

James Brown Bio ‘Get On Up’ Stuck in a Funk

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 1, 2014 - 4:22pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Get On Up” contains one dynamite performance trapped in a frustratingly mediocre movie. James Brown’s life and music offer a wealth of material to work with, but that doesn’t necessarily adhere to the conventions of a formulaic musical biopic. Director Tate Taylor instead decides to put his life on shuffle. Taylor and screenwriters John-Henry Butterworth and Jez Butterworth seem to be intentionally trying to avoid making a straightforward Hollywood biopic. They’ve made a borderline incoherent one instead.

When I saw Chadwick Boseman in the Jackie Robinson story “42” last year I thought he looked like an actor being crushed by the weight of the legend he was portraying. But he is more than up to the task of channeling the Godfather Of Soul. Boseman proves he can get down, entertainingly recreating Brown’s moves on stage right down to those leg stretching splits. But the performance goes beyond mere impersonation. He captures not only Brown’s voice, but the funk in his spirit as well.



Chadwick Boseman is James Brown in ‘Get On Up’

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

I only wish I could say the same for the script. The film starts with the bizarre 1988 incident that led to his arrest and incarceration. But from there it flashes backwards and forwards seemingly at random trying to cram in as many touchstones of his life and career as possible. Then at times James Brown will stop in the middle and address the camera, or offer a sly wink to the audience. I have no problem with this as long as there's some groundwork set beforehand and it's handled well so it seems organic. But these interludes seem to come out of nowhere and then disappear just as quickly.

The supporting cast is led by Harvey, Illinois native Nelson Ellis as Brown's longtime friend and collaborator Bobby Byrd. While Oscar nominee Viola Davis and Oscar winner Octavia Spencer get their names above the title on the poster, they have precious little screen time. Instead we get more of former Blues Brother and noted music fan Dan Aykroyd (sporting a ridiculous stereotypical New York Jewish accent) playing Brown's manager Ben Bart. He's portrayed as the only honest white guy in the business.

The film is in such a rush to get on to establishing Brown's musical legacy it never gives his obstacles the dramatic weight they need. It was certainly hard for any entertainer, much less an African-American entertainer in the 1960's, to get a fair shake and take control of their career. But the film makes it look as easy as buying a box of cereal.



Dan Aykroyd and Chadwick Boseman in 'Get On Up'

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

The whole film has a sloppy, slapdash feel to it as it lurches from Brown's beginnings in poverty, to his stormy relationships with his band, his troubled home life, and his legacy as one of the most influential musical giants ever to grace a recording studio. The grooves Brown invented almost on a weekly basis continue to be fertile soil for music today. There's a reason he's the most sampled artist of all time, after all. Those musical performances are undoubtedly the film's highlight.

But once the music stops, that screenplay keeps hitting the wrong notes. The film is perpetually in a funk, unable to capture THE funk that made him special in the first place.

"Get On Up" opens everywhere on August 1st. Featuring Chadwick Boseman, Viola Davis, Dan Aykroyd, Nelsan Ellis, Craig Robinson and Octavia Spencer. Screenplay by John-Henry Butterworth and Jez Butterworth. Directed by Tate Taylor. Rated "PG-13"



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