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The Funky Divas Talk Back: Dialogues about Black Feminism, Masculinity, and Soul Power in the Music of James Brown

E. Taylor Atkins

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One of the persistent themes of James Brown's music was the assertion of manliness and male entitlement to sexual attention and deference from women. Yet Brown also enabled some of the most forceful expressions of a specifically black feminism by producing records for Vicki Anderson, Marva Whitney, Lyn Collins, and others, with lyrics reflecting black women's individual and collective struggles in relationships with men and offering instruction and inspiration for self-assertion within those relationships. This article examines internal dialogues within James Brown productions of the 1960s and '70s that expressed grievances in a black American battle of the sexes, but also sought to foster gender reconciliation through "soul power."

The Godfather of Soul, James Brown (1933–2006), waded into the turbulent waters of second-wave feminism when he opened the jittery jam of "It's a New Day" with an indignant spoken exchange with his all-male band, the JBs:

> JB: Fellas, things done got too far gone.
> Band: Tell us about it. That's right.
> JB: We got to let the girls know what they got to do for us!
> Band: Yeah!
> JB: It's done got to be a drag, man, a man can't do nothin' no more! A-ha-ha-ha-ha!
> [Horn riff and guitar lick start] It's really a drag. Got to do somethin'. Can I tell 'em?
> Looka here.

Other songs comprising the 1970 LP *It's a New Day—So Let a Man Come In*—a hodgepodge collection of new funk workouts, older singles, and fully orchestrated examples of Brown's dalliance with the "supper club" set—perhaps give the impression of a concept album dedicated to masculine assertion; however, "Let a Man Come In and Do the Popcorn," "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World," "The Man in the

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Glass," and, arguably, "If I Ruled the World" never cohere as fully articulated artistic statements. Later singles, especially "Hot Pants (She Got to Use What She Got to Get What She Wants)," make it tempting to characterize Brown's response to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a misogynistic backlash, an effort to re-establish a male-dominated order in which women were primarily and fundamentally objects for male titillation and sexual conquest.

Brown's real-life relationships with women provide ample fodder for such a view. He was married four times and his controlling and abusive behavior toward his wives and lovers considerably blemish a record that also includes admirable humanitarianism, courageous racial self-assertion, entrepreneurial pluck, and musical innovation. Like his close contemporary, jazz legend Miles Davis, James Brown was a man of relatively short stature who had trained as a boxer and routinely expressed his insecurities, jealousy, and anger toward female companions with his fists and feet (or, in the case of Tammi Terrell, a hammer).[1] He put a gun to the head of Marva Whitney when she gave notice she was leaving his revue (Whitney xiii, 142–43). Although, as his former bandleader Fred Wesley makes clear, JB was little more respectful toward the men in his organization, Brown regularly displayed a domineering, contemptuous attitude and a presumption of male privilege toward women with whom he was involved, and his conduct toward women whom he employed would today be "actionable" as unambiguous sexual harassment (R. J. Smith 138–39; Wesley; Whitney 73–75, 90–95).[2]

Yet, as is so often the case with James Brown, the story is much more complicated than that. During the fertile period when he recorded "It's a New Day," "Hot Pants," and multiple versions of "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine," he oversaw parallel projects that featured women artists preaching black female empowerment and self-assertion and frequently "back-talking" songs within Brown's own oeuvre. These songs, by artists such as Marva Whitney (1944–2012), Vicki Anderson, Lyn Collins (1948–2005), Yvonne Fair (1942–94), Martha High, and Elsie May—collectively and retroactively dubbed "James Brown's Original Funky Divas" on a 1998 anthology—were significant statements of feminist assertion. Brown's involvement as producer, composer, and "overseer" (a term whose connotations I quite deliberately invoke) certainly circumscribed the artistic autonomy of the singers themselves: their recording sessions were "hurried," with little time for rehearsal, and they rarely chose what they recorded or received credit or royalties for what they wrote (Parker 137; Whitney 91). Nonetheless, the body of work they produced constituted a forthright expression of black women's individual and collective struggles in relationships with men, and offered instruction and inspiration for self-assertion within those relationships.[3] Though manipulated and abused by Brown behind the scenes, these women projected a public image and carried a message that asserted the dignity of black womanhood.

I contend that James Brown's productions featuring female artists in the 1960s and '70s constituted one half of an *internal dialogue* between black women and men about gender relations in African America. Songs within this body of work were in explicit

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conversation with one another, sometimes engaging in a frank—yet hardly humorless—battle of the sexes. For an artist so famously protective of his own image as an authority figure, Brown not only allowed but also enabled a surprising amount of candid "back talk" from the Funky Divas, as a counterpoint to his own ceaseless, fervent assertions of black masculinity, virility, and entitlement. Messages about gender politics from Brown productions were in explicit contradiction: although his own releases persisted in objectifying women, asserting male privilege, and expressing exasperation with feminist demands, the Funky Divas' collective message about self-respect and female autonomy was as clear and unyielding an articulation of feminist empowerment as any found in popular music of the time. This paradox notwithstanding, the objective of this musical conversation was the public reconciliation of black women and men as a community of mutual respect, sexual reciprocity, and collective racial empowerment, through what JB called *soul power*. As "soul sisters" and "soul brothers," black people had to resolve their differences, speak truthfully, and redirect their antagonisms away from one another and toward the internal and external forces that held them back from individual and collective achievement.

