

# The Boston Globe

## He said it loud, and they're proud

Africa gave James Brown his beat, and now its musicians are celebrating his legacy

By: Siddhartha Mitter

8/15/08

Hard to believe, but it's coming up on two years since the death of James Brown. The undisputed master of funk passed away Christmas Day 2006. And since then, there has been surprisingly little in the way of big-ticket musical tributes to the man, as if his influence and legacy were too monumental to be tackled in any one concert.

Now a major tribute tour is on the move, one that sheds intriguing and valuable light on an aspect of his legacy that Americans don't always fully grasp: its global reach.

Titled "Still Black, Still Proud," the tour presents the musical and cultural chemistry between Brown's American hard funk and multiple strands of African pop music. It gathers two key Brown sidemen, saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis and trombonist Fred Wesley, with a shifting cast of major African artists - some of the older generation who knew Brown in person, others younger but no less marked by his influence.



After several months of European touring, the group arrives stateside this week in a formation that features Cheikh Lo, the mystically inclined Senegalese singer, and the charismatic young Malian guitarist Vieux Farka Touré, son of the late Ali Farka Touré and an emerging star in his own right. They play two shows at the Museum of Fine Arts' Calderwood Courtyard on Wednesday.

The tour is the brainchild of Ellis, who reached out to former colleague Wesley and to some of the African musicians he's come to know on the European scene - from Afrobeat pioneer and Fela Kuti collaborator Tony Allen, to Manu Dibango, Angélique Kidjo, Lo and Touré. Ellis himself is based in Britain these days.

"It's very simple," he says on the phone from his home there. "I've worked with a few African artists and had reasonable success. And since the beat came from Africa, we wanted to bring it back by way of combining funk with some African rhythms."

The concert program is a mix of Brown classics and new music written for this occasion, Ellis says. There's no recording of the ensemble as yet, but he says they are likely to release a live CD documenting the current tour.

But of course there's more going on here than your regular summer reunion tour or supergroup. By its title alone, "Still Black, Still Proud" not only honors James Brown, but references a specific aspect and time period in his multifaceted body of work. It recalls the political, even revolutionary Brown, whose music was a virtual soundtrack to the breakthrough of black consciousness in American culture.

Recorded in the volatile year 1968, the song "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" not only reflected the burgeoning awareness, but also did much to advance it, informing both black and white ears that the old term "Negro" was obsolete and its accompanying baggage of deference and humiliation cast aside.

Ellis, who played in Brown's band from 1965 to 1969, co-wrote that fundamental song. And the album of the same title marked Wesley's induction into the group; he would stay with Brown through the mid-'70s.

But attuned as they were to the politics of race and empowerment in the United States, both men admit that at the time, Africa was a hazy concept, often invoked but not fully understood. Ellis had taken his first trip to the continent with the band in 1966, for a concert in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. "I'm afraid I was guilty of being just above the Tarzan level of understanding," he says.

"Consciousness of Africa came later," says Wesley. On later African jaunts, including the memorable trip to Zaire for the 1974 Ali-Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle," he saw how great an impact their music was having. "Africans loved James Brown," he says. "And whenever we played in Africa, people wanted us to play all night."

Vieux Farka Touré confirms, based on his childhood growing up in Mali, that Brown registered on the continent far beyond the specifics of his music or indeed its availability on cassettes.

"Even in the deep bush, the villages, people knew about James Brown," Touré says, adding that there were always characters around whose hero-worship was so deep that everyone would simply call them "James Brown" instead of their real names.

Like many Africans when faced with the complexities of America's racial history, Touré demurs at the black-consciousness side of the Brown legacy in favor of its more universal impact. "I'm not really all that much into black, white, brown," he says. "I judge each person individually. And James Brown was an immense personality."

It's ultimately that force of personality that "Still Black, Still Proud" celebrates, with a cast and concept of the caliber to do the late master proud. The legacy of James Brown will be mined for decades to come, but as Pee Wee Ellis puts it: "I think this particular homage has a deeper meaning than most."

## James Brown: funking it up for the Godfather

African artists are to pay tribute to the influence on their music of the late "Godfather of Soul", James Brown

By: David Hutcheon  
June 3, 2008

As anybody who has been to one will testify, tribute concerts can be a mixed bag. On June 27, for example, Simple Minds, Queen and Annie Lennox will be playing in Hyde Park to celebrate the 90th birthday of Nelson Mandela. As one of South Africa's most acclaimed young musicians, the jazz singer Simphiwe Dana might have expected to be there too. But not only was she not invited, she had not even heard of it prior to our interview.

