

# So you think you know Mr. Brown?

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Over the past few years, James Brown had become a figure that I mostly took for granted, only pausing momentarily to observe his foibles with the law, tax problems and marital strife. Of course, after he passed away on Christmas Day 2006, I was glued to the coverage of his funeral, estate mismanagement and the many who came forward claiming to be long lost children.

But James Brown was so much more than that.

Yes, he had his share of discourse, but he also had the power to influence people and change lives. He was loved and admired by many. Some may even consider him an American hero.

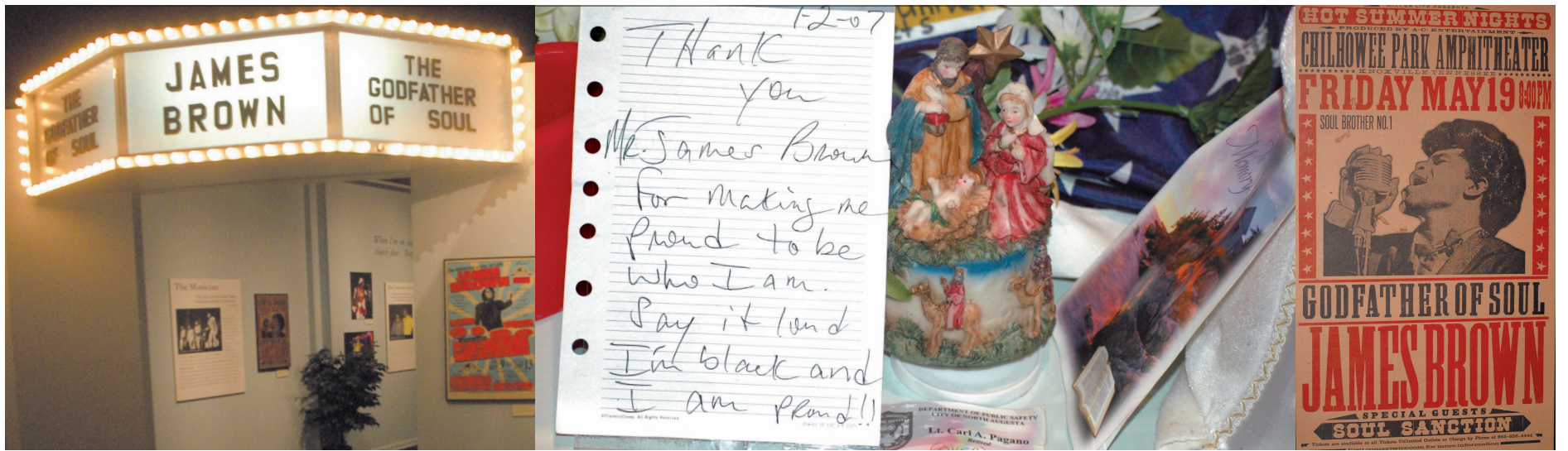
Brown was an activist, philanthropist and an innovator in music. All modern R&B has its roots in the ground that James Brown himself broke — and not just R&B. Ask any major musician who has come to fame over the past four decades who their musical influences were, and I'm guessing nine out of 10 will list James Brown somewhere in their top 10.

He was an international icon and to quote Nancy Glaser, Executive Director of the Augusta Museum of History, "He is a true national and international treasure."

You don't have to take my word for it though. You can reacquaint yourself with James Brown as I did, by visiting the Augusta Museum of History and experiencing the new exhibit, The Godfather of Soul, Mr. James Brown, a celebration of the man, his music and his legacy.

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▲ INSIDE THE JAMES BROWN EXHIBIT: POSTERS, NOTES LEFT AT HIS STATUE AFTER HE DIED AND (BELOW) A SUIT WITH WORN KNEES FROM HIS WILD PERFORMANCES.

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The James Brown exhibit begins by introducing visitors to James Brown, the man, and features candid photos, personal items from his home and stories of Brown's humble beginnings. Guests can also read pages of anecdotes that show what an obliging and generous man he could be. The display includes audio clips from famous friends and admirers, such as Rev. Al Sharpton, Stevie Wonder and Anthony Kiedis. There's even one from an Augusta fan who lovingly describes what Mr. Brown means to him. It's an outpouring of respect, inspiration and love from fans, musicians and family.

