

FIVE BUCKS A SESSION

(AND A BOWL OF SOUP)

Precisely when and how James came to Motown is a mystery that is lost and buried somewhere down in old Studio "A" amongst the ghosts of recording sessions past. Early guitarist Don Davis, producer-saxophonist Hank Cosby, and keyboardists Joe Hunter and Popcorn Wylie have all been credited by different people as being the person who introduced James to the basement studio at 2648 West Grand Boulevard. Despite all the uncertainty, there is one fact that everyone agrees upon. Although James is the unquestioned "King of Motown Bass," he was definitely not the first to lay down a groove for Berry Gordy. Clarence Isabell, Tweed Beard, Willie Green, and a high school principal named Professor Joe Williams all preceded him. In fact, Professor Williams played on Marv Johnson's "Come to Me," which is the record that is considered to be the birth of Motown. However, Berry's thirst for perfection was apparently not satisfied by any of these players, because they quickly became history when Jamerson arrived on the scene.

The title of James' first Motown track is also an image that has long since faded from the minds of Motown's original studio crowd, but the impression that he made on everyone who watched his initial company recording date will never be forgotten. Early Motown bandleader Joe Hunter narrates:

"Jamerson came into the studio with Hank Cosby and he was just standing on the side watching Tweed Beard struggling with the song we were cutting at that session. Somebody pointed to James and said, 'This is a good bass player here,' and they said, 'Man, come on and try this thing out.' James picked up Mr. Beard's upright bass and played the damn thing so good, everybody said, 'Shit, that's it!' Mr. Beard almost had a heart attack 'cause he knew he just lost the gig."

Although the musicians instantly took to James' style of bass playing, Motown's production team was not quite sure what to make of him. Popcorn Wylie explains:

"At first, they said that James played too busy because Motown didn't understand the sound that he was trying to bring in. They wanted a straight one and two and one and two . . . almost a Lawrence Welk feel with a lot of tambourine and loud guitar. The band that I brought in with Jamerson (Popcorn and the Mohawks) had a much more aggressive sound. We didn't convince them until after the different promotion and A&R guys from other companies like Chess and United Artists stopped by the studio and said, 'Hey, this guy has really got something.'"

The "something" that James had was the ability to incorporate his jazz background into Berry Gordy's R&B influenced pop format. Although his early Motown bass work was nowhere near the mature late sixties style that would ultimately evolve in masterpieces like "Bernadette" and "I Was Made to Love Her," James was quickly setting himself apart from most of the bassists in the R&B industry. Gone were the stagnant two beat, root-fifth patterns and post-"Under the Boardwalk" clichéd bass lines that occupied the bottom end of most R&B releases. Jamerson had modified or replaced them with chromatic passing tones, Ray Brown style walking bass lines, and syncopated eighth-note figures—all of which had previously been unheard of in popular music of the late fifties and early sixties.

While James' widow Annie claims that he played on some of Gwen Gordy's 1958 Anna Records sessions and some of the early dates produced by Berry Gordy and his second wife, Raynoma, the first important hit that can definitely be credited to Jamerson and his new sound was the 1959 Miracles recording of "Way Over There." Even though this record would eventually only sell 60,000 copies, it was significant because it was Smokey Robinson's first solo production. It was also the Miracles' first release on Berry Gordy's independent Tamla label. While it's impossible to ignore the influence of all the bassists that James had previously heard on 50's hits by the Drifters, the Coasters, and the rest of the R&B world, the subtle distinctions between their lines and the synco-