

The Evolution of Funkness: James Brown Grooves of the 1960s

By Christian Asplund

Introduction

A chronological documentation of James Brown's hits during the 1960s¹ illustrates a gradual textural transformation from a jump swing texture ("Think"), to the minimalist/polyrhythmic funk style of the Alfred "Peewee" Ellis produced, "Give It Up or Turn it Loose". This paper will focus on the evolution that occurs between these two songs. After "Give It Up", the groove gradually fattens and dissipates into the early '70s pimped out chromatic funk of "Brand New Funky President." Transcriptions of these grooves tell a story of the transformation, and thereby illuminate aspects of funk rhythmic texture and how it is different from the swing or jump textures it grew out of.

Durational quantum or least divisible unit

The concept of swung eighth notes, while not usually associated with James Brown, is essential. Moreover, a broader concept of pulse may unify our understanding of swing as well as funkness and other types of beat construction.

In swing texture (as manifest in jazz, show tunes, etc.), the quarter note pulse is articulated very steadily. There is very little rubato or rhythmic flexibility in the duration of a quarter note. However, the temporal space between quarter notes is open, smooth, flexible, free of striations. In eighth note passages this is usually manifest in an "and" that is a bit late, so that a quarter note divides into a longer first eighth and a shorter second eighth. The ratio of the first to second eighths is generally in inverse proportion to the tempo, so that at very slow tempos

¹ Brown, James. Solid Gold. 30 Golden Hits, 21 Golden Years. A compilation of hit songs from 1956 to 1976. Select double LP 2679 044 Polydor, 1977.

(like in many Chicago blues recordings) the ratio is 2:1, like compound time. In very fast tempos, as in bebop, the eighth notes are almost even. In medium and slower tempos there can be a wide range of ratios, even within the same performance, all of which are idiomatic. In other words, the attack point of “and” is not fixed, despite its general tendency to occur proportionally later in slower tempos. The variable location of “and” and the generally open micro-rhythmic space within the quarter note is what allows an otherwise rigid pulse texture to be so expressive. This concept is very difficult to reconcile with a notational system (and thus a conceptual system) that subdivides all units equally and evenly. How does one subdivide an eighth note of indeterminate duration? This was made very clear in an amusing situation when a colleague introduced a piece to a rehearsal that specified swung eighth notes but that included 5/8 measures. Musicians were very puzzled by the conundrum and made several valiant attempts to “swing” an odd number of eighth notes, all to no avail.

This phenomenon may be described as a kind of “durational quantum”. The durational quantum is a rhythmic value that is fixed in duration, but that resists even or consistent subdivision (by twos or threes). The temporal space within a durational quantum is smooth, unstriated. Attacks within it are free to occur anywhere, without strong metrical consequences. They may occur in a given attack point from beat to beat with some consistency, thus giving the impression of metricality, but it is all in the context of a flexible, open space.

In swing, the quarter note is the durational quantum. In most swing textures, the quarter note is also the pulse, or beat unit. This is perhaps what is so characteristic of swing texture. In the course of James Brown’s music of the 1960s we can observe funk texture evolving out of swing texture. This evolution consists in the durational quantum moving from the quarter note to

the eighth note, but the beat unit remaining the quarter note throughout. We notice in the funk songs the new presence of sixteenth notes, and that these sixteenth notes are slightly “swung” .

The “tempo” or duration of the beat gets slower in this evolution, but the music does not feel slower, because of the multiple layers of metrically coherent activity that occur within the quarter note beat.

Perhaps technological developments made this evolution possible, most notably, the advent and improvement of amplified guitar and bass guitar, and the isolation of tracks in the recording process. The bass voice has a structural importance in most music's texture that is acoustically and perhaps physiologically derived. In swing and bebop texture, the bass plays quarter notes and, in effect, "swings" the band as much by the contour of the plucked string bass attack and decay as by its pitch and quarter note motion. In 50's R&B, the bass commonly played two beat style, on beats one and three, much like march music, pre-swing “syncopation” jazz, and show tunes. The string bass rarely handled syncopations because the slowness of its attack (especially before transducers were used). The electric bass guitar, on the other hand, spoke more quickly and easily, and had a much slower decay and was more agile and able to attack syncopated rhythms precisely than the double bass. It is not surprising, then, that we should find eighth notes, syncopations, and, eventually, sixteenth notes in the basslines of Brown's funk grooves. But these funk bass lines retain some of the spaciousness of the earlier R&B bass lines (with attacks mainly on beats one and three). The funk bass lines tend to have dense clusters of notes separated by space, rather than evenly distributed attacks of swing, and, unlike two-beat and swing lines, they rarely include attacks on beat 3. In fact, beat 3 becomes somewhat of a taboo attack point for all instruments in the late '60s funk grooves.

