

# JAMES BROWN



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1956-2002</i>	<i>Classic R&amp;B</i>	<i><a href="#">Night Train (1962)</a></i>

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*Only Solitaire*

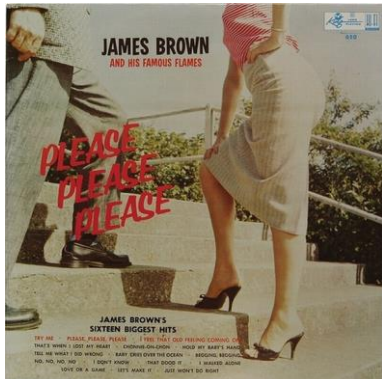
Artist: *James Brown*

Years: *1956-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

## **Page contents:**

- [Please Please Please](#) (1958)
- [Try Me!](#) (1959)
- [Think!](#) (1960)
- [The Amazing James Brown](#) (1961)



# PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE

Compilation released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E** **December 1958** **3** **3** **3** **2** **2** [More info:](#)   



**Tracks:** 1) Please, Please, Please; 2) Chonnie-On-Chon; 3) Hold My Baby's Hand; 4) I Feel That Old Feeling Coming On; 5) Just Won't Do Right; 6) Baby Cries Over The Ocean; 7) I Don't Know; 8) Tell Me What I Did Wrong; 9) Try Me; 10) That Dood It; 11) Begging, Begging; 12) I Walked Alone; 13) No, No, No, No; 14) That's When I Lost My Heart; 15) Let's Make It; 16) Love Or A Game.

## REVIEW

Nobody could ever argue, I suppose, with the simple truth that James Brown wasn't exactly born for the three-minute single format. In his live shows, three minutes was typically what it took for him to just get himself and his audience into the groove, which he could then sustain for an indefinite amount of time, depending on how many cups of coffee — or something *much* stronger — he'd ingested in the past 12 hours. But back in 1956, the only way he and his Famous Flames could reach a mass audience was through records, and the only records he could make for the Federal label were three-minute singles. It was nice of his label, after almost three years of recording, to grant Mr. Brown the right for a full-fledged LP, but the only thing they put on that LP were the exact same A- and B-sides.



Unfortunately, the biggest problem with Brown's early career is that the man found his showmanship much earlier than he found his music. Few, if any, of those early singles are particularly interesting from a rhythmic or melodic point of view — perhaps the *most* interesting thing about them is the ease (or maybe the *desperation*?) with which James and his buddies hop from ship to ship, investing here in doo-wop and torch balladry, there in old-fashioned rhythm & blues, here again in more modern rock'n'roll, with Brown alternately taking lessons from the Flamingos, the Dominoes, Little Richard, Fats

Domino, Ray Charles, and whoever else he may see as a spiritually (and commercially) viable path to follow, imitate, and adapt to the peculiarities of his own persona. The Flames — quickly upgraded to the Famous Flames once word begins spreading just a tiny bit — loyally follow their leader wherever he takes them; some, most notably the original leader Bobby Byrd, also co-write the material (it is worth noting that the Flames declined to do straightahead covers, much preferring to rip off others' musical ideas and pass them off as their own after introducing tiny variations).

The actual musical backbone, however, in those early years was not all that inspiring. Although the Flames played their instruments on stage, they were far better group singers than players, and, with the exception of guitarist Nafloyd Scott, on record their parts are taken care of by various local musicians, usually from the Cincinnati circuit where Federal Records were based. The results are as decent as they come, but nothing in particular, neither the rhythm section nor the brass nor any lead guitar or piano, ever stands out — it is clear as daylight that the only function of this music is to provide a reliable platform for the lead singer. And with so much diverse musical territory to be covered, even the lead singer is not always up to par. The fact that most of these early singles sank like stones commercially can hardly be blamed on the tastelessness or stupidity of the public, or even on the lack of promotion: the public clearly saw no need to be bothered with a new artist so obviously unsure of how to put his own stamp on well-known musical styles.

Of course, this was not the case with the very first of these singles, the one that rightfully gives its name to the entire LP as well: 'Please, Please, Please', not so much even an actual song as an extended vamp (inspired by the Orioles' 1952 take on Muddy Waters' 'Baby Please Don't Go' and a Little Richard inscription on James' napkin). It is musically simple as hell, and vocally direct as purgatory — pure, distilled soulful pleading, which, in his live shows, Brown would imbue with downright silly theatricality (most of us probably saw at least the *TAMI Show* version, with the Flames having to cool down their leader by throwing blankets around his shoulders and walking him across the stage). But precisely for these reasons, it worked — the same reasons, I think, why Jimmy Reed was so popular: sometimes you just gotta say it precisely as it is, without any extra embellishments whatsoever. Sometimes all it takes is a "baby please, please don't go — I love you so", though it wouldn't work nearly as well without the Flames drawing out that *oooooh* note in between the two parts, adding a touch of solemn gospel flavor to a broken man's plea.

