

FOR SWEET PEOPLE FROM SWEET CHARLES

BY BRYN LEWLEN



Sweet Charles Sherrell belting one out during his '70s solo career. Archival photos courtesy of Mickie Sherrell and the Joseph H. Davis Master Video & Film Collection.

Nashville, Tennessee. Music City, USA, if you please. I certainly am pleased, because my hometown of the last seven years has proven to be a great resource for digging up and learning about music history. Contrary to popular belief, Nashville earned the title "Music City" way before it became a hub for the country and western recording industry. Fisk University's Jubilee Singers established the creative power as well as the commercial viability of African-American music back in 1871, when choirmaster George White bravely took his septet of former slaves out on tour singing "spirituals" and smashing stereotypes about the potential for America's newly freed Black people. A huge success, Nashville's finest didn't stop until they had performed for the Queen of England and toured Europe. The music world would never be the same.¹

A few blocks from Fisk lays Tennessee State University (TSU), where a certain drum major by the name of Charles Sherrell studied composition in the late '50s. Although his first instrument was the drums, Sherrell (aka "Sweets") picked up the guitar while watching Curtis Mayfield's Jaguar at the El Dorado Motel, where he did yard work. He switched to bass guitar while in the air force gigging at officers' clubs. Soon fate would lead him to Club Del Morocco down on Jefferson Street, where he would hone his performance chops in Johnny Jones's band alongside a young Jimi Hendrix, who was stationed at nearby Fort Campbell. Before long, Sherrell was touring with the likes of Aretha Franklin, Jackie Wilson, and the Drifters.

By 1968, the soul music scene was changing for good. In July of that year, James Brown would come through Music City and recruit Sweet Charles, the first of a handful of Nashville musicians to join the Godfather's groove machine. After some brief consideration, Charles joined the James Brown Orchestra and—like the Jubilee Singers a century earlier—went out and changed the world.

Ever heard of a song called "Funky Drummer"? That's Sweets on bass there in the pocket with Clyde Stubblefield. "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud"... "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose"... "Mother Popcorn"... "It's a

New Day"... "Soul Power"... "Hot Pants"... "Get on the Good Foot"... "The Payback"... Sweet Charles definitely stayed busy laying down the groove for many of the most seminal, monumental funk recordings of all time. After a break in 1971 he came back to join the J.B.'s in 1973, and stayed through the remainder of the decade. His 1974 LP on Brown's People label entitled *For Sweet People from Sweet Charles*, and a series of singles including the classic funky 45 "Hang Out and Hustle," gave Sweet Charles a chance to shine as a solo artist, writer, and arranger, thus securing his complete artistic legacy.

Mr. Sherrell's contributions to modern music are inarguable, especially when one considers that it was the electric bass that made this kind of music possible! Bassists like Sweet Charles and Larry Graham plugged into the funk vibe at a unique time when the bass player's newly electrified role was pushing dance music and rhythm and blues into a whole new realm. Within a decade of Leo Fender's development of the electric bass in 1953, the relationship of the rhythm section and the horns and other melodic instruments would fundamentally mutate into a new funky language. According to Quincy Jones, the electric bass forever "changed the sound of music.... The rhythm section became the stars."² In other words, the bass player got down before the drummer would ever get some!

Knowing such a legacy had roots in my hometown, I knew I had to hook up with Sweet Charles the next time he came through. He now resides happily in the Netherlands, where he still records music and plays with the Dutch band Gotcha!, but was pleased to arrange a meeting in Nashville when he came to visit around holiday time. He brought along lifelong friend and James Brown band mate, Joe Davis. Also a Nashville resident, Davis played trumpet with the James Brown Orchestra from 1968–1971 and was actually the first Black television producer in the city. These two soft-spoken gentlemen had plenty to say on music and life in the James Brown world, and I consider myself blessed to have had the opportunity to take it all in.

So tell me about growing up in Nashville.



Sweets and Macco Parker lounging on the rooftop.

I grew up around Pearl Street, which now is projects and stuff. I went to Beard School, Pearl Elementary School, Washington Junior High, and then Pearl High. And went to TSU for a minute.

How did you start out in music?

I actually started out playing in the first, second, third grade band. My music teacher was Andy Goodrich.

What was your first instrument?

Drums. Actually, I started to play the trombone, but that was too loud for my mom and dad...

Louder than the drums?

Yeah, because I really couldn't play it. It was a whole lot of bllaabbb... Plus the mouthpiece on the trombone at that time. It was so big, all up on top of my nose. So I put that away and started playing drums. At Pearl High School I was drum major the whole time, also playing snare and timpani in the concert band.

What did your music teacher say about you back then?

If you're gonna stick to this for a future, you have to learn the basics first. And then study, experience, study, experience... keep learning, keep learning. Because you never stop learning. I'm still learning.

When did you start learning keyboards?

This organist at our church, Prof. Scandricks, offered to give me private lessons at his house. I was out of school [TSU]. Before then, I was into concert music—Bach, Beethoven, Nocturne, you know. Because that was the kind of stuff we were playing. We went all the way through school together. [pointing to Joe Davis]

JOE: Probably the most important thing I can say is that the man you're here to interview is the reason why I was ever included in a context like this, even though we came

down the pike together. The teachers he was telling you about I was exposed to and trained by also. But had it not been for Charles I never would have been exposed to that rock and roll, or rhythm and blues on the level of a James Brown. It's proven to be one of the best experiences of my life, even though I've gone on to have two or three other careers after that time.

So you were listening to classical. Who got you into that?

SWEETS: By playing that type music in high school and then listening to people like Roger Williams, when Ray Charles first come with the strings, Nat King Cole and people like that. I loved the sound of the music.

The arrangements...

I love arrangements. And I love violins. Because violins to me...it puts a cape on music. It makes it real angelic. It puts a spiritual thing into your body if it's a good arrangement.

It comes through in your music. When did you get into the soul and R&B scene?

Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions were living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, but would record in Nashville. They would always stay at the El Dorado Motel where I was keeping the grass cut and yard work. I washed his car and played around with his guitar. After that, I come out of school, my father passed. I went into the service to help my mom out.

That's in the early '60s?

Yeah. All this music was on the air bases that I was on. I formed a group. We were playing at the officers' clubs and stuff. That's when I picked up the bass. I said, "I think I can play bass."

So you moved from drums in the combo to the bass. How

did you know that the bass would be an instrument that would take you places?"

Because the bass to me is the foundation of any song. If the notes and the changes are played real good, you can feel the bass going through your body. That's when you touch people. When you feel that certain thang.

When was your first professional gig?

Some people came through Nashville looking for a back-up band for Aretha Franklin and Jackie Wilson for the tour. So I knew this guy Johnny Jones who had a group called Johnny Jones and the King Kasuals. Him and Hendrix and everybody and Billy Cox [bass player with Jimi at Woodstock and in the Band of Gypsies].

So you played with Jimi Hendrix in Nashville?

Yeah. Club Del Morocco down on Jefferson Street. He lived here for a while.

That's hip.

Johnny found out I was pretty talented. I think it was through this friend of mine that also used to play with him, Waymon Reed [also a trumpet player with the James Brown Orchestra in the late '60s]. This would be 1967. They was playing everything. Had a good horn section, the Muscle Shoals Horns.

