

Review

Scannell, John. 2012. *James Brown*. Sheffield: Equinox. ISBN 978-1-84553-743-2 (pbk). 168 pp.

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John Scannell's book on James Brown is both a biography and a reading of Brown's music from the perspective of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. According to the back cover blurb, it aims to demonstrate how Brown's music 'mirrored the broader changes taking place within the African-American community at a crucial political time'. In so doing, it also attempts to bring together the world of European vitalist philosophy and African-American groove-oriented music. While it accounts admirably for both Gilles Deleuze's basic ideas and James Brown's life story, it is not clear whether any actual synthesis between the two manages to arise.

As the author notes in his introduction, there are quite a few biographical accounts of James Brown and his career, including two autobiographies from Brown himself, whereas the academic literature on his musical output is scarce. In addition to my own book on Brown's funk grooves from 1965 to 1975 (Danielsen 2006), there are a few scholarly essays (see, for example, Brackett 1995; Wilson 1974; and Stewart 2000) that deal with his music as music. In other words, it is high time for a new academic book on the musical and political significance of Brown's music.

But how successful is Scannell in providing one? His study focuses on two central features of Brown's pivot towards funk in the mid-1960s, namely 'the One'—that is, Brown's fresh emphasis on the basic downbeat in the bar, as opposed to more backbeat-oriented grooves—and his change to a repetitive song form centred on a basic groove. Scannell conceptualizes this change by introducing the Deleuzian concept of a minor temporality to describe both the musical and the political aspects of Brown's 'brand new bag'. A crucial (and worthwhile) point here is that Brown's political impact arrived via his music. Exploring the central Deleuzian notion of becoming, Scannell sees Brown as providing a *musical* opportunity for becoming for African Americans towards the end of the 1960s, a time of severe setbacks and general disillusion.

In his description of Brown's music, Scannell draws heavily on the distinction between the movement-image and the time-image (from Deleuze's two books on cinema [Deleuze 1986; 1989]) to depict the shift from a teleological temporality to a musical focus on presence, or simply on time itself. Applying heavy European philosophy to James Brown's work is not new, and the Deleuzian worldview feels very apt in the context of confronting Brown's uncompromising groove-based approach (it is also an important aspect of my own book). Yet Scannell appears unable to actually move *beyond* the world of Deleuzian philosophy in his attempt to develop a more in-depth understanding of these aspects of Brown's funk. Theoretical speculation often drowns out the music, so that the specificity of these grooves falls away. At times, this leaves the reader with the impression that Brown's grooves could have been replaced by any other artist or genre characterized by a repetitive musical form and Scannell's conclusions would have been much the same.

That said, there is much that is interesting and innovative in the book, including Scannell's discussion of the tension between James Brown's self-taught approach to music-making and the approaches of the highly skilled musicians he hired for his bands. Here, the Deleuzian concept of the Idiot from *Difference and Repetition* (1994) provides Scannell with interesting insight, illuminating as it does how Brown's musical naivety and stubbornness (or courage, depending on your point of view) can be seen as important prerequisites for his ability to come up with stylistic innovations. The flip side of this perspective, however, is its resonance with a modernist-Marxist romantic view of the artist as a subversive genius—someone who creates great art by opposing every tradition and convention.

Over the course of the book, it becomes clear that Scannell is coming to his subject from a profound alignment with the avant-garde electronic dance music culture. Both his focus on form and repetition and his emphasis on Brown's position as subversive or alternative point in this direction. Again referring to the back cover, the book claims to articulate 'decisive links' between Brown's work and the subsequent DJ culture. Though this is, in fact, a relevant goal, Scannell provides no discussion of what kinds of insight this positioning of Brown might produce. It is almost as though the book sets out to give the ultimate reading of Brown's grooves, but its theoretical underpinning insists that no such thing exists: just as every repetition is new, every reading is produced in the meeting of those particular rhythms and a particular audience. Other interpretations that might not resonate well with the author's view are also possible and perhaps even more relevant from the point of view of a particular group of people at a particular point in history. This fact, together with the constraints forced upon the material by the chosen theoretical perspective, is somewhat problematic. The book would prob-

ably have benefited from reflecting more on its own idiosyncrasies, and not least from asking this question: Brown's grooves, for whom?

References

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