That said, already the second single, 'I Don't Know', which was clearly aimed at repeating the same formula (at least, the number of times James chants "I don't know" is clearly comparable with the number of times he belts out "please please please"), missed the mark completely — and it would take the man almost two and a half years to repeat the success of

'Please Please Please', during which he'd almost lost his record contract (you do have to admire the loyalty of the Federal label which let him release *nine* commercial flops in a row — a situation hardly imaginable in more modern times). Why exactly did that happen — what was so right with the first single, and what was so wrong with the next eight ones? I don't know. (More correctly 'I-ee-I-ee-I-ee-I-ee-I-ee I don't know').

What I *do* know, honestly, is that I have never been a huge fan of the «soul» aspect of James Brown's artistic persona. James Brown as a hyper-energetic, one-of-a-kind showman, capable of electrifying the crowd with his crazyass dance moves and non-stop vocal fireworks (and, later on, working in perfect agreement with the innovative and just as captivating musical foundation), is easy to «get». But James Brown as a «soul brother», evoking genuine empathy and heartfelt emotion as he wails about broken hearts, romantic feelings, and deep devotion, is a concept that I have never managed to truly digest — there is simply too much theater, too much show, too much heart on too much sleeve for me to be able to take it seriously, as opposed to people like Ray Charles or Marvin Gaye, whose soulful declarations may not always be «sincere» in the straightforward sense of the word, but are usually *believable*.

For James, wherever he goes and whatever he does, it is always the *show* element that remains the most important; and 'Please, Please, Please', in its two minutes and forty seconds, did somehow manage to deliver a bit of a show — what with the words of the tune not even so much sung as they were *fired* into the microphone. 'I Don't Know' is actually a bit more smooth and tuneful, but allegedly disc jockeys did not even want to play it on the radio while they still had copies of 'Please Please Please' lying around — it had nowhere near the same hammer-on impact: too screechy and theatrical to pierce their hearts, but *not* screechy and theatrical enough to beat them into a pulp.

Such is my tentative explanation, coupled with the fact that I, too, do not feel anything particularly special about 'I Don't Know', or about 'Just Won't Do Right', which is just a standard doo-wop progression with draggy vocals (the «hooky» chorus is given over to the unison of the Flames, while Brown just tries to sound as deep and passionate on the verses as possible, and it doesn't really work). In fact, at this stage he does a more credible job on songs that sound straight out of the 1940s — 'I Feel That Old Feeling Comin' On' is essentially a jump-blues piece in the style of Wynonie Harris, except that Brown's vocals are an electrified tightrope compared to Wynonie's rough, rowdy, much lower delivery, and you can feel that already at that stage the man was already trying his best to earn that "hardest working man in show business" title.

Problematically, after the first flops of the Soul Brother approach, Brown and the Flames began experimenting in all sorts of styles, which most people simply ignored. On 'Chonnie-On-Chon', for instance, he goes for a straightforward imitation of

the all-night-party approach of Little Richard and especially Larry Williams ("big bone Lizzy, old aunt Fanny"), which is fun, but not particularly original — in this style, he can hardly hope to beat Larry's sense of humor or Little Richard's vocal attack. Even more ridiculous is 'That Dood It', a barely funny half-spoken anecdote which directly rips off Ray Charles' 'Greenbacks' — ironically, the B-side of that single was a re-write of 'My Bonnie' ('Baby Cries Over The Ocean') that came out several months *before* Ray's classic version; fun, but the straightjacketed pop format of the tune is simply not right for the free-form style of Mr. Dynamite.

'That Dood It' already comes from the 1957 sessions, by which time the original Famous Flames, fed up with the lack of success and with Brown's egotistic behavior, had abandoned him altogether — something that may have been noticeable in the context of live shows, but hardly on record, where session musicians still rule the day and the Flames are always relegated to secondary, if not tertiary roles. The people may have changed, but the music remained the same mix of styles: a bit of old-fashioned doo-wop ('Begging, Begging', 'That's When I Lost My Heart'), old-fashioned R&B ('I Walked Alone', 'Love Or A Game'), and old-fashioned jump blues ('Let's Make It').

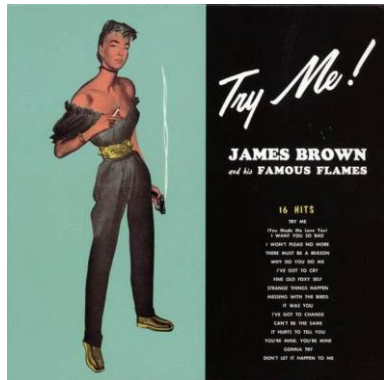
Just when the studio people, including Syd Nathan, president of King Records (of which Federal was a subsidiary), were beginning to have enough, Brown finally turned around and rebounded with 'Try Me' — the last of his singles to have been included on the LP. Differences between it and his previous slow ballads are subtle rather than revolutionary: 'Try Me' rides the same waltzing chord pattern that the Flames had favored since the beginning. But the song makes a harder pass at being soft — Brown's delivery, first time in ages, is genuinely sentimental, as if he really is serenading under his love's balcony (I like to imagine that he himself imagined this as a love letter to Syd Nathan while recording); the Flames are more crooning and angelic than ever before; and even session guitar player Kenny Burrell plays a series of soft and sweet licks, enough to melt a lady's heart on the spot.

