite succinctly, Brown's revolutionary mindset is not only reflected in the lyrics of his song but also in the way rhythm is woven. Brown makes use of complex rhythms which are layered to create polyrhythmic patterns. The song is, thus, polyrhythmic. The polyrhythms are danceable and create rhythmic tension.

The scream singing technique is one of the rhythmical ornaments (des éléments paramusiquaux) that make the song more powerful and meaning-laden. Screaming, which is paramount in this song, adds to the harshness of the rhythm. It is popular in aggressive music genres as it helps to clearly communicate the message of the song. The recurrent sudden, ferocious, and high-pitched cries have effects on the listener. The song's highly aggressive rhythms echo the harsh reality of the 1960s. The lyrics display several issues like slavery, racial strife, rebellion, and black pride. Themes are, indeed, as varied as the polyrhythms Brown and his band employ. Rhythmical patterns, screams, and politicized lyrics make up one perfect whole: a song that is no less influential than other forms of resistance. To sum up:

Many African languages are tonal and African Americans transferred some of that tonal tendency into features of their vernacular English and music. Consequently, it is the rhythmic and tonal pattern of speech that determined the rhythmic and melodic framework for early African American vocal and instrumental music. Rich mixtures of vocal devices are used to infuse both vocal and instrumental African American music with additional expressive and emotional dimension. African vocal and instrumental expression includes the indefinite pitch used in African American music to approximate speech—vocal effects that include screams, shouts, moans, and groans. (Prince III et al, pp. 5-6)

Quite significantly, Brown uses a call-and-response format while addressing a chorus of children which is rooted in the black spiritual and gospel tradition. Children are said to be white or Asian, which reflects the fact that Brown tries hard to move beyond racial boundaries and fuse different ethnicities. As a corollary, "Say it Loud" celebrates multi-racialism and paves the way for a race-neutral community. The refrain "I'm Black and Proud" is repeated many times by a group of children which stresses the aggressive timbre of Brown's voice. To go beyond the pejorative beliefs often associated with blackness, Brown shouts to convey the long-awaited message: "Black is beautiful". The repetition of the rhythmic patterns "Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud" all along the song brings to the fore the central theme which is rising black pride. Blackness is no longer a disgrace but something to be proud of.

Hence, rhythm speaks louder than the lyrics in "Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud". Through a merger of multiple rhythms, Brown and The Flames give birth to a ferocious funk song that seeks to liberate the black community. Funk is a means of rebellion against the race-based society blacks live in. Funk is, therefore, a means of self-expression and an efficient way of self-liberation. During the civil rights movement, music was one of the non-violent strategies of resistance blacks used to fight back against the opposing regime. Brown's rhythm-driven song aims to provide a space for an embrace of people of African descent in the United States. Accordingly, funk and politics are interrelated.

3.2 Funk and Politics

The civil rights movement has been, indeed, a fertile soil for the development of various tools of resistance in the struggle for justice in America. Black music has operated as a non-violent means of resistance against the race-based regime. To quell the unrest and anxiety that black Afro-Americans felt during the Civil War, Brown released his song "Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud" which fosters black pride and vocally advocates the rights of blacks without innuendo in a tensely rhythmical music style. In "Message in the Music: Political Commentary

in *Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop* (2005), James B. Steward states that “[s]ome anthropologists argue that music played a functional role in early human development by facilitating transmission and retention of information necessary for individual and group survival” (p. 198). Thus, during the tension-filled period of the civil rights movement, music served as a vehicle for collective empowerment.

In a highly tense timbre, Brown tries to oppose the practices of the past, unveil the effects of legalized institutional segregation and promote self-liberation. Through this polyrhythmic song, Brown awakens social consciousness and tries to endow blacks with power. Brown strived hard to counter the mainstream culture at that time which advocated white supremacy. The song is imbued with a rebellious spirit that reflects the rise of consciousness among blacks. The merger of multiple rhythms communicates a political message the gist of which is the following: blacks should pride themselves on their blackness and fashion a new sense of selfhood. More to the point, music functions as a weapon to go beyond the narrow classifications of color during the civil rights movement:

Through an egalitarian distribution of power across the band, vocalists deliver not only text, but also grunts, hollers, chants, and moans, invoking West African polyrhythm. Funk lyrics vary but common themes include pride, power, freedom, love, aspects of black culture, sexuality, and spirituality. Funk music helped negotiate black mass culture by reconciling post-civil rights identity through pulsing dance rhythms with politically articulate words. (Prince III et al, p. 337)

Funk, indeed, introduced a counter-cultural model as it linked the notorious concept of blackness with pride. Quite significantly, “[f]unk not only changed the structure of music but also the structure of race and power in America” (Prince et al, p. 341). Now that politics is no longer an off-limit to musicians, resisting the status quo and laying bare its injustices is the major aim of African-American artists. In this sense, Keshia M. Morant contends that “[m]usic accompanied many prominent protest movements, including the civil rights and Black power movements” (p. 71). Typically a political song, “Say it Loud” becomes the anthem of the civil rights movement. Quite conspicuously, Brown conveys a political message: black Americans are equal to whites. Black empowerment is their whole and sole aim as expressed in the following lyrics:

We’d rather die on our feet

Than be living on our knees (“Say it Loud”).