I use the term "Funky Divas" for convenience to describe a group of women who successively released Brown-produced records under their own names or had solo features in his live revue. These singers rarely shared the stage or studio together when they were with Brown, but rather replaced one another as someone left his show. The *diva* appellation connotes a woman supremely confident in her musical or theatrical talent, and independent to the point of difficulty. It appears to have been used in the 1990s for marketing purposes, to capitalize on a popular fascination with the "pop diva," as indicated by the *VH1 Divas* television specials, to sell the CD anthology, and to generate interest in a "reunion tour" by Whitney, High, Anderson, and Collins. The term "*original* funky divas" marked them as the foremothers of groups like En Vogue, whose second album was entitled *Funky Divas* (1992). Moreover, as the word *funky* itself became a form of praise and emblem of pride, the funkiness of these females was noteworthy. Funk was a male-dominated subgenre of rhythm and blues; aside from Betty Davis, Betty Wright, and Chaka Khan, few women were identified with it, a fact Vicki Anderson herself noted on one of her records ("The boys don't think we can get down"). James Brown's Original Funky Divas were a happy medium between the raw sexual aggression of Davis and the jazz-inflected sophistication of Chaka Khan: earthier and grittier than the latter, they were more restrained and less voracious than the former; but their determination to "get down" to the grooves over which their voices soared gave them credibility as formidable funkateers. It did not hurt to have the widely acknowledged progenitor of funk behind them.

JB's reputation as a control freak is so well established that it is difficult to imagine his female singers having a great deal of creative autonomy, though neither should we presume they had none. "James picked all of my songs, of course," Whitney recalled, "as well as what I wore." Still, she did record her own material, including "I Made a Mistake Because It's Only You" (King 45-6268), a song she wrote "to appease James

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and stop him being mean to me" (and for which, ironically, Brown claimed co-writer credit) (91, 139). Lyn Collins later said that the Godfather "gave you the feeling that you better do it now while you got the chance. He never said it, but you kind of got that feeling" (qtd in S. Smith 13). "I could never figure out why," Maceo Parker reminisced, "but James treated Lyn really harshly. He used to tell her right before the show that he wanted her to do a new tune that she wasn't familiar with. She had to scramble around to find a recording for the song to learn the lyrics, which wasn't always possible" (Parker 137; Whitney 198). Whitney figured that "he didn't want any of his singers looking or sounding better than him" (138–39). Fred Wesley likewise remembers Brown as a master of mind games, who kept his employees constantly on edge: "When you're playing a game, be sure you know who is on your side and who is on their own side. In the James Brown game, everyone was forced to be on their own side. I learned that each person was there for his or her own reasons and dealt with the situation in his or her own way" (Wesley 154–55, 160–61; see also R. J. Smith 255, 299–300; Whitney 76, 138–39; Parker 119, 137, 143). No doubt, like many a manager, Brown believed that insecurity would elicit better performance and greater loyalty. Nonetheless, whether or not he actually wrote any of the Funky Divas' feminist anthems and response songs, they certainly had his blessing and the full benefit of his resources. We know that, although James Brown took umbrage at any perceived slight or challenge to his authority within his organization, he not only permitted but also sponsored very public "back talk" between songs in his catalog.

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I Know You Got Soul

One of the perks of being Soul Brother #1 is the presumed authority to determine what soul is, who has it, and who does not. James Brown did not hesitate to exercise this authority. As nebulous a concept as *soul* is, in his recorded and live performances Brown provided ample clues to the qualities and credentials that made one a soul brother or sister; he magnanimously acknowledged (or conferred) soul in his audience, in his band and in the Funky Divas, situating himself within an egalitarian populist community while still making clear that he was the first among equals. It was James Brown who brought these people together, who identified and celebrated their bonds to one another and to him, and who gave a name to those bonds. And yet, as he regularly proclaimed onstage, "I'll never forget who I am, where I came from, how I got here, and who put me here: *YOU*." James Brown was both *of* the soul people and *above* them. His own personal story of childhood privation and adult accomplishment was in fact too compelling for anyone to seriously challenge his dual authority as the people's representative and their high priest, responsible for calling them to mindfulness of the soul they shared.

The 1971 double LP *Revolution of the Mind: Live at the Apollo, Vol. III* captures a remarkable ritual moment in which the soul of the assembled collective—the notoriously demanding Apollo Theater audience, the band, and the Godfather himself—is defined, affirmed, and fêted. With the JBs "doin' the do" for 16 full

minutes on the "Escape-ism"/"Make It Funky" vamp, the Godfather takes the opportunity to initiate a racial bonding experience. "You know, everybody in the group, we're from down home," Brown says, then proceeds to introduce several of his musicians by name, making special note of the places from which they came and thereby affirming their "soul cred." The audience response to each of these introductions further indicates the value placed on *Southern* roots as an indicator of authentic blackness and soul. This is most apparent in the derisive reaction to music director Fred Wesley's claim to be from "L.A." "Now wait a minute," Brown chides the audience, "you can't condemn a man. Let's listen to the *case* . . . .Brothers been railroaded all their lives." When Wesley clarifies that "L.A." stands for "Lower Alabama," Brown and the crowd explode with approval.

In addition to celebrations of southern hometowns and cuisine, this extended banter is peppered with multiple references to both the visible racism in the South (specifically, the Ku Klux Klan and Uncle Tom) and more subtle yet no less insidious manifestations of prejudice in the North. "[We] come on up here and take care of business, and go on back down [South] . . . down there where we *know* where The Man comin' from. Up here, he jivin' you . . . .We can *deal* with him when we *see* him. Hah!" The crowd responds favorably, indicating a half-century's worth of disillusion, frustration, and anger with the results of the great migration of Southern black folks to the industrial North. The more subtle but omnipresent racism they encountered outside the South has created a tempered nostalgia for "down home"; it is not an uninformed sentiment that elides or diminishes the dehumanizing violence of Jim Crow, but it does affirm still-vibrant connections to a particular geographical space in which black American identity is rooted.