This was indeed the first time that James Brown did truly tame the beast inside — there are no signs of vocal hysterics whatsoever, just signals of I-wanna-be-your-dog submission (*humble* and *courteous* submission, that is, not Iggy Pop-style masochistic submission). If I didn't know better, I might even be fooled, and apparently, so was the public, who did undergo a change of heart and agreed to try him, carrying the single to the top of the R&B charts. Note that it did not actually reverse Brown's fortunes overnight — 'Try Me' was followed by at least another year of trials and tribulations, before 'I'll Go Crazy' and 'Think' finally solidified the man's presence on the musical scene. It was more like a temporary carte-blanche which helped James keep his footing and continue waddling on until he'd finally strike gold by finding just the right kind of music

to go along with his personality. But it's a curious phenomenon in its own right — apparently, in late 1958 the public was ready to accept Brown if he'd converted into a sentimental balladeer (imagine, for instance, if the Rolling Stones' first hit single happened to be something like 'As Tears Go By' — just how much pressure would they have to withstand proving to the industry bosses that they were so much more at home reinterpreting Chuck Berry?).

In any case, although the album in general is no great shakes, it still presents an intriguing study of the early evolution of James Brown as a struggling, searching artist. Do make sure to arrange the tracks in chronological order while listening to it, so that it properly starts off with 'Please Please Please' and ends with the 'Try Me' single — or just ignore it altogether and go straight on to the detailed, well-documented collection of **The Singles: The Federal Years 1956–1960**, because, honestly, the selection principles based on which Brown's early A- and B-sides were distributed across his first two LPs (this one and **Try Me**) elude me completely.





# TRY ME!

Compilation released:  
July 1959

V A L U E  
2 3 3 1 2

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) There Must Be A Reason; 2) I Want You So Bad; 3) Why Do You Do Me; 4) Got To Cry; 5) Strange Things Happen; 6) Fine Old Foxy Self; 7) Messing With The Blues; 8) Try Me; 9) It Was You; 10) I've Got To Change; 11) Can't Be The Same; 12) It Hurts To Tell You; 13) I Won't Plead No More; 14) You're Mine, You're Mine; 15) Gonna Try; 16) Don't Let It Happen To Me.

## REVIEW

Despite Brown's seemingly inexhaustible energy and King Records' generosity – once again, the LP contains a staggering sixteen numbers worth of material – **Try Me!** is, on the whole, an even less interesting collection than **Please Please Please**. For one thing, its most famous track – the title one, of course – had already been issued on the first LP; the only reason why it was included here is due to the fact that, in mid-1959, 'Try Me' was arguably the only song besides 'Please Please Me' that the average customer might have remembered of James Brown. In between October 1958, when 'Try Me' essentially saved the Flames from floundering, and mid-1959, the band put out two more singles ('I Want You So Bad' and 'I've Got To Change'), both of which flopped, bringing the whole situation back to square. Once again, James had to be rather humiliatingly marketed along the lines of «the magnificent James Brown who gave us 'Please Please Please' and 'Try Me' which, believe it or not, are still played on the radio... here's hoping that it won't be one more year before he gives us *something* that will attract the public's eye!»

For another, even if the various genre experimentations of 1956–57 were indeed amateurish, with a bit of a kleptomaniac feel to them, at least it was an intriguing spectacle, much like watching some hyper-enthusiastic start-up company come out with one blatant example of plagiarism after another, until finally striking gold with an original approach. By early 1958,





however, Brown had begun narrowing the scope of his game, largely tossing out such genres as «pure» rock'n'roll or electric blues – realizing, perhaps, that he'd never be able to dethrone Little Richard or B. B. King, and that it would be best to concentrate on styles in which he felt most self-assured: (a) soulful balladry, with a steady doo-wop foundation, and (b) groove-oriented R&B, with a focus on «winding up» and ecstatic improvisation rather than disciplined vocal melody. This means that most of the 16 songs included here fall into one of these two categories – making the journey predictable – yet, unfortunately, most of them also follow pre-existing patterns, and with the three-minute length factor still in full force, rarely give the chance to either James or his musicians to truly show themselves off in full splendor.

Take 'I Want You So Bad', for instance, the immediate follow-up to 'Try Me'. It's a little faster, a little brassier, a little screechier (as if it were trying to re-introduce a bit of the 'Please Please Please' vibe into the overall balladeering softness), but on the whole, it is just an attempt to have another soulful hit in the same vein. Why didn't it work? Perhaps it was precisely due to the middle ground approach – he «toughens up» the atmosphere to the extent that the song no longer has the silky, seductive, caring vocal overtones of 'Try Me' (which was probably Brown's most successful ever infiltration of Sam Cooke's territory), but at the same time does not toughen it up to the ecstatic levels of his first hit single. It's a decent tune with a catchy vocal hook, but hardly anything more than that.

Or take 'I've Got To Change', the next single. Here, he decides to return to 'Please Please Please' territory in an utterly straightforward way – might as well have called it 'I've Got To Change Back To 1956' – so much so that even the Flames' backing vocals slavishly repeat the lines of his first hit tune (ironically, this was recorded right after James had fired the entire band and replaced them with a new lineup!). If your hungry inner demon goes wild every time Brown rattles his decibels, 'I've Got To Change' will feel as impressive as anything – but if, like most music critics, you prefer to separate him from the crowd as one of the few R&B performers who always sought new ways of expression, you shall probably have to agree that this particular song seeks anything *but* new ways of expression.