Fair enough, these powerful lines convey much willingness to capsize the discriminatory parameters of the African-American community and to struggle for liberation. No longer able to bear the subservience inflicted upon blacks, Brown released his political song as a bold, urgent, and unprecedented call for liberation. Released four months after the assassination of Martin Luther King, “Say it Loud” marks a tension-filled moment in African-American history. Brown strives to free the black race from the paralyzing strictures of color. He goes further to proclaim that:

We demand a chance to do things for ourselves

We’re tired of beating our head against the wall

And working for someone else

We're people, we like the birds and the bees

That being said, redeeming the position of the black man is the major aim of funk music as a non-violent means of resistance. Brown tries to reframe American society by keeping at bay the narrow classifications of subjectivities. When addressing the white man Brown says "so tough. You're tough and rough". Typically a political music genre, the song underscores the wrongdoings of whites. Brown draws an awful image of the racist practices black Americans have been subjected to. He proclaims:

I worked on jobs with my feet and my hands
But all the work I did was for the other man.

That being said, popular black music is a medium through which "the struggles, faith, and joys of a people are expressed" as Kesha M. Morant affirms (p. 72). In fact, "[m]ore than mere entertainers, Black musicians serve as the village griots, the revisionist historians, and the voice of a people" (p. 72). Brown, in this case, expresses the societal woes of the black community through his song. Accordingly, "African American music solidifies the message of the societal concerns of a period by offering snapshots of social conditions and historically defining moments within a society" (p. 72). Funk is meant to confront, oppose, and resist the race-based regime and fashion the contours of the black identity. The black man is born to be proud of his skin color. Brown diffuses a new culture that hails Blackness as a grace instead of something disgraceful. Morant goes further to proclaim that:

"Say It Loud," was more than a cry of protest; it was also a call to action. The immediacy and intensity of the song resonated with the Black community unlike any popular music that had come before: "'Say It Loud' was a turning point in black music. Never before had black popular music explicitly reflected the bitterness of blacks toward the white man _ and here it is done with ferocious funk" (Vincent, 1996, p. 78). The music "was a scorching expression of the black man's soul, just when the entire world was listening in anticipation" (p. 74). The musical content encompassed self-empowerment, celebration, and self-love. It paved the way for improved self-esteem and community esteem, challenged societal social norms, and, most important, created an avenue for self-definition. (p. 74)

Quite clearly, funk is radical enough to oppose the dominant power structure at that time. Fair enough, the song is counter-discursive as it challenges the deeply inherent premises of the African-American community. Funk provides a space for self-redefinition. Music is a weapon of empowerment as it touches on various social as well as ideological issues. "Through music and language, we can trace salient ideas, emotions, and events chronicling the history of human development. It helps to expose the way a given people walk, talk, joke, think, strategize, love, and approach survival" (Prince III et al, p. 5). Feelings of pride and liberation are overtly expressed in this music genre.

"Say it Loud" contributed to the success of the civil rights movement as it urged blacks to rebel against the remnants of slavery and seek re-definition as American citizens. Quite conspicuously, "[m]usic is a mirror that reflects our total experience through physical, emotional, intellectual, sonic, individual, and collective musical expression. It reflects elements of an era, culture, and society wherever it functions" (Prince III et al, p. 5). The violent funk

music aspires to bring to an end socioeconomic inequalities, racial segregation, and disenfranchisement. Combined, rhythm and lyrics create a powerful art form.

Rhythm fuels the black community's desire to break free from the fetters of institutional segregation. "Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud" fuses multiple vocal styles. The song's strong bass lines, drumbeats, syncopated beats, and the recurrent refrain all along the song: "Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud" create rhythmic patterns that awaken black consciousness and emphasize black pride. Through a merger of various musical instruments like drums, the trumpet, the bass, and the guitar, Brown produces highly rhythmic sounds that endow the song with much force and energy. Rhythm, in this case, is a carrier of power and a way to introduce a new culture within the African-American community. What adds to the revolutionary tone of the song is its unprecedented rhythmical structure.

4 Conclusion

In the late 1960s and early 1970s music came up with a new vision of the African-American identity. What Brown pines for is deconstructing the racialized image that stigmatizes blacks. Breaking free from the narrow classifications of the past and the stereotypes inflicted upon Black Americans is one of the messages Brown conveys through his song. Reconstructing an African American identity that empowers blacks is what he seeks out. Rhythm is, thus, a weapon of empowerment and a tool of resistance in the history of rebellion against hegemonic institutions in America.

With the advent of funk, leaders strategically dissolve the racialized assumptions of the past. The intensity of rhythm communicates much dedication and fury in the project of black liberation and the struggle for social justice. Through his rhythm-driven song, Brown expresses how much he abhors the racist classifications nurtured in America. Funk is a socially and politically utilitarian repository of racial consciousness as it urges blacks to liberate themselves from the fetters of color and establish an equal-opportunity and desegregated society. Accordingly, funk is a style of music and a site of black identity re-construction.

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