JOE: Johnny Jones is better known today as a blues guitar player. Really roots blues... Real blues. But rhythm and blues was getting bigger and bigger. Johnny Jones, he played it all. He was a bandleader. He organized groups and combos. Charles played with him, I played with him, locally and in an extended fashion—the chitlin circuit, as it was known back then. Johnny Jones had an organization that played at Fort Campbell, which was where Jimi Hendrix was enlisted. Hendrix was attempting to learn guitar, and Johnny Jones, Billy Cox, and those people were already at least semi-professional because they were entertaining the soldiers. And that's how they came to know each other. A lot of people credit Johnny Jones with being Jimi Hendrix's first guitar teacher.

SWEETS: We used to jam together in Club Del Morocco on Jefferson Street. Had to get out before five o'clock because I was under age.

Man! So Aretha Franklin and Jackie Wilson came to town. Did you play on "Your Love Is Lifting Me Higher"?

I didn't play on the track, but in the show many times. It was a package show: Jackie Wilson, Aretha Franklin, the Drifters, Big Maybelle, Peg Leg Moffett, which was a guy who had a peg leg, right...but he tap-danced on one leg. Oh yeah, Curtis Mayfield and them...the Impressions.

Would you play with all those groups on that tour?

I think we did play behind all of them...

Did you graduate TSU?

No.

What was your concentration?

Arranging, Composition.

Past, Present and Future [band]: that was 1967?

Yeah, that group was a super-group here in Nashville. I was a vocalist for the group. Every now and then I would play bass or drums on certain tunes that the drummer couldn't hack it.

You had a 45 out...

I believe it was on Mecca. "Bones to Bones" was the hit, and then on the flip was "If I Only Had a Minute."

What made it a hit?

It was different. It was a different sound coming from white musicians. But that sound with my voice... It was different to people. It was a funk beat, sort of like hard-rockish beat... but the melody was sweet, the horns was "bat bat bat" and then the way I was doing my voice...

So when did James Brown come and offer you a job?

July 1968. See what happened... He had me and my band [Past, Present and Future] to open up his show at Municipal Auditorium. He figured I didn't need to be there; I need to be over here. "You got too much soul to be over there! You're in Nashville, this is country, you're not going nowhere but to a farm." So I said, "Well, I'll tell you what... You give me a couple weeks to think about it." That pissed him off. Because he figured, "I'm James Brown. If I offer somebody a job, they should just jump right at it." But I wanted to think about it and think about my purpose for going out there with this guy that I didn't know, how I was gonna conduct myself. But I promised myself not to change me for nobody. So I said, "I'll just go out there as me." If he does something that I think was disrespectful, I'll tell him.

When I first went out there, he had me sitting behind a set of drums. Waymon Reed told him I was a good drummer. He said, "He's a good musician." So the bass player he had, which was Tim Drummond [white bass player with the Dapps, plays bass on "I Can't Stand Myself (When You Touch Me)" and "Licking Stick - Licking Stick"], caught hepatitis [on tour in Vietnam] and came back. So James says, "You play bass?" I says, "Some." "We're going to find out. We're going to cut 'Black and Proud.'"

What had you heard about his style, his way of managing things?

Well, I heard that he was real firm on dress attire. I agree with that. With the fines and stuff... Because he used to buy all the uniforms, all the shoes, all the shoe trees, all the bow ties, everything. Everybody had their own stuff. He would get them cleaned, so, if he would get them cleaned, I mean, you *should* look good on stage. Your stage appearance means a whole lot in show business. You go up there looking good, that's the first good impact you get on the crowd. And then you hit 'em in the jaw with the funk or the country or whatever... but if you look good, you're halfway there. Sometimes, the pay would be late. That used to bother me. To me, if the band hit on time, they should get paid on time.

What was it like playing on "Say It Loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud" in 1968?

Well, after I heard the words to it, it kind of frightened me, because you know at that time a whole lot of stuff was going on... Martin Luther King and all the riots and stuff. We've been playing, performing for all races of people—I've seen them in the crowd, you know. So [I'm thinking], "This is going to hurt him." Because you can't



Swears performing with the Majestics at Club Staal-Away in Nashville, pre-JB 1967.

go to a concert and sit there and say, "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud" if you're not Black or if you're not Mexican or whatever. You can't do that so you'd feel cheated, you know. That scared me. But James realized it too. Because all of a sudden his crowds started dropping off. He only did that song live maybe three or four times. Five at the most. Then he stopped doing it. For that reason.

How did the Black community at large at that time perceive that record?

The DJs of course went on it big time. It started selling. But I think that James made them stop selling the record. So we had to come up with some James Brown funk stuff. So that's when we did "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose" stuff like that.

"Funky Drummer"...

Yeah. So we started cutting stuff like that. Then James went back to the DJs, played this, played this, and boom.

He just came out with the funk and blew everybody's mind

I WENT OUT TO THE BUS AND GOT HIS BASS, TOOK HIS BASS INSIDE THE CASINO AND BUSTED IT. "CAN I GET PAID NOW?"



basically.

Yeah. Blew everybody's mind.

In that era, your first stint of playing and recording, you were on "Funky Drummer," which is one of the most sampled drumbeats ever.

I know it. I hear it all the time.

Often the musician's credits read, "Bass: Fred Thomas or Charles Sherrell." So, you were both in the studio and whoever happened to be playing at the time...

Yeah, whoever played it more distinct and really brought the note out. Fred played real heavy, like on "Funky Good Time" [i.e. "Doin' It to Death"]...

What song made you first realize the scope and power of what you and the James Brown funk movement were doing across the world? What made you first realize that nobody had created this funky sound before and that you all were making history?

"Mother Popcorn" was the song that I realized was a powerful movement in the James Brown groove machine. Heavy on the one with the bass drum. Bass guitar was on the "one and," horns on the "and two" of the beat, which made the track groovy and funky at the same time.

What kind of things did James Brown say to the band in order to impart his unique musical vision to the musicians in the studio when writing and recording? Because it seems to me that the song structures, the repetition of the beats on the one, the heaviness, the emphasis on the drums, the crazy way to play the guitar, all these things were a radical departure from convention. What was it like in the studio inventing this stuff?

Most of the ideas came from James Brown. He was a good dictator more than musician. He would make different sounds and we were musically educated enough to turn the sounds he made into music. Myself, the drummers, the guitarist, we [were] like mechanics on a Rolls Royce...

Knowing how to make it run smooth. Being in the studio inventing this stuff was educational for all of us.

You split in 1971... Decided to take a break?

Yeah, if you want to call it a break. I split because of a business disagreement. Financial business disagreement. We were doing a thing in Vegas. And it was time to go home. James was in the casino gambling. We're outside waiting to get paid and go home. I got tired of waiting. I had a plane to catch, so I went in the casino and told his bodyguards, "Hey, we need to get paid. We need to go home." He says, "Don't bother me, I'm gambling." I said, "Okay." So I went out to the bus and got his bass, took his bass inside the casino and busted it. Right there. And says, "Can I get paid now?" And then I left.

And what did he do?

Looked at me like I was crazy. I left. A month later, Joe and Maceo and them left.

Yeah, that's history.

You know, if I work I want to get paid. Simple as that. I don't want nobody else's money... I just want mine. So to me, he was giving my money to those people. I wanted mine before they took it all.

You're gonna come back... But tell me more about that period. You worked with Marva Whitney and Lyn Collins. What was the like?