In fact, looking over the sprawling track list even a few refreshing re-listens into the album, I find it problematic to single out any stand-out recordings. Almost perversely in a way, I think that the most memorable track for me remains the first one – 'There Must Be A Reason', the original B-side for 'I Want You So Bad' (is it any coincidence that they put the B-side first while sequencing the LP?). It's a fast, boppy blues-pop ditty with doo-wop vocals, not unlike one of those 'Don't Be Cruel'-type «cutesy» numbers that Elvis recorded with The Jordanaires. Catchy, lively, with a sprightly sax solo in the middle, it seems to have more natural adrenaline to it than almost anything else on here... even despite being probably the

last thing you'd want to associate with James «True Grit» Brown. There are a couple more like it on the album (e.g. the symmetrically placed album closer 'Don't Let It Happen To Me' — the original B-side to 'Good Good Lovin'), but nothing quite matches the tightness and energy of the opening number.

In terms of instrumental power, the best number is probably 'It Was You', recorded in December '58 and actually issued as a single already *after* the LP — driven by a simple, loud, inspiring sax riff from J. C. Davis, which is the first thing you hear and will probably be the one thing you'll take away and remember from this song, rather than Brown's vocals (there is also an interesting «mini/malistic/-duel» between Davis' sax and Bobby Roach's electric guitar licks in the solo section). It is just not too often, on these early recordings, that the musicians ever get to outshine the frontman; although Brown is usually reported to have been working them to the bone, it wouldn't really be until his funk phase that their voices would be allowed to raise above the master's, so every instance, no matter how brief, of them reminding you that at least *some* of this music could be worth your while even without the lead vocalist, is treasurable.

Naturally, all of this stuff is still perfectly listenable — even the rare leftovers from all those other stylistic directions, e.g. the generic 12-bar blues 'Strange Things Happen', on which James Brown and his band pose as, let's say, Little Richard wailing over a B. B. King-style lead guitar. If I am being distinctly sour, it is mainly so that you realize the impressiveness of the qualitative leap from **Try Me!** to **Think!** the very next year. There can be, I believe, but two schools of thought about James Brown — either that James Brown had a ton of hackish filler over the years, or that James Brown never had any filler in the first place, since what matters is really the «James Brown spirit» of things, and that spirit he carried in his pocket for all of his long and productive life. And if it is possible to belong to both those schools of thought at the same time, just give me two admission tickets for the price of one.





# THINK!

Album released:  
February 1960

V A L U E  
2 4 4 3 5

More info:



**Tracks:** 1) *Think!*; 2) *Good Good Lovin'*; 3) *Wonder When You're Coming Home*; 4) *I'll Go Crazy*; 5) *This Old Heart*; 6) *I Know It's True*; 7) *Bewildered*; 8) *I'll Never Let You Go*; 9) *You've Got The Power*; 10) *If You Want Me*; 11) *Baby, You're All Right*; 12) *So Long*.

## REVIEW

While the symbolic significance of the unusually serious baby on the front cover somewhat eludes me (motionless babies lost in deep thought are probably the *last* thing anybody would want to associate with James Brown's music), the front sleeve should by no way detract from the fact that the measly thirty minutes of **Think!** are, in fact, quite a monumental achievement for the man. For one thing, **Think!** is the first James Brown album to have been released as an *album* — mainly recorded over just two sessions (November 1959 in Cincinnati and February 1960 in Hollywood, to be precise) and featuring quite a few LP-only tracks or, at least, tracks that came out on an LP *before* appearing as singles. For another thing, its actual singles, such as the title track and 'I'll Go Crazy', firmly and decidedly returned Brown to the charts, proving that he was *not* going to be remembered as just a two-hit fluke wonder — indeed, while he would still go on to have occasional flops from time to time, the commercial wit that he showed in 1960 would never leave him again until the end of his life (for better or worse).



And most importantly (if also most subjectively), **Think!** is also the first James Brown album which I am able to appreciate *in toto*, from top to bottom. The rocking numbers, the poppy ditties, the ballads, the doo-wop, even the oldies — each and every song has something to offer, something at least mildly interesting and attention-grabbing to stand out in memory.

The contrast with **Please, Please, Please** and **Try Me!**, both of them so much longer and so studded with filler, is so sharp, in fact, that I made several attempts to understand what it was exactly that might have caused such a difference around late 1959 / early 1960, and still came up empty-handed. Most likely, there was no single specific catalyzer here, but rather just a process of gradual ripening. For four years, James Brown and the Famous Flames were trying to find and define their own sound, that special vibe which could put them on top of, or at least aside from, everybody else while also holding enough commercial potential. With **Think!**, they finally found it.

