

# “I Got That Something That Makes Me Want to Shout”: James Brown, Religion, and Gospel Music in Augusta, Georgia

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## Abstract

Using ethnographic and archival data, this article explores aspects of global superstar James Brown’s participation in the black gospel music community of Augusta, Georgia, from the 1980s until his death in 2006. Using rare footage of Brown performing sacred music on a local gospel music television program, the article builds on scholars’ longtime recognition of Brown’s engagement with black sacred song by engaging the singer’s negotiation of sacred and secular musical and cultural boundaries from the perspective of his gospel performances. The article also examines Brown’s personal relationships with local gospel musicians, ultimately arguing that his involvement with Augusta’s gospel tradition near the end of his life provided Brown with an alternative social space for articulating a musical and personal identity somewhat separate from his mainstream media image.

On 26 May 1992, “Godfather of Soul” and former gospel quartet singer James Brown gave an interview and sang on the *Parade of Quartets*, a black gospel music television show produced and broadcast in Brown’s hometown of Augusta, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> During the interview, Brown told the program’s host:

This [show] is professional, believe me. Believe me, because I know Detroit, Chicago, New York, and all those major places—L.A.—they don’t have nothing like this. And I tell everybody about the *Parade of Quartets*. And I’m telling you, this is a landmark. A lot of times when I don’t feel like going to church and I just can’t make it—I always feel it in my heart—but I get that same feeling—if I done come in from a long trip, I don’t care what happens, I turn on to get the *Parade of Quartets*.<sup>2</sup>

According to this statement, Brown viewed the gospel program frequently, considered it a unique media product with cultural significance exceeding its broadcast

Many thanks to Jean N. Kidula and Sandra Graham for their insightful critiques of this research in conference paper and article form, and to two anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of the article.

<sup>1</sup> Augusta’s WJBF-TV has broadcast *Parade of Quartets* on Sunday mornings from April 1955 until the present. Because WJBF is an ABC affiliate with a fairly wide broadcast radius, *Parade of Quartets* has enjoyed decades of exposure in eastern Georgia and western South Carolina. The program includes gospel music performances and interviews with black political, religious, and cultural figures. As a sustained black media presence on a southern television affiliate, the show is a rarity in television history. For an account of its development and significance to local religious and musical communities, see the author’s article, “‘When We Send Up the Praises’: Race, Identity, and Gospel Music in Augusta, Georgia,” *Black Music Research Journal* 27/2 (2007): 79–94, and dissertation, “A Mighty Long Way’: Black Gospel Music on Television in Augusta, Georgia, 1955–2009” (University of Georgia, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> 26 May 1992 episode, *Parade of Quartets* Collection, DVD no. 66. Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Award Collection, University of Georgia Libraries.

radius, and regarded it as a substitute for church services. He confirmed this high opinion of the *Parade of Quartets* in another televised interview in the early 1990s, in which he stated that “this is the best gospel show there is” and that he would “like to see it go all over the world.”<sup>3</sup> In the context of other evidence, the statements Brown made on the television program indicate that in the last twenty-five years of his life, he was deeply involved with the gospel music community of Augusta. In addition to extant *Parade of Quartets* footage, articles published by the Augusta press, interviews with members of the local gospel community, and observations at gospel music events point toward Brown’s late-life involvement with his hometown gospel tradition. From the 1980s until his death in December 2006, Brown enacted the roles of both consumer and performer as he attended and sang at local gospel music events, performed on and regularly viewed *Parade of Quartets*, and maintained vibrant personal relationships with Augusta gospel musicians. However, no scholarship has discussed this lengthy and important phase of Brown’s participation in a gospel music community or analyzed his performances of gospel music.

Scholars have repeatedly acknowledged Brown’s general stylistic debt to black gospel music, but they have engaged his lifelong dialectic with gospel music exclusively through the lens of his secular music.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Brown’s professional and personal relationships with gospel musicians in the 1950s and 1960s have formed the central subject of only one article, and no scholarship has discussed his substantial interactions with gospel artists after the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> This article provides a fuller account of Brown’s relationship to gospel music and musicians by describing his social and musical participation in Augusta’s gospel music community during the last twenty-five years of his life. Following a brief overview of Brown’s complex relationship with black sacred song, religion, and gospel music from his childhood to his religious conversion in October 1979, I describe the social connections Brown formed and maintained in Augusta’s gospel community from the 1980s to his death. Close readings of rare extant footage of the soul music star performing gospel music on the *Parade of Quartets* in the early 1990s highlight the rich musical and historical

<sup>3</sup> Excerpt of *Parade of Quartets* episode from the early 1990s used in the 2006 DVD *The Brewsteraires: Yesterday, Today, and Forever*.