Marva... beautiful lady. Lyn Collins... beautiful people. No problem performing with them. The only problem that they had was satisfying Mr. Brown.

His perfectionism?

I wouldn't say perfectionist, because very few stuff that he did was with perfection. I mean whatever it is, is what it is. But I think it was the power... the power play of James Brown: You're gonna do what I say. I'm the boss. I'm James Brown. So he had that on the singers and some of the band members. He tried it with me a couple of times, but he saw that I wasn't biting, you know.

What was up with not getting any credit on the albums?

Well... Like I said, with the power, with his name. He knew the people to play on. He was surprised that I had my music business end on... Having stuff copy written, having my own publishing company. It just freaked him out.

That's one of the most important things...

That's the most important thing. But a lot of people were just so excited about being with James Brown, that he said, "Write me a tune." They'd do it and just give it to him. They wouldn't have no back up, no kind of legal protection like sending it to the Library of Congress or whatever or the publishing company. As soon as it's finished in the studio, *that's* when you do it: The very next morning. When the mailman come.

Is that what you tried to do...

No. That's what I *did*. That's what I did. That part he

didn't like about me. But he respected me for being like that, because most of the people out there let him get away with a lot of stuff. But just about all the stuff that I wrote and recorded with him together, we split publishing, I got mine. Except one tune... "Get Up Offa That Thing."

"... (Release the Pressure)? That was 1976.

Oh man. Me and Jimmy Nolen come up with that tune down in Florida somewhere. Me and Jimmy Nolen come up with that. And James heard us playing it. He come into the dressing room, said, "What is that?" "It's a tune." "What is it?" "We call it 'Get Up Offa That Thing.'" "Yeah? Let me hear it! Sweets, you gotta help me with some words." "No problem. 'Get up off that thang / Dance and you'll feel better / Get up offa that thang / Try to release that pressure.'" Plus I'm singing on that cut with him! Answering him, you know. That's the only one... Him and Hal Neely [Starday-King] they did something with it and got it out there. Because the next day he booked the studios. Me and Jimmy Nolen, you know, cookin' and shit, then, boom, we cuttin' the tune... The next thing I know—'bout a week or two—it was out on the airwaves!

Before you came back to the James Brown camp in 1973, you were back with Past Present & Future for a minute, back in Nashville.

Yeah, working with them. Working with a bunch of other people.

JOE: What we did together earliest after the group left James was the two albums we cut that were Nashville-oriented albums. Most of James's band left around the time Charles was describing in 1971 from the gig in Las Vegas. Although we stayed on the bus and went to Augusta [Georgia] and began to record there what came out to be the *Sex Machine* double LP. Part of the reason we left was because of the way we saw Charles getting treated. You know how members of a band kinda cult up together and they feel like all for one and one for all. From time to time, James would have incidents with individuals. Like Charles said, he was a control freak and he liked for you to feel his power. And we would be watching as individuals somebody that was a part of our unit being misused and that kept us kind of down. We didn't like that. We all got fed up at the same time. Money was getting to be late, he had stopped paying for some things that he had been known to pay for, and things were changing... So we just decided we didn't want the unit tore up... We'd leave and go do something on our own. We met with James to discuss what we felt was fair treatment. And we disagreed. All we did was formalize a disagreement and we left. We came to Nashville and cut an album. I feel like that was one place where my influence—right or wrong—was felt by a group of people that I held in high esteem: those band members. They were why I wanted to play with James Brown. I didn't necessarily want to play with or for or behind James Brown... I wanted to play with that damn band! That bad band! Just to tell the truth about it. So I identified more with them. I can appreciate James Brown... Like I said, it was the best part of my life. I have not [had] a high point like that since then, and I've been around, you know. I really treasured that period



Sweet Charles and Maceo at their home away from home, the James Brown bus.





Guitarist George Yates with Sweets on bass during the mid-'70s.



Bobby Byrd and Sweet Charles hard at work with the engineer in the studio control room.

THOSE GUYS WERE GLAD TO SEE ME BACK BECAUSE I BROUGHT THAT GROOVE BACK. I BROUGHT IT BACK IN THERE AND KEPT IT IN THERE.

of time. But we left and we came to Nashville and we cut an album—Maceo & All the Kings Men *Doin' Their Own Thing*, which turned out to be the best album that we as that group did.

By 1973 it was the J.B.'s. What was it like playing with the new group?

SWEETS: It was all right. To me, I feel that the first James Brown funk band that I went in had the baddest guitar player in the world: Jimmy Nolen. And Alphonse Kellum. And then me and Clyde and Jab'O and Melvin Parker [Maceo's brother]. With me coming back, those guys were glad to see me back because I brought that *groove* back. I brought it back in there and kept it in there... until the milk turned sour again. You don't like drinking sour milk. *"Doin' It to Death." With the J.B.'s.*

Right. Well, Fred... He played real heavy. My style of bass... I played notes and measures and bars where people wouldn't expect. I would play syncopation and then I would hold on the groove, and every now and then go somewhere where people wouldn't expect to hear something. That's the reason my style is different. It's not that I'm the best bass player in the world, because I don't think

none of us will ever live to see the best, right? But I do what I do. I play the feel that God gave me the gift to play and fill it up and make it different.

What led up to the Sweet People LP?

They released a couple things off the album as singles. I went out and did *Soul Train* a couple times. I did *Midnight Special*. I did Don Kershwin's *In Concert*. When I did *Midnight Special*, Wolfman Jack was the MC. The name Sweet Charles was given to me by James Brown and producer of *Soul Train* Don Cornelius because a group of ladies organized a "Sweet Charles Fan Club" in California.

Then James started asking me to do this, or do this, come up with a bass line for this and Fred Wesley and stuff. We went to Zaire and played for the fight—Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. They shot a movie of it; it's called *When We Were Kings*. It's a good one.

How did your record fit into the whole People vibe? It kind of stands out.

It's the only thing in there like it.

Right. Whose idea was it to come with an album like that?

Mine. Let me tell you how I got to do this album. At that time, Fred [Wesley] found out what a good medium—



Sweets singing at a Nashville honky-tonk club in the '60s.



Charles Sherrill in Nashville, 2007. Photo by Brian Murray (www.brianmurrayphoto.com).



On stage with James Brown during the early '70s.

I won't say good, because I don't feel I'm good... I'm mediocre. I play what's needed. All right, so Fred found that out, right. So Fred said, "Sweets, we're going to run over these tunes. I know you know the lyrics." James stuff. We're in A&R Studios [NYC] rehearsing these tunes. So while I was singing, the president of Polydor, Jerry Schoenbaum, walked in the studios looking for James. He heard me singing. He says, "Hey kid, what's your name?" I told him. He says, "My name is Jerry Schoenbaum. I'm the president of Polydor. You wanna do an album?" I said, "Yeah. With an orchestra." He says, "We can get what you want from the union. Come to the office after you finish with this. We're gonna have a talk." So I looked at Fred, I says, "You're going with me." Fred said, "Hell yeah! You know who that is?" I said, "He just told me: Jerry Schoenbaum." This was maybe in early 1974.

How did Dave Matthews get involved?

