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Right Kind of Reverence

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Chadwick Boseman, who played Jackie Robinson in the biopic '42,' returns to the screen to star as James Brown in the film 'Get On Up' from the director of 'The Help.'

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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Biopic on James Brown gets it right

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

A biopic about James Brown surely presents challenges. It is hard to imagine capturing Brown's extraordinary gifts as one of the founding fathers of funk music without devolving into mimicry. Fortunately, for the most part, "Get On Up," the long-awaited biopic about the Godfather of Soul, avoids those pitfalls and inspires the right kind of reverence and enthusiasm for a musical genius whose influence can't be overstated.

First and foremost, this film gets the musical performances right. None other than Mick Jagger produced the musical tracks for the film by re-mixing Brown's original multi-track recordings; and the remarkable Chadwick Boseman, seen as Jackie Robinson in "42," positively channels Brown's musical vibe.

The film stages key performances in Brown's musical evolution, including a dazzling 1962 Apollo Theater concert; a 1964 performance on the T.A.M.I. show in which Brown famously upstaged The Rolling Stones; a historic concert at Boston

Garden shortly after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination; and a 1971 concert at the Olympic theater in Paris. The presentations are thrilling to watch, capturing the innovation and care that went into each elaborate show, with a huge and talented band, energetic choreography, and of course Brown himself, whose physicality and vocals grabbed audiences by the lapels. Boseman's performance (building on Brown's own vocals), and the elaborate restaging of those iconic show-stopping concerts, makes you feel you are there.

The sheer energy marshaled for each performance is astounding and, seen from this distance, Brown's profound influence on popular music becomes undeniable, no explanation necessary. He was so original — and so black — that you sense he claimed an audience, in a time when audiences were not used to hearing acts remotely like him, by the sheer force of his will and ego. His influence is everywhere — on Jagger, Michael Jackson, Prince, Lady Gaga, Jay Z, Bruno Mars, and Justin Timberlake.

Jagger has spoken admiringly not only of Brown's complex moves but also "his whole persona" and "the way he worked the audience, the way he works so hard himself, the way he put all his energy into it."

The music does the best talking here. The film captures how much

good and it feel good, then it's musical." It doesn't matter whether this scene ever actually happened, because it convincingly captures what Brown was about, and how he brought up everyone's game and created one new thing after another.

The film doesn't skimp on what a

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care went into each performance; how controlling Brown was of every aspect of the arrangements; how hard he was on his side men; the sheer ego it took to create his high-energy shows. In one pivotal scene, he insists on a rhythmic change that one of his side men protests "doesn't work musically," and Brown makes the inarguable case that "if it sound

hard man Brown was to live with. It opens with and frequently returns to an incident in the '80s when, high on PCP, he brandished a gun at a group of strangers and led police on a high-speed chase that landed him in prison. A scene in which he punches his second wife establishes that such violence was not an isolated incident, though I understand

the criticism that the film gives that well-documented aspect of Brown's history short shrift. But incidents of Brown's bad behavior are sprinkled through the film and they needn't be explained and aren't excused. That isn't the point of the film, nor should it be.

The seeds for Brown's musical genius, his ego, his frequent violence, and his antisocial behavior are evident in his childhood of extreme poverty, domestic abuse, and abandonment by his parents. He lived his early years hungry and abused in a shack in South Carolina, then spent much of his childhood in a brothel in Augusta, Georgia, and was in prison by the age of 16 for theft of a suit. The film wisely doesn't lay on those connections too thickly; it shuffles the time sequence, returns to certain pivotal scenes (like the PCP-fueled arrest from the '80s) a handful of times, and then lets them go. The effect is to toss up those disparate elements of Brown's life and to suggest the connections between them but not push the point too hard.

The same is true for his musical influences. The film depicts signs of a rhythmic drive early in childhood, and also a scene when he walks into a revival meeting as a child and is drawn into the music that absorbs all the participants. The vibe is perfect — a preacher with an elaborate hairstyle and everyone in white suits and dresses, worshipping with their whole bodies. The scene has a mythical quality that captures the sense of such a meeting but also the sense of how it might be remembered by a child.

Occasionally the shuffling between time periods can be disconcerting, as can instances when Brown speaks directly to the camera. I'm not sure those risks always pay off. But, in the end, most of it does. The elements of Brown's history, his hardships, and his foibles — they are all here, and all must be functioning somehow to drive the man. For the most part, the film wisely backs off from wrapping it up too neatly.

And a certain truth emerges. As Brown himself puts it, "Nobody helped James Brown" as a young person. Nobody taught him the rules, though his experience taught him the rules weren't in his favor. His tremendous drive pulled him out of his dire

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