"I guess the organisers just want to go with what they know works," she says diplomatically, before turning the questions round to another London concert in which she will be taking a starring role. Billed as an African Tribute to James Brown, the Barbican's Still Black, Still Proud concert on June 14 is guaranteed free of Simple Minds.

"James Brown made a real connection with the townships," Dana says. "He stood for freedom, and he had a real impact in my country because he had a voice and he used it to speak for the oppressed. Our own music would be banned under apartheid, but music from outside was available - well, maybe not Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)."

"James influenced many African musicians and they influenced a lot of things happening in music, so it has come full circle," says Pee Wee Ellis, the Godfather of Soul's former musical director, who conceived the show and invited Tony Allen and Wunmi, from Nigeria, Cheikh Lô from Senegal, and Mali's Vieux Farka Touré to reproduce the excitement of a James Brown revue.

Top of Form  
Bottom of Form

Ellis and his fellow musical director Fred Wesley were there when Brown first touched down in Africa, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 1968. "We were mobbed at the airport," Wesley says. "We'd see women doing our dances, you could tell how much they were influenced by America. James loved the drive of African music. They had the same beat and chords, but they had a hard drive."

That Ivory Coast concert was also crucial to the development of West African music. Early converts such as Moussa Doumbia and Geraldo Pino turned to funk, blowing away old-fashioned entertainers such as the young Fela Kuti. A year later, Kuti was in America, learning all about Brown, soul and black power. Two films capture the excitement of black America colliding with the motherland. The 1971 documentary Soul to Soul followed Ike and Tina Turner and Wilson Pickett to Ghana. They were greeted like heroes at the airport, visited villages, hung out with kings and were terrified of the animals. Ike Turner refused to eat anything except cornflakes the whole time he was there.

Even better, *When We Were Kings*, the Oscar-winning film about the 1974 Muhammad Ali-George Foreman fight in Zaire, features Brown, the Pointer Sisters and Celia Cruz and the best musicians in Kinshasa. Wesley recalls a DC-8 struggling to take off from New York's JFK airport. "We had a lot of equipment, but the real problem was the Pointer Sisters' wardrobe," he says.

The week of concerts they put on remains a career highlight for Wesley. "It was the moment the music all came together for the first time, we saw the two cultures merge into one."

It was also the start of the long, slow decline of Brown. Wesley left his employment when Brown asked him to start copying the indigenous music they had heard in Kinshasa. "James wasn't sure he had enough music left inside him," he says, sadly. "He thought he was running out." He was.

By then, Ellis had long gone, but not because of musical differences. "It was my golf clubs," he says. "He wouldn't let us take our clubs on the tour bus. He'd say: 'Golf is for white folk and rich people, and you ain't neither.'"

# The Argus

## **Still Black, Still Proud, Dome Concert Hall, Brighton, May 6**

Wednesday 7th May 2008  
By Sureka Fernando

The Dome Concert Hall was transformed into an Afro-funk party for this explosive world premiere which paid tribute to James Brown.

The godfather of soul inspired a whole generation of African artists when he played a show in Zaire in advance of Muhammad Ali's Rumble In The Jungle in the 1970s.

And to celebrate his lasting legacy, his former arranger and co-founder of funk, Pee Wee Ellis and seminal trombone player Fred Wesley teamed up with some of West Africa's greatest musicians to throw Brighton a party they certainly wouldn't forget.

Afrobeat stalwarts such as drummer Tony Allen and Senegal's Cheikh Lo shared the stage with emerging talents like firebrand saxophonist James Morton and Nigerian vocalist Wunmi to create a crackling energy combined with an expertly tight set.

Warming the audience up with a smooth version of Brown's I Feel Good and an elaborate instrumental interpretation of It's A Man's, Man's, Man's World, they proceeded to whip the crowd into a frenzy with their own funky creations.

One such offering was Wunmi's Talk Talk Talk, an acerbic attack on politicians who merely discuss problems when they could be solving them. With a huge afro and exposed muscular stomach, she cut an imposing figure, and her blasting lyrics combined with lightning-speed dancing brought the house down.

Unfortunately, Cameroon-born saxophonist Manu Dibango couldn't appear due to ill health, so he was replaced by Nigerian Bukky Leo who showed no signs of having been drafted in at the last minute.

