

# Blue Rhythms

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IN RHYTHM AND BLUES

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## RUTH BROWN

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### "Nobody knows you. . . ."

"We're going to do 'St. Louis Blues.' There's no arrangement. I want everybody's input for what they think is best," Ruth Brown tells the musicians gathered around her in the studio. Guitarist Rodney Jones asks if he might switch to banjo for this number; she nods. She tells trumpeter Spanky Davis he is to start it out, specifying: "I want an intro that won't give away what I'm going to sing—not the melody." She directs the other musicians to hold off until she reaches a certain point in the lyrics. Davis experiments with possible introductions.

In the control room, producer Ralph Jungheim says to engineer John Eargle: "Let's roll tape." They don't inform the musicians they're rolling. Davis settles on an intro, and Brown intones, "I hate to see."

I watch the unfolding of this song in fascination, marveling at the expressiveness she can bring to a line like "if I'm feeling tomorrow like I feel today"—a line that takes on added meaning because I know that in recent days, due to the flare-up of an injury, her legs have been giving her much pain. In fact, yesterday, the first day of the recording session, she had been in a wheelchair. Now she repeats the line, coming in just a bit later than you'd expect and thereby building anticipation; she's calling out now, testifying with an unexpected urgency: "*If I'm feeling tomorrow.*" This timeless blues is a perfect song for Brown. Not every song is big enough, sturdy enough to suit her majestic, often highly dramatic style.

She extends a hand toward Rodney Jones, summoning him to take a banjo solo. Finally, she begins to wrap it all up—or so we think. But Davis plunges forward on trumpet, former Ellingtonian Britt Woodman opens up on trombone, and Brown returns to take one final pass at the lyrics, ending—as she sometimes will—with a note that has a hint of sadness in it. Jungheim looks at the clock: "Nine and a half minutes of pure heaven," he remarks. Some disc jockeys

will be afraid to play a song that long. But that will be their loss, because this is a magnificent performance. There is no need for a re-take. And that's much the way this whole 1989 session for Fantasy Records goes; most songs are recorded in single takes.

But Ruth Brown has been preparing for these performances all her life. As she puts it during a break in the taping, "You got to live 'em a little to sing 'em." And Lord knows, she's had her ups and downs in her career. After making so many hit records for Atlantic in the 1950s that industry wags referred to the company as "the house that Ruth built," Brown's career gradually went into an eclipse that by the 1970s seemed total.

She sings "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" today with a conviction, a sense of authority she couldn't have projected in the early years of her career when she and Dinah Washington vied for the title of the nation's top female rhythm and blues singer. "I try to pick a lyric I can relate to," she explains as we listen to the playback. "And I can relate to this, baby! You can't find 'em when you need 'em."

In recent years, she's made a striking comeback, scoring successes on records, in clubs, on screen, and on stage, and in the process reaching many who are too young to remember her first period of fame. When she's inspired and performs the right material, Brown can pack about as great an emotional wallop as any performer I've seen.

In 1989 she won the Tony Award for best female starring performance in a musical for her galvanic work in Broadway's *Black and Blue*. She made her way to the stage of the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre to accept that award, saying, "It took me forty-two years to climb those eight steps." When we got together for the first of our interviews for this book, I asked Ruth Brown to begin by telling me of the earliest steps she took in her career as a singer.

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"I sang for practically as long as I can remember, whether it was something that I just wanted to do or whether it was required," recalls Brown, who was born Ruth Weston on January 30, 1928, in Portsmouth, Virginia. "In the very beginning, it was like required because Sunday was the day that we went to church and participated in Sunday school, and after Sunday school, the morning service, and after the morning service, a little bit of break and then you come back for youth counsel, and after youth counsel, you would go to the night service. Those things occurred actually after I was old enough to have

friends that we would go to Sunday school or whatnot together. But in the very beginning, it was a case of the children being taken to church by their parents. If my mother was not able to take us—which on many Sundays she was not able to, due to the fact that she was a domestic and some Sundays she was required to be at her job—I had an aunt who acted in mother's place. But there was always somebody to see to it that we got to church. You didn't plan to do anything on Sunday."

You can hear a good bit of soulful southern church feeling in Brown's singing today. The church, not surprisingly, plays a strong role in her early memories. "As a child, I was christened as a Methodist in the Emanuel A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] church, and that was the church I mostly grew up in. That was my father's people's religious persuasion. But my mother's people, who were North Carolinians, were Baptists, and when I got to be a little older, I was torn between those two. In the summertime, when we went to North Carolina to work in the fields, my grandmother there was a Baptist. And she indeed did believe that unless you had been submerged, you had not been truly baptized. And baptizing came about after you had heard the word. At some point or other, the word had a spiritual effect on you—you took it upon yourself to make a decision that you wanted to be submerged, which signifies that you will be washed clean. I was baptized when I was about twelve.

"Every true southerner knows that the third week in August is revival, all around. And Revival Week meant being in the churches from sunup to nearly sundown, with a break for lunch and dinner. And you usually didn't have to stray far from the church for that, because when you came to the church in the morning, with the wagon or whatever you drove to the church, you brought your food with you, and the mothers and grandmothers would spread the tables out under the trees at the church. And once the service broke, everybody would come out to eat, and you would go from one table to the next. So you didn't have to leave the grounds of the church at all. There was a well there for drawing the water, and the graveyards of parents and loved ones was right on the grounds, so it was all very closely connected.

"First, we had to sit on a mourners' bench. That's when you had not received the spirit, so to speak; you sat on those benches, listening to the preaching and confessions, sometimes for days on end; for me, I think it was at least sixteen, seventeen days maybe. Not only myself, my other sisters and brothers—we were all here together—and it's only after you find that you feel you want to stand up and

confess that the spirit has touched you, then you become a candidate for baptism. My sisters and brothers and I became a little restless, we got tired of sitting there, so we had a scheme we planned at night. We talked about it and by the time we got back to the church for probably the tail-end of the revival, we already had choreographed what we were going to do." She chuckles at the reminiscence.

"So after a while, one of the deacons started marching around—and one of the songs I remember yet was 'Sit Down, Sinner, You Can't Sit Down'—you ain't going to heaven so you can't sit down. And I had given the cue that when I got up, everybody else was sort of timed to get up shortly after that. So eventually I stood up and I went into my 'holiness dance' and my sister Goldie followed. We almost followed in age group—my sister Goldie, my brother Leonard, and then Benny and then Leroy, in succession. But my grandmother was very wise. She knew. She knew that we had done this, and nothing had touched us deep, nothing had touched us except restlessness. And she had a way of just looking at you—she didn't have to open her mouth—and you knew that when you got home, the best thing for you to do was to go out and select your switch for your whipping, because you were going to get it, baby. And she gave us one look, and I'll never forget it, as we were coming out of the church, she said, 'Oh, you're going to play with God, right?' And that's all she said. But we knew that without a doubt, punishment time would be coming.

"I have fond memories of my singing beginning. I started singing like that, just sitting in the church as a listener to the minister, because my grandmother was sitting there, requiring that everybody at least be able to sing a children's song, 'Jesus Loves Me, This I Know.'" It's hardly surprising that there's much of the church feeling in Brown's singing today. "It was there then," she acknowledges, "because that was all I'd ever heard." She sang spirituals throughout her formative years, first in a soprano that eventually ripened into a contralto. "You are familiar with what you hear constantly. And I grew up in that. In the Methodist church, the spirit and feeling was a little more laid-back and a little more reserved, because they indeed had the big organ and the piano and everything. But when we went to North Carolina, to the rural church that my mother grew up in, which was Lovely Hill Baptist Church, there were none of these things. Someone in the back just started the tune, and the hands went together, and the feeling just took over, and you sang. And we had no thought of drums and instruments and everything else—not at that particular church. It was all done a capella and just being im-

provised as the spirit touched. And somebody would just pick up a song and start singing it, somebody else would join in."

Brown mentions, as an aside that at today's matinee of *Black and Blue*, drummer Grady Tate was not able to get to the theater in time to play for her first number. Although some performers backstage voiced concern about having to go on without a drummer setting the beat, Brown says she recalled how many times she'd sung in church without any instrumental support whatsoever; she knew she didn't have to hear a drum to have a sense of rhythm. She sang without drums until Tate got to the theater and doubts if anyone in the audience noticed.

When did Brown first know she wanted to sing for a career?

"First time I got paid," she says with a laugh. "I sang for a wedding once and I got paid. I think I made \$5 or \$10, and that was a lot of money. I was seven or eight. Yeah, by that time I had a little bit of a reputation—the little Weston girl (Weston was my family name) could sing. And my dad was a singer, so he introduced me to a lot of those things. He played piano by ear. And I was sort of like his little prize. He would stand me up on the piano because I was small, and he would play and I would sing. And I could sing 'Oh Promise Me,' 'I Love You Truly,' 'The Lord's Prayer,' and 'Ave Maria,' all those strong things. And I had gotten to be a little familiar at the Tom Thumb weddings in the church. And all the children of the church, their parents would make them little tuxedos and little gowns, like the bride, and they'd have a Tom Thumb wedding. And they'd sell like little raffles, to earn money for the children, for picnics or whatever. They always had little Tom Thumb weddings, with the little bride with the veil, the cutest things. All children. Wonderful, wonderful. I used to love those Tom Thumb weddings, which you never see any more, when I was a child. And I was always a part of that, always had to be the one that did the singing. I never got to be the bride. All of that is the foundation upon which Ruth Weston Brown has grown."

Did her family feel good about her going on to become a professional singer? Did they encourage that?

"Well, I think my father was very proud once I really got a foothold. I'm sure he was, but it went against everything that he had stood for, because he had said, 'No, no, no—you're not going to sing outside the church.' You see? And then there were these awful untrue thoughts about people involved in show business. That everybody involved in show business, as the movies and radio and everything else depicted them—you know, you have visions of the

ballroom girl or the 'hostess with the mostess'—and *no, I will not have my child be a part of that*. If you sang anything outside the church, it was truly the devil's music. So, his standing in the church and the fact that he only sang gospel kind of went against the grain for me. But I think that secretly, outside of the confines of Portsmouth and when he really was with his real friends and could let his hair down and just tell the truth about it, he was probably the most proud. He was probably *the* most proud because I've gone home and heard people say, 'Oh your father told me you was making a movie.' I wasn't even making no movie, because he could exaggerate a little bit. So I think indeed he was proud, and mostly because everybody would say to him, 'Well, she got that voice from you.' And indeed I did. It was passed down." The baritone voice of her father, Leonard Weston, rang out strong when he sang in the church choir. He was also active in the all-male Hiram Simmons Glee Club. And he'd sing with his family at home—not the blues, of course, for the blues, with their often frank dealings with sexuality, were considered profane—but some favorite older pop songs and novelties.

"We had an old raggedy upright piano, and when he was in a good mood, he would sit down and we'd all sit around and he would sing some of his little things. 'Down by the Old Mill Stream.' It's interesting—'Am I Blue' [which Brown recorded on her album *Blues on Broadway*] was one of the old things he used to do. And 'I Ain't Got Nobody.' Oh, my Daddy used to sing it. Someday I'd like to record that song. And there was a little novelty thing he used to do, like, 'Saturday night in the pale moonlight . . . the vegetables was having a stew. Even the turnip top was dancing with Miss Turnip Top.' Yeah, he always had some cute little things he would do to keep us entertained." Brown says that someday she'd like to do a whole album of songs her father taught her.

When she began singing, Brown did not really feel comfortable singing the blues. That was something she'd do out of earshot of her parents—out with the boys who were sneaking smokes.

"Well, I had been given this understanding that blues was just *not* the proper thing to sing. The people who had made these decisions, of course, probably were listening to the blues with the doors closed," she notes. "Because as I have become a woman and experienced life, I know that at one time or the other, the best Christian in the world has had the blues about something. And it's not until you get the blues that you go to Christ for help—believe me. You understand? When they get so low down they can't deal with it, *then* everybody jumps on the other side and says 'Lord have mercy.' Even when they

sing the blues, people say, 'Lord have mercy, have mercy on me.' Even within the song itself. So it all has to do with the interpretation, what you give it. You can make it as filthy as you want—depending on where your head is, it can be as nasty and as filthy as you want. And then again, it can be sarcastic. But it can be warm [and her remarkably expressive voice abruptly turns soft and comforting as she says the word *warm*]. You can speak for a lot of people, depending on what you do with it. It is all about that old saying 'it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it.'"

Her father chastised her when he first heard she was singing some blues, but in time, she recalls, he came around. "I know he was proud of me. And in later years, when he was able to come to New York and visit, he got to see me at the Apollo and in a number of instances that made him really, really proud.

"He was a laborer. He worked on the docks, unloading trains and boats, and then he did day work at a hardware store, maintenance, custodian, whatever. And my mother worked in private homes, as a cook and a cleaning person, took care of other people's children. But, even though they had to do those menial things, I—being the oldest child—have fond memories. I can never remember being hungry. That is, while dad and mama were taking care of us. I've come kind of close to it a number of times when Ruth Brown took over. And as a mother who has had to struggle at times to survive with only two children, I am in awe of how they took care of eight of us. One died, but seven living children fortunately are standing on their own two feet. And I'm sure it had to be very hard. I don't know that my father ever made over \$50 a week, if he made that. But we were kept together as a family. My mama and daddy took care of us, the best they could. I became the rebel when I realized that I could do something to help. I found out that I could sing and make some money."

But when she began taking gigs and bringing money into the house, it seemed to rankle her father's pride—as if she were implying he needed help from her to earn the money the family needed. "My father was reluctant [to approve of my singing professionally]. The father at that time was the head of the household, regardless of what he brought in. And in my home, that was indeed the rule, and my mother and father worked," she recalls. Her singing professionally "was a no-no, up until at least I could get through high school. Of course, I had some little menial jobs while I was still in school."

The school system, Brown notes, was segregated, which she simply accepted as a fact of life when she was growing up. She doesn't recall being bothered by racial prejudice in her youth; in her home-



town of Portsmouth she didn't experience the gross indignities of bigotry that she later found during some of her performing tours throughout the South. "I'm sure that as a child there probably were some incidents that had I come closer to them would have probably bruised me emotionally, but I can't remember any. I cannot remember any," she remarks. "I remember *living* next door—I had white neighbors, we played in the streets together—I didn't realize until I went on the road the magnitude of this thing called segregation. I never really felt it that much in Portsmouth. True, we went to different schools. But it wasn't really the issue. There was not much that I could see going up on Woodrow Wilson [the high school for whites] that we didn't have at I. C. Norcum [the high school for blacks]. I thought I. C. Norcum was the school of all schools. We had good football teams, I was on the cheerleading squad. And Woodrow Wilson—we were proud when they won. If they beat Craddock, we were glad. We were indeed happy when each other won.