I knew Dave from Cincinnati. James always had Dave Matthews there at the [King] Studio. And then James had a group up there called the Dee Felice Trio. So it was Beau Dollar and those guys [the Dapps—James Brown's funky white protégés] and Dave Matthews, so I knew where he was at. So after I talked to Schoenbaum and told him, "I want an orchestra," he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I want the harp, I want oboes, I want bassoons, I want French horns, and I want twenty-one violins. I want a full percussionist. I want Cornell Dupree on guitar. And if we

can find Wilbur Bascomb or Gordon Edwards on bass."

So Bad Bascomb played bass? I just figured you played bass on...

No. All I did was... Fred and I would sit in hotels all night drinking coffee, eating salads. We had manuscript paper all over the floor. I was all the way over here, Fred was over here. I was writing what I wanted on this song, what I wanted on this song, what changes, what riffs. Fred said, "Damn Sweets, we need to call Dave Matthews if you want strings like that!" I said, "I want strings just like that. I don't care if you call Quincy Jones! I want strings! These peoples got money!" They come up to me, I didn't go to them. He said, "Okay, well, I'll call up there..." I says, "Call him! Tell him I want him. I want him for three weeks." It was me, Fred, and Dave Matthews in a hotel room with stuff all over the floor, drinking coffee, sometimes staying up all night, writing arrangements.

What was Dave Matthews like? A lot of people don't know much about him. He's a white dude from Louisville, Kentucky, right?

JOE: He's the funkier, most together arranger/composer that I ever met through James Brown.

SWEETS: Me too.

People don't even know. There's a guy out today called Dave Matthews, and I'll say "Dave Matthews" and I'm not talking about today's Dave Matthews, I'm talking about him.

JOE: I know it. I remember running down to 328 Per-

formance Hall [in Nashville] because I thought it was the Dave Matthews you're talking about, when this [new] Dave Matthews's career first started.

It sounds like the three of you really had a vision and the musicians were following your vision. Because when I hear it, it sounds totally different than everything else to me. I'm hearing all those changes, like the little pause with the clarinet riff...

SWEETS: Yeah. Like on "Strangers in the Night." [singing] Doo doo doo doot. Weird stuff.

One of my favorite cuts is "Dedicated to the One Love," which is like a 6/8 beat, but it's on the same album as "Soul Man," which is the heaviest funk beat. So you were really doing something different, bringing this sweet flavor with the really hard...

Yeah... And this other tune here, "Yes It's You" ... [sings] "Doot. Chicka doo doot. Chicka doo doot." They released that as a single and that thing went off! And they still playing that in discos all over Europe.

Were those the biggest records off this?

"Soul Man," "Yes It's You," and believe it or not... "C'mon let me show you where it's at."

"I Like It Like That." Who did "Strangers in the Night" first?

You know, I really don't know. You see, the "Strangers in the Night" came from the time when I told you I used to listen to Roger Williams and people like that, Nat King Cole. And plus Dinah Washington—"This Bitter Earth"

and all that shit. That's where the "Strangers in the Night" thing came to my brain. We got to do "Strangers in the Night." And Fred looked at me like I was crazy. I said, "We got to do it." You know, they played [that song] a lot too; because it was totally different than the normal "Strangers in the Night" the way Sinatra sang it.

What is it about singing in falsetto? How did you know that doing the whole Sweet People LP in falsetto was the right move?

Singing in falsetto is an ear-catching move because you're not straining, plus you don't have to sing loud and hard. It's like people will listen if you talk to them in a normal tone, but if you yell at them they don't. For the *Sweet People* LP I wanted to sing to the people in a normal tone.

Let's see what else...

I wrote "Give the Woman a Chance" and "Treat Me Like a Man." The voice on the intro of the album was Fred Wesley.

The woman between the songs. Tell me about her. What's her name?

Vespa. She was the secretary at the recording studios. After we did the tracks, Fred said, "We need to put something totally different as a lead-in to each song. Think of something." So he called Vespa. "Vespa—come here, come here for a minute. Just put the phone on hold or whatever. Come here. Let me hear you say, [whispering] 'He's a sweet soul brother.'"





The mid-'70s Sweet Charles Sherrill looking forward.

And she just...

"Say it exactly the way that you just said it. Can you do that again for us please?" [whispering] "He's a sweet soul brother." Boom. And then after every song, he says, "Think of something else." And she starts, [whispering] "Tu amore. Je t'aime." ...in different languages. And that freaked us out, but we let her go, because she was relating to other different races.

She wasn't Black?

Oh yeah.

She spoke different languages? This is New York, right?

Yeah, she spoke, you know, three or four different languages. Her hair was short, right? She had "good hair," so evidently I think she was... She was a beautiful lady. That's all I gotta say. I don't want to say she was Puerto Rican or whatever, but God made a beautiful lady.

So what was the reaction to this album?

When we finished it, they were very pleased. I was truly satisfied with it. You know sometimes when I listen to it, I say, "Oh, I should've done it like this." But it's today. I did this back in '74. So I did it the way that I felt in '74. If I do some of these songs on stage, I do it exactly the way that I recorded it, but I put a little bit more *balls* in the song. You know, put the power in it. You up there with the horns and the guitars and stuff... you don't have an orchestra. But the band has still got to play the same arrangement and basically the same feel. But I have to bulk it up, you know.

It's the rarest People LP, isn't it? Was it moving units?

Man, you know what? When James did that deal with Polydor, that label [People] didn't have Polydor distributing it. To me, that really hurt the musicians and the artists that was on James's label. Because, say if they wanted to release something off this album, they wouldn't call me, they would call the People label, which is James Brown. And then James would tell them do this and do this... If the thing was just strictly Polydor, then Polydor would have called the artist that James really [jerked] around financially. Taking what wasn't his, you know. But, it got me out there.

Yeah, well, *People* was the most successful of any of his other little labels. It could have been worse... It's a miracle that it came together. It's pretty rare that an album with such a unique vision as yours and Fred Wesley's and Dave Matthews's would come out like this. [Note: In his autobiography, *Hit Me, Fred*, Fred Wesley says, "I came of age as a producer/arranger on (*For Sweet People from Sweet Charles*)."³]

See, that shows the versatility in a musician, a bandleader, or arranger. You have to be able to—if you're going to classify yourself as an arranger—you have to be able to arrange *any* kind of song that they bring to you. Country, bluegrass, whatever... You got to be able to do that. Fred was good at it, you know. I was good at it, some stuff. Pee Wee [Ellis]... And that's what freaked people out about this. "Fred is doing arrangements like *this*?" See they

was thinking the people that played with James is only people that can play funk! When you do stuff like this, this brings the truth out.

He was working with the best. And fortunately he brought all these people to the point where they could do something like this, that he can't even really take credit for. But he brought you all together somehow, one way or another. For the Black Caesar soundtrack, I read that James thought that all doing a movie soundtrack involved was just, "Okay, we'll put 'Try Me' for this part, we'll do 'I Lost Someone' for this part, and then we're done." And Fred Wesley said, "Well, you know, maybe we can use some clarinets. This is a soundtrack, you know..." So they did the whole nine, and Wesley arranged "Down and Out in New York City," which had been written as a countrywestern arrangement, and Fred had to make it funky, like you said.

Whatever the menu calls for, do it.

"Hang Out and Hustle." 1975. Did that have to do with the



IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR JAMES BROWN, I FEEL THERE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN A SWEET CHARLES.



dance that was coming out?

