

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • CELEBRITY • CONTENT WARNING

Almost Like a Kinston Band

James Brown, Funk, and the Night After Memphis

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Contribution Track • ERA VI–VII • Barnwell, South Carolina

Content Warning

This entry references domestic violence allegations and legal proceedings involving James Brown. Reader discretion is advised.

Who He Is

James Joseph Brown was born May 3, 1933, in Barnwell, South Carolina — his first and middle names reportedly transposed on the birth certificate — and raised largely in Augusta, Georgia, in deep poverty; his mother left the family after enduring domestic abuse, and Brown was raised chiefly by an aunt in Augusta's red-light district. At sixteen he was convicted of robbery and sent to a juvenile facility in Toccoa, Georgia, where he formed a gospel quartet and met Bobby Byrd, whose family helped secure his 1952 parole after hearing him sing. That group evolved into The Famous Flames, whose 1956 single "Please, Please, Please" became their first hit.

Building Funk from the Ground Up

By the mid-1960s Brown had pioneered a fundamentally new sound — stripping away conventional chord changes in favor of interlocking, syncopated rhythm, with the beat itself becoming the song's melodic center. "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" and "I Got You (I Feel Good)" (both 1965) and "Cold Sweat" (1967) are widely cited as founding documents of funk, and his declamatory, near-spoken vocal delivery is frequently named as a direct antecedent of rap. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986.

The Night After Memphis

On April 5, 1968 — the day after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination — Brown performed a scheduled concert at Boston Garden that Boston's mayor arranged to broadcast live on public television, in hopes of keeping the city's residents home rather than in the streets. Brown is widely credited with helping keep Boston calmer than many other American cities that night, though this entry treats the causal claim as widely reported rather than independently proven. That summer he released "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud," which became an anthem of the era's Black pride movement even as Brown later expressed some ambivalence about its separatist reading.

Brown's political relationships in the years that followed were genuinely contested: he endorsed Hubert Humphrey in 1968, then performed at Richard Nixon's 1969 inaugural ball and publicly backed Nixon's 1972 re-election — drawing sharp criticism from civil rights organizations, including a 1972 Cincinnati concert picketed with signs reading "James Brown: Nixon's Clown." He later distanced himself from Nixon amid Watergate. This entry does not resolve that tension; it was, and remains, disputed among Black political commentators whether his choices reflected pragmatic self-interest, a genuinely independent politics, or both.

Legal Troubles

Brown's later decades included serious legal trouble: a 1988 high-speed police chase across the Georgia-South Carolina line ended in convictions for weapons and drug offenses and a six-year sentence, of which he served roughly two. He also faced multiple domestic violence arrests involving his

third wife, Adrienne Rodriguez, across the late 1980s and 1990s, and a 2004 domestic violence charge involving his fourth partner, Tomi Rae Hynie. He died December 25, 2006, in Atlanta, at seventy-three, after which a prolonged, multi-year estate dispute — including a 2020 South Carolina Supreme Court ruling on Hynie's marital status — worked through the courts. This entry names these matters directly rather than omitting them, consistent with treating Brown's full record honestly.

NC Local Lens

James Brown's most significant North Carolina connection runs through Kinston, in Lenoir County — not Fayetteville or Cumberland County, a distinction this entry states plainly rather than blurring. Several of the musicians who helped build the James Brown Band's sound, and with it the foundations of funk itself, were Kinston natives: saxophonist and musical director Nathaniel "Nat" Jones, legendary saxophonist Maceo Parker, and drummer Melvin Parker among them, alongside trombonist Levi Rasbury and trumpeter Dick Knight, a Kinston resident. As one band member put it, the sound was, in a real sense, "almost like a Kinston band." No documented Brown performance or connection specific to Fayetteville or Cumberland County was found in this research pass, though his extensive Southern touring in the 1950s through 1970s makes a Fayetteville date plausible and simply unconfirmed rather than ruled out.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Boston Garden financial figures: a commonly cited \$60,000 demand and \$15,000 payment are widely repeated but not confirmed here against a primary contemporaneous account.

"Kept Boston calm" causal claim: should be presented as widely credited, not as proven causation.

Domestic violence and sexual harassment allegations: carry different evidentiary weight across arrests, dismissals, and convictions — do not flatten into a single undifferentiated narrative.

Estate dispute: may have continued to evolve after the 2020 South Carolina Supreme Court ruling; recheck for later developments before publication.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. James Brown, with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1986).
2. "James Brown," Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, inducted 1986, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.rockhall.com/>.
3. "James Brown Band: 'Almost Like a Kinston Band,'" North Carolina Arts Council, NCpedia, 2013, <https://www.ncpedia.org/>.
4. "African American Music Trails of Eastern North Carolina," North Carolina Arts Council, 2016.
5. RJ Smith, *The One: The Life and Music of James Brown* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).
6. Supreme Court of South Carolina, ruling on the estate of James Brown, June 17, 2020.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.