"Three or four years ago I went home, when my hometown gave an affair called 'A Notable Occasion.' And they honored twenty-nine people from Portsmouth who had made worldwide names for themselves," Brown recalls. She was amazed to discover that many successful people in various fields had grown up in Portsmouth around the same time she had—including many whom, due to racial segregation, she had never known. Saxist Tommy Newsom, assistant conductor of the Tonight Show Orchestra, for example, had grown up less than four blocks up the street from her, and the current U.S. ambassador to Kuwait had grown up just two blocks from her, but because they had gone to white schools and she to black schools their paths had never crossed. She learned that fashion designer Perry Ellis, jazz clarinetist Mahlon Clark, and figures active in the space program and politics had all grown up in Portsmouth. "I sat there that night with my mouth wide open, saying, 'I can't believe this. These people went to Woodrow Wilson High School; I went to I. C. Norcum—walking distance apart.' These people are world-known figures. We were in the same town at the same time. That was one of the most mind-boggling affairs that I've ever attended. To sit there and hear these names called, of the people whose names I knew—but I had no idea that they had come from the same place I did. And we were the same age-group." She was proud to be part of such company and pleased to see people who had been educated separately, due to race, now being honored together. To show her gratitude, she made a video for Portsmouth schoolchildren in the hope that the success

she has achieved, despite obstacles of poverty and racial segregation, might inspire and bolster their self-images.

Which singers inspired Brown when she was a teenager? Who did she want to emulate?

"Billie Holiday. Ella Fitzgerald, naturally. Oh, these are the first records that I heard," she recalls. But she makes it clear that she did not hear many records when she was young. Her family didn't have the money for them. "I heard mostly country and western singers. How? Because my mama worked in a restaurant, over on Fourth Street, where all the things on the jukebox were country and western. Most of the radio stations at that time tuned in country and western. And I used to hear that quite a bit."

Just as many streams will contribute to the flow of a mighty river, diverse musical traditions contributed to the development of Ruth Brown as a singer. In the church, she developed her sense of rhythm and emotional expressiveness; the fervent eruptions in her singing harken back to church singers in her youth suddenly "feeling the spirit." Her fondness for having an organ, rather than a piano, back her as she sings—and even as she speaks, in her club appearances—likewise stems from her church background. Less obvious is what she may have picked up from country and western (or "hillbilly," as the music was called) traditions, but traces can be found. The "hoo-ee" vocalizing she'll do when she closes "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean" seems derived from country and western, along with, perhaps, a certain feeling she has for melodrama. Brown listened to, and learned from, leading pop singers on the radio, both white and black. Although her singing now, with its great strength and sense of authority, might seem inspired at least in part by such classic blues singers of the twenties as Bessie Smith (1894–1937) and Ma Rainey (1886–1939), she never heard their records in her youth. They had been the singers of her parents' generation and no doubt influenced her indirectly by influencing some of the older singers she heard.

"I didn't hear many professional singers until I heard records by Ella Fitzgerald: her 'Have Mercy' and 'I'm Up a Tree' [from 1938] were the first records ever played in our home. We didn't own a record player. My uncle bought one, and brought this record of Ella's from New York City.

"The first woman that I really tried to emulate was Billie Holiday. But of course, locally now, there were some little clubs when I was sneaking out. There was a singer called Honey Brown. And Betty Roche [who had been Duke Ellington's vocalist] was probably one of

the first that I heard in person. There was a club in Norfolk called the Big Track Diner. And these New York stars used to come down—well for us they were stars—and I heard Betty Roche there.

“But there was this woman I used to listen to who had such strength: Maude Thomas. Now I realize, she was probably a cross between a Bessie Smith and a Ma Rainey. I didn’t hear Bessie Smith myself until I became older. (Growing up at home, I heard country and western.) I’m sure my father and them were probably aware of who she was, but I wasn’t until later. But this woman that I admired, Maude Thomas, very possibly had listened a lot to Bessie. She was older. She was sort of a celebrity. I don’t know if she was from Baltimore or Chicago or where—but she wasn’t local. During the war years, because this was a navy area, there were a lot of little small places that had entertainment. I saw Redd Foxx down there in Newport News, before I saw him up here. All of them used to come down there. I was sneaking out to see them because I didn’t have no business in there. But this place called the Big Track Diner, then there was a place in Newport News called the TWA, the Tidewater Athletic Club. And there was George Page’s Offbeat.”

She listened, on radio, to everything. “I heard Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters and the Mills Brothers. The Charioteers, Red Foley, Hank Williams, Glenn Miller, Tex Beneke. Those were things that I heard and those were the songs that I sang in the USO shows. ‘Chattanooga Choo-Choo’ and Vaughn Monroe; I was hearing all those things. So I was learning to sing all of their things, mostly. And there was a show called ‘The Mail Bag’ [on which] I started to hear really the first real records by black singers, and that was like the groups—the Ink Spots, the Charioteers, and I heard Sonny Til and the Orioles. Those are the first vocal groups I heard. But then on Sunday I heard ‘Wings over Jordan’ and the Southernaires and the Golden Gate Quartet. That’s all I heard. That wasn’t bad company, though, was it? [She laughs.] Yeah. A lot of different influences.”

The fact that Brown listened to so many different types of performers, white as well as black, undoubtedly contributed to her ability to later communicate successfully with a broad audience. According to Atlantic Records head Ahmet Ertegun, it was an important element in her commercial success. Her singing, although soulful, was more accessible to white audiences than the rougher, more wholly black style of itinerant blues singers. She wanted to sing not only with rich emotion but also with polish, the words sung in tune and with clear articulation. For example, the song she chose for her first New York appearance—as a contestant in the famed amateur show of the Apollo

Theatre, which had launched the careers of Ella Fitzgerald and many others—was “It Could Happen to You.” She learned it from a recording by Bing Crosby.

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It was the summer of 1944. Brown at sixteen did not feel that she could reveal to her parents her dreams of show business glory. When she got on the bus for New York, she didn't tell them that she was going to enter the Apollo contest. “I told them that I was riding up here to visit my uncle who lived at 153d Street. That was the truth. But it was the sneaky way to come up here and get on the amateur show.

“I'll never forget walking on that stage. I passed the tree of hope; I didn't touch it.<sup>1</sup> And the emcee that night, Doc Wheeler, said, ‘Oh, little girl, go back, go back, and touch that tree.’ And I went back and touched the tree and I came back and he said, ‘And where are you from?’ I said, ‘Portsmouth, Virginia.’ ‘Portsmouth, Virginia? Where in the world is Portsmouth, Virginia?’ I said, ‘Near Norfolk.’ He said, ‘Oh, all right. That's right. Name the big cities.’ And when I started to sing, I think I got right into it and the audience started to applaud. At that time, they at least gave you a chance. It's a little different now, from the way I've seen it on television—they're really unfair to the contestants. It's all done for the benefit of the camera. And I feel so sorry for some of the contestants who are not getting a fair shake. But at that time you had people like Doc Wheeler and Leonard Reed and Ralph Cooper and Willie Bryant to kind of keep the crowd in control.

“I sang, ‘It Could Happen to You,’ and when I got through the house just screamed. When you first start singing, you're only working with the pianist. And the band—Tiny Bradshaw's was there that week—heard that I was going to actually do well, and they started filling in. And by the time I got to the end of the song, the whole Tiny Bradshaw Orchestra was improvising behind me. When I got through and I walked off, he said, ‘Oh no, come back, come back. We have never done this before, but let us sing that again.’ I sang it a second time.

“And I won first prize! But it didn't change things overnight. No. I had to go back home to Portsmouth and I was scared to tell my family I had won the amateur contest. I had to go home, back to school. I never did get my week in the Apollo—the prize for winning the contest—until later when I had a record contract.”

Against her parents' wishes and sometimes without them know-

ing where she was—they'd think she was going to choir practice—Brown would sing in little clubs and USO shows, playing at places like Langley Field Air Force Base and Camp Lejeune. She added songs of Hadda Brooks and Una Mae Carlisle to her repertoire. Good local musicians influenced her style of singing as well. Sometimes she'd sing just with piano backing, but at other times she'd sing with five-piece combos—rhythm and blues combos featuring a heavy beat and hot-blooded tenor sax solos that foreshadowed rock 'n' roll. While working at the Big Track Diner in Norfolk, she met a trumpeter named Jimmy Brown, then still in the navy, who would eventually become her first husband.

Brown was finding herself as a singer. She had a rather commanding presence and a lush, full voice. What sort of songs did she most like singing then? "Torch," she answers without hesitation. "I always was interested in singing something that I could really get a hold of. . . . I was doing like 'Happiness Is a Thing Called Joe,' 'Good for Nothing Joe,' 'Where Can I Go?' 'Stormy Weather.' These are the great songs—strong songs, songs with a beginning and a middle and an ending, songs that told something. And I still am like that."

After graduating from high school, Brown was free to take gigs out of the area. A 1947 appearance at the Frolic Show Bar in Detroit brought her to the attention of Lucky Millinder, whose bluesy, big, swing band was playing at Detroit's Paradise Theater. Although Millinder's band never reached the very top rung occupied by such bands as Duke Ellington's, Count Basie's, and Jimmie Lunceford's, it had always been quite good, and, by moving in a rhythm and blues direction, it was maintaining its popularity after many other big bands had lost theirs. Brown was thrilled when Millinder offered her a job singing with the band; she could hardly imagine having a better showcase. The only problem was that Millinder already had two well-liked vocalists, Bullmoose Jackson and Anisteen Allen, and Brown would not be singing much—at least at first. For now, Millinder wanted her to observe and learn the ropes; her time would come. Allen, Brown recalls, "was like my mama when I got on that bus; she took care of me. And Lucky had great musicians in the band at that time, like Jimmy Nottingham, Clark Terry, Billy Mitchell, Al Grey, Al Cobbs, Frank Galveston. I traveled with that band for almost a month and I never got to sing anything. Finally, the first time I was going to get a chance to sing was in Washington, D.C.—Turner's Arena—and I got all prepared.

"I had two songs. One was Dinah Washington's 'Evil Gal Blues' and the other one was 'Tomorrow Night.' These were my two debut

tunes. So I went up, I did the first set—oh, I was delighted. So I did these two, and I came down and people were going [she claps and says, "Raayyy," suggesting an enthusiastic crowd]. I guess it was about the first time I had anybody ask me for my autograph. So I'm just standing there by the side of the stage. And I think that originally it was Billy Mitchell, the saxophone player, who said, 'Hey Ruth, would you go up there and get us some sodas?' Billy Mitchell, Al Grey, Al Cobbs. So I pushed my way through the crowd, went up to the refreshment stand, came back with this cardboard carrying the sodas; I had about seven or eight of them. I set these paper cups and thing down on the side of the stage, and the musicians were reaching down, getting them, and passing them. And Lucky Millinder looked over at me, came to the edge of the stage, and said, 'I hired a singer not a waitress. You're fired! And besides, you don't sing too good anyway.' Oh God. Every time I see Billy Mitchell and Al Grey up until this day, I tell them, 'You guys owe me!'"

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Brown can laugh at the memory today, but it was far from funny at the time. Millinder refused to pay her anything. When she said he owed him, he countered she owed *him* because he'd been providing room and board for a month. She was stranded, two hundred miles from home with no money—and little enthusiasm for returning home a "failure" even if she had money. An acquaintance got her an audition with singer and former big band leader Blanche Calloway, Cab's older sister, who was then running the Crystal Caverns in Washington. Brown sang "It Could Happen to You." Calloway told her the club didn't need any more performers, but she'd let Brown work until Brown had earned enough money to get back home.

That temporary gig at the Crystal Caverns proved to be the real start of Brown's career. Calloway was impressed enough by Brown's talent to offer to become her manager and helped manage Brown for about ten years, until declining health eventually forced her to withdraw completely. Brown credits the extroverted Blanche Calloway, who reportedly had been an influence on Cab's singing style when he was starting out, with also being an influence on her singing style.

The Crystal Caverns was an important venue in Washington at that time; the fact that Brown clicked there did not go unnoticed. She recalls that "Willis Conover of Voice of America radio came in the club one night, along with Duke Ellington and Sonny Til and the Orioles; they were all sitting there together. Willis got up and went to the pay phone, right there in the check room, called Ahmet Erte-

gun and Herb Abramson, who were just forming Atlantic Records, and said, 'You better get down here and hear this young girl that's singing at the Crystal Caverns!' Ahmet had been around Washington because his father was Turkish ambassador to the United States. Ahmet, Herb Abramson, and a fellow named Blackie Sales came down from New York to Washington to hear me. And they talked to Blanche about offering me a record contract. And as far as I knew, they were the only people that were trying to get me. I never knew until a few years ago that Capitol Records was one of the record companies that was fighting to get me. I never, ever knew that. Because we went with Atlantic Records." Herb Abramson recalls:

Before she came to us, she had been on the road; she had sung with the USO. It had helped, I'm sure, to sharpen her up. The first time we heard her, when she was at the Crystal Caverns, where Ahmet and I went at the invitation of Willis Conover—she was at that time, as good as she ever was. I mean, she was a finished performer, one of the best that we had seen. And Blanche Calloway was her "manager" in quotes—she had gotten her the job singing as a single at the Crystal Caverns and became quasi-manager. Ahmet and I wanted to not only sign her up, which we did, but also to have control of her career and try to build her. We had great faith in her, because she was great. And Blanche Calloway diplomatically agreed to become co-manager—we were the co-managers. So Ahmet and I were managers of Ruth Brown for a period of time. However, before the hits started to come in, I would say that our function as managers really consisted of laying out money for gowns, arrangements, and transportation—everything to try to build her. But we never took a cent in commission.

Ruth Brown has been one of the few artists that has been genuinely appreciative of the work that I did. And I'm not denigrating Ahmet's contribution; he and I worked as a team for six years, very, very well. She's just always been very appreciative. So, like for example, as recently as her "live" recording session at the Hotel Roosevelt for another label, she introduced me from the stage, saying, "This is the man, without this man, there'd be no Ruth Brown." I'm a modest person and sort of embarrassed for that. But anyway, I'm happy for her, that she's on the brink of a big revival.<sup>2</sup>

Technically, Brown did not sign with Atlantic while she was in Washington. She agreed verbally to go with the fledgling label; they

planned to go through the formality of signing contracts when she got to New York. Blanche Calloway telephoned Apollo Theatre owner Frank Schiffman, whom she had known for years; her recommendation was enough to get Brown a booking right away. Brown was set to make her New York debut at the famed Apollo. The headline attraction was to be Dizzy Gillespie and his big band. Brown was looking forward to singing with Gillespie's band, which was then riding high.

"Every time I see Dizzy, he talks about how they waited for this young singer that was supposed to be coming that was so good. And I never got there," she recalls. "You see, it was while I was coming here for that, that I had an automobile accident that put me in the hospital for months. I was in Chester, Pennsylvania. And so Ahmet and them came down to the hospital, and they signed me to Atlantic Records in the hospital room. On my birthday [in January 1949], they came down and they offered me a pitch pipe and a music book; I'll never forget it because I had told them I wanted to learn how to read music, and they brought me a pitch pipe and a music book and a scratch pad so I could write songs. I was trying to do a little writing to pass the time away in the hospital. And my love of Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson began right there in that hospital. Because they had never even known what I would sound like in the studio. They had heard me at the Crystal Caverns. But they cared enough about me that they signed me anyway. And they waited. And they paid my hospital bills—I don't know until today what it was—because I didn't have anything. Of course I had gotten a couple of dollars out of the insurance company. But the insurance company people had come to the hospital while I was really sick. Nobody was there but me. They talked to me and I signed papers, and I think I got a thousand dollars if it was that, which is nothing."