Perhaps that one truly fateful day could be determined as June 27, 1959, when down at Beltone Studios in New York Andy Gibson produced the first single to be included on this LP — ‘Good Good Lovin’. The song is an odd mix of influences: Bobby Roach’s seductive opening guitar licks sound like a nod to surf-rock, the main melody is a sort of sped-up Chicago blues, and the groovy tempo and lively sax break give it a bit of a Coasters feel, with a touch of the «comic R&B» vibe. But the overall feel of the song, with Brown’s hysterical vocal driving his players on and on, is exclusively James’ — a mix of rock energy, pop playfulness, and soul passion completely unmatched by any other artist at the time. It’s catchy, it’s danceable, it’s fun, and it’s got the spirit. (For a long time, I also thought it got great lyrics — “*good lovin’, good lovin’ made me feel so bad*” — before finding out that he really sings ‘*glad*’, not ‘*bad*’, which makes things far more boring). The song, heralding a new, self-assured sound for the Flames, should have been a big hit — but, for some mysterious reason, ended up as yet another flop. Fortunately, it did not dissuade Brown that they had something really good going on here, and by the time the band reconvened in Cincinnati for their November recording sessions, he had quite a few ideas in his head on how to properly follow up the vibe of ‘Good Good Lovin’ and really make it happen.

‘I’ll Go Crazy’, the first single to be released from those sessions, also opens with a seductive guitar lick (this time, more of an opening — and, later, closing — fanfare than a surf-rock chuckle), but the mutations to the blues idiom that they injected on ‘Good Good Lovin’ are even stronger this time. The way the song’s memorable bluesy riff gets capped off by the pompous guitar/brass one-chord fanfare could be something from the textbook of B. B. King (although he would probably play it slower and with more of that Vegas pomp), but once the vocals enter the picture, it’s 100% James Brown rule all along. Most importantly, listen to the wonderful shadowing of James’ vocals by the Flames — “if you leave me...”, smoothly flowing right into “leave me-e-e-e-e...”, then “I’ll go crazy”, echoed by “oh yeah!”, and then “’cause I love you...” — (“love you!”) — “love you...” (“love you!”), and James’ final flourish of “I love you too mu-u-u-a-a-a-i-i-ich”.

That is the kind of vocal richness that ensures this song, as popular as it eventually became, would never ever be performed

better by anybody else. (Just relistened to the Moody Blues cover from 1965 and, with all love and respect for Denny Laine, it's a total joke next to the original). However, here as in many other places, I would not emphasize the «soul» aspects of the performance — it is, in my opinion, more of a «touch of soul» which gets converted into a gripping pop hook. Listening to the song never really makes me believe in Mr. James Brown as somebody capable of going crazy if somebody whom he loves too much ends up leaving him. Rather, it makes me believe in Mr. James Brown as somebody capable of going crazy... *period*. But that's alright, works for me too. "*You got to live for yourself, yourself and nobody else*" is the real message of the song; I've never been able to buy the message of James Brown as a heartbroken, vulnerable guy whose life could have been made miserable by a member of the opposite sex — but the image of James Brown as a self-obsessed, maniacal guy whose life could be dominated by violent emotional flares is totally believable (even if that image, too, had been quite meticulously constructed and calculated for maximum public appeal).

'I'll Go Crazy' did what 'Good Good Lovin' failed to do and restored Brown to the R&B charts, going all the way up to #15, but the ultimate comeback was achieved with 'Think!' — which, as a single, was released already a couple months after it had appeared as the opening title track on the same-titled LP. Now this is an interesting case because the song was *not* an original James Brown composition: it was written by Lowman Pauling, the guitar player for The "5" Royales, and originally released by his band in 1957 (the same year which also produced 'Dedicated To The One I Love', arguably their most famous song because of the later Mamas & Papas cover). [The original](#) is a nice enough blues-pop ditty with inventive stop-and-start elements and some impressive (for the time) guitar work from Lowman — but really, it mainly makes sense to listen to it just to be able to better appreciate the tectonic changes brought on by the James Brown treatment. In Pauling's hands, the song is merely a tepid, passable dance-hall number, a piece of friendly background entertainment, whose occasional interruptions by that shrill, sharp blues guitar come across as a novelty moment. In comparison, Brown reinvents the song to the point of making it barely recognizable — I'm actually impressed that he gallantly did not add his name to the credits, since from a moral, if maybe not legal, standpoint at least, he had every damn right to do so.

I mean, 'Think!' just kills — and I even like this studio version more than the one on **Live At The Apollo**, where it would be sped up to a ridiculous, «Ramon-esque» tempo that probably worked like a charm for the audience but does not do the song proper justice on record. Here, the tempo is just right — still quite fast, but enough to let you soak in and digest all the crazy stuff going on, starting with Nat Kendrick's complex and metronomic drumming pattern and ending with the equally tight and metronomic brass riff, something the likes of which simply did not exist before the song — count it as a natural precursor to all the funk and jazz-rock patterns from the mid-Sixties and onward. Together, the percussion and brass whip

up an atmosphere of perfectly controlled hystrionic frenzy, giving James the ideal backing for his own vocal hysteria. Taking the punctuated breaks of "*think!.., think!.., think!*" from the "5" Royales original, he evolves them further into veritable boxing punches: "*THINK! – About the good things!*" ... "*THINK! – About the wrong things!*" ... "*THINK! – About the right things!*" – before that lady leaves him, she'll probably be all bruised up, if not physically, then at least emotionally. Nothing in the entire R&B scene of 1959–60 rocked quite as hard as this song – nobody on the scene even dared to kick that much ass, let alone having the musical chops to back the aggressive, frenetic energy with tight-as-hell musicianship.