No... At that time, that's when the disco thing started coming in, right? So I said, "I'm going to write a tune about me going to the disco, hanging out with my friends. That'll work." Yeah.

It's a pretty mean bass line. Did you play bass on that?

Yeah, I played bass on it. [pulls out *Nighty by Nature* Poverty's Paradise...] This group here... You heard of that group? Did you know that they done "Hang Out and Hustle" on this album?

They sampled it? 1995.

I just found out about it three weeks ago. They got me singing "Hang out and hustle..."

Did you get paid?

No, I didn't. I called about this and asked, "Why didn't somebody contact me?" They said somebody *was* contacted. So what they did—they called James. So James okayed it, so I'm sure they wrote James a nice check. Because I was affiliated with the James Brown empire.

How did you get to the Netherlands?

The reason I moved to the Netherlands was because I had been going everywhere with James. And during the times that we played the Netherlands, it was a totally different atmosphere than playing anywhere else in the world. People treat people like people. There's no guns in Holland. You don't hear sirens twenty-four hours a day. You barely hear a siren. If you do, it's because it's a bad wreck on the interstate. Plus, you don't see people's furniture and stuff set out on the street over there because the government takes care of the people over there. You don't have nowhere to live? They give you a place to live, plus give you money. The tax over there is very high... but it's cool! Because you are well taken care of. You can go into any hospital without having to sit out and die out there in the lobby if your

grandmama don't have American Express, you know what I'm saying? You can go to any hospital. No hospital turn nobody down. That's enough.

Give me one of the wildest memories from the late '60s, early '70s out on the road with James Brown... One of the highlights.

One of the wildest things that happened... First of all, James Brown—he's a strange guy. After all the stuff that I went through with him, I survived. Thank God. But if it hadn't been for James Brown, I feel there wouldn't have been a Sweet Charles. There's only one Sweet Charles. He took me all over the world. He gave me the exposure. The rest of what I do is left up to me. So I want to take my hat off to him for doing that. I want to make sure that's known. Now the wildest thing that happened... We did a job down at the stadium in Miami. Played after a football concert. Then we played a nice club right down where the boats are—the marina. Played two nights in this beautiful

club in Miami, and the stadium. After the gig we was ready to get paid.

As usual.

Yeah, as usual. James was gone. He left that night after the show. Got on his private jet and took off. So then everybody was calling me, because they figured, "Man, Sweets will do anything. Anything!"

Was this before or after Las Vegas? What year was this?

This was in the '70s. Before I quit in '78. After I had written "Kiss of '77" so it had to have been around '78 or something. Everybody calling me: "Sweets, James and the payroll man—they're gone!" Gone! Didn't pay the band. So I looked out my window, I saw the bus still there, of course, and the equipment truck full of equipment. I had the room list of everybody. I called the guy that was driving the truck: "Come down here and bring me the key to the truck. I need to get a keyboard off the truck later on and I got a song I need to write for James." He said, "Oh, okay, Sweets." Brought me a key, he said, "You want me to open it..." and I said, "No no no, you go on back. I didn't mean to wake you up. I'll get it and I'll bring the key back." Called the bus driver: "Hey man, I need to get something from underneath the bus. I got to get some books that I'm supposed to give some DJs that's going to come by. For James." The bus driver came down and brought me the bus key. I said, "Go on back to bed." I took the keys to his bus and to his truck with all the equipment, put them in my pocket. I called him [James] and I says, "I have the keys to your bus. I have the keys to your truck, and it's going to be mine unless you bring that money down here and pay us. Why did you do us like this? Now we're in a hotel, we don't know how we're going to get out of here. But I have the keys to your bus—if I have to sell this bus and your truck with the equipment, that's what I'm gonna do!" And I

hung up the phone. I took the band... I called this guy, the promoter that booked the other gigs for James. I called him and let him know what happened. I said, "Man, I now have the band. The name of the band now is the Nuclear Explosions!" And people... freaked... out. So of course he sent a couple of big guys down there to Miami to get me and get the keys back to his bus. Big guys. But I also talked to the promoter and told him, "Call the highway patrol and the state troopers and have them over here." I told him what was going down and I said, "I have a feeling that James is going to send some goons down here to get me." When they came in, guess who met them at the front door? The highway patrol and the state troopers. "You boys here for something? You here to see somebody?" "Yeah, we here to see..." They said, "Yeah, we know. What you want? What you want? You got any money with you? Well, if you don't, get your ass back up... *Nobody* is touching Charles. If you don't have the money, get your asses back in them cars and we'll escort you back."

How many guys was it, just two?

It was three guys. Big guys. One of them used to play with James. He's dead now, he died I guess about a year ago. He was a drummer. His name was Clayton Fillyau. You probably seen his name. He was the drummer playing on that first James Brown *Live at the Apollo*. Big guy, good drummer. Him and a couple others...

What happened then?

So I talked to the promoter and said, "Look. What you do... The band is now called the Nuclear Explosions, so find a club for us to work so we can pay the hotel bills and move on." So he did. We worked a club down there like three nights and he paid us. And then I contacted some other people in Guadalupe. Called them and had them to book us over there. I took the band to Guadalupe for like two or three weeks.

Where is that?

One of them islands—Ibiza Islands.

In the Atlantic?

Yeah, it's a nice place. They have a Club Med. It was great.

What happened after that? What did James do?

Well, he sent me money. He finally sent me money. We didn't have no argument about it at all. No bad words. He sent the money. I gave the guys a piece. Returned the truck and the bus after we flew back into Miami from Guadalupe. They wired me the money. And so the band went back. He walked up, "Sweets! How you doing?" I said, "I'm fine, how you doing? Good to see you."

That's it?

That's it.

To wrap up... What is funky music? What is soul music? What were you feeling back then, because you all were inventing this rhythm that's now taken over the world. The rhythm on the one.

The rhythm that we created back then had a couple of things about it. It was heavy. It was good and danceable. The feel of the rhythm then was funky and it was consistent.

You could nod your head to it...

Yeah, to where you could just be in a car and bang your head on the dashboard, you understand? James Brown's funk thing that we had was consistent. It'd just drive people...

Yeah, you could play James Brown records all day [Sweets: "All week!"] and not stop nodding your head!

Yeah, so it's the type of rhythm that relaxes the mind. Plus, it makes you think. Because once you start doing this [nods head] you get into a different rhythm and then you gonna think about something that's positive. So our groove was a groove that kept people focused.

I find it helps me focus, personally.

Yeah. It's all true. One thing I found out: When you tell the truth, you don't have to think about it twice. If you tell a lie, if you say it again, you gotta say the exact thing, and that's kind of hard to do. I want to thank you for taking your time out and contacting me. I've been around for a long time, thank God. I want to thank you for being into our music, our history. I want you to make sure that you mention [Joe Davis] because we grew up together. We went all the way, I mean *all* the way together. When I got wind that James needed a trumpet player, I told James, "I got a trumpet player in Nashville. This is my man!"

JOE: The real truth is that Charles Sherrell... everybody didn't know this, but he had a side job when he was working for James Brown. He was the Unemployment Bureau for the James Brown organization. And James had a penchant toward Nashville musicians. I guess he was caught under the "Music City USA" concept.

The rhinestones and what not...

JOE: He had a preference, because he had a good experience with people like Charles for Nashville musicians. That made it easy for people like me to go out there and do well. But I still wouldn't have been able to do it without Charles. And every other musician who was from Nashville who played for James at any time after Charles went out there was recommended by Charles Sherrell. So Charles has always promoted Nashville as a city.