She spent ten and a half months recuperating from the accident, most of the time in the hospital, and then in Cab Calloway's Westchester County, New York, home. The damage to her left leg was extensive; the injury still bothers her. "The accident was in October 1948, and I didn't get to make my first record until [May 25th] 1949," she recalls. She was on crutches and in leg braces when she recorded "So Long." It became a hit, reaching the number six spot on the *Billboard* R&B charts. It was only Atlantic's second record hit, but over the next dozen years Brown would give them many more successful recordings, including twenty-three more *Billboard* chart hits. Ironically, "So Long" was not originally recorded with the idea of releasing it; Atlantic was just interested in making a test of how Brown



would sound on record when she had a chance to sing with some top-flight musicians. Abramson recalls the story behind the making of "So Long":

The "March of Time" wanted to show how a record was made. So they contacted Ernie Anderson, who was a well-connected publicist and a good friend of Eddie Condon, and he arranged to have Eddie Condon's band be the one. Ernie then contacted us and said, "How would you like to do the other side of this record?" We jumped at the chance because we were planning to record Ruth Brown anyway, and Eddie Condon's band had all good studio musicians—Ernie Caceres on baritone sax, Dick Cary, trumpet and piano—these were very fine men who not only played Dixieland but they were also skilled musicians from the big swing bands. So yeah, we'll have Eddie Condon's band back up Ruth Brown, and Dick Cary will make the arrangements. We especially wanted to record "So Long" because that was Ruth Brown's killer number. It had previously been recorded by Little Miss Cornshucks [Mildred Cummings]; this was her big number and Ruth Brown did it even better—she really had a tear in her voice. So this "So Long" record had this young rhythm and blues singer who was giving her all and being backed up by a smooth, Tommy Dorsey-type of big band sound, which is lovely—in other words, it put Ruth Brown into a better category.<sup>3</sup>

According to Brown, the musicians, after spending a long time recording their own number, initially did not seem too pleased about having to back an unknown singer, but after she began singing, drummer Big Sid Catlett said something to the effect that this girl could really sing and encouraged the other eight musicians (including such lyrical pros as cornetist Bobby Hackett and trombonist Will Bradley) to give it their best. Abramson recalls, "'So Long' was a hit record that helped establish Atlantic and it helped establish Ruth Brown." Atlantic's only previous hit was Stick McGhee's "Drinking Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee." The success of those two numbers helped make Atlantic viable.

In the meantime, she was appearing around town in venues ranging from Harlem's Baby Grand Club (where she became friends with a then-unknown comedian who would have a great future, Nipsey Russell) to the Apollo Theatre (where she made her debut as a featured attraction, singing with Louis Jordan's band). She was paired on gigs with artists including Charles Brown, Roy Brown (neither a relative), Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams, and Amos Milburn. She was

particularly thrilled with a booking at Barney Josephson's prestigious Cafe Society Downtown (where Brown was billed second to folk singer Josh White), because the club had long been the base for one of Brown's idols, Billie Holiday. "She was quite something," Brown says of Holiday, some of whose songs she still sings. "When I think of her, there's a real warm feeling." One night, Holiday came into Cafe Society to catch the show. Brown recalls: "When they told me she was there—ohhhhh!—I pulled out all the stops; I pulled out every Billie Holiday song I could think of. She got up from the table—I could just see her kind of moving off, in the light—and she kind of stormed off, went over to the dressing room area. I couldn't imagine what was happening. It hurt me. I had thought that she would be so proud. I was just working to get this Billie Holiday ovation here.

"Well, she said to me: 'Every time you do what you did, it makes it better for me. Now I know who I am; it's for you to find out who you are.' I didn't understand. And she said, 'You are too good to copy me. Because there's only one me. I am already me. Every time you copy me, it's just better for me. And until you get to the point that somebody wants to copy you, you don't matter.' That's what she told me, and God knows, that was probably the best advice, the most constructive criticism that I ever got. I didn't understand it then, but I understood it later." Holiday discouraged Brown from simply emulating her style. Brown adds, "I saw her again just before she died [in 1959]. She was working in Philadelphia at Pep's Show Bar and I went. As she was coming down, I stopped her and I said, 'Lady, do you remember me? I'm Ruth Brown.' And she looked at me and she said, 'I remember you. See, they're copying you now, aren't they?'"

But in 1949 Brown was still in the process of finding herself as a singer. She had married trumpeter Jimmy Brown a few years earlier and did some touring with his rhythm and blues group. Billed as Brown and Brown, they sang vocals together, such as "Sentimental Journey" and "Hey Pretty Baby" (a thinly disguised reworking of "Caldonia," a song she liked because of the way Little Jimmy Scott used to sing it). The two recordings they made, neither of which was released at the time, show more youthful high spirits than polish. ("Hey Pretty Baby" was included—for its historic value—in Atlantic's 1989 double compact disc set *Ruth Brown: Miss Rhythm, Greatest Hits and More*.) Jimmy Brown also tried, without much success, to make it as a vocalist on his own. Abramson remembers, "We recorded, perhaps like as a favor to Ruth Brown, Jimmy Brown's band, and the song was called 'Climbing up to Heaven Blues.'" It didn't go anywhere, nor did a couple other sides Jimmy Brown made for Atlantic, all of

which were released under the pseudonym Jimmy Earle. He later recorded as vocalist with Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams's popular band, but he never attained the success that Ruth Brown did. The marriage did not last long.

\* \* \*

Between 1949 and 1961, Ruth Brown cut nearly one hundred sides for Atlantic. To be sure, not all of them are R&B classics. In the quest for records that would sell, producers had Brown record material of varying styles and quality, including ballads, blues, gospel-inflected pop tunes, and even some mambos when mambos were in vogue. Indeed, as we listened to tapes in her Broadway dressing room, she sang along with some numbers but admitted she had forgotten recording some others. But her big records, trend-setters in the field of R&B, evoke memories for anyone who listened to that music during those years, and her best recordings should interest anyone getting into rhythm and blues now.

She scored a success with "I'll Get Along Somehow," which she recorded in 1949. Nipsey Russell, who toured with Brown in the early fifties and remains a great admirer of her talent, remembers that number as proving for the first time—via the lines Brown declaimed in numerous live appearances—that she was an actress, not just a singer. Backed by the smoothly harmonizing Delta Rhythm Boys, she gave "Sentimental Journey" a forthright approach. She sounded wistful on "I Can Dream, Can't I?" and sultry and sensuous on a laid-back "Rockin' Blues." Brown still believed—a carryover from her church upbringing—that ballads, which she sang in a lush style, were purer and "more respectable" than blues, but she recorded what Abramson recommended. Abramson knew she handled blues effectively. He sensed that she had just enough refinement (without losing soulfulness) to appeal to a broader audience than pure "down-home" blues singers could have. That blend of the finesse associated with the white pop singing tradition and the stronger emotional quality of the black gospel and blues traditions would help Atlantic sell a lot of records by Brown and others working in a somewhat similar vein throughout the fifties.

The recording that really took off for Brown, and to a considerable extent determined the direction she would pursue, was "Tear-drops from My Eyes," which landed in the number one spot on *Billboard's* R&B charts in October 1950 and stayed in that spot for eleven weeks. It was on the charts, in total, an incredible twenty-five weeks. This was Brown's first rhythm number—a comfortably chugging band

arranged and conducted by Budd Johnson (whom Abramson had known and admired from his arranging work for Billy Eckstine's big band) set Brown off effectively. The song's great popularity encouraged Atlantic to have her record more numbers with an easy-rockin' tempo and feel—a feel that foreshadowed rock 'n' roll. "Teardrops," which Brown says she never imagined would be a hit, was written by Rudy Toombs, a dancer turned songwriter who was to create many hits for Brown, Joe Turner, the Clovers, and other R&B notables before being beaten to death by muggers in front of his New York apartment in 1962. It was also the first record Atlantic released as a 45, the new speed for singles, rather than as a 78. After the record took off, Brown went on tour, backed by saxist Willis "Gator Tail" Jackson's band.

In 1951 Brown hit the charts again with a moderately up-tempo number "I'll Wait for You" (piping out the song's final notes in a voice evocative of young Ella Fitzgerald's) and "I Know." The flip side of "I'll Wait for You"—which was not as well received at the time but has become one of her most frequently requested specialties—was the intense "Standing on the Corner," known now as "Miss Brown's Blues." That same year she recorded a gutsy, driving, life-filled version of "Shine On (Big Bright Moon)," a number created by old-time bluesman Tampa Red and arranged and conducted by jazz trombonist Slide Hampton. With all of those up-tempo successes to her credit, it's no wonder that Frankie Laine nicknamed Brown "Miss Rhythm" that year. The billing caught on. Brown was also billed as "The Girl with the Tear in Her Voice," a reference to her distinctive way of sometimes cracking a note at the conclusion of a phrase, producing a kind of squeak or squeal. The first time that happened during a recording session, she thought that she had made a mistake and wanted to do a retake, but Abramson wisely told her to keep it in. The squeal—or "tear in her voice" as Abramson named it—became one of her identifying marks.

Brown made the charts again in 1952 with a light mambo "Daddy Daddy," which was backed by the unforgettable "Have a Good Time" (a number Tony Bennett also recorded). On the latter, she was given a sentimental backing reminiscent of any number of old Pied Pipers' hits while she sang lyrics more sophisticated than ever sung by the Pied Pipers—encouraging her man, if he must, to have a good time having a fling with another. Her "Three Letters" was successful enough for Kay Starr to cover it. And then came "Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours," a monster hit that stayed seven weeks at number one on the R&B charts and remains among her most-requested numbers. Abram-

son, who played a key role in guiding Brown's career during the period, recalls that Rudy Toombs originally wrote the song as "Five-Ten-Fifteen Minutes": "He came in and sang, 'Give me five-ten-fifteen minutes of your love.' I said that 'minutes' wasn't enough in this era of 'The 60 Minute Man'—we better make it 'fifteen hours of your love.'" As Brown and I listen to this recording in her Broadway dressing room, she scats along with every sax lick—she hasn't forgotten a single nuance. "That was Willis 'Gator Tail' Jackson," she explains to me; they were lovers then. "He used to talk to me through his horn." And then, listening to the sax interjections of Jackson, who became her second husband, she begins singing what she hears him saying to her with his sax: "Baby, baby," and, "You know I love you, baby." The rhythmic piano work of Vann "Piano Man" Walls contributed to the success of the record as well. "Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours" was the third-best-selling R&B record of 1952; Brown was the sole female among the top ten R&B artists of that year.

Like all black performers in the era, Brown suffered her share of indignities on tour. "Ruth's Cadillacs Cause Unpleasantness in South," *Ebony* magazine headlined in May 1952. The story told of an FBI agent in Atlanta stopping Brown and asking to see proof that the Cadillac she was driving was really hers; he claimed that he was on the lookout for stolen Cadillacs. On another occasion, when she drew up to a roadside fruit juice stand in Opalacka, Florida, the proprietor objected, "We don't allow niggers to park that close to us down here, particularly Yankee niggers in expensive cars." *Ebony* reported, "An incident developed during which Nick Zal, her road manager, was denounced by local citizens as 'a damned nigger lover.' Ruth broke down and cried."

Other sorts of difficulties also cropped up from time to time on tour. Brown played a dance in Philadelphia with bandleader Sonny Stitt, for instance, in which a fight broke out between two teenage boys over a girl. A riot developed, with guns and knives drawn, and a thousand patrons scrambled for safety. One sixteen-year-old was shot to death, and several other youths were seriously injured. Two bullets hit the wall inches from Brown, *Ebony* reported. *Ebony* also said that singer Arthur Prysock escorted Brown away from the turmoil—the one part of the account that she doesn't confirm. Her memory is that he was scrambling to safety like everyone else.

In 1953 Brown reached the number three spot on the R&B charts with the infectious "Wild, Wild Young Men," a great favorite of Jerry Wexler, who produced or coproduced a number of Brown's recordings, including this one. Wexler sees this number as containing the

essence of funk; it was written by Atlantic's president Ahmet Ertegun under his songwriting pseudonym, A. Nugetre—Ertegun spelled backward. After making the record, she played some New York-area dates, took time off to have her tonsils removed, and then toured in the summer in a package with the Clovers, Louis Jordan, and Wynonie Harris.

That same year yielded a number with which Brown is still identified—her biggest hit, "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean." It was number one on the R&B charts for five weeks (staying on the charts sixteen weeks in total) and reached as high as number twenty-three on the pop charts in a period when it was exceptionally rare for an R&B hit to also become a pop hit. (Not until 1957 would Brown again show up on the pop charts.) *Down Beat* readers voted it the number one R&B record of 1953. The song was written by Johnny Wallace and Herb Lance, although, like some other notable R&B successes, it's actually based on older material. Abramson recalls that the number has an interesting history: "They said they'd heard a blind blues singer sitting on the curb in downtown Atlanta with his hat out for coins, singing a mournful song that included the line, 'Mama, don't treat your daughter mean.' They made a song out of that, and they switched it around to, 'Mama, he treats your daughter mean.' When they brought it to me, it was a slow, mournful ballad. And I, working with Ruth Brown, decided to put it into tempo."<sup>4</sup> Abramson adds that in 1949 Atlantic had made a recording (unreleased until 1972) of Blind Willie McTell singing "Last Dime Blues" that included the line "mama, don't treat your daughter mean." But exactly how far back that line may go is unknown. "Last Dime Blues" dates back at least to the 1920s, when it was sung by Blind Lemon Jefferson.

Of "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean," Brown says, "That tune I didn't want to do. I thought, when I first heard it, 'That's the silliest mess that I have ever heard.' At that time, I wasn't having too much of a problem [with men], so I felt like: 'What is she talking about, *Mama he treats your daughter mean . . . mama, the man is lazy, almost drives me crazy*. I wasn't dealing with that kind of a lifestyle, so that didn't make sense to me. But when they got in the studio with it, I think I really paid attention to it because the two guys that had written it were friends of mine—Herb Lance, who was a singer, he had a hit in the fifties called 'Close Your Eyes,' and Johnny Wallace, who was a friend of mine, who was a brother to Coley Wallace, the fighter. And they said, 'Ruth, do this song.' And so my outlook at that moment was, 'Well, if I do it, they're going to make a buck.' And we went in the studio, and I think that tune was proba-

bly done in two takes at the most. They just sat around and talked about the idea, and I think there were some lead lines written." Brown's recording contains repeated examples of her trademark way of cracking a note. Listen for the suggestion of a squeal with which she ends such key words as "mama," "man," and "understand."<sup>5</sup>

The tambourine heard on the record was played by disc jockey Hal Jackson, who happened to be in the studio when the musicians were running the number down and—caught up in the rhythm—picked up a tambourine and began hitting it. The musicians decided to keep his playing in, so the record opens with four bars by Jackson on tambourine, setting the beat, and his tambourine is heard throughout. Brown notes, "When I started to do that tune in public, I used to play the tambourine on it. I got away with that for quite a while 'til I got down to Washington. And the [musicians' union] representative down there showed up one day at the Howard Theater, and I was with Basie, and he said, 'You can't play that.' I said, 'I beg your pardon?' He said, 'Well, that's an instrument, a percussion instrument.' And I'll never forget, for that show, [tenor saxist] Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis played it, the introduction. They wouldn't let me play it. I finally had to join the musicians' union just to play those four bars on tambourine. So I belong to every union, now. I'm *bad* on the tambourine."