What may appear to be merely self-indulgent stage shtick is thus a collective exorcism of the demons of injustice and racial self-hatred and a celebration of the collective experience of black Americans. There is an unmistakably sharp edge to the proceedings, not all of it aimed at white racists. Brown polices the borders of soulful blackness when he teases Herlon "Cheese" Martin about his "country stroke" on the guitar, and scolds Wesley (a college graduate) onstage for saying "Yes" instead of "Yeah"—"Don't be so polite," he warns, "'cuz you can get cut up here like that. Go on down home with me, y'understand . . . but don't get sassy." Putting the "uppity Negro" back in his place, where he belongs, among the soul sisters and brothers, was another assertion of James Brown's authority within that community.

From an ethnomusicological perspective, we may regard this 16-minute performance as emblematic and expressive of a transformational moment in African American history, in which the defining qualities of "soul siblings" were articulated with stunning clarity and elemental force, and the boundaries of community and collective identity were delimited. A person had "soul" if s/he was from "down home" and still carried the plainspoken manner, appetite for southern delicacies, and keen awareness of racial insult s/he cultivated to survive in the American South, wherever s/he eventually came to rest and reside. "Soul" implied the ability to navigate the minefields of both overt and institutional racism, and the innumerable associated

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hardships, with individual *and* collective dignity intact. The album's grandiose title, *Revolution of the Mind*, surely expressed the ultimate objective of this remarkable exercise in collective consciousness raising.

In "What is Soul?" from their eponymous 1970 debut album, Funkadelic playfully lists tangible substances that connote the "down home" stereotype: "ham hocks in your corn flakes," "a joint rolled in toilet paper," "rusty ankles and ashy kneecaps," and "chitlins foo young." James Brown approached it with greater reverence and gravitas. As JB himself described it, "I was the one who turned racist minstrelsy into black soul—and by doing so, became a cultural force" (Brown, *I Feel Good* 46). In his mind, the shared experience of racial oppression, struggle and survival, home-cooked southern cuisine, and the groove signified the "'experiential' difference" of people of African descent (Brackett 321), and bound them together as soul siblings; maintaining one's ties to that community, however wealthy or educated one became, was both an obligation and a virtue.

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A Man's Man's Man's World

Collective racial consciousness did not negate gender distinctions in James Brown's world; indeed, his music was characterized by an obsession with masculinity. This is hardly surprising, considering that emasculation of the black male was an equally obsessive purpose of Jim Crow America. The hysteria over the sexually predatory black male was inscribed in multiple sites, from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to the lynch mobs' persistent fetish for mutilating their victims' genitalia (Tolnay and Beck 14; Wiegman 446–47; "Without Sanctuary").[4] In the face of these relentless attacks it was not uncommon for black men to reassert their manhood through the (frequently violent) subjugation of black women (Davis 25–33).

As his career ascended through the 1960s, James Brown's flamboyant appearance led some to question his sexuality. Following the examples of Little Richard, wrestler Gorgeous George, and tent show transvestites, he wore make-up and eyeliner onstage, "softening [his] hard features." He was unapologetically obsessed with his processed hair, sitting for an interview with a 1966 *New York Herald Tribune* reporter while wearing curlers (George and Leeds 21–22). A boyhood friend who ran into Brown wondered if he had "gone sissy." There was even a rumor that Brown intended to get a sex change operation and marry sideman Bobby Byrd (Brown, *The Godfather of Soul* 161, 166–67; R. J. Smith 66, 159–60).

But, despite such ambiguities, in most other ways James Brown was machismo incarnate. The dominant message in his song lyrics and stage banter favored a gendered order in which men's and women's roles were clearly defined and implicitly hierarchical, but in which soul brothers exercised their innate patriarchal privilege and authority with wisdom and benevolence (as the "Godfather" sobriquet implies). The April 1966 single "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" (King 45-6035, co-written with Betty Jean Newsome) expresses this with lyrics that have been described as "biblically chauvinistic" ("500 Greatest Songs"). They ascribe all inventive and productive labor

to men, for the benefit of non-men, while magnanimously conceding that this man's world "wouldn't be nothing, not one little thing, without a woman or a girl." Patriarchal benevolence is also at the heart of 1969's "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)" (King 45-6224, March 1969), in which Brown demands "equal opportunity, to live tomorrow." "We don't want no sympathy," he assures (presumably white) listeners, "we just want to be a man." Here, "to be a man" means providing for oneself and a family on an equal playing field, without the barriers imposed by racial discrimination. Brown insists on the right "to get myself together," but admonishes black listeners to go through that door once it has been opened: "Let's get our heads together and get it up from the ground/When some of us make money, we forget about our people" (Brown, *Star Time*). The quintessential black capitalist, James Brown measured manhood by standard of livelihood.

In "Don't Be a Drop-out" (King 45-6056, Oct. 1966), he tells a fable about a "good friend" abashed by his lack of education, which limits his employment opportunities and thus compromises his manliness. When the protagonist looks around at his more educated friends, he notices that "they were clean, and his clothes were like rags." "Without an education," the refrain insists, "you might as well be dead." Related in explicitly gendered terms, for a target audience of black male youth, this mortifying tale of lost manhood depicts masculinity as a virtue *earned* through the perseverance, hard work, and patience required to "stay in school"; to realize one's full potential as a real man, "Don't be no drag/Take a fool's advice, and stay out of that bag" (*Star Time*).