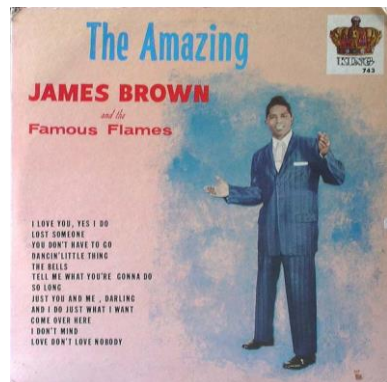
And while the singles, naturally, attract the lion's share of attention, the rest of the album hardly strikes me as just filler, either. The same frenzy that permeates the dance numbers can also be seen in (at least some of) the ballads: thus, 'Wonder When You're Coming Home' builds up a really dark mood with its combination of deep bass, somber, echoey backing vocals, and Brown's own tragic-hero delivery which, for two and a half minutes, turns him into sort of an R&B Tristan, waiting for his Isolde on his dying bed. The Isolde in question might be identified as Bea Ford, who briefly worked with Brown as a supporting vocalist – before retiring after Mr. Dynamite knocked her up – and is given a chance to shine on another colorful blues ballad, 'You've Got The Power', where her smart-and-smokey voice forms a great counterpart to James' own. Lyrically and musically, it seems to be a fairly straightforward declaration of mutual love, but with all those weird overtones and modulations, you always get the feeling that there is something deeper and darker going on here, and that there may be quite a few circumstances in their love life those two are keeping from each other...

Even something as superficially flat-footed and simplistic as 'I Know It's True' with its lyrical minimalism (each verse consists of four repetitions of a single line such as "*do you need someone to love you?*") is made exciting – this time, by Nat Kendrick, who adds a deliciously fussy (but metronomically precise, as always) hi-hat pattern on top of the regular beat; but also by James, whose soaring delivery of each third line really makes the difference. And even when Brown chooses to cover an oldie from the American Songbook ('Bewildered'), he adapts it to the Flames' new style so well, you'd never guess the song's origins – lots of artists had their day with 'Bewildered' before, but nobody got the idea to sing it like an actually bewildered person: listen to [the Ink Spots](#) deliver those first lines like a bunch of angels, then revert back to James Brown to have them delivered from the mouth of a madman.

Without going into details on the other songs, let me just generalize: **Think!** is where the James Brown machine really starts hitting on *all* the cylinders *all* the time, rather than *some* of the cylinders *some* of the time. The backing band here becomes more than a backing band – you can hear and appreciate all the individual talent and all the initiative, from Nat

Kendrick's highly inventive and unpredictable drumming patterns to the brass section's combination of almost military discipline with catchy riffing. And Mr. Brown himself realizes that his power lies not in the source material, but in the creative touch applied during the recording session — and, of course, in taking every song's vocal portrait to the highest level of expression (which is not *just* about screaming his head off: when necessary, he can sink to the lowest depths of soul just as fine as he can rise to the utmost heights of it). The result is a thirty-minute long blast of non-stop energy which, one might argue, would never be topped again — musically, Brown's albums would of course get more complex, innovative, and interesting over time, but in terms of sheer enthusiasm, ecstasy, and professionalism, **Think!** really gets the goat; I like to imagine it as Brown's equivalent of the Beatles' **Hard Day's Night** — lightweight, naïve, and utterly perfect as far as pure, fresh, untapped musical genius is concerned.





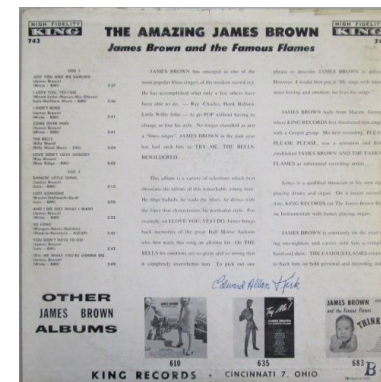
# THE AMAZING JAMES BROWN

Album released:

1961

V A L U E  
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More info:



**Tracks:** 1) Just You And Me Darling; 2) I Love You, Yes I Do; 3) **I Don't Mind**; 4) Come Over Here; 5) The Bells; 6) **Love Don't Love Nobody**; 7) Dancin' Little Thing; 8) **Lost Someone**; 9) And I Do Just What I Want; 10) So Long; 11) You Don't Have To Go; 12) Tell Me What You're Gonna Do.

## REVIEW

By mid-1960, Brown's future as a reliable pop hit maker seemed so assured that he got to sign a new contract directly with King Records, of which Federal, his previous label, was but a subsidiary — but while this may have increased the payouts and the promotional benefits, I wouldn't say that the transition made any direct impact on the music. The Famous Flames continued the same way as they always did, and the steady flow of hit singles and LPs, for the time being, continued to milk the same musical directions that worked so well on **Think!**. In all actuality, I believe that the titles to those two LPs should have been reversed in retrospective, because the word *amazing* fittingly applies to **Think!** — this was the kind of album that nobody probably expected from Brown back in 1960 — but after **Think!**, James' potential to *amaze* his listeners with something truly unpredictable got held up for a bit.