Brown shared bills with both jazz and R&B musicians in those years. "You see, not only did I work with Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke and Charles Brown, I also worked with Charlie Parker, and Lester Young, and Bud Powell. Oh! And John Coltrane went through the South in the band with me. You understand? Also, I toured with Joe Louis, the heavyweight champion of the world, and I toured with Sugar Ray Robinson. You know? I toured with the Basie band all through the Deep South [circa 1953–54]—with Count Basie, George Shearing, and Billy Eckstine."

Nipsey Russell, emcee of that headline package tour (Brown insisted he be hired—he went from making \$125 a week at the Baby Grand to \$500 and more a week, on tour), recalls: "She was a superstar by then. She would have at that time, I would guess, maybe four hit records on the charts. At that point she was bigger than Dinah [Washington] or anybody. She was *the* thing."<sup>6</sup> Those hits were all on the R&B—not the pop—charts, however. When I asked Jerry Wexler whether it was difficult to get R&B records played on the general-audience radio stations during the early fifties, he answered, "*Difficult* would have been easy—it was *impossible*."<sup>7</sup> Atlantic was recording black artists, and their records originally got played primarily on

stations aimed at black listeners—although comparatively small but growing numbers of whites were tuning in. Most whites in the early fifties, Wexler suggests, would have been unaware of this music. The real crossover, when black R&B artists often made it big on white pop charts, would not occur until the 1960s.

Russell points out, "Ruth Brown appealed to anybody that heard her—she didn't just appeal to black listeners. The limitation of her appeal at that time would just be the limitation of the exposure. Many of the records that they called rhythm and blues—which is a euphemism for race and black—were not played on some general stations. It would mean she would be big in a city like Detroit where there's a mass black population and therefore two or three radio stations that played black records. In a city where there's not much of a black population and no black station, she wouldn't be as well known."<sup>8</sup> But on tours, whether playing theaters, tobacco warehouses, or intimate clubs, Russell recalls, she tore the audiences up.<sup>9</sup> Her following during the early fifties, Herb Abramson says,

definitely was mostly black people. This was like the so-called chitlin' circuit. However, stations like Randy's Record Shop in Nashville began to play the hit rhythm and blues songs, and they began to attract the white youth. Even before the birth of rock 'n' roll, we had rhythm and blues crossing over and becoming the music that the youth preferred. In other words, R&B was on its way to becoming what it is today, the music of young Americans. The records were played not only on black stations but also on some very powerful clear-channel stations like WGN in Chicago, but mostly I'm talking about Randy's Record Shop in Nashville, on a fifty thousand-watt clear channel that could be heard all the way to Chicago. And Randy sold records by mail, so he would play a Ruth Brown record and say, "Get this record and two others—send two dollars plus postage to the address of Randy's Record Shop." It was an important way for companies like Atlantic to promote records. For example, we made every effort to cultivate Randy, to put our records on his rhythm and blues program. So Randy was responsible—there was a black jockey who was playing the records at the station, but I can't remember his name right now, and there were three or four or five others. And we would make calls on these disc jockeys, make sure that they were supplied with the records. The distributor used to promote records, too. The distributor had a territory, to handle Coral Records, Atlantic Records, Savoy



Records, et cetera. And he had promotion, he would go around to the jockeys. Later that developed into payola.<sup>10</sup>

Based on chart hits, Brown was almost certainly the top-selling black female recording artist from 1951 to 1954. (Dinah Washington had more hits than she in 1950 and in the later fifties and early sixties.) But exactly how big were the big R&B hits of the early fifties? What were the actual sales figures? Abramson comments: "To tell you the truth, I don't know that myself. In those days, a selling record was 50,000, and a minor hit was 150,000. Didn't sell no million records until 'Sh-Boom' [a record by the Chords, which was a hit for Atlantic in the summer of 1954]."<sup>11</sup> Abramson doubts that any of Brown's records sold a million copies; in R&B, he says, a strong seller sold maybe two or three hundred thousand copies. Very few R&B records ever sold a million copies—*maybe*, Abramson guesses, Louis Jordan's record of "Caldonia" and a few others actually sold a million. He stresses that the record sales figures touted to—and printed uncritically by—the press were often inflated. And Abramson should know—he was helping to put out such hype for Atlantic. Atlantic's Ruth Brown bio flatly claimed that her record hits included many "million-copy sellers." It lists "Teardrops from My Eyes," "Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours," "Daddy Daddy," "I'll Get Along Somehow," "Three Letters," and a "string of others." But in reality, an independent like Atlantic was not getting nearly the sales for its R&B artists that a major label like RCA was getting for such mainstream pop artists as Perry Como or Eddie Fisher.

While newspaper and magazine write-ups about Brown repeatedly suggested that she was earning a fortune—one account estimated she could make as much as \$200,000 in a year—Brown says she never became rich. She got about \$69 for each tune she recorded, she recalls, against a promised royalty of 5 percent. But she actually received little in royalties, because costs of hiring musicians and arrangers, renting recording studios, and so on were billed to her account, and—at least on paper—her records did not appear to be making much money for Atlantic. Nipsey Russell says Brown gave away a lot of what she earned anyway; it was her nature to share her blessings generously with others who weren't so well off. But he also observes that black performers of Brown's generation had more limited money-making opportunities than black performers now have. The independent record companies had limited funds for promotion, and live appearances by the artists were usually in comparatively small venues. Today, Janet Jackson, for example, will play are-

nas and stadiums that hold many times more people than did the theaters of Brown's era, and even accounting for inflation, admission prices are much higher. When Michael Jackson releases an album or goes on tour an international marketing campaign of proportions inconceivable in the 1950s goes into effect. Brown and her contemporaries didn't have the chance to earn anywhere near the sums that the most popular black recording artists of subsequent generations could.

Brown would typically do two twelve-week tours a year. Abramson recalls, "Booked by Shaw Artists agency, she toured the country with a package show—they made shows with two or three rhythm and blues headliners and the band—doing one-nighters. And so she toured up and down the South—including some venues that are surprising to people that don't know the South. I think in the fall season, the spring season, the tobacco sheds are empty—they use them for dances, and she played many a tobacco warehouse in the Carolinas and like that."<sup>12</sup>

Brown explains: "When you toured through the South, there were no big auditoriums. We worked in warehouses where they stacked the tobacco and the cotton on work nights. And on the one night off for the dance, they just pushed all that stuff in one corner. Trucks and stuff was put together to make the stage. And that's what we worked on. That's what the stages were. Yes. And there'd be a clothesline down the center, with a piece of cardboard or paper folded over it, and somebody would take a pencil and write 'white' on one side of it and 'colored' on the other, hang it over the rope, and staple it. Believe it, my darling. It was real. I tell you." She halts to regain control, the memories getting to her. For her, rhythm and blues is linked inextricably with that time when blacks had not yet won the battle against segregation. In a low voice, she continues, "Yeah, it was real. I remember it *well*. I think that's why I want so much, so much for them not to just throw away this music. It's lasted. And it's something that is now surfacing all over again. And it hurts me to see it come out of Europe and everywhere else, and have our young people think that that's where it started. It did not come from there [she is near tears now]—it came from here. People paid heavy dues to perform the music, you understand? People paid heavy dues to perform this. And the people who remember that music paid heavy dues to pay to hear the music. Because they came on the nights that they were not working in the fields, you understand? The nights that they were not marching and being sprayed with water hoses—whatever that quiet night was, that's where this music was. And it just kind of

gets underneath. I turn on the radio sometimes and I hear new versions of things that I have done or songs that I know who did them. I *know* where the song came from, I know where the whole arrangement came from. And all of a sudden—this is new?" There is a militant edge to her voice. Then she adds softly, sounding for a moment almost like a little girl, "It's not fair."

Probably no booking meant more to Brown than one she got in 1953 in Norfolk, Virginia, near Portsmouth, where she had grown up. Family and hometown friends would be seeing her return as the most popular female artist in her field. But a half hour before show-time, she received word that her father had just died. The promoters insisted she perform. After a few numbers, she struggled to sing "Have a Good Time," which begins with the words, "Good-bye, I hate to see you go." But Brown broke down and was unable to continue. That number would henceforth be so strongly associated with the day her father died that for many years afterward she refused all requests to sing it.

Later that year, Brown was presented by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a leading black newspaper, with the Bessie Smith Award for being the best female blues singer. Brown had won the *Courier's* readers' poll by an unprecedented margin. She responded, "I am overcome, both with humility and gratitude. Bessie Smith was the very greatest of blues singers. For me to receive an award in her name and honor is the biggest honor I could have ever dreamed of."

*Billboard* reported on October 24, 1953, that Atlantic had emerged as the clearly dominant company in the rhythm and blues field—and a lot of the credit was due to Brown. *Billboard* noted that in the first nine months of the year, using their National Best-Seller list as a measuring standard, Atlantic recordings had by far the largest total number of weeks on the R&B charts—fifty-six in all, twenty-seven of them due to just two Ruth Brown records, "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean" and "Wild, Wild Young Men." The other record labels with the most weeks on the R&B charts were: Apollo (thirty-eight weeks), Chess (twenty-seven), Imperial (twenty-four), RPM (twenty-three), Duke (twenty-three), Federal (twenty-two), Aladdin (twenty), RCA Victor (twenty), Okeh (nineteen), Peacock (fourteen), Prestige (twelve), Savoy (twelve), and Specialty (twelve). In 1953, six-year-old Atlantic's roster of R&B artists included—in addition to sales leader Brown—the Clovers, Joe Turner, Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters, LaVern Baker, and Ray Charles.

Brown ended the year by making the most uninhibited-sounding recording of her career, "Hello Little Boy." She remembers that ev-

everyone was exhausted when they cut the number at an after-midnight session in a little studio above Patsy's Restaurant in New York, but the results were exhilarating. Although "Hello Little Boy" would later become a collector's item and remain in her working repertoire for many years, it failed to make the charts, probably because its frenzied, high-speed style—anticipating by a couple of years the direction some rock 'n' rollers would take—was ahead of its time.

It was never easy for anyone to predict which records would prove popular. Brown was often surprised. "The way they gave tunes to me at that time, they used to say, 'Ruth, I've got some demos, pick 'em up,' and they'd have a stack of things, and I would take them home and listen to them. Jesse Stone and Rudy Toombs were writing, and people were sending in things. Jesse Stone was probably the busiest, he and Rudy Toombs. Jesse was *the* writer over at Atlantic. He was quietly 'Mr. Atlantic' for the music. He's in his late eighties now, living in Florida. He came to see me since I've been doing *Black and Blue*." Others who contributed numbers included Leroy Kirkland, the team of Charles Singleton and Rose Marie McCoy, Budd Johnson, Doc Pomus, and Otis Blackwell. And there was give-and-take in the studios among the singers, musicians, arrangers, and producers. "At the recording sessions, you had great musicians," Brown remembers, "and everybody was allowed to give input. Usually, we would know the key. And sometimes the guy who wrote the song was there, would go to the piano, plunk it out, and everybody would come up with an idea. Maybe eventually it would go down on paper, but most times it was just right there: 'The horns, we're going to play so and so and so. And you play eight bars of this and then so and so you take that note, and then—bop.' A lot of times it was like that, you see, because a lot of your great musicians didn't read.

"It was probably one of the better musical periods—ever. You understand? The music was *very* honest. The difference from the way they make records today—and it was quite a difference—was that music then was done purely on the spot, with everybody present in the studio, everybody looking at one another. And if a musician hit a bad note, you could stop and say, 'What the heck was that you played?' Or if I sang out of tune, they would stop and say, 'Hold it, Ruth, just a minute now, this is ridiculous. Let's go back.' But now, you go in and more than likely you sing with the rhythm track, and you go home, and you don't hear it again. And when you do, you have to really say, 'My God, is that what I did?' Because in the room where they do all of the engineering wonders of this new age, they overdub [other instruments] and they double track, and singers dou-

ble up—you work with five singers and when you hear it you sound like you've got twenty-five. Life moves on and technology is here and it's good in one respect. But it's not the best thing to happen in another way, because it does not allow the singer to think and improvise at all."

The big guns at Atlantic—Ahmet Ertegun, Herb Abramson, Jesse Stone, and (a little later) Jerry Wexler—all loved jazz and blues, and they strove to give their singers the best instrumental backing they could provide. They wanted records that discerning adults could appreciate, not just teenagers. Some other labels might cut corners by backing singers with fewer musicians—often playing sloppily at that—but Atlantic's R&B records had a greater polish to them.

Atlantic used the best available musicians, veterans from the greatest of the big swing bands and small jazz groups. Jesse Stone often served as musical director, contracting the musicians, arranging and conducting the band, and, in the early years, playing piano on sessions. Howard Biggs and Budd Johnson also turned in memorable arranging-conducting jobs on Brown recording sessions. Seven or eight musicians were the average: a trumpet (once in a while a trombone would be added), a tenor sax (perhaps featured in a honking solo) and a baritone sax (once in a while an alto would be added), and full rhythm section. Personnel varied from session to session, but among the personnel of four Ruth Brown sessions in 1953–54, all of which were directed by Jesse Stone, were trumpeters Taft Jordan (from the old Chick Webb band) and Ed Lewis (from the Count Basie Band); reedmen Arnett Cobb (from the Lionel Hampton band), Heywood Henry (from the Erskine Hawkins band), Sam "The Man" Taylor (from the Cab Calloway band), and Paul "Hucklebuck" Williams; and the rhythm section players (besides electric guitarist Mickey Baker and Vann "Piano Man" Walls, both Atlantic regulars) included some of the most respected players in modern jazz: pianist Hank Jones, drummer Connie Kay, and bassist George DuVivier.

Brown's hits in 1954 included two that reached the number one spot on the R&B charts: the topical "Mambo Baby," which enjoyed a twelve-week run on the charts in total (one week at number one) and the sentiment-drenched, era-evoking "Oh, What a Dream," which enjoyed a seventeen-week run (eight weeks at number one). Chuck Willis wrote "Oh, What a Dream" especially for Brown, and it remains one of her favorites. She had matured considerably as an artist and was phrasing with better taste. Her voice had more grace; there is a particular tonal beauty on such sides as "Oh, What a Dream," the following year's poignant "I Can See Everybody's Baby,"

and 1959's "Don't Deceive Me" that was not in evidence on her earliest recordings. (The removal of her tonsils in 1954 lowered her voice, too, she notes.)

Ruth Brown's career received a setback when Herb Abramson was inducted into the service. She had always felt that he took a special interest in her career and trusted his ability to come up with the right songs for her and guide her generally. "'Oh, What a Dream' was the last record that I rehearsed with Ruth before I went into the service," Abramson recalls. "I think that the actual session occurred just after I left for overseas. [Atlantic recording engineer] Tom Dowd sent me the tape, to approve the takes and to select the song to promote. He sent me the tape—I still have that box—and next to 'Oh, What a Dream,' I wrote: 'Hit!'"<sup>13</sup> Abramson's instinct, in this case as in many others, was right on the money. The popularity of Brown's recording prompted Patti Page and Mary Dell to cut cover versions. After serving for two years in Germany, Abramson, on his return, was put in charge of a new Atlantic subsidiary, Atco. Others handled Ruth Brown's career. Although she continued to do well, her career was beginning to slow down. She continued to have hits all through the 1950s, but 1954's "Mambo Baby" and "Oh, What a Dream" would be her last recordings to reach the number one spot.

