Classic rhythm-and-blues man CHARLES BR(limelight after being reintroduced by I

By Dave Becker
STAFF WRITER

C. Brown" is all it says on the room roster outside the modest apartment complex for Berkeley seniors.

Unless you know what you're looking for, there's no indication the Mr. Brown in question is one of the greatest living figures in rhythm-and-blues, a man whose influence is still profound some four decades after he disappeared from the record charts.

Such anonymity is a familiar state of affairs for Charles Brown. While performers such as Ray Charles enjoy lasting fame with music largely based on Brown's style, Brown himself was all but forgotten after his brief Truman-era heyday.

He went from packing the house at Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater to playing Ramada Inn cocktail lounges. He didn't even benefit from the songs he wrote, including the perennial holiday favorite "Merry Christmas, Baby," due to shady royalty arrangements.

It was only through the relatively recent intervention of blues-rock songstress Bonnie Raitt, who says she was "floored" by Brown's playing, that he has begun to achieve a measure of recognition in his twilight years, including a special concert Friday with the Oakland East Bay Symphony.

Yet Brown recalls the past with more enthusiasm and wonder than bitterness. In fact, it's hard to get the charming septuagenarian to say a negative word at all as he recounts his roller-coaster career.

"When things started to go downhill, I just blanked my mind to what I had done before," he says from the living room of his small, sparsely furnished apartment.

"I never felt bitter — doesn't do any good. It's what you are now that's important. The past is only good for memories.

"That's why my focus now is to enjoy the opportunities that are coming my way again. I'm getting offers all the time, going to Europe playing these casinos full of millionaires. Why would I want to dwell on old mistakes and problems?"

Raitt

Morgan

But that doesn't mean the talkative artist is shy about recounting his early years. With only the slightest prodding, Brown cheerfully starts presenting bits and pieces of his past, obviously savoring the memories of old friends and past triumphs. While his memory is a little shaky on names and exact dates, he can recall the exact songs he played to win his first talent contest and the cut of the suit he wore his first time at the Apollo.

Born in rural Texas City, Texas, 71 years ago, Brown started taking piano lessons as a child and quickly developed a pleasing style with the classics. Still, music was just a sidelight for many years. Even when he started playing the local blues clubs, it was mainly to make money for college.

"My mama's intent was for

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me to be a schoolteacher, because that was something important and respectable," he explains. "The piano was just something to play at school and church."

Brown graduated with a degree in chemistry and landed in the Bay Area in 1943. A job opportunity with a Berkeley chemical firm quickly fizzled, forcing Brown to seek other means of making a living. He found his new calling at a USO hall in San Francisco, where he entertained soldiers and their dates with boogie-woogie dance tunes.

After a year or so of that, Brown headed down to Los Angeles, where he played at various churches and worked odd jobs. Friends convinced him to show his stuff at the weekly talent contest at the Lincoln Theater. His knockout rendition of the "Warsaw Concerto" won him first place and led to a steady gig playing light classics at Ivy's Chicken Shack, where all the black movie stars congregated.

Besides impressing the judges, Brown's amateur-night performance also wowed guitarist Johnny Moore, who was putting together a pop-jazz trio in the mode of Nat "King" Cole's group, then the hottest thing in town. Moore eventually tracked down Brown and convinced him to join up.

"Then we signed with the William Morris Agency and had a $600-a-week job lined up, so that was too good to pass up," Brown says, demonstrating the swing tune he plinked out to convince Moore he could play jazz.

"The thing was, they wanted someone who could sing, and I hadn't even thought about singing at that point. But I knew what Nat Cole sounded like, and I figured I could do that.

"I didn't really know what I was doing, though, so I went back to what I learned in Texas, which is why we sounded different from the other trios."

The difference with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers was a one-of-a-kind blend of pop sophistication and down-home blues, thanks to Brown's elegant piano stylings and heartbreaking, blues-drenched vocals.

"Our whole family had this sad way of singing," Brown explains. "It's something that came natural to me, which is why they always wanted me to sing at funerals when I was a boy.

"People assumed later on that it came from living a hard life, but at that point I was still pretty innocent. I didn't know anything about the blues then. I hadn't really been hurt yet."

People ate it up

Whatever it was in Brown's voice, people ate it up. The Brown-penned "Driftin' Blues" was the first single by the Three Blazers and the biggest R&B hit of 1946, instantly catapulting the act to stardom.

Local rhythm-and-blues maestro Johnny Otis, a friend and former sideman for Brown, says the song is a landmark in black music.