Each and every performer on stage seemed devoted to giving the audience the party of a lifetime and the crowd showed their appreciation raucously.

When the super group attempted to leave the stage for the first time, it felt like there might be a riot if they didn't play an encore.

And when it came - appropriately including James Brown's Gonna Have A Funky Good Time - the crowd went wild for Fred Ross's powerful vocals.

Returning to the stage after the band had taken their final bows, Ross threw off his jacket and strutted his funky stuff in true Brown style.

Pure soul satisfaction.



## **Still Black, Still Proud – The African Tribute to James Brown**

By: Emrys Baird

2/8/2008

When fellow cohorts Fred Wesley and Pee Wee Ellis touched down in Africa, in Abidjan, on the Ivory Coast, in 1968. "We were mobbed at the airport," Wesley comments. "We'd see women doing our dances, you could tell how much they were influenced by America. James loved the drive of African music. They had the same beat and chords, but they had that hard drive."

A defining moment, indeed, when the two cultures merged into one. A self fulfilling prophecy that ignited the world!! However, without his superlative cast of accompanists, notably Fred 'The Ambassador of Funk' Wesley and Pee Wee 'Cultural Attaché to Soul' Ellis (and let's not forget the curiously estranged Maceo Parker in this) Mr Dynamite could not have achieved such greatness on his own.

So, with their credentials in full tact, they took to the stage in a buoyant mood. The Big Chill Crowd, now swarming, knew they were in for a monumental ride with this ultra-stellar band presented before them.

Opening the show with some blistering funk instrumentals (including a glorious version of Pastorious's 'The Chicken') we were privy to witnessing some furious bone blowing and strident tenor and darting alto (courtesy of rookie James Morton, filling the shoes of Maceo admirably!)

Stepping up to the mic to sing 'It's A Man's World' was the irrepressible Cheikh Lô singing in his native senegalese. His projection and enviable control coupled with great force of clarity and heartfelt conjecture, saw the summer air fill up with his long sensual tones, like a voice out of the dawn of time!

Kicking into gear Rapper Ty (and he is different gear!) added his unique soul of blessed blackness with the field hollering "make it Funky" which to my surprise had A great D.C.Go Go feel to it courtesy of the mightily robust drumming groovemeister Guido May (this bus was going nowhere without his say so!) Ty knows how to whip,whoop and wipe out any crowd-he was on tip top form even mimicking the cloak scenes (JB used to do) with backing singer par extraordinaire the beautiful, Lizzie Deane, possibly one of the best white singers I've heard in ages.

It was good also to see Fred Ross up on stage too, shining his light on the seminal 'Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud' bolstered by the horn maestros now in full stride with their sharp, entrancing phrasal explosions making the funk as real as real can be and giving out the coldest of cold sweat! Tony Remy's concise, rhythmic perambulating riffs added the necessary grit this genre demands- the cogs in the wheel of funk were well oiled!

What made the show so special was the abundant collective energy emanating from these highly skilled purveyors of pleasure and the old theory of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts being true. Soul Brother No1 knew this and his discipline instilled is what keeps the legacy alive. A legacy that stretches back beyond the landmark of spirituals and Gospel to Africa, vocally, rhythmically and harmonically-Funk has come full circle. Vintage grooves abound this was a veritable humdinger of a gig- Funk in the name of Funk!

## Tribute band keeps James Brown legend alive

By Dan Emerson  
08/25/2008

One of the hits of the 2008 summer musical festival season both in Europe and North America stopped in the Twin Cities for a one-night stand Monday at the Dakota: the cross-cultural James Brown tribute band "Still Black, Still Proud."

The eight-piece band, with several vocalists, just fit on the Dakota's stage. Most of its performances have been in much larger venues such as New York's Lincoln Center and next week's Chicago Jazz Festival.

But the powerful funk machine didn't let the lack of space cramp its style or energy.

Still recovering from the bus ride from Washington, D.C., the group started off with two inimitable trademark instrumentals of the Brown band's 1970s-'80s repertoire. Over the driving rhythm provided by drummer John Mader and Senegalese conga player Assane Mbaye, Malian star Vieux Farka Toure — son of the legendary Ali Farka Toure — delivered a punchy guitar solo that cleverly blended African rhythms with American blues licks.