By now she and Willis Jackson had gotten married, and she took some time off to start a family. Her first public appearance after giving birth to a son in January 1955 was when she went to Birdland with LaVern Baker and others from Atlantic to see Count Basie and his orchestra. On March 8, 1955, Brown made her network television debut on NBC-TV's "Tonight!" starring Steve Allen. Several days later, during one of Brown's frequent appearances at the Apollo, Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler presented her with a special gold disc in honor of, they said, having sold a total of five million records. On April 30 Atlantic released a new Ruth Brown single that turned out to be a double-sided hit. The soulful "I Can See Everybody's Baby" (a pop song with substance by Leroy Kirkland and Mamie Thomas that, Wexler notes, was a swipe from an older gospel song, "I Can See Everybody's Mother"), which reached number seven on the R&B charts, was coupled with "As Long as I'm Moving," which reached number four. "As Long as I'm Moving" was written by "Charles Calhoun" (whose "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was a big hit the year before), the pen name of veteran Kansas City pianist-bandleader-composer Jesse Stone. Stone notes that, as a songwriter, he's always thought of the rhythm first, aiming to make listeners want to dance. "As Long as I'm Moving" is, like so much of Stone's work, infectiously rhythmic.

mic, and Brown gave it a knock-out performance. Stone has only good memories of her ("just a very tiny little thing when we first saw her") but adds, "She was kind of temperamental—not as difficult as Joe Turner, but some certain songs she wouldn't like, and didn't want to do."<sup>14</sup>

She recorded a couple of duets ("I Gotta Have You" and "Love Will Join Us Together") with Clyde McPhatter; they had worked together during a Christmas R&B show hosted by disc jockey Dr. Jive at the Brooklyn Paramount Theater. But the records did not sell as well as Atlantic had hoped. "Love Has Joined Us Together" reached number eight on the R&B charts; "I Gotta Have You" didn't make the charts at all. (It's a pity Brown did not get to record duets with any of the other greats with whom she worked live during the fifties, from Billy Eckstine to Ray Charles.) She did a tour of West Coast clubs and sang songs by some of the newer writers, such as Bobby Darin and Neil Sedaka. "All these young kids were bringing in material," she says.

Atlantic didn't seem to have a clear idea of where her career should be headed. Some sides she recorded were thoughtful and somewhat sophisticated; others were so slight and commercial that Atlantic appeared to be reaching down toward the bubblegum set. As she listens to the old recordings now, she's amazed at all of the different musical attitudes she was asked to express. Atlantic would back her with a doo-wop-type vocal group on one record, give prominence to a rock 'n' roll guitar on another, and put her in a jazz setting on the next. On "When I Get You, Baby" she was given a brisk, marching band kind of backing; on "Don't Deceive Me," with its wonderfully sweet sadness (Brown's voice was often so revelatory of her feelings), she was supported, quite effectively, by a dozen strings.

Composers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who had emerged as important forces in rock 'n' roll via such hits as "Kansas City," "Hound Dog," and "Jailhouse Rock," concocted a flimsy song called "Lucky Lips" for Brown. Released in March 1957, it reached the number six spot on the R&B charts and, as an early example of crossover, reached the number twenty-five spot on the pop charts. Gale Storm did a cover version—white artists were forever copying the hits of black artists—which reached only seventy-seven. Brown also turned up on European charts with this number.

Leiber and Stoller produced some of Brown's records in this period, too, including her 1958 hit "This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'" (written for her by Bobby Darin), which reached the number seven spot on the R&B charts and the number twenty-four spot on the pop charts. Like "Lucky Lips," "This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'" is a re-

minder that the greatest commercial successes aren't always the highest quality songs. But both catchy numbers, promoted to the best of Atlantic's limited abilities, went over big with teenagers. Wexler recalls that Atlantic, unlike the biggest companies, had no staff for promotion in the fifties. He had to go to stations himself to get the records played. In Georgia, he succeeded in getting one DJ to play "Lucky Lips"—which the DJ introduced as "Lucky Tips."

Television exposure would have helped Brown's career, but television was still a white domain; opportunities for black artists—particularly black R&B artists—were restricted. The only black performer to get a network show during the 1950s was smooth balladeer Nat King Cole (who was on NBC in 1956–57), and when he appeared, some affiliates refused to carry his show. Big variety shows were much more likely to give exposure to Georgia Gibbs or Gale Storm than to Ruth Brown or LaVern Baker. The power of television to sell records and make careers, of course, was enormous. As a case in point, Ricky Nelson, just shy of his seventeenth birthday, recorded a cover version of Fats Domino's "I'm Walking." Then, on television's popular "Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet," Ozzie Nelson mentioned that his son had just recorded a "rhythm and blues tune." Ricky sang "I'm Walking," and within weeks that record—his first—had made it into the top twenty on the pop charts, launching his career as a top-selling singing star.

By the late fifties rock 'n' roll was the music of American teenagers. New stars were rapidly coming up or being manufactured. Callow singers of the Fabian-Frankie Avalon sort were becoming household words, their records selling far better than those of many more talented and creative older R&B performers who had helped lay a musical foundation for them. Ruth Brown was aware—and understandably resentful—of the way institutionalized racial prejudice had affected her career. Yes, she had made it big and was certainly earning a lot of money "according to my standards," as she expresses it, but she knows she could have been better known were it not for prejudice. An undercurrent of bitterness, and of a grim determination born of overcoming hardships, still informs much of her work and gives it guts. She put her emotions into her singing.

"I wasn't so upset about other singers copying my songs because that was their privilege, and they had to pay the writers of the song," Brown says. "But what did hurt me was the fact that I had originated the song, and I never got the opportunities to be on the top television shows and the talk shows. I didn't get the exposure. And other people were copying the style, the whole idea." Generally speaking,



she wasn't impressed with those who tried copying what she and her R&B colleagues created. "There is no way that I would mistake a duplicate for the people that I knew and watched from the curtains doing these things. There's nobody, as far as I'm concerned, that could duplicate what it was that Jackie Wilson had. There's nobody that had the charisma that Sam Cooke had. To be backstage at the Apollo and see the Clovers just rehearsing what they're going to do, or the Cadillacs, the Five Keys—it was wonderful."

Meanwhile, there were personal as well as professional changes in her life. She and Willis Jackson divorced, and she married another sax player, Earl Swanson, who became the father of her second son. A strongly sung "Why Me," effectively mixing lamentation with assertiveness, returned Brown to the R&B charts (peaking at number seventeen) in 1958. She had a chart hit a year later as well with the breezy "Jack o' Diamonds," which was written for her by Lloyd Price and reached number twenty-three on the R&B charts and ninety-six on the pop charts. "I Don't Know" reached number five on the R&B charts (and number sixty-four on the pop charts) in 1959, and "Don't Deceive Me" reached number ten on the R&B charts (and number sixty-two on the pop charts) in 1960.

Brook Benton wrote a couple of songs for Brown, too, and she toured with him. After years of recording nothing but singles, she recorded her first album, *Late Date*; she also sang on all-star rock 'n' roll stage shows. But she was in her early thirties now, not old by most standards but getting old in the eyes of an army of teenage record buyers who favored young singers, preferably teens, as spokespersons for their generation. Atlantic was still coming up with some intriguing songs for Brown, although the overall quality of the songs they gave her was declining. Wexler liked such distinctive numbers as "I Can't Hear a Word You Say" (1959) and "Takin' Care of Business" (1960), but the hoped-for sales didn't come. Abramson comments, "An artist's popularity gains and wanes. It fluctuates. Inevitably, a hot artist cools down."<sup>15</sup> "Takin' Care of Business" didn't do squat," Wexler says. "By then, entropy had set in. Her career had slowed down, the way every career does eventually, from the Coasters to Joe Turner. We couldn't get a hit anymore. It had nothing to do with the quality of her voice; it was just a shift in trends, in tastes. It's a miracle when someone becomes a hit."<sup>16</sup>

"I stayed with Atlantic until in the sixties," Brown recalls, "when the music changed, a lot of things changed. The company got bigger, and I didn't get the kind of material that I used to get because there were too many people to spread it around among. Of course,

by that time they had like Ray Charles—the label was very big.” In 1961 Brown switched from Atlantic to the Phillips label, making the charts once again—just barely—with “Shake a Hand” (ninety-seven on the pop charts) and a remake of “Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean” (ninety-nine on the pop charts), the last chart appearances of her career. “And for an album *Along Comes Ruth*, I did tunes done by everybody else; I did LaVern Baker’s material, I did Clyde McPhatter’s, I did Bobby “Blue” Bland, the Clovers, and a couple of original things,” she recalls. She sang on the Playboy Club circuit for awhile and then went into semiretirement.

\* \* \*

From late 1962 through late 1972 Ruth Brown largely withdrew from the business. She never got out completely—she still made occasional albums and sang in local clubs when opportunities came up—but her desire to be home with her two young sons, Ronald and Earl, ruled out extensive touring. She had tried taking her sons on the road with her, handing them to friends standing in the wings when she performed, but she didn’t believe that was fair to them; children deserved “roots.” And when her marriage to Swanson ended in divorce, she was more determined than ever to be home with her boys.

Then in the mid-sixties, the pop music scene underwent so complete a transformation that she wondered if her time as a performer had indeed passed. Beginning in 1964–65, British groups dominated American pop charts: the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Herman’s Hermits, the Dave Clark Five, the Kinks, Gerry and the Pacemakers, and others. To Brown, that “British invasion” seemed to sound a death knell for R&B. “The music got pushed out of the way. And I just didn’t fit into that new mold,” she says. “I could not travel. And the clubs around the New York area where I could have worked—all these eventually became discos and went for a different kind of music. All that changed.” She made some attempts to win a jazz audience, playing an Apollo Theatre bill, for example, headlined by Miles Davis, but without much success.

In the fifties, when she had been making all those hit records, she admits, “I was comfortable; I wasn’t rich—never was, that’s by any stretch of the imagination; just comfortable,” she says. But in the sixties, as a singer working but sporadically, her earnings were meager. “It got down to little things that I needed for my children, money for education, a decent house to live in. And what I could earn, I couldn’t do that—I just couldn’t do that,” she says.

Accountants always seemed to have ways of showing that her new

recordings weren't making money and neither were reissues of her old ones, so no royalties could be paid to her. Although Atlantic continued selling albums compiled from her old singles, she had not received a dime in royalties since leaving the company. Like a number of other artists, she received quarterly royalty statements that indicated that she *owed* Atlantic money. After 1969 she stopped receiving royalty statements from Atlantic altogether. Bootleggers put out Ruth Brown albums as well. "After a while," she notes, "I looked up and saw records coming from everywhere. Go in the stores and records cost so much—and I said, 'Well, my God, I'm not being paid for this!'" She wrote to Atlantic a few times but says that she got no reply. She also consulted with several lawyers, all of whom told her that there was nothing they could do.

Occasionally, Brown would resurface to do a new album, winning admiration from other singers and musicians, if not sizable record sales. Several albums from those years of semiretirement remain favorites of hers. Mainstream's *Ruth Brown '65* (later retitled *Softly* and rereleased as *Help a Good Girl Go Bad*) was an attempt to position her as a superior pop singer who recorded for mature listeners. With lush orchestral backing, she sang such quality songs as Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen's "Here's That Rainy Day" and Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields's "Porgy." (It's a pity she'd never been given a chance to record material like this before.) Perhaps the standout track was a languorous, wistful, pure rendition of "On the Good Ship Lollipop." "I liked that album, very, very much," Brown comments. "And I would love to hear again the album that I did with Thad Jones and Mel Lewis [and their jazz orchestra]. I can't even find it."

She married for a fourth time, "to a police officer from Long Island named Bill Blunt. Well, it didn't last because we were totally in two opposite worlds. But in the short time we were together, he gave my boys a wonderful outlook on life—the need for sports and keeping themselves clean. And I'm very sure that if there was anybody in the world that was good for them, it was he. In that relationship, I tried to be a suburban housewife, but music called more often." She sang in a church choir and occasionally at Sonny's Place, a club in Seaford, Long Island.

It was not easy for Brown, a single mother trying to raise two sons in Deer Park, Long Island, to make ends meet. "I have no other background except music. I can't type, I don't know shorthand," she points out. She took what jobs she could. At times she worked as a domestic, cleaning homes; her employers had no idea she was a singer. "When I did the jobs in the big homes in the hills up there, I was

using my marriage name: Ruth Blunt," she notes. When her boys saw her in her white uniform, she told them she was going to beauty school. (She wanted them to go to college someday.) At times, she couldn't pay her bills. She can now joke about answering her phone in a different voice to tell bill collectors something like "Miss Brown is in Switzerland this month," but it wasn't funny at the time. Nor was it funny when, while she was signing autographs after a club performance one night, her car was towed because she hadn't been able to keep up the payments.

Some friends from the early days remained steadfast. For example, she notes, "Nipsey [Russell] has always been there. If I needed help or someone to cry to when I was struggling with my children by myself, many times he helped me then." And she feels a deep debt of gratitude to her family. "Those brothers and sisters of mine, ain't nothing like 'em in the world—no place," she tells me, struggling to hold back tears as she remembers their aid when times were hard. "I get full, because there have been times I couldn't pay the rent, and they have always gotten together, and without asking me, 'Why can't you pay it?'—they paid it. If I was ill, if it was just a matter of coming and spending one hour, they got there and went back [to Portsmouth]. They're still punching time clocks, they're all nine-to-five people. No rich people in my family. The only thing that they're rich in is respect and love for one another. And all of that comes from the strong lady that my mama was. She made us that way. And the strong man that my father was gave my brothers a strong identity. My mother gave me a strong strength of a strong woman. My father made me respect myself, irregardless to what. It was like, 'If you get whipped, I'll whip you. And you cannot let it beat you, you understand? You cannot let it beat you. If you can't do one thing, do another. It doesn't matter, so long as you pay the rent. And as you're doing that, thank God for giving you the strength to pay the rent, no matter how you have to pay it, so long as it's not in a manner that will shame you.' And when you can maintain that kind of an understanding, then you can move.

"It wasn't too long ago that I did those other jobs. In Long Island, I rode and I tended the school bus, and I worked in preschool as an aide, a playground counselor. I worked with retarded children. I worked as a domestic. Did everything to pay the rent. And sang at night, whenever I could. But the only thing that kept me alive musically in those lean years was a group in Long Island called the International Art of Jazz led by Anne Sneed. They did school programs, where they'd go into the schools, and she included me; I was the

recorded another album for a minor label but recalls that "the check that I got for it bounced. I've been trying to catch the guy. There's so much floating around that's not out there with my consent." Several years later, she began recording an album for another company, but midway through the project the producer told her they had run out of money and the project was put on hold.

In the meantime, she had come up with a young organ player whom she has used as her music director ever since. "When Don Pullen went off with Charles Mingus [around 1973], Bobby Forrester was recommended to me by someone to take his place. At that time, we were rehearsing out at George Benson's house in the Bronx; George had a basement with all the set-ups and everything. So when I walked in the first day with my music and saw this little bushy-haired kid sitting there I thought, 'This white kid don't know my music.' I said, 'Well, sweetheart, I think we're going to need more than one day to rehearse this music, you and I.' I was just so sure he couldn't play it. He said, 'Oh no, Miss Brown'—he was very polite—"I know everything you do.' I said, 'What?!' And do you know, I don't think that from that day until this we have had a really stretched-out rehearsal. Because Bobby's fantastic. I told him, 'You're a smart dude, because you know all my music. You never even open the book. So I can't hire nobody if the music gets lost, because you've got it here in your head.' But he's fantastic in that he hears me, he anticipates."