Masculinity, of course, was also demonstrated in the boudoir. As the 1970s began James Brown's music increasingly celebrated male libido and carnal prowess. The single "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" (King 45-6213, Jan. 1969) appears to mark the transition, musically and lyrically, to a harder funk groove with a more sexually insistent message, both of which were amplified further in the better known "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine" (King 45-6318, July 1970). These songs are raw, unadorned demands for sexual attention, premised on the insistent power of a man's appetite, which belie Brown's later criticisms of contemporary popular music as being too sexually explicit.

But other songs adopt another tack: they rejoice in the *aesthetics* of a woman's form and the *power* she possesses as a result of being well endowed. Starting with "Mother Popcorn (You Got to Have a Mother for Me)" (King 45-6245, June 1969), the Godfather recorded multiple tributes to the woman of ample proportions who strutted her stuff with aplomb: "Some like 'em fat, some like 'em tall/Some like 'em short, skinny legs and all/ I like 'em boss, huh, I like 'em proud/And when they walk, you know they draw a crowd." He elaborates on this theme most emphatically in "Hot Pants (She Got to Use What She Got to Get What She Wants)" (People 45-2501, July 1971). The titular article of clothing, Brown says, "make you sure of yourself/ Good God, you walk just like you got the only lovin' left/ Hey! So brother, if you're thinking of losing that feeling, then don't/ 'Cause a woman got to use what she got to get just what she wants!" (*Star Time*). Brown confesses that the vision of a fine, self-assured

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woman, proudly displaying her body, gives him "fever" and "fits." It was the one sign of weakness James Brown allowed a man: to be brought to his knees with agonizing desire at the sight of such a woman. In his world a woman's power comes not just from her physique but from her pride in it, her forthright welcoming of the male gaze.

As the 1970s progressed, Brown became even more precise and detailed about what aspects of a woman's body induced this effect, selectively mincing it into choice cuts. On the 1975 disco remake "Sex Machine Part I and Part II," Brown exhorts his bandsmen to share their predilections: "How do you *laa-ak* [like] 'em?" We learn that Fred Wesley "like[s] 'em loo-ong and tall, so I can look up at 'em," and that Jabo Starks digs women who are "meaty." When JB's turn comes, as we know it will, Wesley teasingly predicts that his boss likes women "heavy on the spank." Brown confirms this: "I don't mean no, I don't mean no harm, I don't mean no harm. But you see, ya see, I like all kinda, I like all kinda thangs, but, uh, when I ride I wanna *glide*. I wanna *ease* my ride! I need *cushion* in my ride! And make me *glide*, and have my stride when I glide! *I like 'em fat like that!*" As if putting out a record of locker-room banter were not enough, Brown later released a single entitled "For Goodness Sakes, Look at Those Cakes" (*Dead on the Heavy Funk*). When it came to his tastes in women, James Brown kept few secrets: "The more you got, the more I want!" (*Revolution of the Mind*; R. J. Smith 186, 220–21).[5]

It might be difficult to accept that a man who so publicly and shamelessly objectified women and advocated male prerogatives could simultaneously provide a platform from where female recording artists could back talk him and other men who recorded under his supervision. Many of these women embraced the Brown paradigm of sexuality-as-power, but they also demanded respectful and equal treatment from their male partners; sometimes they objected to statements or attitudes expressed in specific songs within the James Brown corpus. They projected images of strong black womanhood that were persuasive and appealing in the contexts of second-wave feminism and Black Power. They spoke to and for black women who were increasingly disaffected with both the "mainstream" feminist and black pride movements, because the former ignored racism and the latter downplayed sexism. In that sense, James Brown, who had proclaimed to the world, "I like 'em boss, I like 'em proud," literally put his money where his mouth was.

The Message from the Soul Sisters

"Answer" or "response" songs were fairly common in American blues, R&B, and country music recordings from the 1930s to the 1960s, in Jamaican reggae of the 1960s, and in hip hop from the 1980s to the turn of the millennium. Of course, writing an answer song to a proven hit record exploited that record's popularity and increased the chances—but hardly guaranteed—that the response would also hit. Sometimes such songs merely provided another perspective from that expressed in an earlier recording: Kitty Wells's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels," though written by a man, was a corrective to the "faithless woman" scenario depicted

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in Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side of Life," for instance. Artists would playfully one-up each other through response songs, as in the case of Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley going *mano-a-mano* with "I'm the Hoochie Coochie Man," "I'm a Man," and "Mannish Boy," or Rufus Thomas's "Bear Cat" retort to Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog." In some cases, particularly in early reggae, the trash-talking had a sharper, more personal edge, taking feuds between rival artists, studios, or stylistic camps public.[6]

James Brown's Funky Divas rarely got so nasty, but they had plenty sass and didn't "take no mess," either. Disarmingly blunt about their needs and desires, emotional independence, sex appeal, and aptitude as lovers and pleasers of men, these singers wrote (or co-wrote with Brown) songs that were a sort of "benevolent matriarchal" counterpoint to the Godfather's own gender politics. They were not anti-man: they wanted male attention and companionship, and promised to lavish their partners with maternal care and good loving, but not at the cost of their own sense of self-worth; they admonished their female listeners to cultivate similar self-regard in their own relationships; and they gave "no-good men" scathing tongue lashings. Setting their lyrics and melodies atop grooves laid down by the JBs at the height of the band's full funk powers, the Funky Divas made singular contributions to the James Brown catalog, which were sometimes more memorable than what the Godfather himself was putting out.