The horn section featured longtime James Brown veterans Fred Wesley (trombone) and Pee Wee Ellis (tenor sax), who arranged many of Brown's hits and assembled this tribute band to honor his former boss, who died on Christmas Day 2006. Alto saxophonist Charles McNeil ably filled out the front line.

One of the show's energy peaks came on the next tune, when longtime Brown backup vocalist Martha High applied her soaring gospel-drenched voice to one of Brown's early hits, "Try Me." High, who has been spending time in the Twin Cities at Prince's Paisley Park studio, may have sung the tune better than Brown did himself. The horn section provided soulful call-and-response backing vocals on the doo-wop-influenced tune.

One of the band's African members, Senegalese vocalist Cheikh Lo, then took the stage and sang one of his own compositions in his native language. The song's funky beat served to illustrate Brown's indelible influence on the modern pop music of Africa.

Then Wesley led the band through his own "House Party," leading the normally sedate Dakota crowd in a sing-along on the chorus. The tune referenced George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic groups of which Wesley was a charter member.

The real star of Monday's show was Lo, who brought down the house with his heartfelt Brown-like rendition of the 1966 hit ballad "It's A Man's Man's Man's World." The West African pop star screamed, grunted and writhed like a JB doppelganger, even doing a verse or two in his native tongue. He also fattened the already-fat rhythm section at various points in the show when he chimed in on timbales.

Later, Lo and one of the band's other vocalists, Fred Ross, belted out an equally arresting version of Brown's "Cold Sweat." That segued into Brown's 1968 anthem, "Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud." He led the audience in an (attempted) sing-along of the chorus, this time in his native language.

# Mshale

THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

## **African Artistes Pay Tribute to James Brown: Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud**

Nelima Kerre, Mshale Contributing Writer

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What do you expect from an ensemble of legendary musicians paying tribute to a legend? You expect a performance that will keep you on your feet all night with your hands in the air as you raise the roof. Such was the night granted to patrons at the Dakota Jazz Bar and Restaurant when saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis, horn player Fred Wesley Jr., singer/guitarist Cheikh Lo, singer/guitarist Vieux Farka Toure, singer Martha High, percussionist Pappa Assane M'baye and singer Fred Ross put their incredible talents together to present *Still Black, Still Proud: The African Tribute to James Brown*.

After the opening song 'Soul Pride' it was obvious that the seating arrangement, which is usually perfect for the establishment's jazz concerts was a little restrictive for some who wanted to jam to the funky soul sound from the band. Nonetheless some got up to dance while others tapped their feet and others clapped their hands. Vieux Farka Toure, son of legendary Malian musician Ali Farka Toure, headlined the second song 'Octane Road' electrifying the crowd as he strummed the chords of his guitar. The end of the song elicited a standing ovation and it was a 70s' party from then on; all that was missing was flashing strobe lights and funky hairdos.

Song by song the group enchanted the audience. The older crowd relived the seventies while the younger audience was introduced to the roots of funk. They swayed to Martha High's soulful voice as she sang 'Try Me' and eagerly engaged her in a call and response echoing "ta-ti-ta-ta" when she performed "Payback". They clapped along when Senegalese sensation, Cheikh Lo together with M'baye did an African drum set and watched in awe when Lo, a slender dreadlocked man, sounded just like Brown as he sang 'This is a man's world' in English and his native tongue Wolof.

Throughout the night, former director of Brown, Pee Wee Ellis, gave a few insights on the life of Brown as he reminisced on the times they had. "In public I was to call him Mr. Brown, only in private could I say James and get a response," he joked. Ellis, who was very gracious and generous with his compliments of his mates, was perhaps the favorite of the show. He seemed to easily hold and blow into his saxophone, only to release sweet, complex melodies and elicit a wild response from the audience. So intense was his performance that he kept standing and sitting on his chair.

Pee Wee Ellis chose to do an African tribute to the King of Funk, because of all the tributes to the renowned "King of Funk", none puts the connection between Brown and Africa. While James Brown is widely regarded as an American and European icon, few know of his ties to the continent. In the 60s and 70s he performed to many packed stadiums in Africa; most notable of these was a concert in Zaire right before the Muhammad Ali - George Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle". As much as the music of the continent influenced his style, he inspired many African artists. One such artist is the king of 'Afro Beat', Fela Kuti, who repeatedly cited the "Godfather of Soul" as a major influence in his music.

So how did the black patrons at the Dakota respond to an ensemble of legendary African and African American musicians honoring James Brown? In his likeness they echoed 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.'