In addition to being reminded of how greatly he was adored and the power he had as an activist — promoting racial equality and black empowerment through nonviolent means — I was also struck by the many paradoxes in his life that can be seen in the assortment of personal items on display from his home.

Here was a man who unfortunately, became more infamous than famous in his hometown — known for his brushes with the law and stories of spousal abuse and drug use — yet he had a Bible in nearly every room of his house, each opened to a different book and passage.

He was a man of wealth and stature, with a larger-than-life ego. He wore suits of unimaginable finery, yet looking at the assortment of toiletries displayed among the items he used on a daily basis, I was surprised and amused to see few “designer brand” products, but rather many items that anyone could find at the local drugstore or discount mega-mart.

Also in the case for viewing are Mr. Brown's blood-sugar test kit, some insulin and a syringe. The man who was “The Hardest Working Man in Show Business” was a diabetic.

In a weird way, I respect him even more after seeing that. It shows me that in addition to all the pomp and circumstance he presented on stage, throughout the charity work he did, and encouraging others to work hard and make something of themselves, he was dealing with his own daily frailties and still put himself out there to entertain, inspire and even be judged harshly by his critics.

On one wall of the exhibit is a quote in which he says: “The hardest thing about being James Brown is I have to live. I don't have no down time.” I definitely walked away with a greater understanding of just what he meant by that.

The next part of the exhibit explores his music career and features concert posters, interactive audio-visual kiosks, tour passes and flight schedules, many of his record albums, and several of his show suits and costumes — complete with shoes and a “King of Soul” crown worn by Brown in the 1950s.

It was a treat to view video clips of The Godfather performing various hits and giving dance instructions, but I believe the big show stopper of the video collection is a performance that features a duet between Brown and the great tenor Pavarotti singing “It's A Man's Man's Man's World.” While I was there, a gaggle of fans watched it in delight and kept coming back bringing one friend after another with the preface, “Did you see this yet? You have to see this!”

In another corner of the room, fans can select songs from a mini “jukebox” that features a range of selections illustrating the evolution of Brown's music. I was thrilled to see that I wasn't the only one there who would make a selection and then dance respectfully on the spot while listening. I have a personal belief that anyone who can listen to James Brown and stand still at the same time has no soul. Not that they have no rhythm, but they just might be dead inside.

His musical career spanned five decades, won him two Grammys, and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. One whole wall of the exhibit displays many of his albums, and explains their significance. Another wall features a James Brown discography of the singles released over the years, and how high they climbed on both the R&B and pop charts.

In addition to his impressive musical talent, the man knew how to dress. This room also shows an array of suits that is both impressive and tells a story. One suit in particular speaks volumes. The knees on it are worn, undoubtedly, from Brown's energetic, over-the-top performances. Looking at it, I could just picture him sliding across stage, falling to his knees, doing splits and earning his title as “The Hardest Working Man in Show Business.”

The final leg of the exhibit is the legacy left by James Brown. This is without a doubt the most poignant room of all. It features a collection of items left at the James Brown statue in the days following his death. It also has copies of programs from all three memorial services held in New York, Augusta and South Carolina.

There is an interactive kiosk where visitors can listen to band members and other close associates speak about the influence Mr. Brown had, and will continue to have, on the world through his music, and through the way he lived his life.

Again, in this room I was reminded of what a complex and ironic man Brown was. He was a lifelong Republican. I learned this as I gazed into another display of items and became transfixed on a medal hanging from a red, white and blue ribbon. It was a “Republican Presidential Task Force Life Member Medal,” given to him in 1996 at the Republican National Convention.

James Brown was more than a musician. His life story and legacy reminded me of that. George W. Bush called him “An American original.” He was definitely that, and more. He's an American institution.

In many ways, James Brown is America. He had a humble beginning, took some dubious turns along the way, but still grew to a position of wealth and influence. Even when his own finances were in shambles, he still found the where-with-all to give back to others in his community. He is despised and criticized by almost as many as those who revere and adore him. (I don't know about anyone else, but that sure sounds like America to me.)

He was more than just a musician and story on the news. He was human, and a pretty great one at that.