Not that **The Amazing James Brown** is any kind of major disappointment, though; continuing the analogy started in the previous review, it's a bit like **Beatles For Sale** after **A Hard Day's Night** — temporarily riding the safe waves of an established formula that can still yield plenty of nutritious milk. It's just a little less inventive, a little less diverse, and does not contain nearly as many glorious musical moments where you want to hit pause and just think and talk about them and then think and talk about them some more. But it is still an essential entry in James' early discography, and I think it does





have the second largest number of songs on it (after **Think!**, of course) that ended up on **Live At The Apollo**, and it is not just because this was the latest studio LP at the time of the actual Apollo performance (it wasn't). So let us take a closer look, as usual, along with several contemporary singles that never made it to the LP (which, just like **Think!** before it, was also put together as an album, containing a large bunch of songs that had not previously been issued as singles, though some of them still ended up as singles later on).

The only two tracks that were taken off of a late 1960 single — Brown's very first record for King, actually — were 'The Bells' and 'And I Do Just What I Want'. The former, somewhat surprisingly, was a piece of slow, moody soul-blues whose most distinguishing feature was probably James' crying hysterics, with the man ad-libbing sobs, howls, and tragic screams all over the place. In all fairness, though, for all his pioneering moves in «pop theatricality» he did not invent this one: 'The Bells' is actually a cover of an old [Billy Ward & The Dominoes](#) R&B hit from 1952, with none other than the great Clyde McPhatter on vocals. And it is interesting to go back and forth between the original and the cover, because no matter how many times I do, I still cannot determine where my preference lies. Both versions try to be as somber as possible, but Clyde and his pals do that through the power of spooky doo-wop backing vocals and some actual bells, which play a large role throughout the track; Brown achieves his own effect with instrumentation, namely, the atmospheric interplay between the echoey blues guitar of Les Buie and the sax parts by Alfred Corley and J. C. Davis — owing more to the Chicago blues scene in this case than to the doo-wop tradition.

Back in 1952, 'The Bells' was actually quite strikingly macabre for a doo-wop performance — any song that opens with lines like "*there are four black horses with eyes of flaming red*" would have to be pretty macabre for that period — and it was also the gloomiest song so far in Brown's own catalog, with the singer basically confessing to the fact that he is at least indirectly responsible for his loved one's funeral and probably awaiting for some creepy Edgar Allan Poe-style retribution to come. To drive the point even further, Brown ad libs "*ashes to ashes, dust to dust*" at the end of the song (not there in the original performance), rather bravely invoking death upon his own head and doing it in a much more straightforward manner than, say, somebody like Screamin' Jay Hawkins would (the latter would probably play things out in a more tongue-in-cheek, vaudevillian manner). I would probably call the Clyde McPhatter performance more «angelic» in nature and Brown's more «demonic», but both are equally worthy. (Strangely enough, the song never made it to **Live At The Apollo** despite quickly becoming a permanent fixture in James' live repertoire).

The B-side, 'And I Do Just What I Want', was far more lively and dynamic in comparison; credited to James himself, it was

a not particularly original stylization of a New Orleanian pop melody, but with a tremendously sharp bass riff and a slightly «twisty» touch to the rhythm section that probably got you moving from the first couple of seconds. The stop-and-start structure somewhat predicts the future kick of ‘I Feel Good’, too. Many artists at the time released such contrasting singles with completely different moods for the A- and B-sides — but few could take these moods to such searing, almost absurdly hyperbolized extremes. One thing was for sure: Mr. Brown was not going to go down under a middle-of-the-road moniker, regardless of whether you bought his singles or not.

And he was making his band run up a heavy sweat, too: two of the following singles were almost completely instrumental (apart from a few vocal ad libs) — ‘Hold It’, ‘The Scratch’, ‘Suds’, and ‘Sticky’ all amply demonstrate that The Famous Flames tolerated no competition when it came to establish a tight, fast, danceable groove. ‘[Hold It](#)’, in particular, which used to be a pleasant little R&B hit for organist Bill Doggett, is sped up, enlivened by Nat Kendrick’s loud, crackling, and complex percussion shots, and turned into a bit of a battleground between James and his brass players. All the other three instrumentals are fun as well, with ‘The Scratch’ featuring guitarist Les Buie in a bit of a sinister, proto-Batman-theme mood; ‘Suds’ being a cool bluesy variation on the old ‘One Mint Julep’ theme; and ‘Sticky’ presenting an experimental mix of time signatures for which, I believe, the term «intelligent dance music» should have originally been reserved.

Indeed, one of the reasons why I always urge people not to neglect all those early British Invasion covers of (usually black) American artists — by the Stones, the Animals, the Yardbirds etc. — is that they typically provide a fresh perspective by tightening up whatever might have been too loose and lax about the originals, be it intentional artistry or simply technical deficiency. There can be a stronger kind of adrenaline produced from listening to the early Stones covering Chuck Berry than listening to Chuck Berry himself (although the «fun» vibe thrown out by Chuck cannot be beat by the exaggerated seriousness of the Stones). But there are artists who are totally and completely immune to that, and James Brown is at the top of that list: *nobody* improves on James Brown when James Brown really goes to work.