The electric bass and guitars could articulate rhythms with a concise attack without the noise of an unamplified plucked string. The electric instruments also conveyed an intimate tactile sensation that resulted from having pickups so close to the performers' fingers. The listener feels as though the guitarists' and bassist's fingers and strings are inches away from his or her ears. Pitch in these instruments (especially as the guitars eschew fuzz and distortion) is as clear and distinct as the attack. Moreover, the Famous Flames horn section used an accenting technique that resembles the sound of a plucked string. (Listen especially to the brief sax solos played by Maceo Parker at the end of "Cold Sweat," "Mother Popcorn," and "Superbad.") The distinctness of individual lines, was newly possible with multi-track recording, which made adjustment of balance and the use of panning to spatially distinguish instruments possible. The subtle new art of mixing added to the interlocking, pointillistic nature of the texture. In this texture, the newly liberated bass voice becomes the focus of rhythmic activity. Of pitched instruments, the bass typically plays the most attacks and the most prominent syncopations.

Think (1960)

The first song in the appendix, "Think", is in jump blues style, but it has some embryonic characteristics of funk that warrant its inclusion. It is also very useful for comparison and to show how very quickly yet steadily the evolution took place. The funk characteristics are in the bass and drums. The drummer uses only snare, bass and high-hat and keeps the basic pattern of eighths in high-hat, bass on one, and snare on two and four that will become the basic drum beat of pop music for decades. The one difference in the two bars makes an antecedent consequent relation that will become increasingly important in highly repetitive funk lines. The eighths in the high-hat are swung, if only slightly. The durational quantum is therefore still the quarter note as is the beat unit. The bass is not playing quarter notes, walking or not. It is not yet a funk bass

line and does not anchor the structure as does a funk bass line. However, it is syncopated and outlines the underlying rhythm of the whole texture. The underlying rhythm is played in unison by all instruments, so that there is nothing comparable to the rhythmic polyphony one finds in more complex structures, such as the funk songs. The syncopation is a straight-forward 3 3 2 and is perceived as a syncopation.

Outa Sight (1964)

Here, the eighth notes are straight, except for a slight swing in the rhythm guitar with the down strum being slightly longer than the up strum.² Aside from the fact that there are no sixteenths, the eighth note still does not seem to be divisible. The least divisible unit is in limbo. I would call this a funk tune nevertheless. The roles of the instruments begin to be stratified into different interlocking layers with less rhythmic unison. The bass is almost a fully formed funk line in that it plays the most attacks, and outlines something that is both an underlying and a resultant rhythm.³ The rhythmic texture is still not especially complex.

Papa's Got a Brand New Bag (1965)

The following year's big hit, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" is a contrapuntal texture made up of three textural levels, or "voices": 1. the drum beat, 2. the bass line, and 3. the horns and guitar chords. The drummer uses open high-hat in a pattern that will be idiomatic for several years. The lone B below middle C and D# in the first measure of the bass line are significant articulations of positions not attacked by any other (pitched) voices. Notice the antecedent

² The swing of this figure, as in walking bass discussed earlier, seems to arise principally from the physics of the action rather than any deliberate attempt to "swing" it. A down stroke will naturally tend to be longer. Similarly, in the jazz high hat pattern (quarter-eighth-eighth) the lateness of the second eighth results from the technique of allowing the stick to bounce. This begs several questions: Is the figure any less swung? Does all swing originate this way? etc.

³ An underlying rhythm is one that most voices share, but embellish. It might be called rhythmic heterophony. A resultant rhythm is a rhythmic figure that is made from more than one voice and is analogous to hoquet.

consequent relation of the two guitar phrases. The resulting convergence with the bass line is as significant as the lack of convergence in the previous bar. Such convergences will become increasingly important. The other significant advancement is the clear arrival of the eighth note as the durational quantum, as evidenced by (among other things) the existence of sixteenth notes in the horns (the first in Brown's output). The true funkness, however must wait for syncopations at the sixteenth note level, which we first see in the seminal "Cold Sweat."