Lyn "The Female Preacher" Collins's semi-sung introduction to 1972's "Think (About It)" (People PE 608)—one of the most sampled songs in the Brown catalog—serves well as the Funky Divas' collective manifesto:

> Hey, fellas! I'm talkin' to you, you, and you, too.
> You guys know who I'm talkin' to:
> Those of you who go out and stay out all night and half the next day,
> Expect us to be home when you get there.
> But let me tell ya somethin'—
> The sisters are not going for that no more,
> 'Cause we realize two things:
> That you aren't doing anything for us that we can't better do for ourselves.
> So from now on, we're gonna use what we got to get what we want!

Significantly, Brown and the JBs can be heard in the background, cheering, clapping, and hollering approval, egging Collins on—indeed, it is one of only a couple of Funky Diva songs that retain the interactive, collaborative vibe that was Brown's signature at the time. The recording gives the impression that the soul brothers around her fully endorse this soul sister's feminist stance, even though it's quite likely that some of them were guilty as charged—Brown, especially (who acted "like a master with his concubines," Whitney recalled, with women in his revue (75)). In fact, Collins's proud, defiant rejection of double standards makes this soul sister all the more desirable to these male observers. Equally important is the pledge/threat with which the female preacher concludes her short sermon: she

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not only accepts the "hot pants" sex-as-power paradigm, but also determines to carry it out.

To be sure, the Funky Divas did have other things on their minds and released records that explore themes other than the ups and downs of female-male relationships. Marva Whitney's 1968 record "I'm Tired, I'm Tired, I'm Tired (Things Better Change Before It's Too Late)" (King 45-6193), credited to Brown, is an unambiguous complaint about the limited options and continuing indignities black people experience in a racist society: "I'm tired of having to be a maid/And I want a real, real job … I'm tired of my father being oppressed/Comin' home a' raisin' sand/I'm tired of my mother sitting home dippin' snuff/And telling about the boogie man." "I Want to be in the Land of Milk and Honey" (Brownstone 45-4204, 1971), sung and co-written by Vicki Anderson, yearns for a place of universal love and equality, "where all men are free." Kay Robinson's recording of the traditional gospel song "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow" (King 45-KNG-004, 1970) begins with a soliloquy about the sad state of the world, mourning the loss of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Kennedys to assassins' bullets, and lamenting, "There are protests everywhere, children running to and fro, people not knowing just what to do." These songs subordinated the black-on-black battle of the sexes to issues of broader concern to soul siblings and humanity at large.

But, by and large, the lyrics of Funky Diva songs were in step with James Brown's "sexual turn" of the early 1970s, if usually more restrained in their approach (and not nearly as raunchy as the contemporaneous work of Betty Davis). Although many of the songs seem to be addressed specifically to women, they also implicitly proffer advice to soul brothers about how to treat soul sisters, mediating gender-based conflicts among black folks. In a 1969 interview on the messages in her music, Marva Whitney told *JET* magazine, "It would be just beautiful if black men and black women could have love, understanding and respect for one another. Things would be better all around" (Black 57; qtd in Whitney 134).

Sexual reciprocity—which I offer as a "translation" of the euphemism "TCB," "takin' care of business"—was a common theme, as it was in other R&B songs of the era, conspicuous in the lyrics of recording artists and songwriters of both sexes. Significantly, women singers insisted that they were as entitled to sexual attention as men were, that it was both a need and—when properly offered—a pleasure. As Angela Davis has argued, black female recording artists and performers were the most sexually assertive entertainers in the business in the 1920s and 1930s, prefiguring by decades the feminist consciousness and "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and '70s (3–11, 22–24). In black American popular music women and men had mutual sexual obligations to one another (expressions of same-sex attraction, though never absent, were far less conspicuous) that were every bit as important to the relationship as earning a livelihood, common interests, or making a home together. Failure to "do your duty" (as Bessie Smith famously sang in 1933) was grounds for dismissal and exploration of other options.

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This sentiment is quite clearly expressed in "The Message from the Soul Sisters" (King 45-6377, 1971), voiced by Vicki Anderson, the wife of JB sidekick Bobby Byrd (1934–2007), and the woman whom Brown praised as the best singer ever to perform in his revue (Brown, *Godfather of Soul* 156). "The boys don't think we can get down," Anderson announces at the beginning of the record. "Girls, let's have a meetin'." She then launches into a frontal assault on male privilege over a dirge-like groove:

> They keep sayin' what they don't need and they're not gonna to take it,
> And if we don't please them, huh, we can't make it . . . .
> Tell me I'm crazy, and I'm just naggin',
> And when I ask you 'bout other women you start braggin'.
> When a man digs me don't drop your face,
> 'Cause if you don't give me what I want I got to get it some other place.