Case in point — ‘I Don’t Mind’, arguably the most famous song off this LP, and not least because the single made such a big impression on British youngsters that it was covered both by The Moody Blues *and* The Who over the course of 1965. But other than, perhaps, Mike Pinder’s valiant (but not tremendously interesting) attempt to transpose the melody to piano, there is absolutely nothing about these cover versions that would make them recommendable — and yes, we *are* talking about The Who, a band famous for breeding terrifying musical golems out of humbler beginnings by the likes of Mose Allison, Eddie Cochran, or Johnny Kidd. But they themselves seemed to be so terrified of James Brown that they did not

even try to convert 'I Don't Mind' to classic early Who style — and considering that Roger Daltrey in 1965 was a street hooligan type of singer rather than a true «soul man», and also considering that the band's group harmonies were downright terrible compared to the Flames, this was a rather obvious embarrassment for the young mod pack, forgivable only as an amusing side effect of youthful maximalism.

Not that 'I Don't Mind' is a particular personal favorite of mine. Several things about this explosive blues-soul ballad have always felt clunky to me — such as, for instance, the absurdly rapid "*Idon'mind!*" backing responses after James' perfectly drawn-out "*I don't miiiiind...*" opening; or the way that the verse really misses a suitable resolution — each of the "*you're gonna miss me*" conclusions is kind of left hanging in the air, making you wish for a proper landing that never ever comes, so the overall feeling is that of a half-great song with the writer running out of inspiration halfway through. I believe this is very much the reason why producer Gene Redd considered the song «musically wrong», but, of course, Brown always had to have his way — which is admirable, but I side with Redd on this one. Sometimes unusual chord progressions are unusual *for a reason*, you know. On the other hand, it's a sure way to deflect any accusations of being uninventive — something that did plague so many of Brown's genre-hopping ventures in the early days of his career.

I have to confess, though, that I find him to be more temptingly inventive on the B-side of the single: 'Love Don't Love Nobody' used to be an entertaining, but strictly generic [jump-blues hit](#) for James' namesake Roy Brown back in 1950 — but ten years later, here it is flashing a completely new coat of paint: sped up, peppered with minor chords, frenzied up with delirious brass duels, and, most importantly, replacing Roy's typically late-1940s podium-style jump-blues bellowing with James' Dionysian histrionics. Roy Brown informs you that "*love don't love nobody*" with the force of a seasoned preacher; James is telling you the same thing from the point of view of a mental patient, which, one must admit, is a perfectly valid point of view for a song with lyrics like "*love don't love poor me at all, love is the cause of my downfall*".

Of the other songs included on the album, the one most people are going to be familiar with is probably 'Lost Someone' — mainly because it would be included, in an insanely extended version, on **Live At The Apollo** two years later. The song itself is not particularly catchy or original (Brown himself said it was based on the chord pattern of Conway Twitty's 'It's Only Make Believe', though you'd probably never think of associating the two all by yourself since the moods are so very different), but James' vocal dynamics, as he effortlessly goes from melancholic crooning to desperate screaming and back, is cool as heck, although this is precisely why the long-winded vocal version works better than the forcedly short original on the LP. Of note, perhaps, is the C-sharp minor transition to the bridge, which completely changes the feel of the song from

«soothingly emotional» to «ominously dangerous» — more or less the same progression would later be nicked by the Stones for 'Heart Of Stone', whose own mood swings mirror the ones of 'Lost Someone' pretty well. (The big difference being that James wails about his poor broken heart, while Jagger boasts about nobody being capable of breaking his — the man may have faithfully copied all of Brown's dance moves, but he sure as hell never copied his vulnerability.)

Most of the other short numbers are catchy little dance-oriented tunes that either shuffle along in a 4/4 bluesy manner ('Come Over Here', 'Just You And Me Darling', 'You Don't Have To Go' — not the most exciting rhythmic patterns for Brown), or sound a little too New Orleanian for the likes of the Godfather of Funk ('Dancin' Little Thing'). One thing that did stick in my mind was the fabulous descending brass riff on 'Tell Me What You're Gonna Do' — which just kept burning a hole in my brain until I realized that nine years later, it would actually form the backbone for the Kinks' punkish-anthem 'Brainwashed' on the **Arthur** album. Unless both artists got it from a third source or something, it's quite fabulous evidence of the subconscious influence of James Brown on Ray Davies — certainly not the most natural or obvious type of artistic connection you could make, but there it is. You just can't get away from the powerful voodoo of the hardest workin' man in show-business, even when you're writing about the decline and fall of the British Empire.

In any case, from this point and onward all of Brown's studio albums, with maybe just an occasional exception or two, have something exciting to offer, regardless of whether they are largely following an already established formula (like this one) or represent important musical breakthroughs. Technically, you could still call James a «singles-based artist», but it has to be remembered that at this point, quite a few of the singles in question would be released *after* the LP, not *before*; and despite occasional filler (like, why did they have to include 'So Long' when it had already been released on **Think?**), every single recording is imbued with so much energy that even if you do not remember the song once it's done, you'll still headbang to it like crazy while it's on. A pretty damn solid discographic run begins here, even if it can never hope to reach the legendary status of LP strings by the Beatles or the Stones — for reasons we'll be coming back to every once in a while.