Opportunities for work were still spotty, and things got so bad in 1975 that Brown's telephone was disconnected. She had to make calls from the pay telephone of a Texaco station across the street from her home. The head mechanic, Mike Balducci, would whistle for her when she'd get a call.

One night in September 1975 Brown noted that two of her friends from the old days, comedian Redd Foxx and Billy Eckstine, were appearing at the Westbury Music Fair. She tried to go backstage to see them, but a security guard stopped her. Foxx, standing in the hallway in his underwear, spotted her and hollered, "Let her in!" Eckstine came out, too. After the hugging and kissing and reminiscing, Foxx—distracted that Brown had fallen upon hard times—said he was going to send for her when he got back to California. She protested, but he reminded her that years before, when he had been without funds for food or rent, he had sought help from her. She had pointed to her money, lying on her dresser, and told him to take whatever he wanted, no questions asked. He hadn't forgotten her generosity.

Several weeks later, Brown heard Mike Balducci's whistle from the Texaco station. She looked out and he yelled that Redd Foxx was call-

ing her—from *Hollywood*. All the mechanics were gathered around the pay telephone. She had everyone at the gas station say hello to Foxx, who told her that he was sending her plane tickets to Los Angeles, along with \$500. He was rehearsing *Selma*, a musical based on the work of Martin Luther King, and he had had the role of Mahalia Jackson written into the script for Brown. That role started a new career for her in the theater.

For several years she lived in Las Vegas, where she played General Cartwright in an all-black production of *Guys and Dolls* and eighty-three-year-old Big Mama Cooper in *Livin' Fat*. She also sang at Circus Circus and other venues as her schedule permitted. She adds, "I took Bobby Forrester to Vegas, the first time he'd ever left here [New York]. The only reason that his mother wanted him to go was because I agreed that he was going to live in my place. He shared a room with my son. So he sort of just grew up with us."

Although Brown has always considered herself first and foremost a singer not an actress, she was glad for the heightened visibility that acting on television gave her. Norman Lear cast her in a supporting role in a short-lived television situation comedy, "Hello Larry," starring McLean Stevenson. Following that, she got parts in the film *Under the Rainbow* (which starred Chevy Chase) and a series, "Checkin' In" (starring Marla Gibbs). To Brown's surprise, acting became a means of survival. "I've had to learn how to act," she says. "But that hasn't come too hard to do. Because the whole thing is not that far from what I was doing all my life: running up onstage grinning, pretending everything was all right, while the finance company was outside taking my car. So I've been acting a long time."

She traveled to Japan as singer in an all-star group that included Dizzy Gillespie and Mel Lewis in 1979. Mayor Marion Barry proclaimed a Ruth Brown Day in Washington, D.C., in 1980, an event tied to the fact that her career began at the Crystal Caverns. She also received word that year that funds had been found to complete an album begun in 1976 but put on hold. She went into a New York recording studio to sing with an orchestra arranged and conducted by Manny Albam.

Meanwhile, Barney Josephson, who had run the famed Cafe Society nightclubs during the 1940s, had returned to the entertainment business, running a popular Greenwich Village club called the Cookery. He was looking for a replacement for his summer 1981 booking, Helen Humes, who had taken ill. Albam sent word that Brown was back in town and sounded better than ever. Josephson went to the recording studio and signed her for eight weeks in his club after hear-

ing her belt out just eight bars of one song. The Brown's Cookery engagement—her first Manhattan club appearance in nine years—left no doubt that she had become a more powerful performer than she had been in her heyday. In *The New York Times*, John S. Wilson suggested that her experience acting on stage and television had enhanced her abilities as a singer. But there was more to it than that. The hardships that she had endured had added character to her work. Wilson noted, "Her voice is, if anything, stronger than ever when she is shouting the blues or rising to a gospel urgency in an inspirational song such as 'You'll Never Walk Alone.'"

But Brown's run of bad luck hadn't quite ended. She still couldn't get a major-label record deal. She recorded a critically acclaimed album in 1982, but the company for which she did it, Flair, soon went out of business. "That was the story of my life," she says. That same year, she got what appeared to be her biggest break in ages. Brown was to make her Broadway debut in a show with Leslie Uggams called *Blues in the Night*, which would include classic blues songs associated with Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and others. However, Brown's elation soon turned to sorrow when the producers replaced her with Jean DuShon, a much less distinguished—but much younger—singer from the cast of *Sophisticated Ladies*. The *Daily News* reported on June 2, 1982, that a source close to the production of *Blues in the Night* had said that Brown "had arthritis and couldn't cut it. She got through the rehearsals but never made the first preview."

The show—an attempt to cover some of the same sort of musical territory *Black and Blue* would cover so successfully a few years later—flopped, and Brown was soon disproving the notion that she didn't have the strength to carry a stage show. She appeared in the 1983 production of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*. "My mama saw me in that show—she died five days after it closed," Brown remembers, adding, "I would have given anything for her to have seen me in *Black and Blue*—she wanted me to make Broadway." When she had another starring role in Vernel Bagneris's acclaimed off-Broadway R&B musical *Staggerlee* (in 1987), she could feel momentum building.

Her success in *Staggerlee* led to her being cast as Motormouth Maybelle in the 1988 John Waters film *Hairspray*, with a cast including Deborah Harry, Ricki Lake, and, in a dual role, the transvestite actor Divine, who had appeared in other of Waters's offbeat productions. "I didn't know much about the character when I agreed to do *Hairspray*," Brown says. "I was just so excited and happy about being called to do a movie: 'Are you serious? I'm going to do a movie!' And—to show you how naive I was—I had not heard of John Waters

before. Well, I went to the theater where I was doing *Staggerlee* and all of the kids backstage—the tech crew, they used to all talk with me, because I became like the mother hen backstage—they said, ‘Miss Brown, I hear you’re going to do a movie. Who’s the director? Who’s the producer?’ I said, ‘What’s that man’s name? Oh, John Waters.’ And they screamed: ‘What?! John Waters? Have you ever seen one of his films? What are you going to do in a John Waters film?’ Because he already was this cult figure and had this reputation for the so-called, as the press says, trashy movies. So I said, ‘I don’t know who he is.’ They said, ‘You’ve never seen a John Waters film? Well, you better be careful.’ So I said, ‘I’ll be careful.’

“*Hairspray* is a spoof of the early sixties. It has to do with dance programs—like Dick Clark kind of things—dance programs in Maryland where the white kids were dancing to black music but the black kids were not allowed to attend. And I have my own record shop and dance program in the ghetto, where the black kids dance. So the white kids eventually find their way over to my record shop, and the black kids are having such a good time, and we teach them dances called the Bird and the Roach and the Itch. And I decide that no longer are we going to take this—if they can dance to our music, then we can dance to the music with them. The whole scene is about integrating the dance program. The character I played in the film acts like she’s kind of insane most of the time but she makes her point. As John Waters says, ‘It’s a funny movie about a very serious situation.’ I grew to be very fond of John Waters although the first time we met wasn’t the happiest of times because I refused to put that blond wig on my head. And he had to sit down and remind me that the character on the screen was Motormouth Maybelle and not Ruth Brown. That wig! I don’t want my people walking with signs in protest, after all these years—because I’ve usually been walking with them, with the signs. But it’s a good movie. People come out laughing. The dances are good; the music is good. Divine was wonderful to work with. The name was perfect because he was divine. I knew him for a short time, but I feel a lot of fulfillment from just having met the man, for the perfectionism and what he gave to it. And he was a very, very warm human being. Whenever I was in his presence, he made me feel so welcome. One day I looked at one of the stills from the movie, where I was wearing this wig and this crazy costume, and I said, ‘Oh my God, Divine—my children, my family, everybody’s going to put me up for adoption when they see this film!’ He said, ‘Well, darling, don’t worry about it. For every one that you lose, I got one of mine that you will gain. So put your wig on and march



on to the bank!' Yeah, he was a nice person. Everybody was very nice in the film."

*Hairspray* gave Brown more visibility than she'd had in a long while. At the time, she was living rather anonymously in Harlem. The people in her neighborhood, she felt, were kind. Many of them had no idea who she was, other than someone with whom they'd chat if they'd run into each other when she was out walking her dog or buying groceries. But after *Hairspray* people recognized her: "I went in the supermarket, and this little kid said [she gasps], 'You're that lady I saw in *Hairspray*.' Incredible! I had on a blond wig in that movie; I'd hoped I looked better than that," Brown says. But she knows that doing the film was good for her career: "I owe a lot to Motor-mouth Maybelle."

Brown gained further exposure when she got a weekly show on National Public Radio, "Harlem Hit Parade," on which she played classic R&B records, offered recollections, and interviewed the artists who had made the records. "One of the nicer things that happened was the mail that I got from listeners to the show, all around the country. People wrote to me about how long they had been Ruth Brown fans. And I think some of the good luck that started came because there was many a person praying around this country for Ruth Brown to surface again. Every other letter that I received would say, 'I'm going to remember you in my prayers. I'm praying that I will soon see you being received the way you should be.' And I've got mail I wouldn't get rid of for the world. That's my inspiration. When I'm really feeling low down, I open my scrapbooks and read some of these letters. I've kept every letter because I hope at some time to be able to answer each one," Brown says.

"And I received a lot of mail from young people who were in prisons. A lot of the people were listening to the music for the first time as adults. They had heard it in their homes because their parents were my age. But they were so glad to be able to find out something about the people who performed the music. And I think what was special about my interviews was that most of the people I spoke with on the show I had at one time or another worked with. So we talked about a lot of personal things and we had good laughs." Doing the series prompted her to reflect upon her career. "It's only after I started doing the radio show that I really started listening to my own records; I never really listened to my own music that much other than when I was performing it."

She often sang at Harlem's Baby Grand Club, even when she began receiving offers from clubs in midtown that could pay much bet-

ter. She felt that she had gotten her start in New York at the Baby Grand, and she also liked the idea of giving something back to her own community.

In the meantime, she had met a fan named Howell Begle, who became her lawyer. She recalls, "I did an appearance and he showed up with all these albums of mine to get them signed. I said to him, 'Where'd you get all these records?' He said, 'I paid dearly for them.' He's a collector. I said, 'Well, somebody's making money because I'm not.' And he said, 'What?'" When she told him she hadn't received royalties in many years, Begle vowed to do what he could—on a pro bono basis—to right that wrong. From 1983 to 1988 he devoted legal time worth an estimated \$60,000 to settle the issue of whether Brown and others had been compensated fairly. Brown introduced him to Big Joe Turner, Sam and Dave, and other R&B artists whose stories echoed her own. In the end, Begle investigated the cases of some thirty-five R&B artists. He found that their royalty records often appeared to have been maintained poorly, and in some cases were no longer maintained at all. When records did appear accurate, royalties were being calculated according to original contract terms, tightfisted by contemporary standards.

Begle found that the pioneers of R&B, recording for various labels from the late 1940s through the mid-sixties, typically signed contracts promising just 1 to 4 percent of retail price, a fraction of what would be offered now. They typically received advances per song recorded that ranged from a low of \$50 to a high of \$350, and some artists recorded for one-time-only payments of \$200 or less per song; they were promised no royalties whatsoever. What was worse, the record companies that did offer royalty contracts often billed artists for so many diverse costs (recording sessions, fees paid to arrangers, producers, managers, and choreographers, and even, in some instances, lessons in charm, fashion, and other forms of "personal enhancement") that companies claimed they owed no royalties at all. They said that they had never recouped what they had so generously invested in the artists. Popular R&B artists thus often received little or no payment beyond the initial advance on royalties, even for hit recordings that might be endlessly reissued.<sup>17</sup>

Brown recalls that Atlantic's royalty accounts in the mid-eighties indicated that she *owed* Atlantic some \$30,000. After scrutinizing Atlantic's bookkeeping practices, Begle was certain that the negative balance in Brown's account—and those of many other artists recording for Atlantic and other labels following similar practices—was radically wrong. Begle found other artists who had been told that they

had negative balances ranging from \$20,000 to \$60,000, which meant that they were being paid no royalties whatsoever for reissues of their recordings.<sup>18</sup>

He eventually hoped to effect industrywide reforms but Atlantic was his first target, and he pressured Atlantic by generating publicity. For example, Begle got CBS to do a segment on its newsmagazine "West 57th" on the problem, and Brown and Joe Turner appeared. Turner, dying of kidney disease and without health insurance, described being too ill to be out working in clubs but said that he had no choice financially. He had to try to pay for dialysis treatments. He and Brown thought it grossly unfair that their accounts had recently been billed for the remastering of some reissued recordings made a quarter of a century or more before. That seemed unfair to a lot of viewers as well. Ahmet Ertegun, chair of Atlantic Records, which had by then become a part of the Warner Communications empire, canceled the remastering bills. The larger question of what, if anything, Atlantic really owed to artists such as Brown and Turner was still being looked into when Turner died. Ertegun paid Turner's funeral expenses.

Begle obtained further publicity for the issue when he got Ruth Brown to take the stand at a congressional hearing on consumer fraud. Atlantic saw that the question of whether Brown and other R&B recording stars had been exploited was somehow becoming a federal issue, and the company didn't need that kind of negative PR, especially while gearing up for a heavily promoted fortieth anniversary celebration. Brown was surprised—and delighted—to discover how many people she met in Washington still remembered her from the years she turned out one R&B hit after another; to her, those years seemed long past. She remarks, "I had the privilege of being at a hearing with the Reverend Jesse Jackson. And he came from Greenville, South Carolina—I played there so many times, at a place called Textile Hall. When they said, 'Do you remember Ruth Brown?' he said, 'Ruth Brown!? "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean.'" And then there was Congressman John Conyers, who was chairing the meeting, and he said, 'Ruth Brown—"Every Time It Rains, I Think of You.'" He sang 'Teardrops.' And then there was a white senator—I can't recall his name—I think he was from North Carolina, who said, 'Well, I won't be outdone, because I also heard Ruth Brown, even though I had to be in the spectators' gallery.' And he said, "'Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours" was my favorite song,' which just killed me."

Many others also assured her that they had been fans. "Alex Haley said he went AWOL to listen to me perform. Katie Hall, the wom-

an who placed the nomination up for Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, brought her daughter to see me and said, 'I want you to meet the Aretha of my day'—talking about me. And recently Aretha made a statement that there were a lot of singers when she was coming up, but for her it was Ruth Brown. Etta James said the same thing. Ray Charles, in his book *Brother Ray*, makes mention of the fact that the first person he went out with, with his band, was Ruth Brown. Little Richard said, 'I heard Ruth Brown's voice and I loved Ruth Brown.' There there are so many people who are now saying, 'Hey, I've been a Ruth Brown fan all these years,' that that makes up for some of the time I felt left out of things."

Jesse Jackson helped Begle get access to top brass at Warner Communications. And, after five years of wrangling, Begle received a settlement from Atlantic, which made no admission of any intentional wrongdoing, that was better than Brown had hoped for. In 1988 she received her first royalty check from Atlantic in twenty-eight years—\$21,000 after deductions. "It was all settled amicably," Brown says. "It was a little late coming, but it did come. And my friendship is intact with Ahmet, which I'm very glad of." Many of Brown's R&B colleagues also received royalty checks. She notes, "A lot of people benefited. That's one of the reasons *U.S. News* and *Newsweek* and all picked the story up. When I started it was only me, but I drew in other R&B artists who had the same problem so it ended up being about thirty people that are getting royalties now. The settlement is going to be a long-range benefit for everybody concerned, because they've erased the debts. A lot of us were supposed to be in the red [with Atlantic], and one of the things in the agreement was—all of that was erased."