The lyrics (credited to Brown) urge men to take responsibility and pride in providing for their women, but are adamant that a woman need not rely on any one man who can't get his thing together. "I'll not suffer no more, I'll not suffer no more/Let me do my thing, let me do my thing/'Cause I want a man, I want a man." Here again—as well as in the Whitney/Brown duet "You Got to Have a Job (If You Don't Work You Can't Eat)"—we see Brown's insistence on provision for loved ones as an index of manliness. In 1972's "Don't Throw Your Love in the Garbage Can" (Brownstone 45-4207, co-written by R&B legend Betty Wright), Anderson advises women, "You know, girls, without your love, you don't even exist, so why waste your love on some no-good man?" It is unclear if the statement "without your love, you don't even exist" is intended to describe a woman's existential reality or rather is an ironic indictment of men's views of women as useless if they do not provide sexual affection, but the rest of the song unquestionably insists that women find partners who are attentive, faithful, and appreciative. Anderson gets quite specific about whom to avoid: "The wrong man is the man who can't be true/The wrong man is the man who don't dig you/ . . . Stop giving your love on a silver platter, all decorated/Stop wasting your loving time on them, when they don't appreciate it."

The songs above rebut the many androcentric expressions in R&B music with feminist messages of empowerment and self-respect, but other Funky Diva songs were intended as direct answers to specific songs by James Brown and others. Marva Whitney lost little time piggybacking on the Isley Brothers' 1969 hit "It's Your Thing" (which was itself aimed at the head of Motown mogul Berry Gordy) to create a feminist anthem: "It's my thing, I can do what I wanna do/You can't tell me who to sock it to/ . . . .I don't need love as bad as you/Makes me no difference who you sock it to" (Whitney 129–32). Anderson appears to have recorded more answer songs than any other single artist in the Brown organization. "I'm not fat, and I'm not tall," she sings on "Answer to Mother Popcorn (I Got a Mother for You)" (King SK-6251, 1969), "I'm not a girl with skinny legs at all/But if you like them boss, baby, you like them proud/Then I'm the girl who's going to shout way out loud." With JB yelling "Tell It!" in the background, "Super Good (Answer to Super Bad)" (King 45-6344,

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1970) is Anderson's response to both "Super Bad" and "Sex Machine": "I'm not trying to tease/A soul sister like me don't grow on trees/So fellas, take care plenty business/ Yeah, and treat your woman like you should/You hear me? 'Cause if you think you are super bad/Girls! We know we're super good." On "I'm Too Tough for Mr. Big Stuff (Hot Pants)" (Brownstone 45-4202, 1971), her one-up response to Jean Knight's 1971 Stax hit "Mr. Big Stuff," Anderson warns the titular cad that she is immune to his charms: "Can't fool me with that Chicago strut/And that Detroit grin/Your New York rap won't get you in." Again, she makes her affections conditional on financial provision: "But maybe a nine-to-five, or an eight-to-four/May open my door."

After Vicki Anderson and Bobby Byrd's departure from Brown's revue in 1973, the role of brassy, sexually gifted spokeswoman for black feminism fell largely to Lyn Collins, a native of Abilene, TX. When promoting a Brown show in Dallas in 1970, Collins managed to get a demo tape to the boss; within a year, she received an invitation to join his revue and record her debut album *Think (About It)* (G. Brown 156–57; "Obituaries: Lyn Collins" 18). In an often-sampled snippet from the title track, she advocates parity in romantic relationships: "It takes two to make a thing go right/It takes two to make it out of sight/ … I won't do nothin' that you won't do." She warns her man that she doesn't need him to survive: "When it comes to taking care of me, I know I'm able." The album also features "Women's Lib" (credited to Brown), which announces, "The time is here at last" for sisters to "take a stand." In a spoken interlude, Collins repeats almost verbatim the threat issued on the title track, to "use what we got to get what we want."

In other songs Collins tells a potential lover to "Take Me Just as I Am" (People PE 633, 1974), because "I know how to make your liver quiver/And I know how to make your love come down." "Don't Make Me Over," she sings, "now that you know how I adore you/ … Love me with all my faults/The way that I love you." She demands commitment ("Put It on the Line"), and informs a suitor that "You Can't Love Me If You Don't Respect Me" (People PE 650, 1975). Collins was easily the most sexually assertive of the Funky Divas. When covering JB's sexually insistent "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" (People PE 636, 1974), she reverses the sentiment, replacing the lyric "With all my might/I got to please you" with "You got to please me" (*Funky People Part 3*). Although Collins's 1973 single "Mama Feelgood" (People PE 618) seemingly invokes Aretha Franklin's famous 1967 homage to an attentive lover, "Dr. Feelgood (Love is a Serious Business)," it functions more as a response to the sexual braggadocio and bluster in James Brown's own songs.

> I can make my lover reach for the stars when the sun is out,
> And I can make my man forget what he's thinkin' about.
> … In other words, what I'm trying to say is,
> Don't be a teaser, be a love pleaser.
> … I can take a four-dollar dress and let up a funky hem,
> Yeah, I can look hip, and if he wants, I can look slim.
> I can fill up his shoes and do anything he thinks I can't,
> And I can stand behind him and make him feel like a man.

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Another interesting aspect of this record is Collins's relationship with the band. Whereas nearly all other Funky Diva records sound as if the lead vocal might have been laid on top of a previously recorded instrumental track, on "Mama Feelgood" Collins interacts with and instructs the all-male band as Brown frequently did on his own records: "Band, let me hear ya *say* somethin'! Guitar, let me hear ya *speakin*'!" Brown's interaction with his band, which rendered the music-making process itself transparent to listeners, was one of the most distinctive aspects of his presentation (as well as a reminder of who was paying the cost to be the boss), so Collins's usurpation of his role is a notable act of female assertion. Collins pulls it off by replicating Brown's bluster—the screams, rhythmic grunts, and ferocious energy for which the Godfather himself was known—a performance that amplifies the message in the lyrics substantially. Little wonder the *Chicago Defender* referred to Collins as "the female James Brown" ("James Brown to Star in Soul Train Revue" 23).