Cold Sweat (1967)

"Cold Sweat" marks the real arrival of funk and was Brown's first song produced by Alfred ("Peewee") Ellis, who added a minimalized, skin-tight, interlocking aesthetic. The tempo, or at least the pulse, is slower than earlier (non-ballad) songs. One thing that sets its groove apart from earlier ones is that there are at least four distinct contrapuntal lines. One of them is doubled, another is reinforced occasionally and two have substantial convergence and even parallel unison motion for a short stretch. Nonetheless, the individual lines have such a strong independent profile and gesture that they seem like they could be from separate pieces. The fit is tight, however, and one feels a tremendous resultant rhythmic as well as directional pull. Note the "pizzicato" articulation of the horn chords. Note also the single note left out of the second measure to make it a periodic structure. There are two guitars. The lower one plays not chords, but an undulating higher bass line that actually goes below the bass at two different attack points. The other guitar is scarcely detectable but is perhaps the key that sets the James Brown sound apart from the others of this time. It is perhaps the clever use of jumping tracks that makes this (and the baritone sax) so soft, but the syncopation on the sixteenth level affects the mind and body even if the line is not consciously perceived. It is actually the same beat the drummer is playing on the snare. The first few times I wrote out this line, I filled in a lot more

notes than either the pitchless picked guitar or snare drum were playing. It soon became apparent that I was filling in attacks that were implied by the on-the-eighth-note attacks of the other instruments. In this sense, Brown and Ellis have worked with something similar to *klangfarbenmelodie*. There are at least two things that make this song and the others for the next three or so years funkier than songs from other artists of the time or than any since from James Brown or anyone. First I mentioned earlier that the least divisible unit has shifted from the quarter note to the pulse. What happens is the sixteenth note is now swung ever so slightly, as the eighth was in "Think." It is impossible to understand the impact of the sixteenth level syncopations, particularly in the drumming without realizing this. Second is the unpitched ghost-like guitar parts such as in this song, and "Mother Popcorn," as well as pitched ones that are similarly subliminal such as in "Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Nuthin'." Both of these factors contribute to the distinctiveness of James Brown's funk.

Givit Up or Turnit Alose (1967)

I mentioned earlier the voice crossing between bass and lead guitar. I also mentioned some significant convergences, and it is in the interaction of these two lines that we find these significant convergences. This relationship is even more striking in the song "Give It Up or Turnit Alose" from 1967. This arrangement is pared down almost to a hard driving guitar and bass line which interact so intriguingly that they can almost stand alone. And it is really only one bar long. If we divide the measure up into sixteen units (sixteenths) we notice five points of convergence: at 5, 6, 10, 12, and 15. The effect of each convergences differs and is conditioned by the context of the texture, the interval of simultaneity, and the natural strength of the position. The context of the complex pointilistic funk texture makes unisons and octaves the most striking simultaneities, with the more dissonant intervals being progressively less striking. What we find

in this measure is a linear progression of convergences from the beginning of the bar to the space at 13. The first two convergences are repetitions and are minor sevenths, a weak interval in this context. In position eight there is a C in the guitar that is followed in the next position by a C the octave down in the bass. Now admittedly, this is not a strict simultaneity, however the effect of a convergence offset by syncopation is strong, especially considering the strength of the interval. The next convergence is a C# in octaves at 10 in the second strongest position of pulse three (if we consider the fourth sixteenth strongest in terms of syncopation, followed in order by the second, the third, and the first). The next convergence, the octave on D at position 12 is the most striking because it is at the strongest position of pulse three and because it is the second of a series of two convergences in not only similar, but strictly parallel upward motion in octaves. So we could say there is a linear series of convergences that climaxes at position 13 where there is space, what we might call dynamic space. The same phenomenon occurs in "Cold Sweat." A similar pattern of convergences between the (overlapping in this case) guitar and bass which leads to an even more breathless space in the seventh eighth note of bar 1. It is framed by two somewhat isolated attacks. That of eighth note six is isolated by a previous rest in the bass and a melodic skip in the guitar. It is reinforced by attacks in the snare drum and rhythm guitar. The attack on eighth note eight which frames the space on the other side is the strongest convergence of the whole structure. Everything except the horns (including the vocal in one part) converges here and the bass note seems particularly isolated from the rest of its line by space on one side, a succession of descending sixths on the other. The articulation of that D (the final eighth) also isolates it. Notice that in both songs, the space occurs in the first of the fourth pulse.

Similar close reading of the subsequent songs in the appendix will doubtless be revealing. However, a cursory glance reveals a general trend that covers all of the songs included. From

“Think” to “Givit Up”, the amount of space, as well as the variety of densities between timepoints, increases. “Givit Up” feels like a touchstone for transparent groove. The subsequent songs increase in density. The result is that the fat groove of “Brand New...” rediscovers some of the expansive party-time vibe of “Think”, as opposed to the intense, taut groove of “Givit Up”, or “Mother Popcorn”. But the “Brand New...” groove has retains a multidimensional, multidirectional, syncopated quality from the late-‘60s minimal funk.

Each of these grooves has continued to be troped and sampled in vernacular musics ever since, a testament to their durability and power.