The royalty payments that Brown and the others received in 1988, however, were calculated solely from sales of post-1970 reissues. Atlantic's bookkeeping records before that date were incomplete, and there was no longer any way of accurately determining what additional royalties might have been due individual artists for sales from earlier years. Yet Begle and Atlantic worked out an imaginative and equitable solution to the problem. A nonprofit foundation was established—Brown likes to think of it as "her" foundation because it came about as a direct result of her struggle to get the back royalties she was owed, but its formal name is the Rhythm and Blues Foundation—that could help channel funds to deserving older R&B performers.

"Atlantic has given the foundation almost a million and a half dollars," Brown notes. "And from that, we are setting it up so that

there will be death benefits, pension, welfare, health benefits—you won't be turned away from a hospital because you can't pay—and career development for people like myself who want to remain in the business, who cannot afford a press agent. These benefits are coming from my Rhythm and Blues Foundation. Plus, every year, we get together and there's a Board of Directors, including Jesse Jackson, Dan Ackroyd, and Bonnie Raitt." Brown hopes other record companies will follow Atlantic's lead in making donations to the Rhythm and Blues Foundation. She has sung in benefit shows to help raise additional funds for it, and Begle has sought to get other labels to reform their royalty accounting practices.<sup>19</sup>

For Brown, the struggle to get a settlement from Atlantic was about more than just money; it was about recognition, about feeling that the contributions she and other early R&B stars had made had been appreciated. Too often, she had felt slighted, had felt her role in music history was being forgotten. It bothered her, for example, that she was never asked to appear on television shows dealing with the roots of rock 'n' roll, or at jazz and blues festivals, or even at award ceremonies. Why couldn't she be given a chance to present a Grammy Award to a current R&B star? As she comments, "It's a little heart-rending to watch the years pass by and then, when your music starts to surface again, to see it being done by everybody but you." She recalls, for example, the day her sons told her how much they liked a "new" song that the Honeydrippers sang called "Sea of Love." They were unaware that "Sea of Love" had been recorded years before by a number of other singers, including their mother.

Brown feels that one of the best things that came out of her struggle for back royalties is her friendship with Howell Begle, who "stood by me when nobody else did, and he's remained a friend. He looks at all the contracts I'm offered and lets me know if they're good contracts. I don't have an agent. The work I get all comes by word-of-mouth."

Brown loves performing for audiences. She likes to draw listeners close to her, establish a one-to-one feeling so they'll feel comfortable requesting songs, which, unlike many performers, she sings. With that rapport established, she can then build up steam to the big, house-rockin', powerhouse numbers. As she describes her club act, "The very first thing that I do is try to get the audience to understand how grateful I am that they came. I feel very fortunate that after forty-two years of being in this profession, there are still those people who would come to see me if I worked in an outhouse. And I always try to set the songs up. I'm sort of a story-teller. I do some

things and then I tell what year it was. And then I'll remember something about that period, some town in the South where I played and how wonderful the people were. They would come and bring food to the dances in the warehouses and spread a table, and then invite you to their table. And you had to get in town early so you could meet some of these people. And sometimes you had to stay in their homes, because there were not always hotels available. And the good times that we had on the buses. The buses were like home for us, when we were doing the big shows.

"I sing according to what I feel. Sometimes I don't feel the lyrics the way I sang it the night before. I'm just human. And I come into a job with the same kind of problems the average woman would come into. I have children who sometimes concern my heart. And sometimes I will have cried before I got to my job. But thank God for the Max Factor and the pancake and the makeup, you can sort of do something about that. You can put the smile on your face. You can't always wipe it out from inside your heart." She adds with a laugh, "And it's a good thing I wear long gowns—so they won't see the knee braces, or the surgical stockings, right? You've got to look cute on the stage. But I've got to go to the doctor about these legs. The dampness gets in this leg, after all these years, when it gets cold. And it's been playing tricks on me, so I've been walking with the knee brace on.

"A singer has to deal with the emotions of the people that they're performing for," she emphasizes. "You may go in some night, and a woman or a man sitting in front of you will take your attention. And you focus your whole evening on them, because either they are giving you something good, or you're concerned about this negative attitude that's coming up—they're not smiling. So you just may want to stop and say, 'Hey, what's wrong? Would you like me to do another number?' You have got to deal with your audience and why they're there. If they need their spirits lifted, you've got to realize that's what they came for; they don't want to deal with your troubles. Not at the prices they're paying to sit down at a table—when nowadays a person could really stay at home where you feel safer and have all the conveniences—videos, cable TV, everything.

"Outside of being a rhythm and blues singer, I'm a stylist. I can sing anything that is needed. There are pockets [in my club act] where I will do show tunes, pockets where I'll do strong torch materials, yeah, and ballads. I have a rhythm and blues band behind me. Charles C. I. Williams and Bill Easley are on saxes, Clarence "Footsie" Bean's on drums, Bobby Forrester's on Hammond B-3 organ, Bill Williams out of New Orleans is on guitar. I would go lacking in my funds

just to have my musicians because they give me a sense of being at ease. Bobby Forrester, on organ, is incredible. I like the organ because it substitutes for a lot of the lacking instruments—but basically I like it because it gives me the spiritual undertone. That's my beginning. Rhythm and blues, jazz—everything you listen to is built on that spiritual basis. And there's nothing that will send a cold chill up you like a Hammond organ, which is possibly the one strong sound in the world. And so, when I do the laid-back and sentimental things that I really need to talk about and feel myself, when I need energizing myself, then I give it to Bobby and myself, because he's got a special thing with me." Indeed, Forrester continues playing the organ softly while Brown talks with the audience between numbers, much the way organists in some churches continue playing softly while the preachers speak. "When we do our show, we never let up; I just go from one thing into the other, and the music lays under," Brown notes. "And I think we make a cozy feeling. I try to get everybody in the club to feel like they're in my living room."

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You'll often hear jazz and blues artists say that foreigners appreciate our music more than Americans do. Whether that is generally true or not, the fact remains that the two men who were to play the biggest roles in bringing about the comeback of Ruth Brown were Argentinians. After making names for themselves with the internationally successful musical spectaculars *Tango Argentino* and *Flamenco Puro* (creating the overall concepts; designing the sets, costumes, and lighting; and directing the shows as well), Claudio Segovia and Hector Orezza decided to create a revue, to be presented in Paris, that would evoke the world of old-time black show business. They hired veteran choreographers Fayard Nicholas (of the Nicholas Brothers), Cholly Atkins (of the song-and-dance team Coles and Atkins), Frankie Manning (of the original Whitey's Lindy Hoppers), and Broadway pro Henry LeTang, along with such eminent older hoofers as Bunny Briggs, Jimmy Slyde, and Ralph Brown, as well as a teenaged wonder named Savion Glover. They assembled an orchestra richly laden with jazz talent. And as the focal points of their show, they chose three singers: gospel and blues shouter Linda Hopkins (best known for her one-woman tribute to Bessie Smith, *Me and Bessie*), Sandra Reaves-Philips (best known for her one-woman show, *The Late, Great Ladies of the Blues*), and Ruth Brown.

In the fall of 1985, *Black and Blue* opened for what was announced as an eight-week limited engagement at the three thousand-seat Chat-

elet Theatre in Paris. The show ran for eight months. Brown and her costars received ten to twelve curtain calls nightly. Plans to revise and open the show in New York within a few months of its Paris closing faltered, however, because raising the needed funds for so lavish a production in New York was difficult. Although news of Brown's triumphant reception in Paris did not reach the general public in the United States, it spread within show business circles, helping her land better club bookings here. From *Staggerlee* and *Hairspray* to her radio series and the Paris production of *Black and Blue*, her career picked up speed throughout the eighties. And a documentary featuring Brown, "That Rhythm, Those Blues," which was televised on PBS in January 1988 after being presented at several prominent film festivals, no doubt introduced her to many new listeners.

In the spring of 1988 she played top rooms in New York (Michael's Pub) and Los Angeles (the Cinegrill at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel), scoring successes on both coasts that surprised even her. She recalls, "I played the Hollywood Roosevelt and I couldn't believe it; when I came downstairs at night, people were standing three-deep in line. I broke everybody's house record that had ever played that room—including Michael Feinstein. And it was incredible because people like Richard Gere came, Mrs. Mancini—Henry Mancini's wife—Hank Ballard, B. B. King, Bobby Womack, just so many people that I was in awe of. When I came down through the lobby of the hotel at night, I said, 'Are you sure you're in the right place? Ruth Brown is singing here, not Tina Turner.' And everybody laughed. I made so many friends and I tell you, the reviewers in Los Angeles were just wonderful to me. One reviewer's first line was, 'We should get some buses and go down to—and he named about six clubs, discos and things where the young people are—and load everybody in these buses that think that they know how to entertain, and take them up to the Hollywood Roosevelt to see Ruth Brown.' And one morning my son calls on the phone, 'Mama, Mama, turn on the TV!' And there's this man on 'Good Morning, Los Angeles' saying, 'Last night I went to the Hollywood Roosevelt, and I heard rhythm and blues being done the way rhythm and blues is supposed to be done. I saw a woman; they tell me she's sixty years old—I don't believe it—but I heard the name Ruth Brown when I was a young kid, and I had to go for myself to see. And I'm telling you, don't you walk—you run to the Hollywood Roosevelt to see Ruth Brown. Because I feel better for having seen her this morning.' That was probably the greatest compliment that I got. It was just one of the most incredible stays that I have had."



The producers of *Black and Blue* were still hoping to mount their production in the United States and were still encountering difficulties. Plans to stage the show in Los Angeles during the summer of 1988, before moving it to Broadway, fell through. The producers decided to preview the show in New York in the fall, skipping out-of-town tryouts, with the official opening night scheduled for December. In the meantime, Fantasy Records, an important jazz/blues label, had released an album by Brown, *Have a Good Time*, recorded live at the Hollywood Roosevelt—her first album by a record company with strong financial resources and good distribution since the 1960s. The album—which included several of her biggest numbers such as “Tear-drops from My Eyes,” “Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean,” and “Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours,” along with such newer songs as “You Won’t Let Me Go” and a tenderly sung “Always on My Mind”—sold well enough for Fantasy to tell Brown that they wanted more recordings by her. She also received good offers to play Las Vegas and Atlantic City, but with *Black and Blue* being readied for Broadway she had no time to think about anything else.

How did she feel about the renewal of public interest in her in the late 1980s? “Sort of amazed—and very fortunate,” she says. “These last seven or eight years have been very good for me. Sometimes it scares me. I say, ‘What’s happening?’ In my heart I feel like, ‘Well, I’ve been around this long, they’re coming back around to me. Yes, I deserve this, I worked for it.’ And then on the other hand, I say, ‘Oh, my goodness! If I get this good job, am I physically able to stand up under it?’ After all, I’m not twenty-one any more.”

That reality was brought sharply home to her when *Black and Blue* began rehearsing and then previewing in New York in late 1988. She found the stage floor hard on her legs and the theater chilly. She had trouble shaking a cold. Her health collapsed and she was hospitalized, forcing postponement of the opening. The *Daily News* reported January 11, 1989, that she had suffered “an angina attack complicated by pneumonia.” Singer Dakota Staton was rushed in to take her place temporarily, while Broadway insiders feared that Brown might not have the stamina to do the show.

But she was not going to let this opportunity pass her by. When the show finally opened on January 26, 1989, it was Brown who commanded the most attention—no small feat considering she was in the company of such talents as Linda Hopkins, Carrie Smith, and Bunny Briggs. She brought to her performance more than the skills of singing and showmanship she had acquired over four decades as a professional. She brought attitudes forged from her experiences in

life: intimations, at times, of resentment, of feeling put-upon combined with an unshakable determination not to be beaten down, to laugh despite hardships. When she sang that she was "a woman . . . a ball of fire," she smoldered with a bitter-edged pride. When she asked what had she done "to be so black and blue," she drew upon remembered injustices. While maintaining an air of bruised dignity, she extracted all of the exuberant, bawdy comedy contained in the old-time number "If I Can't Sell It, I'll Keep Sittin' on It." She found the simple majesty in "St. Louis Blues" and turned "T'aint Nobody's Bizness if I Do" into a potent battle of one-upsmanship with Linda Hopkins that the audience assumed was just a stage routine but that actually reflected their offstage rivalry. (Both are strong women, musical descendants of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith; both were nominated for Tony Awards as best actress in a musical for their work in *Black and Blue*. It is hardly surprising that friction developed between the two. Each struggled to outshine the other; ironically, the audience was the beneficiary.) The only number that didn't really suit Brown's broad style was "Body and Soul." But she was a pillar of strength in that show, her star turns—along with those of Hopkins and Briggs—being far more important to its success than the big but impersonal production numbers such as "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." Bedecked in striking gowns and tiaras; backed by an orchestra including such distinguished jazz musicians as Sir Roland Hanna, Claude "Fiddler" Williams, Jerome Richardson, and Grady Tate; and socking home first-rate songs, Brown was every inch a star. Never before had she been showcased so well.<sup>20</sup>

It's a pity no one had presented Brown on Broadway before. Her larger-than-life performing style is perfectly suited to the theater. In her singing she can be heavily dramatic in a way that would seem overly dramatic in a close-up on screen but works terrifically onstage. The most powerful of musical theater personalities, from Al Jolson to Ethel Merman, have never achieved the same degree of success on film as in person. The brassy dynamism that can leave theater audiences feeling supercharged tends to register differently on screen.

Audiences enjoying Brown in *Black and Blue* never imagined, however, the degree of pain she often felt in her legs—pain that became so severe that she had to move out of her apartment uptown and into a hotel across the street from the theater. From the hotel, she was taken to the theater by wheelchair. With grim perseverance she would get out of that wheelchair long enough to sing her numbers and say her few lines onstage; afterward she'd get back into the chair. A doctor advised her that if she were willing to take some months

off to recuperate, an operation to replace her knee joints could afford her considerable relief. But taking time off now—when she was in demand she had thought she would never again experience—was out of the question. She endured the pain, letting it, perhaps, add intensity to her singing, and postponed the much-needed operation for several years.

Success on Broadway brought her greater attention than she had enjoyed in many years, particularly after she won the Tony Award: countless newspaper and magazine interviews and offers of bookings. She recorded a new album for Fantasy, *Ruth Brown: Blues on Broadway* (arriving at the studio in a wheelchair made her think of her first recording session, forty-one years earlier, while on crutches), as well as the original cast album of *Black and Blue* for DRG Records. She was asked to do a pilot for a television sitcom, "Uptown at Sylvia's." National Public Radio signed her to host—and occasionally sing on—a new weekly series, "Blues Stage," featuring blues and R&B singers and taped during actual performances in clubs around the country. She got booked onto talk shows, including Johnny Carson's.

How did Brown feel about winning the Tony Award? "I like to say Tony is the one man that came in my life that had a lot to say. He spoke *loudly* for me. It's just kind of mind-boggling." She adds, "The Tony got inside my spirit because it's an award for doing a Broadway show in which I am singing; I'm not acting. I've been singing all my life—[her voice takes on a coloration of sadness, as if she's bearing a burden; she has an unusually expressive, even musical, speaking voice]—and I never got nothing. This award is like saying, 'We know you're here. We know that you exist.'"