When James Brown's artistic, commercial, and financial decline forced him to scale back his operations in the mid-1970s, Lyn Collins disappeared from black radio, and the soul sisters' message of self-assertion, sexual pride and agency, and emotional reciprocity was taken up by disco divas like Donna Summer (1948–2012), Gloria Gaynor, Evelyn "Champagne" King, and Cheryl Lynn. Interest in the Funky Divas' music revived with the release of the first two of three *James Brown's Funky People* anthologies in 1986 and 1990. Immediately, Collins's "Think (About It)"—featured on both the first *Funky People* and the *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* series—became a staple sample in hip hop. The 1998 *James Brown's Funky Divas* CD compilation gave fans a deeper listen and presented scattered singles and album tracks as a coherent body of work. Emphasizing the historical, social, and artistic significance of their work with Brown, Martha High said the *Funky Divas* anthology "would be an asset to the younger people to find out that there's a part of funky music besides just the males . . . .I mean, there are people like Aretha Franklin out there and different people with the Motown sound, but the funk side [for women] still hasn't been heard." "We didn't have to be vulgar or use profanity to get our message across," Vicki Anderson reflected. "Nothing was paved for us to get our music played. And I don't want to see them [younger artists like Lil' Kim] take it and abuse it the way we didn't intend" (S. Smith 13). The success of these CD reissues motivated High, Whitney, Anderson, and Collins to join forces for Funky People, Soulpower, and Funky Diva reunion concerts and tours of Europe and Africa, which continued well into the 2000s. Live onstage, they reminded audiences of an age when feminism first got funky.

A New Day, for Real?

The Funky Divas project was not without risks, especially in the context of persistent controversies about "representation" within both the feminist and civil rights/black liberation movements. Arguably, the Divas' collective image and message reinforced stereotypes of black women as argumentative or "difficult," oversexed, and materialistic. Expressions of sexual agency and sexualized self-display by female

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performers were and continue to be controversial among feminists, resulting in the so-called "feminist sex wars" (see, for instance, Cohen; de Lauretis; Duggan and Hunter; Ferguson; Jaggar). Whereas some regard sexual expressions as fundamental to the overall goal of liberation and equality, others insist they are regressive self-exploitation and capitulation to the objectifying gaze of men. Similarly, although some African Americans describe presentations of jive-talking, sexually aggressive, ghetto-centric "blackness" as "keepin' it real," some—Bill Cosby, among others—denounce the perpetuation of these stereotypes of "black cultural dysfunction," insisting that there is no single way to "be black" (see Childs; Dyson; Harris; Rose, esp. chs 2, 3; Rosette; Shaw). The airing of black people's "dirty laundry" for white inspection and consumption remains a divisive and controversial act, and the Funky Divas publicly fussing with James Brown and other male R&B artists could quite easily qualify as such.

As we have seen, few public figures had as much authority as James Brown when it came to defining what was "black," determining what "soul" was and who possessed it, and representing those qualities in public. "JB was proof that black people were different," writer Thulani Davis has said. "Rhythmically and tonally blacks had to be from somewhere else" (qtd in Guralnick 240). "If there is any black man who symbolizes the vast differences between black and white cultural and aesthetic values," historian David Levering Lewis insists, "Soul Brother No. 1 (along with Ray Charles) is that man" (qtd in Guralnick 242–43). His emphasis on rhythm, Martin Munro adds, became an essential part of a "black aesthetic that served a politicized notion of African American culture as a largely homogenous, untainted entity" (183, 193–94; see also R. J. Smith 261–64).

As James Brown Productions, the Funky Divas carried similar credentials to define blackness generally and black womanhood specifically. Marva Whitney explicitly invoked this authority and engaged in a bit of racial self-caricature when reflecting on her June 1968 tour of South Vietnam with JB and a stripped-down ensemble. Since American troops were dissatisfied with USO acts that were "black on the outside, white on the inside," she claimed, "The soldiers needed to see a soul sister who wasn't an Oreo Cookie" (Maycock 68; R. J. Smith 197; Whitney 100).[7] Being a "soul sister" meant she was *authentically* black, in contrast to others who were supposedly not: the opposite of soul was creamy white icing. The fact that Whitney did not feel compelled to explain what made her a "soul sister" and others "Oreos" indicates a presumption of unquestioned, self-evident authority on the issue. Yet such assertions of racial essentialism, however self-empowering they might be for some, can be oppressive to those who do not conform to expectations (recall Brown scolding Fred Wesley for saying "Yes" instead of "Yeah"); they can also feed racist imaginations already inclined to stereotyping.

Complicating matters further, the Godfather's own recordings offered little backing or encouragement to the Funky Divas' cause of black female empowerment and self-respect. Despite the opening rant that "things done got too far gone" in women's favor, "It's a New Day" finds Brown the benevolent patriarch in a relatively generous

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mood, dispensing sage advice to women who want to keep their men faithful, while hinting that they bear some of the blame for male infidelity. "Girls, let me tell ya what you got to do" to "hold your man," he sings.

> When he ask you do you love him, smile and kiss his cheek,
> Walk away and twist your hips, make sure you keep him weak.
> Don't let nobody take care of your business better than you do.
> Do what he wants, give him what he wants, respect will come to you.

