

INTRODUCTION

Midway through NBC's 1983 airing of *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, Richard Pryor, in his own inimitable style, asked the musical question, "Exactly what is the Motown Sound? What, What, What?" Holland-Dozier-Holland, Berry Gordy, and other assorted Motown production people gave their versions of what they thought the recipe was, but the answer that hit home came from Smokey Robinson's satiny vocal chords: "Well, the Motown Sound is the bottom you know. They got the foot working and you can hear the bass real good." Well, just who was this mystery bassist who was so essential to one of the most influential musical formulas in the history of popular music?

He certainly wasn't the panic stricken bass player screaming out, "What key, what key?" during the reprise of Stevie Wonder's "Fingertips Part II;" and if you're looking for a synthesizer or a sequencer to be the answer to this puzzle, forget it because there never has been and never will be a machine that could possibly have that much soul. So after all this Hollywood buildup, you're expecting a big star to step forward right? Well, if I spill the beans at this point and say, "It was James Jamerson," 98 percent of the general reading public is probably going to say, "James who?" Don't feel bad—even a lot of bass players have no idea who he is.

So why have 25 world famous musicians donated their time and talents to honor some unknown musician who was just another studio bass player? Well for starters, saying that James Jamerson was just another studio bass player is like saying that Baryshnikov is just another dancer, or Picasso was just another painter. For a decade and a half, James' driving bass lines did a lot more than just provide the rocket fuel that propelled the Motown hit machine. Throughout the '60s, when "The Way You Do the Things You Do" was causing teenage males in every urban center in the country to try and learn the "Temptations Walk," and Smokey was busy crooning to millions of back seat sweethearts about the virtues of eternal love, James' musical offerings were

reaching out to a completely different audience. Across the globe, his innovations on his Fender Precision caused bassists to run for their turntables, as they scratched their way through Motown records and annihilated their phonograph needles in vain attempts to figure out just what this unknown musician was doing. Bassist John Entwistle summed up the situation perfectly when he said, "I didn't know that it was James Jamerson. I just called him the guy who played bass for Motown, but along with every other bassist in England, I was trying to learn what he was doing."

Researching this book has not been the usual "get the facts and write a story" type of procedure. At times, it seemed to me as if I was caught in the midst of a detective or spy novel as I tried to sort things out. Some of these events happened almost thirty years ago and "The Jamerson Legend" amongst some of his peers has grown in proportion to the time passed. Initially, the constant conflicts and contradictions that kept surfacing throughout the interviews were extremely frustrating and confusing. As I unsuccessfully tried to explain and rationalize all the inconsistencies by attributing them to time, faulty memory, or different perspectives, I began to realize what all the people I interviewed had been trying to tell me. The conflicts and contradictions were a mirror image of Jamerson's life and music.

Throughout this book, you will notice an overabundance of direct quotes from James' friends, family, and assorted center stage and "behind the scenes" Motown figures. In the period during which I was conducting the interviews and digging into Jamerson's past, I was amazed by how easily the facts poured out—contradictions and all. On a rainy night in November of '87 while James' widow and I were visiting a local Detroit club called Dummy George's, I found out why. The featured act that night was the Jimmy Wilkins Orchestra, a smokin' big band in the vein of Basie, Ellington, and Woody Herman. Most of the players were old veterans of Motown's glory days in Studio A, and they were more than willing—almost eager—to talk about James and their individual