



## Texas Hall Of Musical Excellence (H.O.M.E.)

*The Texas Hall Of Musical Excellence honors excellence in music right here in the Lone Star State*

*This month we induct our 71st member, Charles Brown*

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### ***Charles Brown of Texas City – Elegance & blues***

It's late at night, the lights are down low, a bottle of wine, someone to dream with, and the elegant piano and warm voice of Charles Brown. Although most people have never heard of him, he is possibly the most imitated artist of the last century.

Born in Texas City, Charles Brown grew up with black church music at Barbour's Chapel Baptist Church in the working-man's town. He was raised by his grandparents after his mother died and his father ran off. After graduating high school, Charles worked his way through a degree in chemistry at Prairie View College, expecting to come back to Texas City and get a job at the Carbide plant. But a war had started, and there were more career opportunities in chemistry on the west coast. So, in 1943, Charles Brown went west to seek his fortune. Four years later, he would lose several close friends and family members in the giant explosion that rocked Texas City on April 16, 1947.

In California, Charles hooked up with Ed Williams and Johnny Moore in a group they called the Three Blazers. Of their three wonderful voices, none stood out more than Brown's in its laconic grace and soothing tone (comparable to Nat "King" Cole's "smoky gray" quality). The Three Blazers hit it big out of the box in 1945 with "Driftin' Blues," a song Brown had written in high school, which remained on the R&B chart for nearly six months, until Brown went solo. On his own, he wrote and recorded numerous upper-level R&B chart singles -- nine in 1949 alone -- including two #1s in 1949's "Trouble Blues" and 1951's "Black Night."

While all of this was happening, a Christmas song he had written and recorded with the Three Blazers in 1947, the melancholy "Merry Christmas, Baby," was becoming a seasonal classic, charting every year in the first three years after its release. While "Driftin' Blues" is regarded as his signature song, "Merry Christmas, Baby" has lived on in numerous cover versions, by far the most powerful being Elvis Presley's on his *Elvis Sings the Wonderful World of Christmas* LP. Charles is also remembered for his second Christmas hit, "Please Come Home For Christmas", a song he never got paid for, recorded by many artists.

During this time, Charles Brown was a household name. Obscure today, he was the innovator who created the sophisticated style that was imitated by Ray Charles (who was Brown's opening act for several years) and a whole generation of others who would follow.

Musicians who count Charles Brown as a prime influence include: Boz Scaggs, Donald Fagen (Steely Dan), Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, T Bone Walker, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Sam Cooke, Floyd Dixon, Steve Miller, Pinetop Perkins, Elvis Presley, Don Henley, Billy Preston, Al Kooper, Gregg Allman, and many others.

Brown's chart run ended in 1952, and he became so low-profile he seemed to have dropped off the Earth for a couple of decades. Brown in fact stayed on the road, and every so often found a small label here or there that was happy to have him for a moment. During these years, he had some income, and was able to travel around. He became close friends with Sammy Davis Jr., BB King, and helped launch Etta James career. He would show up in Texas City to visit family and friends, make the rounds of all the top clubs on the mainland and the Island, and head up to Sam Houston Race Park or Delta Downs to bet on the horses. Also during this time, a large number of his original songs and royalties were stolen by unscrupulous record companies. Yet he continued to record. *Blues n' Brown*, never released until 1995, was a ten-song collection of low-down blues - most of them written by Brown - recorded at the Modern/Kent studios in Los Angeles in 1971, with producer Maxwell Davis. Then, in the early 1990s, the Bullseye Blues label performed a great service in giving Charles Brown a home. Brown's first Bullseye effort, *All My Life*, is a masterpiece, a smooth, assured outing showing off the artist's interpretive powers. Throughout these sessions his vocals and words are introspective and mesmerizing. His next Bullseye release (*Someone To Love*) featured a new star, Bonnie Raitt, singing a duet on the title track. Raitt then took Charles on tour with her band for two years as her opening act, and once again, after 40+ years, Charles Brown was a sensation.

The same year he recorded *Someone to Love*, Brown slipped into a San Francisco studio for three days and came back with *Blues and Other Love Songs*, produced by the formidable tenor saxophonist Houston Person, who lent his distinctive touch to five of the songs, including a barn-burning workout on his version of "One Mint Julep."

Brown's 1994 Bullseye release, *Just a Lucky So and So*, is a more ornate affair in that Brown is backed by the Crescent City Horns (the album was recorded in New Orleans) and the New Orleans Strings. The pleasing result is a combination of the best of the Mainstream style with the small-combo midnight blues of *Someone to Love*.

In the late '90s Brown and his regular working combo -- a tight quartet that included Clifford Solomon on tenor sax, Danny Caron on guitar (and providing some savvy business guidance to Brown's career), Ruth Davies on bass, and Gaylord Birch on drums -- cut three fine albums for Verve that turned out to be Brown's final, stirring testimony on disc. Although his voice was now a matured, slightly weathered instrument, his phrasing and suave coolness remained things of wonder, while his piano playing retained its characteristic ebullience and sensitivity, and the band played superbly in support behind him.

Some of the most memorable moments came when Brown went minimalist, as on the solo piano and vocal on a moody version of Duke Ellington's "I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)" or the slow-grinding blues of "News All Over Town"; and on a lively jump-blues tune quite at odds with the subject matter, "I Cried Last Night".

Those were the last notes of Brown's career on record, and when all was said and done he had produced a body of work over the course of 53 years that was remarkable for its consistency and its soulful expressiveness. Gone he may be, but Charles Brown's music lives on, timeless and majestic. He passed away of a heart condition on January 21, 1999. Two months later, he was elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on the first ballot.

In a 100+ year-old wooden house on Bell Drive in Texas City, a 70 year-old baby grand piano that Charles Brown used to play sits, covered with dust. His music is hard to find these days. But if you want some background to get your girl in the mood for romance, forget Billie Holiday, forget Sinatra, forget Sade. The only thing you need is Charles Brown.

**GATOR**