<sup>4</sup> Research on Brown’s musical and cultural engagement with gospel music includes Will Straw’s “Star Profile” of Brown in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85–87; Richard Crawford’s discussion in *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001), 795–98; David Brackett’s remarks in his *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151; Portia Maultsby’s “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Composers*, ed. Bernice Johnson Reagon (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press), 31–32; and her contextualization of Brown within the genre of soul music in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 273. Musical analyses of Brown’s secular repertoire that engage his complex relationship with black sacred music include Brackett’s “James Brown’s ‘Superbad’ and the Double-Voiced Utterance,” *Popular Music* 11/3 (1992): 309–24; Alexander Stewart’s “‘Funky Drummer’: New Orleans, James Brown, and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 19/3 (2000): 293–318; and Guthrie Ramsey’s discussion in *Race Music: Black Cultures from BeBop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 151–55.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Hay focused on Brown’s interactions with gospel musicians in north Georgia in the 1950s in “Music Box Meets the Toccoa Band: The Godfather of Soul in Appalachia,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23:1/2 (2003): 103–33.

layers of the sacred-secular dialectic that Brown enacted in his locally televised gospel performances, illustrating Teresa Reed's historicization of the radical shift in the meanings and categories of the "sacred" and the "secular" within mid-twentieth-century African American culture.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the historical data and theoretical analysis suggest that in the last few decades of his life, Augusta's gospel music tradition provided Brown with a space in which to articulate a musical, social, and religious identity separate from his persona as James Brown, global pop star.

### Brown's Roots in Gospel Music and the Church, 1930s–1979

Brown's late-life involvement with Augusta's gospel music tradition and religious community was only one stage of a long, vibrant, and complicated relationship with the church, religion, and black sacred song. Brown recalled in his 1986 autobiography that as a child in Augusta in the 1930s, he absorbed the worship rituals and performative strategies of African American ministers and congregations, notably the United House of Prayer for All People. This predominantly black Holiness/Pentecostal denomination, known for its brass worship bands, charismatic patriarchs, colorful parades, and unique theological positions, established an influential congregation in Augusta in the 1940s. Brown often attended the House of Prayer's parades and church services, and his later performance style was shaped by the denomination's dramatic worship expressions. Brown's first contact with a professional black gospel group also occurred in Augusta in the late 1940s when he met the Swanee Quintet, a local gospel quartet that later achieved national fame in the gospel industry. (Small gospel groups with more than four singers are sometimes categorized as quartets, as long as their vocal arrangements use four-part harmony. A quartet may also retain two lead singers who take turns singing the melody in different songs, which also expands the group's membership beyond four people.) Brown sang, danced, and shined shoes outside the WGAC radio studios where the quintet performed their daily radio broadcast, probably meeting them between 1947 and 1949.<sup>7</sup> When Brown met them, the quintet had already toured outside of Augusta, although they were still several years away from their successful recordings and national tours of the mid-1950s.<sup>8</sup> Although it is uncertain whether Brown's

<sup>6</sup> Teresa Reed, *The Sacred Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See an official historical account of the group provided at [www.swaneequintet.com](http://www.swaneequintet.com). The year of Brown's first contact with the quintet is unknown, but a timeframe for their initial contact can be deduced from other evidence. The earliest evidence of the quintet's WGAC radio shows are the 1947 *Augusta Chronicle* radio logs, which indicate that the group began broadcasting on weeknights on WGAC in May 1947. In late 1949 the quintet moved to WJBF radio, according to "Augusta's Most Popular Singing Group," *Augusta Chronicle*, 3 October 1949, 2. Assuming that May 1947 marked the quintet's first broadcast on WGAC, Brown would have met the group no earlier than May 1947 and no later than June 1949, when he left Augusta to enter a juvenile detention center in Rome, Georgia.

