

“Say It Loud”: The Song That Backed the Civil Rights Movement

Song Review

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Related in August of 1968, in the middle of the modern Civil Rights Movement, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud” by James Brown became an anthem voicing black frustration with unchanging socioeconomic inequality in the United States. It came at a time when the American government had passed legislative reform that struck down segregation, but the law was not put into practice. In the song, Brown called for a continuation of the fight for equality and challenged his black listeners to take pride in African American persistence and resilience in a country where they had never been seen as equals by the white majority. I aim to reflect upon the historical context of the years up to “Say It Loud’s” release, consider what this says about Brown as an artist, and how his audience received the song’s message.

In the years prior to “Say It Loud’s” release, the Civil Rights Movement had mostly taken a pacifistic approach to protesting segregation. Peaceful demonstrations such as the Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted from 1955 and 1956; the sit-ins in the South in the 1960s; the 1963 March on Washington; and the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1964 were effective in showing African Americans’ desire to see social change, and the passing of both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 suggested that their protest efforts were effective.¹ While these two acts ensured African Americans equal protection under the law, the government did not establish the means of enforcement for the new policies; the lack of enforcement was especially evident in unequal housing opportunities, inadequate schooling, and social discrimination.² Thus, even after the government enacted legislation that was supposed to protect their fundamental rights as American citizens, black people still could not enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts. As a result, Brown addressed grievances with the vast inequality between white and

1 Courtney Joseph, HIST 228 Lecture 01.1, September 4, 2018.

2 Ibid.

black Americans in his song.

Until the release of “Say It Loud,” James Brown was not involved with the modern Civil Rights Movement. Before the song’s 1968 release, James Brown was one of America’s favorite black artists, famous for fun, rhythmic hits like “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” and “I Got You.” This demonstrates that Brown felt compelled to take a pro-civil rights stance as a prominent black figure, and once Brown established himself as a combative black rights activist through the creation of “Say It Loud,” he maintained this stance for the rest of his life and career.³ As both white and black Americans liked his music, he risked losing some of his white audience by releasing a song about black empowerment. Brown explained in his 1986 biography that he did not regret taking the risk: “People called ‘Black and Proud’ militant and angry...The song cost me a lot of my crossover audience. The racial makeup at my concerts was mostly black after that. I don’t regret recording it, though, even if it was misunderstood. It was badly needed at the time.”⁴ It becomes clear that Brown had placed a priority on conveying his message of black solidarity rather than how he was perceived by his white audience.⁵

While some members of the white community reacted angrily to “Say It Loud” and stopped attending Brown’s shows, the song made waves within the black community. In 1967, white people tended to call African Americans “Negroes” or “colored people,” not black people.⁶ Yet, by the end of the 1960s, Brown had “put the phrase on everyone’s lips.”⁷ Chuck D., leader of the rap group Public Enemy, reinforced this idea when he said, “‘Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud’ was a record that really convinced me to say I was black...James said you can say it loud: that being black is a great thing instead of something you have to apologize for.”⁸

James Brown had a two-part message for African Americans

3 Alan Paul, “Behind the Scenes of James Brown’s ‘Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)’...Yep, I Interviewed Him,” last modified September 28, 2013, <http://alanpaul.net/2012/04/behind-the-scenes-of-james-browns-say-it-loud-im-black-and-im-proud-yep-i-interviewed-him/>.

4 James Brown and Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986), 200.

5 Considering that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, it can be interpreted that James Brown created “Say It Loud” to maintain the pace of the Civil Rights Movement and motivate activists to keep going, despite the assassination of a profound and peaceful leader. When Martin Luther King Jr. became a martyr of the movement on April 4, 1968, many protests erupted and many activists lost hope. However, “Say It Loud” became a rallying point for many black people.

6 Mike Vago, “James Brown Said it Loud and Inspired a Generation in Less Than Three Minutes,” last modified March 18, 2014, <https://music.avclub.com/james-brown-said-it-loud-and-inspired-a-generation-in-l-1798267026>.

7 Ibid.

8 Vago, “James Brown Said it Loud.”

listening to “Say It Loud.” First, that black people needed to keep fighting against racial injustice, as he, like many others, had grown tired of being seen as a second-class citizen. This idea was brought to light when Brown sang: “We’re tired of beating our head against the wall.”⁹ In my own interpretation, Brown’s phrase “beating our head against the wall” alludes to tactics used by African Americans to attract the attention of white people so that they could express their discontent with the system, including public demonstrations. Over time, beating their heads against the wall becomes tiring, because white people should be able to recognize the strife of their fellow man. Black people are, simply put, *people*, and deserve rights like any other citizens. The rest of the verse, “We’d rather die on our feet/ Than be living on our knees” implied that black people would rather endure violent retaliation against their protests than remain inferior to the white majority in their own country; therefore, they would keep fighting against both injustice and ignorant racism.¹⁰

Brown’s second message—expressed in the title—is that blackness and pride are synonymous. Black youth were the most susceptible to feeling embarrassed by or ashamed of their racial identity. The polarizing effects of racial segregation for young children became apparent in Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s “Clark Doll Experiment” of the early 1940s.¹¹ During the experiment, black children sat down at a table with two baby dolls: a white doll and a black doll. The Clarks asked children to identify which of the dolls was a “good doll,” and which doll they would rather play with. The results revealed an overall preference for the white doll, which further exposed that young black children internalized biases and racism, since they perceived dolls—objects intended for fun and play—as inferior if the doll had dark skin.¹² Brown was aware of how segregation impacted young black children, and the main message of the song was focused on fostering black racial pride for the youth. As he stated in a 1999 interview, Brown purposefully used the voices of children in the call-and-response refrain of the song so “young black kids [could] wake up and realize that they should be proud of who they were...and try to make something of themselves.”¹³ Brown saw identity as central to a person’s sense of self-worth, so it was critical that black children knew that their race was a point of pride rather than shame.

The message of James Brown’s song “Say It Loud – I’m Black

9 “James Brown – Say It Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud Lyrics,” accessed September 12, 2018, <https://genius.com/James-brown-say-it-loud-im-black-and-im-proud-lyrics>.

10 Ibid.

11 “NAACP Legal Defense Fund: Defend, Educate, Empower,” accessed September 12, 2018, <http://www.naacpldf.org/brown-at-60-the-doll-test>.

12 Ibid.

13 Paul, “Behind the Scenes.”

and I'm Proud" remains relevant in twenty-first-century America, as the black population faces the issues of police brutality, inferior schooling, an achievement gap, a pay gap, and racism in the form of microaggressions or outright bigotry like job and hiring discrimination. Considering that these are just a few of the issues that African Americans are up against in post-racism America, it is critical that black people continue to embrace the messages of James Brown's song. Hip hop lyrics, since the creation of the genre in the early 1970s, often contains themes of black identity and experience with inequality in the United States. From the influence that "Say It Loud" has had on both civil rights and music, it becomes clear that black pride, power, and solidarity were as essential during the civil rights era as they are today.