

Oscar Brown, Jr.

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Oscar Cicero Brown, Jr. was born October 10, 1926 in Chicago, the eldest of two children born to Oscar Brown, a prominent lawyer and real estate agent, and his wife Helen Clark Brown, a schoolteacher. While perhaps most well known as a jazz vocalist, songwriter and composer, Brown should best be understood for fusing art with activism and social commentary to highlight the hypocrisy and racial injustice he saw and experienced in the United States.

Brown got his start at 15 as a singer on the network radio soap opera *Secret Series*. At age 16, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. After attending a few universities, excelling in English but little else, he returned to Chicago in 1947. He soon landed a role as a newscaster on *Negro News Front*, the nation's first daily newscast created by Blacks that he coproduced with Vernon Jarrett. From 1948 to 1950 Brown was also a key performer on Richard Durham's radio series *Destination Freedom* on Chicago's WMAQ.

Prior to this, he had led a relatively comfortable middle-class life thanks to his father's success and despite the second-class status of Black people in the United States at the time. This opened his eyes to the challenges facing the Black community. "[That] sort of pivoted me," Brown told *Black World Today*. "It changed me around and made me not only an actor but also an activist."

In 1948 at age 21 he joined the Progressive Party and ran for Illinois State representative, and in 1952 ran as a Republican for Congress, losing both times. He was also a member of the Communist Party from 1947 until either he resigned or was kicked out in the mid-50s for being "too black for the Reds."

After a two-year stint in the Army, his focus returned to writing and he started composing songs and performing them in local night clubs. In 1960 he signed with Columbia Records, and his first album, *Sin and Soul* was released to critical acclaim. He was soon touring with the likes of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Dizzie Gillespie.

Brown attempted to launch his musical *Kicks and Company* on Broadway in 1961, even managing to get NBC's *Today Show* to dedicate a two-hour program to it. It never made it to Broadway, but it did have a brief run in Chicago that year.

In 1962 he moved to Los Angeles to host the syndicated television show *Jazz Scene USA*, where he met and married his third wife, singer and dancer Jean Pace. This started a 30-plus-year partnership between the two. Shortly after that, they moved back to Chicago and he wrote and produced the musical *Opportunity Please Knock*. This was both a critical and commercial success, and particularly notable for using members of the Chicago street gang the Blackstone Rangers as performers.

Brown continued to write and record several albums, as well as writing plays and musicals. One of his most successful ones was *Buck White*, starring Muhammad Ali in the title role, and exploring themes of Black power and militancy.

In later years, he was an artist-in-residency at several colleges and universities while he continued to write and perform. He also regularly appeared on television, hosting the PBS series *From Jump Street: The Story of Black Music*, appearing as a regular on *Brewster's Place*, and had a recurring role as a jazz pianist on *Roc*.

Brown won several awards over the years, including TV Emmy awards, the Paul Robeson Award, and was inducted into the Black Writer's Hall of Fame in 2002. On May 29, 2005, Brown died in his hometown of Chicago from osteomyelitis at age 78.

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