<sup>8</sup> "Everybody Is Talking about Home Folks Frolics," *Augusta Chronicle*, 24 May 1947, 3; "Swanee Quintet Sings at Lions Club Meeting," *Augusta Chronicle*, 30 April 1949, 4; "Augusta's Most Popular Singing Group," *Augusta Chronicle*, 3 October 1949, 2; Cedric Hayes and Robert Laughton, *Gospel Records 1943–1969: A Black Music Discography*, vol. 2 (n.p.: Record Information Services/Paul Pelletier, 1970); Sharon Wellington, "Gospel Singers 'Walked in the Light' for Half a Century," *Augusta Chronicle*, 29 December 1990, 1B, 4B.

early relationship with the group included music making, he probably overheard them singing at the radio station.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1950s, Brown gained his first professional experience with the Famous Flames, a gospel and rhythm and blues group that formed in the north Georgia juvenile detention center where Brown was incarcerated. The Famous Flames approached sacred and secular boundaries in repertoire, musical style, and performance venues with great fluidity, singing secular music at movie theaters and nightclubs and performing gospel music at religious functions. Brown later reminisced about this stylistic porousness: “We weren’t even sure what kind of music we wanted to do, gospel or rhythm and blues. I hadn’t given up on gospel entirely so I taught them some songs I knew, such as ‘When I Get to Heaven I’ll Be Looking for My Mother. . . .’ I guess a lot of groups start that way, looking for their identity.”<sup>10</sup>

The Flames became increasingly popular in north Georgia after Brown and other members were released from the detention center in June 1952. In late 1952, concerned about the group’s growing success, leaders of the Mount Zion Baptist Church of Toccoa, Georgia, “censured” James Brown and Bobby Byrd, the Flames’ founder, stating that the group should “either . . . play blues music or gospel music,” but not both. The young men apologized but continued to perform both types.<sup>11</sup> Brown later speculated that the church’s opposition to the “devil’s music” (i.e., blues) was rooted in hypocrisy, stating that “some of the deacons didn’t want us to see them in some of the juke joints we played.”<sup>12</sup> Although it is unclear how much the incident shaped Brown’s views on boundaries between sacred and secular music, it indicated that in the early 1950s, some older members of African American churches perceived an irreconcilable dichotomy between church music and worldly music.

Many years later, in a 1979 interview with an African American newspaper in Augusta, Brown stated that he planned to pursue a career in gospel but was “talked out of” it by other gospel groups in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, by early 1956, he and the Flames were performing and recording exclusively secular music. Without changing their group name, the Flames became backup singers for Brown’s rhythm and blues shows and recordings. Despite their movement in a more secularized direction, however, the Flames’ early R&B never strayed far from the stylistic fold of gospel music. In fact, Brown and the Flames secured their first R&B recording contract by auditioning with an emotional rendition of a gospel song.<sup>14</sup> The Flames’ transition

<sup>9</sup> Dr. James Carter III grew up across the street from Rufus Washington, an original member of the Swanee Quintet. Carter often heard the group practice in the early 1950s from his home, which suggests that the quintet may also have been audible to Brown outside the radio station. Author’s interview with Dr. James Carter III, 4 April 2008.

<sup>10</sup> James Brown and Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1986), 54.

<sup>11</sup> Hay, “Music Box,” 118; Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*, 66–67.

<sup>12</sup> Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*, 66–67.

<sup>13</sup> Mallory Millender, “James Brown Is Baptized; Experiences Great Awakening,” *Augusta News Review*, 3 October 1979, 1, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Hay, “Music Box.”

to a gospel-saturated R&B style in 1956 marked the end of the first phase of Brown's developing negotiations of sacred and secular musical styles.

Although Brown abandoned professional gospel performance as a career path in the mid-1950s, he continued to develop personal and professional relationships with gospel musicians, and especially with the Swanee Quintet. In 1966 Brown invited the Augusta group to tour with him as his opening act; in the same year, he produced the quintet's album *Step by Step*. The album featured Brown's horn section and a transformation of his R&B ballad "Try Me" into the gospel number "Try Me, Father." By the time they started working with Brown, the quintet was firmly established as one of Nashboro Records' best-selling gospel groups and as one of the country's premiere gospel quartets.<sup>15</sup> They frequently toured on large gospel concert packages with quartets such as the Soul Stirrers and the Fairfield Four and even performed their hit song "A New Walk" in the 1959 Warner Brothers film *A Night in Harlem*.<sup>16</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the quintet opened Brown's concerts by performing thirty minutes of gospel music at venues such as Madison Square Garden and the Apollo Theater.<sup>17</sup> Other gospel groups such as Clara Ward and the Ward Singers also opened for Brown's Apollo shows. In 1986, Brown commented on his use of gospel groups to open programs:

Besides [Bobby] Byrd and Vicki [Anderson], I had the gospel group the Swanee Quintet on the show. I did a lot of split shows with gospel acts during that time. People always said you couldn't bring together church people and people who dug music like mine, but I thought you could. I used to have the Swanees, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, the Angelic Gospel Singers, Clara Ward, all of them. I had the gospel people on the first part of my show, then an intermission, and then my show. Singing is all about spirit anyway—doesn't make any kind of difference what spirit.<sup>18</sup>