She accepted every outside engagement she could—maybe more than she should have, taxing her strength. It was as if, after so many lean years, she were afraid to forego any opportunities to work, as if she were worried such opportunities wouldn't come again. She might fly to Martha's Vineyard to sing for a night or two one week, then down to Chattanooga to be honored at a festival another week. She'd almost always be working someplace on Monday (*Black and Blue's* night off), sometimes other nights as well. In fact, her standby in *Black and Blue*, Melba Joyce, got to cover for her a good bit. Brown was living up to the wording sometimes used to introduce her club act: "the hardest-working woman in show business."

It wasn't money that impelled her to take so many jobs. She headlined, for example, a benefit concert for the International Art of Jazz, Inc., the outfit that had once hired her to participate in school assembly programs, "because they were there when I needed them. I

have to pay debts. I survived, but it wasn't all by myself. Many nice people along the way reached out to help me, and there are those out there that, no matter, if they call I go. Anne Sneed [head of the International Art of Jazz] was one of those persons."

Her billing was always "Ruth Brown and Friends"—"*and friends*—that's really my thing." If she got work, it also meant work for her backup band directed by Bobby Forrester (which, as her prices rose, she enlarged from a quintet to a sextet and then a septet) and also, quite often, for singers and musicians of her generation whom she would have open for her. If she was enjoying good fortune, she wanted to share it with her friends. She also used "Blues Stage," her NPR radio program, as a venue for helping revive interest in them, fighting with her producer if he would try to book too many younger R&B singers rather than talented veterans who could use the work. (I've heard her argue with him, "Where are all my R&B people? I've been working hard with R&B to keep that floating.") "When the music changed and the British influence came in," she comments, "a lot of rhythm and blues artists got pushed back. Believe me, some of the good singers and groups are still around. A lot of us had to do other things—you had to raise families and some had to go out of the country to live." Bringing some of the R&B pioneers back into the spotlight as guests on her radio show or at her club gigs, she says, "is just my way to help them to smell their own flowers."

Brown began working every Monday night when she was in town at the Lonestar Roadhouse on Fifty-second Street; they would put up a sign announcing that it was "Ruth's Place" whenever she was there. Although her name was packing the club, she would have old friends open the show each week, performing from perhaps 9:30 to 11 P.M. before she would come on to sing for as long as she felt like singing. The nights I caught her at the Lonestar her opening acts included Al Cobbs's eighteen-piece swing band (Cobbs had played trombone in Lucky Millinder's band when Brown was with the band), Panama Francis and his Savoy Sultans (Francis had drummed on some recordings with Brown during the fifties), and unique song stylist Little Jimmy Scott, whom she had known since the late forties. (For awhile, she got Scott a weekend gig of his own at another club, using her backup band.) She got Charles Brown, Lowell Fulson, Chuck Jackson, and LaVern Baker to appear at the Lonestar, too, and Carl Fisher served as her regular announcer and between-the-acts singer. "The whole purpose of Monday night at Ruth's Place is to re-open some faded scrapbooks," she'd tell the audience.

I've sat in the Lonestar until one in the morning, marveling at the

way Brown can fill the room with her energy. With the band rockin' behind her, she'll take chorus after chorus—building excitement for ten minutes—on “Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean” and then hit the audience with a fervent “Miss Brown’s Blues,” which she sings now with much more impact and authority than in her youth.

“WELL,” Brown calls out electrically, testifying to the whole world, “I’M STANDING ON A CORNER.” Now her voice abruptly drops down, sounding as vulnerable as a little girl’s, “and I don’t know which way to turn.” She wrings every ounce of drama possible out of her blues, breaking the rhythm of one phrase by repeating words urgently, over and over, to build tension then cutting the pathos with a hint of humor, “He said, ‘You know I love you baby, better than I love myself.’ He was crazy about himself.”

With Forrester noodling softly at the organ, she talks directly to the audience between numbers. “There have been many highs and lows in the career of Ruth Brown,” she says, and someone calls out: “I hear you.” She reminisces about doing gigs down south, early in her career, when she was paid only “in buns and pies,” recalls singing ballads and watching young couples pressed closely to each other on the dance floor “grinding coffee. . . . I watched a whole lot of coffee get ground.”

She belts out “Teardrops from My Eyes,” the saxes shimmering wonderfully, and a couple of youths at a table in the front get up and begin dancing, which she appreciates. She introduces celebrities in the audience, too, such as Bernie Wayne, composer of “Blue Velvet”; Rolanda Watts of WABC-TV Eyewitness News; and jazz singer Betty Carter. She kids another singer in the house good-naturedly, “Look at that Julia Steele—dressed in red, the color of Jezebel!” She introduces, too, her astrologer, whom she says predicted her comeback; she won’t make a move without consulting her. She also offers tributes to Dinah Washington, Ella Johnson, and Billie Holiday, which are effective in evoking memories but risky in the sense that it’s particularly hard to compete with the memory of Holiday. Brown’s rendition of “Lover Man” seems exaggerated; she’s hasn’t Holiday’s subtlety although there are moments when her pronunciation of words conjures up Holiday.

It’s when she does her own rhythmic specialties in her no-holds-barred style, however, that Brown overwhelms us. “All right, children,” she calls out first to get our attention—and the energy level up—as she prepares to set up the next song. In this room, the audience and the band are all her children. She digs into “Five-Ten-Fifteen Hours” with a ferocious drive. “Sing the song!” someone in the audience calls out in affirmation.

Brown's voice is lower than it was in her youth and has more of an edge. It's not as smooth as it once was; it's had years of heavy-duty use. She never had voice lessons; the way she'll rise to a near-shout is exciting to hear but hard on the vocal cords. It is, however, a much more commanding voice than it was in her youth. In her wordless, "whoo-ee," yodel-like vocalizing at the end of the song she expresses ecstatic power; you feel the force.

What strikes me, as I catch several of Brown's performances at the Lonestar, is that she is singing more powerfully than she was just a few years earlier, more powerfully than on her *Have a Good Time* album. (Someone ought to be making new live recordings of her club performances.) It's as if feeling wanted and appreciated again—hearing the cheers from audiences at *Black and Blue*, getting the Tony, and so on—have fortified her. One night I bring to the club a musician who had worked with Brown a few years earlier; she was always strong, he reflects, but there's a whole "nother dimension to her work now."

Brown, too, is aware that—for whatever reasons—there is more to her singing these days than in her youth. "It takes you many years sometimes to really find out and accept who you are," she says; perhaps that is why she sings now with more conviction. She also reflects, "I don't know what it is, but lately I have really started to have very close relationship to the lyrics that I do. Things I've been singing a long time—all of a sudden I'm hearing them, they're coming out different or something. Maybe it's the turns that my life has taken. Maybe it's that. People are helping me to celebrate something that I've been working on a long time. This whole thing is kind of mind-boggling." There is definitely something more in her singing these days. "Yes," she acknowledges, her voice suddenly becoming hushed and tender. "Yes. It took all those years to get to this point. I think now I'm a soul singer. I wasn't. But I think I am, about now.

"I can still sing everything—depending on what you want to hear. And I'm listening to singers closer than I ever did before, because the lyrics are becoming very important. I think that that's the saving grace right now. Otherwise we're going to look up and not have no singers left. You understand? We're just going to have people who do words and music. But unless we get some people who are sensitive enough to look inside the lyric, we ain't going to have no more Dinahs and no more Lady's and no more Ellas to interpret that lyric. I don't care how many years ago it was Billie Holiday sang 'Lover Man,' I don't care who starts to sing it, people say, 'That's Billie Holiday's song.' Because it was her interpretation of it, and what she felt.

Why was it her song? She sang about what life was giving her. And we don't do that much any more. Because we're too covered up. It's all blanketed, and electronics and the engineer in the booth and the producer. And there's not room for any imagination. We have ceased to be creative. . . . It's sad in a way. There really have been no places for young performers to apply their crafts. If anything happens that their tapes break down, there's no show."

Eventually, the producers of *Black and Blue* made Brown stop her weekly appearances at the Lonestar. She was stretching herself too thin. There was no point in her working so hard she couldn't give her all on Broadway—and no point in her club act competing for customers with her Broadway show. At times, her relationship with the producers of *Black and Blue* was strained. The show, she acknowledges, "has paid me in dividends because it has brought me to the attention—and I feel very strongly that I have been just as good for the show as the show has been for me. That has been an even trade-off. I don't know how long I'll stay in *Black and Blue*. Because I just have to move on. And indeed, it does not pay enough for me to sit down the rest of my life and do this. I am a singer. And there's a song that goes, 'So little time and so much to do.' There's still a lot I want to do. I want to do a jazz festival. I want to go to Europe. And I want to have a good album. I want to record 'My Man.' I want to do 'God Bless America' which Kate Smith did. I'd like to sing 'The Star Spangled Banner' once in my life. Because I can sing it. And I'll give it some feeling, too. I can sing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' like you wouldn't believe. These are things I have not had the opportunity to do, because right away people put you in a pocket. But it'll come. Someday I'd like to record an album of the stuff that my father used to sing: *Songs My Daddy Taught Me*. There are some good songs, if I can get the record companies to realize that I can sing 'em." She adds, after a pause, "I have to be very selective about what I put on wax now. For these will be some of the final recordings."

Any other goals for the future? "I know there are a lot of young people that have no hope. I see it every day. And I guess that I could never become rich enough to do the things I'd like to do," she says. "I wish that I could build, somewhere down where I grew up, on some of those empty lots and fields and farms, like a little community just for kids, young people who just need a chance. I see it on the streets everyday; I see kids who've got no business in the street, just looking in space, being hip, slapping palms. There's got to be something more than that. If they had a good home to go to, they'd go home. No matter how small or how meagerly furnished it is, if there's some

love there, you want to go back to it. I want to go back to Portsmouth so bad because my love is there. I can't make a living there, but once I have decided that I want to stop and settle down, it doesn't take a lot for me to live. There's no place else in the world that I would want to go, other than back home. My roots are there, my brothers and my sisters are there. And I have to decide what I'll do when I get there. But I think that if I were ever to really get lucky, what I would really like to do is take some of that vast farmland back there and build a little community for the children, for senior citizens from the rhythm and blues business like myself who just need a place to pick up their dignity. Maybe a complex with playgrounds and swimming pools and learning centers and little nightclub areas and recreational—everything that's needed. Maybe I could do that; I don't know. I go to sleep at night, praying that something might happen that would allow me to do that one day. And I think that's where I'd like to do it."

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It's Wednesday, February 21, 1990. I call on Brown at her dressing room in the Minskoff Theater on Broadway, where she's just finished a matinee of *Black and Blue* and has two hours before her evening performance. The Grammy Awards are to be presented in Los Angeles this evening. Brown's album *Blues on Broadway* has been nominated in the category of best jazz vocal, female, and a track from that album, "If I Can't Sell It," has been nominated in the category of best traditional blues. I'm surprised that Brown hasn't flown west for the Grammy Awards ceremony.

"When I got nominated, I said great—finally! I was really looking forward to going there," she tells me. "But when I saw that the awards for which I've been nominated would not be televised, I decided to stay home. They give out Grammys to persons of importance in this business—that's what it's *supposed* to be about. But they are not going to show on the telecast anything concerning the blues. They're not showing on screen the best jazz vocal albums. Gospel music will not be in place. All of that's like a slap in the face to the quality of the music."

The televised portion of the Grammy Awards ceremony will focus on the presentation of awards to younger rock and pop artists. "Everything they got, they got from R&B. They stood on our backs to reach and get those Grammys," she says. She doesn't care if producers feel there's more public interest in who'll be chosen the year's best new artist [the odds-on favorite was Milli Vanilli, a manufactured



singing duo that actually had to leave the stage at one of their concerts when the tape to which they were lip-synching stopped] than in jazz or blues. For Brown, being denied the chance for television exposure triggers unpleasant memories of being denied exposure during the fifties.

Brown has received many honors in the past year—indeed, the walls of her dressing room have become filled with plaques and photos (along with images of butterflies, a symbol of her career's rebirth)—but the honor that's meant the most to her was the homecoming celebration Portsmouth, Virginia, recently staged in her honor. "I cried for four days," she tells me. "They had marching bands and majorettes and school assemblies. I received a citation from President Bush. Right through the heart of town, what used to be Main Street—they've renamed Ruth Brown Avenue. And the street on which I was born and raised, they've renamed Ruth Brown Place. So there really is a 'Ruth's Place' now." She made a videotape for the school children, too, in the hopes that her rise from humble beginnings in Portsmouth to stardom on Broadway might help boost their aspirations and self-images.

I show Brown a few old clippings about her that I've brought her from the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. We look at a copy of a magazine article—undated but from the early fifties—which quotes Brown as saying, rather presciently as it turned out, "I'm doing OK today but what about tomorrow?" The story noted she was earning \$1,000 a performance and had a maid yet liked to press her own skirts, explaining, "I'm not the sophisticated type." It went on to say, "She hopes to have her own disc jockey show soon."

Brown smiles, commenting that with her current show "Blues Stage" she's more than fulfilled that goal. "Radio affords me a wide audience, because I have not had that TV coverage. Every home has a radio—even if they don't have a TV or a CD player," she says. "I hope doing the radio show will eventually allow me to go into some of the cities where my show is heard and do some in-person things with some of the people on the show, like the shows we did in the fifties."

Her costar Carrie Smith drops in with some fried chicken and greens she's cooked for Brown, then heads back to her own dressing room. How many Broadway stars, I wonder, are eating home-cooked meals in their dressing rooms tonight? Fourteen-year-old Tarik Winston, who's recently replaced Savion Glover as the show's tap dance prodigy, drops in to say hello to his "Aunt Ruth"; she gets along famously with kids. She predicts big things for Tarik. Her voice drops

low as she intones—and Winston is gazing at her, wide-eyed, as if listening to an oracle—that she can see down a long tunnel and see a bright future, stardom, ahead for him. He's beaming now, and he takes a seat on the couch.

Brown is finishing off the chicken and greens when the telephone call comes. "I won! Oooh! The album!" she responds to Ralph Jungheim, her record producer, who informs her from Los Angeles that she has just won a Grammy Award—her first ever, at age sixty-two—for her album *Blues on Broadway*. She bursts into tears and asks me to hold the telephone while she runs off—"Carrie! Carrie!"—to tell Smith.

Howell Begle quickly calls, too. "You won, girl!" he tells her. She vows, "Next year, an Emmy!" Winston brings her a can of soda—she'll be going onstage soon and can't have anything alcoholic—and she celebrates with that. She wires back her acceptance of the award: "Sorry I can't be there to hold the Grammy in my hand, but I'm holding the nominating committee in my heart." "Oh, that's bad!" says Winston, hugging her as other cast members gather to give congratulations. She hadn't expected to win, she says. Although she feels she's earned this award, she believes there's no counting on anything in life. "God don't love ugly—and he ain't too pleased with beautiful every once in a while," she observes. She calls her brother, her astrologer, who'd predicted she'd win the Grammy, and her makeup man; she has a show to do—and she has cried off her lashes in happiness.

"I do believe you're lucky for me," she tells me, as if my being here somehow had something to do with it. Of her career, Brown reflects before I leave to let her get ready for tonight's performance, "It's like I say—you have to go away in order to come back. . . . I think I've still got a few good years."