Nashville's pretty cool.

SWEETS: Yeah, it's a great place. ●

MATT ROWLAND is art director for *Now-Again Records*. His graphic design website is www.rexresources.com. He also works with *Galt MacDermot* and *Greedy Man Records* (www.greedyman.com).

Contact him at mattrex1@rexresources.com for more information.

Notes:

1. *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory*, from the *American Experience* series (1985, 1009).

2. George, Nelson. *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*. (New York: Plume, 1988), p. 18.

3. Wesley, Fred. *His Mr. Fred*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 115.

Interview with Sweet Charles Sherrell and Joe Davis, December 16, 2002, Nashville, Tennessee.

Archival photos courtesy of Mickie Sherrell and the Joseph H. Davis Master Video & Film Collection.

2002 photo by Brian Murray (www.brianmurrayphotos.com).

Sweet Charles Sherrell Selected Discography

researched by Matt Rowland (with Brian DiGenti and Dante Carfagna)

The unabridged, official discography can be found at waxpoetics.com

CATALOG NUMBER KEY: K = KING | PE = PEOPLE | PD = POLYDOR



JAMES BROWN SINGLES FEATURING SWEET CHARLES SHERRELL

"There Was a Time" (K 6144) 1968
 "I Got the Feelin'" (K 6155) 1968
 "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6187) 1968
 "Give It Up or Turnit a Loose/ I'll Lose My Mind (instr.)" (K 6213) 1969
 "You've Got to Have a Job" (K 6218) 1969
 "Soul Pride Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6222) 1969
 "I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door and I'll Get It Myself) Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6224) 1969
 "The Popcorn (instr.)/ The Chicken (instr.)" (K 6240) 1969
 "Mother Popcorn Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6245) 1969
 "Lowdown Popcorn (instr.)/ Top of the Stack (instr.)" (K 6250) 1969
 "Let a Man Come In and Do the Popcorn Pt. 1/ Sometime" (K 6255) 1969
 "Let a Man Come In and Do the Popcorn Pt. 2/ Gittin' a Little Hipper Pt. 2 (instr.)" (K 6275) 1969
 "Popcorn with a Feeling (instr.)" (Federal 12551) 1969
 "Ain't It Funky Now Pt. 1/ Pt. 2 (instr.)" (K 6280) 1969
 "Brother Rapp Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6285 W) 1970
 "Funky Drummer Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6290) 1970
 "It's a New Day Pts. 1 & 2/ Georgia on My Mind" (K 6292) 1970
 "If You Don't Work You Can't Eat" (K 6342) 1970
 "Spinning Wheel Pt. 1/ Pt. 2 (instr.)" (K 6366) 1971
 "Soul Power Pt. 1/ Soul Power Pts. 2 & 3" (K 6368) 1971

"Hot Pants Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-2501) 1971
 "Make It Funky Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14088) 1971
 "Get on the Good Foot Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14139) 1972
 "I Got a Bag of My Own" (PD-14153) 1972
 "Stoned to the Bone Pt. 1" (PD-14210) 1973
 "The Payback Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14223) 1974
 "My Thang" (PD-14244) 1974
 "Dooley's Junkyard Dog (long version)/ (short version)" (PD-14303) 1976
 "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons" (PD-14304) 1976
 "Get Up Offa That Thing/ Release the Pressure" (PD-14326) 1976
 "Bodyheat Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14360) 1976
 "Kiss in '77/ Woman" (PD-14388) 1977
 "Summertime" (PD-14433) 1977
 "People Who Criticize/ If You Don't Give a Doggone About It" (PD-14438) 1977
 "Love Me Tender/ Have a Happy Day" (PD-14460) 1978
 "The Spank/ Love Me Tender" (PD-14487) 1978
 "Nature Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14512) 1978
 "For Goodness Sakes, Look at Those Cakes Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14522) 1978
 "Rapp Payback (Where Iz Moses) Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (TK 1039) 1980
 "Get Up Offa That Thing (Live)" (PD-2129) 1980

JAMES BROWN-RELATED SINGLES FEATURING SWEET CHARLES SHERRELL

Past Present Future "Bones to Bones/ I Don't Want to Go On Without You" (Mecca 101) 1967
 Marva Whitney "If You Love Me" (K 6146) 1968
 Marva Whitney "Your Love Was Good For Me/ What Kind of Man" (K 6188) 1968
 Marva Whitney "Things Got to Get Better (Get Together)/ What Kind of Man" (K 6188) 1968
 Hank Ballard with the Dappts "How You Gonna Get Respect (When You Haven't Cut Your Process Yet)" (K 6196) 1968
 Marva Whitney "What Do I Have to Do to Prove My Love to You/ Your Love Was Good For Me" (K 6202) 1968
 Marva Whitney "You Got to Have a Job (If You Don't Work—You Can't Eat)" (K 6218) 1969
 Marva Whitney "It's My Thing (You Can't Tell Me Who to Sock It To)" (K 6229) 1969
 Hank Ballard "Butter Your Popcorn/ Funky Soul Train" (K 6244) 1969
 Marva Whitney "He's the One" (K 6283) 1969
 Beau Dollar "Who Knows" (K 6286) 1970
 James Brown "Talkin' Loud and Saying Nothin'" [orig. rock version] (sched. as K 6300, pressed as K P-6359, withdrawn quickly) 1970
 The J.B.'s "These Are the J.B.'s Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (K 6333) 1970
 James Brown "Hot Pants Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-2501) 1971
 The J.B.'s "Gimme Some More" (PE-602) 1972
 The J.B.'s "Pass the Peas/ Hot Pants Road" (PE-607) 1972
 Lyn Collins "Think (About It)/ Ain't No Sunshine" (PE-608) 1972
 The J.B.'s "Givin' Up Food for Funk Pt. 1" (PE-610) 1972
 Lyn Collins "I'll Never Let You Break My Heart Again" (PE-615) 1972
 Hank Ballard & the Midnight Lighters "From the Love Side" (PD-14128) 1972

Lyn Collins "Mama Feelgood" (PE-618) 1973
 Lyn Collins "Take Me Just as I Am" (PE-626) 1973
 Maceo & the Macks "Soul Power '74 Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-631) 1973
 Fred Wesley & the J.B.'s "Same Beat Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-632) 1973
 Lyn Collins "Take Me Just as I Am" (PE-633) 1974
 Lee Austin "The Burner Tutti Frutti" 1974
 Fred Wesley & the J.B.'s "Damn Right I Am Somebody Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-638) 1974
 Sweet Charles "Soul Man/ Why Can't I Be Treated Like a Man" (PE-639) 1974
 Lyn Collins "Rock Me Again & Again & Again" (PE-641) 1974
 Sweet Charles "Dedicated to the One I Love/ Give the Woman a Chance" (PE-645) 1974
 Maceo & the Macks "Cross the Track (We Better Go Back)/ The Soul of a Black Man" (PE-647) 1974
 Maceo & the Macks "Cross the Track (We Better Go Back)/ Boogie 'N' Twist" (PE-647) 1974
 The J.B.'s "Breakin' Bread" (PE-648) 1974
 Sweet Charles "I Won't Last a Day without You/ I Never Let You Break My Heart" (PE-653) 1974
 The First Family "Control (People Go Where We Send You) Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PD-14250) 1974
 Fred & the New J.B.'s "(It's Not the Express) It's the J.B.'s Monaurail Pt. 1/ Pt. 2" (PE-655) 1975
 Sweet Charles "Hang Out & Hustle/ Together" (PE-656) 1975
 Lyn Collins "Mr. Big Stuff/ Rock Me Again & Again & Again" (PE-662) 1975
 Charles Sherrell "If I Only Had a Minute" (Muscle 5007) 1981
 Charles Sherrell & the Chimpanzees "Do the King Kong/ Funky Fantasia" (Crazy Mama's) [Unknown year]

