

RIP, John “Jabo” Starks: Michael’s Rock and Roll Posse

https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/james-brown-drummer-john-jabo-starks-5-classic-tracks-w519744?utm_source=email (5 tracks)

https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/james-brown-drummer-john-jabo-starks-dead-at-79-w519743?utm_source=email (Obit, Rolling Stone)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/obituaries/jabo-starks-drummer-for-james-brown-dies-at-79.html> (NY Times obit)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/18/arts/music/clyde-stubblefield-dead.html> (Stubblefield obit, 2017)

I have always thought that drummers got the short end of the stick, literally and figuratively. Of course, there have been outsized performers, where Keith Moon of the Who comes to mind, sophisticated and nuanced artists such as Ringo Starr, who replaced the underperforming Pete Best and helped propel The Beatles to being the best band ever, Charlie Watts, who still does the same for the Stones, and Jabo Starks and Clyde Stubblefield, who both backed James Brown during his most fertile period. Stubblefield died last year, and Jabo just passed. We all have our favorites, including Ralph Molina of Crazy Horse, Michael Shrieve of early Santana, John Bonham of Led Zep, Sheila Escovedo (Sheila E on her own and with Prince), Tito Puente, and my own favorite: super session drummer Steve Gadd, whose work on the Paul Simon classic “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover,” led me to track him down for that great groove. He also backed Steely Dan, Eric Clapton, and others from Sinatra to McCartney. Also among session drummers was Roger Hawkins, who was with the Swampers—the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section. In that capacity, he may have been the most versatile and the best of the unknowns. Among the young present-day drummers, Questlove of the Roots is at the top, while Dave Grohl also has been distinctive with Nirvana and The Foo Fighters.

Inexplicably to me is that Jabo was not in the list of the best 50 Drummers ever, chosen by Modern Drummer, which list includes many not-so-modern drummers, well before my time. Clyde Stubblefield is on the list:

<https://www.moderndrummer.com/article/march-2014-50-greatest-drummers->

[time/](#)), and more to the point, they appear together as number 6 of all time on the Rolling Stone list of the top 100 drummers:

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-drummers-of-all-time-20160331/john-bonham-20160329?>

The most interesting thing about this duo was that James Brown did not use them together. Instead, he kept them both on the payroll, and alternated them in the various tours he made over the years, so that he did not have to depend on just one. Whatever the odd and expensive reasoning for this exercise of dominance (he did the same with the other players, both guitarists and horns), we are all better off for having heard them both with one of the great rock and rollers. The best concert I ever attended (so far) was James Brown in the pounding horizontal rain at Sandia Amphitheater in Albuquerque, with front row seats. I was in the presence of rock and funk royalty that night. Jabo and Clyde had moved on by then, but old videos and YouTube tapes show these guys at the top of their game. (Watch and listen to the top URL, above, and I defy you to not be excited by the music, led by the percussion.) They later played together as The Funkmasters, but I never got to see them. Jabo backed B.B. King, so I did see him play, just after I arrived in Houston, but I had not realized, if I recall, his earlier career.

If there is a Heaven, and especially a rock and roll Heaven, the joint is really jumping tonight, with Clyde and Jabo reunited. The greatest jam would be with just the guys with whom they played over their long and fertile careers, James, BB, Howlin' Wolf, Big Mama Thornton, Bobby Blue Bland, John Lee Hooker,

If you need any evidence of their influence on hip hop and rap sampling, see Copyright Criminals, a PBS show about fair use and sampling:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIoR3PYpduo>

I can't plan the timing of these sad passings, so I will take them as they come. And, in truth, they and their glorious music gave me great joy and satisfaction, so the news is sad only in the sense of my own selfish sense of loss.

Michael