" Driftin' Blues was the establishment of a very original, successful approach to the blues," he says. "It was so good that a lot of people tried to sound like Charles, including Ray Charles. But nobody does Charles Brown better than Charles Brown."

Further hits followed in quick succession. By the end of 1948, Brown was frustrated at getting second billing in an act he clearly dominated. He went solo and immediately scored a No. 1 hit with "Get Yourself Another Fool" and the even bigger "Trouble Blues."

Brown was headlining all the major black theaters and selling records by the truckload. What he didn't know was that he wasn't actually making much money for himself, due to the exploitative practices record companies routinely employed then.

"The record company wouldn't give me any royalties," Brown explains, "but they'd say, 'I've got this Cadillac I don't need, why don't you take it?' That way I was happy and living in high style, even though I wasn't making much money.

"I didn't know anything about royalties or copyrights. All I knew is I was doing good enough to give my papa a Cadillac, which made me feel wonderful."

When the hits stopped coming in the late 1950s, and rock 'n' roll had sapped interest in ballad singers like Brown, the pianist had little to show for his years at the top.

Playing one-nighters

He started playing one-nighters at little clubs, not even making enough money to keep a steady band together. His career consisted of jumping around between nightclubs, Ramada Inns and small West Coast clubs. By the 1970s, he'd had his fill.

"I kept doing little things to keep going, but I got tired of that," he says. "I was fed up with having to always scramble to find gigs and fighting to get paid. It just wasn't worth the trouble if that's what it took to keep performing."

A friend in Los Angeles gave Brown a job in her janitorial firm, which specialized in cleaning wealthy suburban homes. Sometimes, if a house had a particularly nice piano and the owner was away, he'd sit down and play a few bars of one his favorites.

"People would ask sometimes who I was, but I just told them I didn't play anymore: 'I'm a window washer now, not a piano player.'"

By the early 1980s, Brown had more or less retired and had moved into the Berkeley seniors complex, where he li[illegible] quiet widower's life punctuated by occasional trips to the race track.

"Some people like to drink, some people like to smoke or run around with wild women. I just like to play my $2 bets," he chuckles.

In 1988, though, an old friend finagled a date for Brown to play two nights at the popular Vine Street Grill in Los Angeles. Word of mouth and good press made the gig a sell-out, but it was who was in the house that was important.

"I had no idea then who Bonnie Raitt was," Brown recalls. "I just noticed there was this pretty redhead in the corner singing along with most of the songs."

Brown actually talked with Raitt a few months later when they were backstage at the Rhythm and Blues Foundation Awards. The feisty singer-guitarist, at that point almost as obscure Brown, promised she'd give the pianist a hand if she ever had the opportunity.

"I've always been a fan of Charles, but seeing him at Vine Street, I was just floored with his brilliance," Raitt says. "I promised him that if I was ever in a position to do someone a favor by taking them on tour with me, he was at the top of the list.

He's been overlooked

"He's been so overlooked in the field of rhythm and blues, and to see him performing on the level he was at just really bothered me."

As luck would have it, within a few months Raitt had an armful of Grammy awards for her album "Nick of Time" and was suddenly popular enough to pack 'em in at 15,000-seaters. When it was time for her to go on tour, she stayed true to her word and took Brown along.

"Bonnie gave me the nicest introduction every night, because she knew none of those people had ever heard of me," Brown recalls. "By the time I finished my set, they were usually on their feet cheering."

The notoriety from that tour led to a deal with Rounder Records, which just released Brown's third album of the 1990s, the charming "Just a Lucky So and So." Brown tours regularly now, is accepting awards from everyone from Texas Gov. Anne Richards to the W.C. Handy Blues Foundation and barely has time to play the ponies anymore.

"It's just been fantastic," he says, "and all these things come down to Bonnie Raitt being such a wonderful person."

Raitt says all she did was show a little common decency and courtesy.

"I'm just trying to be honest and let people know whose music this really is," she says.

"Most people think the blues is people like George Thorogood and me. Now I can't make them go out and buy an Albert Collins or a Charles Brown record, but I can at least be up front about who I get my style from.

"And on a personal level, he's such a wonderful man you can't help but want to be nice to Charles. It's kind of like meeting Ronald Coleman, he's so elegant and classy."

As far as the future, Brown recalls the answer he gave on Jay Leno's holiday show last year, when the "Tonight Show" host asked each guest for his Christmas wish.

"I told him I want to be the oldest and ugliest thing they ever put in casket," he says with a hearty laugh.

"The reality is I'm 71, and the Lord don't give you but 72 years, so I'm living on grace pretty soon.

"I figure if I can still be around for another 10 years to enjoy what's happening now, in what I call the evening of my career, that's all I can ask."