JAMES BROWN-RELATED ALBUMS FEATURING SWEET CHARLES SHERRELL

James Brown *I Got the Feelin'* (K 1031) 1968
 Mary Queenie Lyons *Soul Fever* (K/DeLuxe DL2-12001) 1968
 James Brown *Say It Loud – In Black and In Proud* (K 1047) 1969
 James Brown *The Popcorn* (K 1051) 1969
 Marva Whitney *It's My Thing* (K 1062) 1969
 James Brown *It's a Mother* (K 1063) 1969
 Marva Whitney *Live and Loud on at the Apollo* (K 1079) 1969
 James Brown *Ain't It Funky* (K 1092) 1970
 James Brown *It's a New Day – Let a Man Come In* (K 1093) 1970
 James Brown *Sex Machine* (K 1113) 1970
 James Brown *Hot Pants* (PD-4054) 1971
 James Brown *Revolution of the Mind – Live at the Apollo Vol. III* (PD-3003) 1971
 James Brown *Get on the Good Foot* (PD-3004) 1972
 The J.B.'s *Food for Thought* (PD-5601) 1972
 Lyn Collins *Think (About It)* (PD-5602) 1972
 Maceo & All the King's Men *Funk Music Machine* (Excella 820-8022) 1972
 James Brown *Black Caesar* (PD-6014) 1973
 The J.B.'s *Doing It to Death* (PD-6015) 1973
 Maceo Parker *U's* (PD-6601) 1973
 James Brown *The Payback* (PD-3007) 1974

James Brown *Hell* (PD-9001) 1974
 Fred Wesley & the J.B.'s *Damn Right I Am Somebody* (PD-6602) 1974
 Sweet Charles Sherrell *For Sweet People from Sweet Charles* (PD-6603) 1974
 Fred Wesley & the New J.B.'s *Breakin' Bread* (PD-6604) 1974
 James Brown *Sex Machine Today* (PD-6042) 1975
 James Brown *Everybody's Doin' the Hustle and Dead on the Double Bump* (PD-6054) 1975
 Lyn Collins *Check Me Out If You Don't Know Me By Now* (PD-6605) 1975
 The J.B.'s *Hustle with Speed* (PD-6606) 1975
 James Brown *Get Up Offa That Thing* (PD-6071) 1976
 James Brown *Bodycat* (PD-6093) 1976
 James Brown *Mutha's Nature* (PD-6111) 1977
 James Brown *Jam! 1980!* (PD-6140) 1978
 James Brown *Take a Look at Those Cakes* (PD-6181) 1979
 James Brown *Hot on the One* (PD-6290) 1980
 James Brown *In the Jungle Groove* 1986
 Maceo Parker *Funk Overload* (What Are Records? 60032) 1998
 Maceo Parker *Did M-A-C-E-O* (What Are Records? 60038) 2000
 Gotcha! 5.259552260 (<http://www.gotchacollective.nl/>) 2002

DID NOT APPEAR ON → ○
 APPEARED ON → ●

Pictorial assisted by Matt Rowland, Nathan Wheeler, and Dante Carfagna.

SWEET CHARLES SHERRELL → ● ● ← JOHN 'JAB' O' STARKS



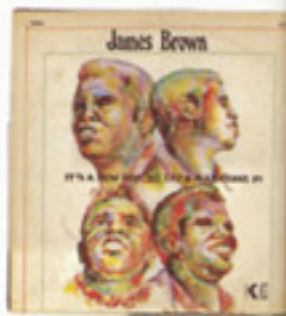
Mary Queenie Lyons *Soul Fever* ● ○



James Brown *The Popcorn* ● ○



Marva Whitney *It's My Thing* ● ○



James Brown *It's a New Day – Let a Man Come In* ● ○



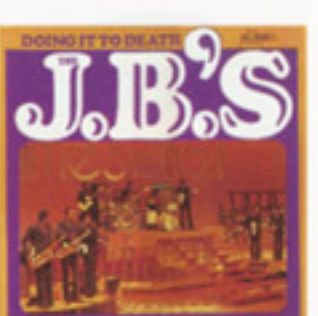
James Brown *It's a Mother* ● ●



James Brown *Get on the Good Foot* ● ●



The J.B.'s *Food for Thought* ● ●



The J.B.'s *Doing It to Death* ● ●



James Brown *Revolution of the Mind – Live at the Apollo Vol. III* ● ○



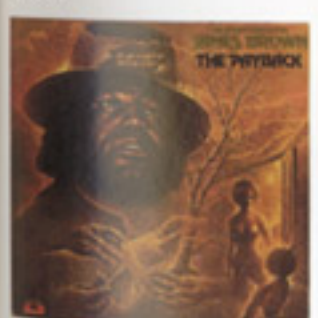
Lyn Collins *Think (About It)* ● ○



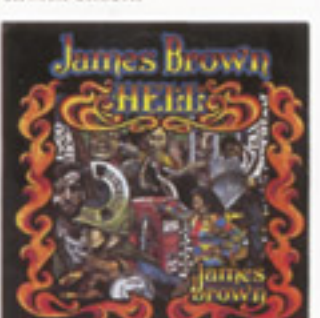
James Brown *Black Caesar* ● ○



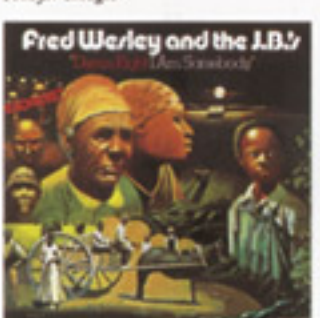
Sweet Charles Sherrell *For Sweet People from Sweet Charles* ● ○