Reminding the female listener that her sexuality gives her "what it takes to be the untold [unspoken] boss," JB urges her to maintain the *illusion* that the man is in control. If she is properly deferential rather than salty and demanding, "respect will come" to her. Female sexuality is thus the great equalizer between women and men; if employed properly it can foster the respect and fidelity women demand of men, and the regular TCB men require of women. His own "message to the soul sisters" thus delivered, the singer then turns to his bandsmen and pleads, "Can I get some help? Can I get a witness?" invoking the preach-and-amen pattern of the African American church to promote male solidarity in the face of the feminist challenge.[8]

As I said, however, "It's a New Day" was James Brown at his most magnanimous, offering his wisdom and "soul cred" to mediate the battle of the sexes in black America. For the most part, his subsequent work in the 1970s—that which coincided with Lyn Collins's releases—continued to express a resilient male chauvinism. If anyone or anything could undermine the blunt remonstrative power of Funky Diva feminism, it was Soul Brother #1 himself and his prodigious output. Like many serial abusers and exploiters of women, JB showed a startling lack of self-awareness about the dissonance within and between the messages he disseminated and his own personal and professional conduct. If we look at other records he released in the 1970s—which, in addition to those already mentioned, include "My Thang" (with the immortal words "Gimme, gimme my thang") and "Hot (I Need to be Loved, Loved, Loved, Loved)"—it is clear that Brown never abandoned a sense of male entitlement to sex. It is not inconceivable that Brown produced Funky Diva records for his own titillation: a spunky, sassy, self-possessed soul sister, who was *actively* rather than *passively* sexual, made for a more satisfying conquest, requiring extra effort and persuasive skill.

Hindsight and background information about Brown, his singers, and their creative process may be beneficial to critical analysis, but they might also dull our senses to the impact that Funky Diva records had on their original audiences and, indeed, on listeners today who do not read liner notes and biographies. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, songs with titles like "It's My Thing (You Can't Tell Me Who to Sock It To)" and "You Can't Love Me If You Don't Respect Me," voiced by black women over monumentally funky grooves, provided some of the most blistering indictments of male privilege in American public culture. Moreover, although some of the most forthrightly feminist songs in the catalog bear Brown's name as sole or co-writer, there is ample reason for recognizing these songs as the work of the singers themselves. Whitney claimed that Brown was known either to claim credit for others' work or to

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randomly assign songwriting credit to friends (129, 131).[9] In at least some cases, then, Funky Diva feminism was a genuine expression of personal belief in women's rights and equality that emanated from the Divas themselves.

Ultimately, the vast majority of black women who originally heard the Funky Diva songs, and those who listen to them today on CD anthologies and digital media, were not and are not privy to the ideological inconsistencies of James Joseph Brown. For most listeners, the songs more likely represent clear, unambiguous statements of female autonomy and self-respect. At the time of their release they were revolutionary. They celebrated and encouraged black women's emotional and economic self-sufficiency, their dignity, beauty, and sexual agency. They promoted relationships of parity between soul sisters and brothers, indeed making such equality a precondition for racial uplift and a qualification for being counted among the soul community. We will never know how many black women found inspiration and courage in the collective "Message from the Soul Sisters" to stand up to controlling, unfaithful, or abusive male partners, to seek out educational and employment opportunities to support themselves, or who found solace in lyrics that spoke to their very specific needs as people caught in the double bind of racism and sexism. The Funky Divas' contributions to the cause of black female empowerment ultimately transcend the flaws of the producer who made them possible.

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Notes

[1] Brown's last marriage, to Tomi Rae Hynie, has been disputed because Hynie's previous marriage had not yet been legally annulled before their wedding in December 2002.

[2] Brown fathered children with two singers in his revue, Bea Ford and Yvonne Fair. Marva Whitney was also pregnant with his child but miscarried (Whitney 110–11).

[3] Whitney's claims that musicians in Brown's employment were his "slaves," and that "we were just a piece of property to him," make the term "overseer" seem less hyperbolic (129, 150).

[4] "In the disciplinary fusion of castration with lynching," Robyn Wiegman argues, "the mob severs the black male from the masculine, interrupting the privilege of the phallus, and thereby reclaiming, through the perversity of dismemberment, his (masculine) potentiality for citizenship ... .[T]he hypermasculinized rapist must 'become' the feminine through ritual castration" (446–47).

[5] Wesley remembers meeting Lyn Collins and thinking she was "some girl who the Boss was trying to get it on with. She did fit the general description of every woman I had ever seen him with. Light skin, pretty face, long hair, big ass" (155). See also Whitney (93).

[6] Early reggae artists such as Prince Buster, Derrick Morgan, Clement "Sir Coxsone" Dodd, and Lee "Scratch" Perry perfected the settling of scores via the "diss track" before such a term even existed, frequently releasing records "aimed at the head" of an imitator or adversary who had insulted, underpaid, or stolen from them (Katz 35–36, 48, 163, 184, 221, 252, 362, 428).

[7] I have looked at lists of performers who went to Vietnam for similar purposes, but have yet to identify who the "Oreo cookies" Whitney mentions might be.

[8] For more analysis on Brown's invocation of black religious mannerisms and symbolism, see Brown (*The Godfather of Soul* 18), DeSilva and R. J. Smith (37–39).

[9] Former Brown bassist Bootsy Collins tells a hilarious story about getting guttural instructions from his boss, which he and the band then had to "translate" into a groove. When Bootsy played the "Soul Power" bass line for him, he says Brown responded, "Yeah, that's it, son, that's what I'm talkin' about. I'm glad I thought of it!" "School of James Brown" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8tReWBBWFY).

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