

CHARLES BROWN

In that purely mental dreamscape where we all wander at times – driving alone or staring out windows or thinking about not thinking at all – there’s a nightclub you might like to drop by. It doesn’t have a name, and it may look a bit different each time you step through the imaginary doors, but the bartender always knows your drink, the scotch is smooth with just enough bite, the lights are comfortably low, and there’s a tall, well-tailored man sitting behind the piano painting a subtle rendition of a blues. His fingers brushstroke the keys, smoothly layering light chords over a hushed, darker rhythm; then he leans back and sings with a confident, bittersweet voice that is maybe a little too romantic, too hallowed for a place like this. ⌂

Though heart disease recently claimed his life, I am happy to report that Charles Brown is still holding forth – with headline billing – in that idyllic, communal juke joint of the soul. ⌂

Brown may have been a Texas-born (in 1922), piano-playing bluesman, but don’t look for any one-room country shacks in his history. Orphaned at an early age, he was raised by loving grandparents who provided his first, classical musical training. Before he had even made twenty-one, Brown proved an overachiever: He was an honors high school student, then a science teacher and junior chemist – all while playing small clubs around Galveston and in his uncle’s church. ⌂

Brown’s repertoire reflected the equal footing jazz and blues held in the black-music scene of the day. Covers of Nat “King” Cole tunes, boogie-woogies and Duke Ellington standards all flowed from his piano. After migrating to Los Angeles, Brown began singing, eventually joining Johnny Moore’s Three Blazers, an outfit modeled on the well-known Nat “King” Cole Trio (in fact, Johnny was the brother of Cole’s guitarist Oscar Moore). ⌂

The year was

The elegant Charles Brown, about the time of his R&B Number One (for fifteen weeks), “Trouble Blues,” 1949

B Y A S H L E Y K A H N





1945. World War II was over, and black GIs were pouring back into the United States by the thousands, demanding a new, sophisticated blend of R&B: a sound still rootsy and blue but certainly more uptown than back-alley. Written and sung by the young Brown, the Three Blazers' "Drifting Blues" – a lonesome, late-night plea with a warm promise of romance – hit like a lightning bolt followed by quiet thunder.

Contrasting with the harsher, shouting style of his contemporaries – Roy Brown, Wynonie Harris, Amos Milburn – Brown's voice seduced an entire generation with a whisper. "Drifting Blues" (an eight-hundred-dollar investment for the fledgling Aladdin Records) sold nearly a million platters, won *Cash Box's* Best R&B Record of 1946 award and set off a chain of career-defining and influential R&B hits that lasted into the Fifties: "Merry Christmas Baby," "Trouble Blues," "Homesick Blues," "Seven Long Days," "Black Night" and "Hard Times."

Except for his other seasonal chestnut, "Please Come Home for Christmas," Brown's hit parade came to a halt when the more raucous sounds of Big Joe Turner, Little Richard and Fats Domino found favor among black listeners and began to conquer the hearts of white Americans. As the fickle waters of popular taste eddied around him, Brown remained a rock, true to his craft, unchanging in his style, spending the next two decades recording for a series of R&B labels (King, Jewel, Imperial), playing nightclubs or wowing them at various blues festivals.

While Brown's name fell off the charts, his influence never did: Ray Charles, Sam Cooke (his "Bring It on Home to Me" was an almost note-for-note copy of Brown's "I Want to Go Home"), Aretha Franklin – even the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, at his most heartrending – represent an unbroken chain of stylistic assim-

ilation that fed from one source: Brown's sophisticated, understated blues mastery. The mid-Eighties found Brown inching back into the spotlight; appearances at New York's famed watering hole Tramps led to a tastefully produced and well-received 1986 comeback album, *One More for the Road*, on Alligator. By 1990, he had landed a deal with Bullseye Blues and was requested to open for a major rock tour by the headliner herself – Bonnie Raitt.

Brown's career reached its coda this past January 21. Over a half century of recording and performing, he touched at least four generations of fans. He will remain the influential inventor of a unique style and sound that is a bedrock of this great tradition we celebrate annually and that continually echoes the past masters – masters like the late, great Charles Brown. ✽

Above: Johnny Moore's Three Blazers; Right: with Ruth Brown and Bonnie Raitt, 1995



Charles Brown

By Bonnie Raitt

It was his voice that got me first – like brandy and molasses dripping down that sultry, laid-back groove. "Well, I'm driftin' and driftin', like a ship out on the sea." There was something so late-night and intimate about it, full of longing and insinuation, like he was leaning over my shoulder singing just for me. One "Ooh, baby, I was a fool," and I was gone.

This was a different kind of blues – far removed from the primal funk of Son House or Muddy and the Wolf, who I'd fallen in love with as a teenager. More jazzy and uptown, for sure, but I could still feel the ache just behind that smooth veneer. I fell for the lure of "Black Night," "Merry Christmas Baby" and "Fool's Paradise" because Charles Brown had a sound all his own. It's what made me fall for Ray Charles when I was given a box of his records at twelve years old and fairly swooned with the promise of adult sex. I'd heard a little of that cool sophistication in Nat "King" Cole and Billie Holiday, but then I found out just how many blues and jazz singers were influenced by Charles Brown, and it all made sense. He was the bridge.

You can ask any of them – Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, B.B. King, Allen Toussaint and progeny like Eric Clapton, Art Neville or Dr. John – and you'll get the same response. "Charles Brown, now there was the cat." His influence and stature are undeniable.

To have had the privilege of working and developing such a closeness

with Charles during our dual comebacks this last decade is one of my life's greatest gifts. To watch him weather the fickleness, racism and outright theft that is the underbelly of our business with his talent, passion and dignity intact has been an inspiration. When the clubs got too funky even for him, he quit and played for himself. He helped so many young artists just starting out who then later never returned the favor, and yet I never saw him buckle under from bitterness. He had great respect for his health and talent, although I'm sure his legendary passion for playing the horses no doubt helped him vent his frustrations. Was he angry? Sure, but Charles didn't worry about that. He said, "You know, it all comes around."

For Charles, it did – and the best part is that it happened in his lifetime. ✨