James Brown *The Payback* ● ●



James Brown *Hell* ● ●



Fred Wesley & the J.B.'s *Damn Right I Am Somebody* ● ●



James Brown *It's a Man's Man's Man's World* ● ○



Fred Wesley & the New J.B.'s *Breakin' Bread* ● ○



The J.B.'s *Hustle with Speed* ● ○



James Brown *Get Up Offa That Thing* ● ○



James Brown *Mutha's Nature* ● ○



James Brown *James Brown Sing Raw Soul* ● ○



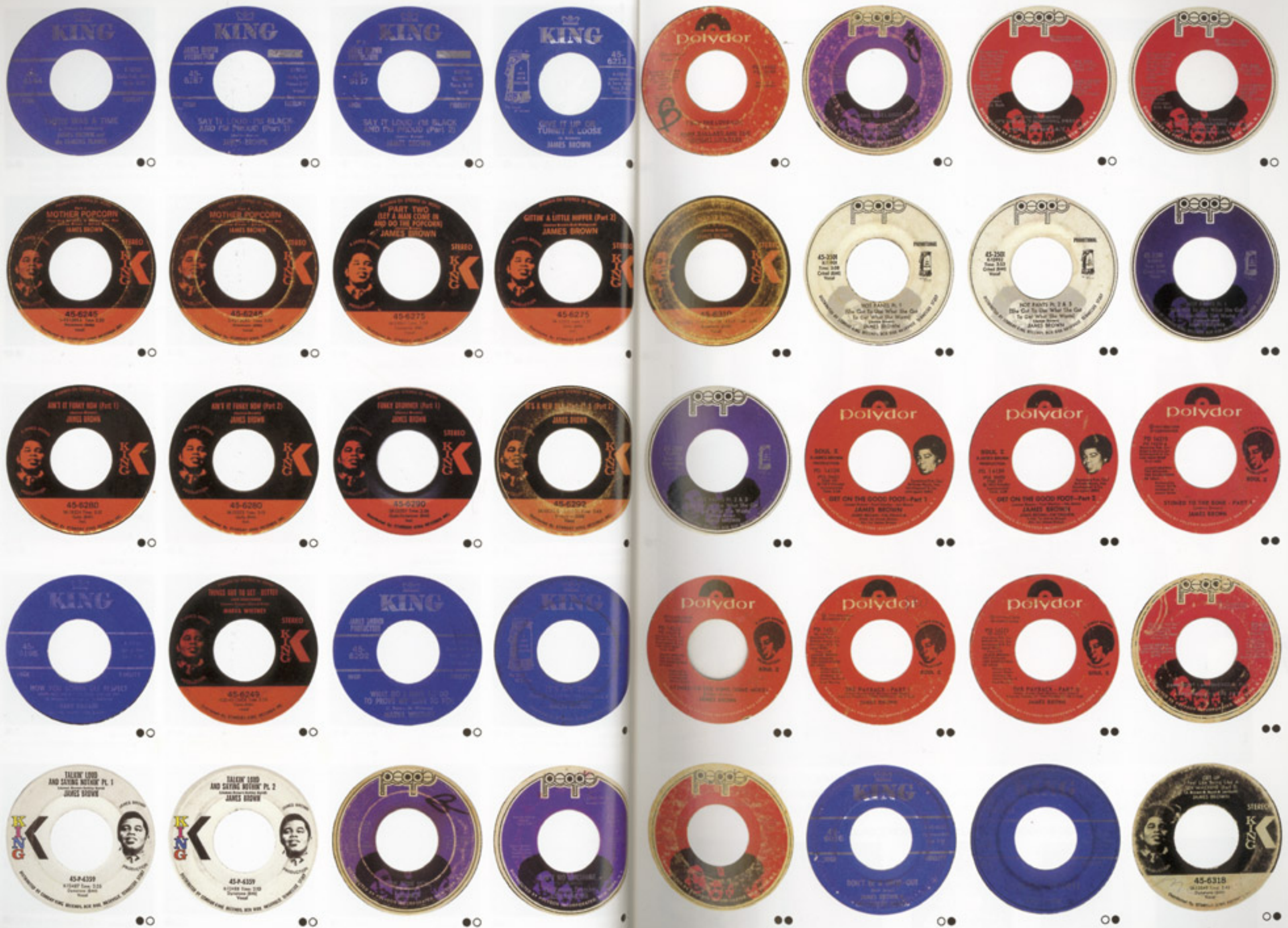
James Brown *Super Rad* ● ○

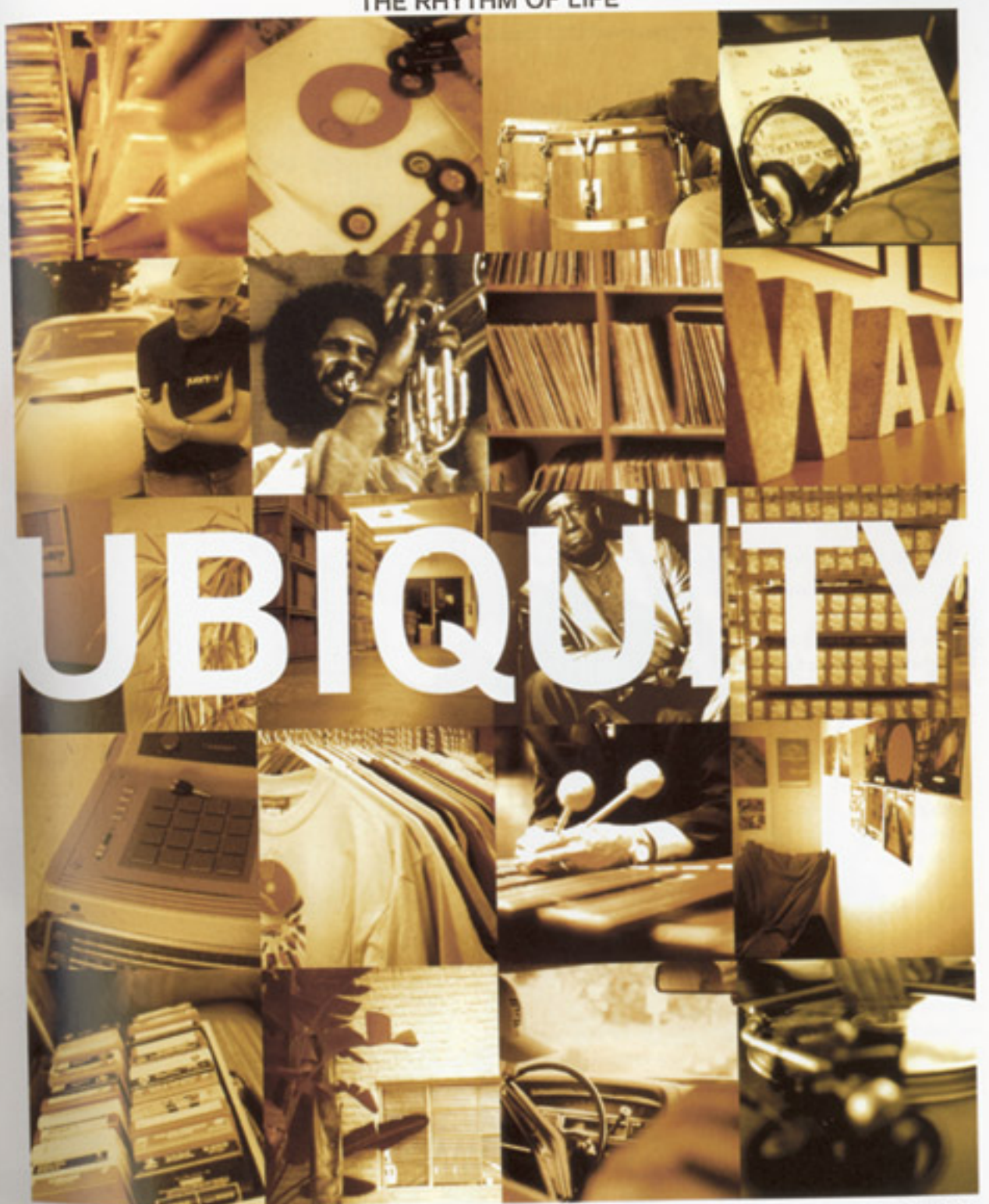


James Brown *Here It Is* ● ○



James Brown *Slaughter's Big Rip-Off* ● ○





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