For Brown, musical and performative quality and vivacity superseded concerns about textual content, genre, or categorization. Although Brown himself eschewed such cultural and stylistic divisions, his respect for the sacred-secular boundaries occasionally imposed by fans and by the music industry was evident. According to Percy Griffin, lead singer of the Swanee Quintet from 1966 until the present, Brown would not let the quintet perform in venues that sold alcohol.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Brown

<sup>15</sup> Nashville-based Nashboro Records recorded southern black gospel artists in the 1950s and 1960s and was characterized by a raw, rural, southern sound, according to Tony Heilbut's *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971). Owner Ernie Young often praised the Swanee Quintet's rural, blues-influenced gospel style and encouraged other Nashboro artists to imitate their sound, as noted by Alan Young in *The Pilgrim Jubilees* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>16</sup> "Augusta Singers in Movie," *Augusta Chronicle*, 29 November 1959, 6-D; Peter Guralnick, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 190; author's interview with Percy Griffin, 5 May 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Brown and Tucker, *The Godfather of Soul*; www.swaneequintet.com; J. Carter interview; Griffin interview. The quintet occasionally appeared on concerts with Brown in the 1970s but never embarked on another major tour with him after the 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*, 164.

<sup>19</sup> Griffin interview.

would sometimes perform a gospel song after the quintet's thirty-minute set in order to conceptually and musically transition into the "secular" portion of the show.<sup>20</sup>

In 1979, after several decades of personal and professional involvement with gospel music and musicians, Brown converted, was baptized, and became a church member at St. Peter's Baptist church in Williston-Elko, South Carolina. Brown experienced this "rebirth," as he termed it, at a "tiny rural church" approximately forty miles from Augusta.<sup>21</sup> A few weeks after his conversion, Brown was interviewed by Augusta's black newspaper for an article about his newfound religious sensibilities. He stated that this "great awakening" constituted the "high point" of his life to date.<sup>22</sup> Brown explained to the journalist the results of his conversion: He now sang in the church choir, was trying to help its members improve vocally, and was "hurt" by hearing profanity.<sup>23</sup> Brown clarified that although he had always considered himself a Christian, he had decided only recently to attend a church regularly and support it financially.

Several years later, when describing his conversion in his autobiography, Brown implied that although it was possible to sing and enjoy gospel music without sincere Christian faith, such actions rang hollow and constituted merely "going through the motions": "I'd sung gospel all my life. Gospel saved me in prison and got me out. Over the years I presented a lot of gospel acts on my shows, too, but somehow, I guess, I'd just been going through the motions lately. . . . Leon [Austin] got me thinking about all that . . . [so] I rededicated myself to God. In a little country church near where I was born, I was rebaptized. I'd been baptized when I was a little boy, but I wasn't as serious then as when I went on my own as an adult. Eventually I just let go and put things in His hands."<sup>24</sup>

During a 1992 interview on the *Parade of Quartets*, Brown referred to the rebaptism as the time that "Christ got into my life and made a difference." Echoing the words of his autobiography, Brown's mention of his conversion in the context of an interview on a gospel music television show obliquely linked his religious crisis with a renewal of his participation in gospel music. In 1985 the *Augusta News-Review* printed a photograph of Brown receiving communion from the Rev. Al Sharpton after his 1979 conversion.<sup>25</sup> The picture, part of a retrospective "Remember When" section commemorating the newspaper's final edition, was captioned, "Remember When James Brown Was Converted?" The fact that the event was referenced several

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; J. Carter interview.

<sup>21</sup> Millender, "James Brown Is Baptized," 1. In late 1979, Brown was also filming the role of a charismatic black preacher in *Blues Brothers*. The role required Brown to preach a truncated sermon and sing an exaggerated shout-tempo arrangement of "The Old Landmark," backed by James Cleveland's choir. Brown's conversance with the rhetorical characteristics of black preaching traditions echoes even through his lampoonish onscreen antics. Although it is uncertain whether his conversion experience was related to his film role, the timing of the events seems worth mentioning here because they occurred during the same time span in late 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*, 252. Brown attributed his conversion partially to religious conversations with his childhood friend Leon Austin, an Augusta R&B and gospel musician.

<sup>25</sup> Mallory Millender, "Remember When?" *Augusta News Review*, 16 March 1985, 1–2.

times over a span of years in two local black media outlets suggests that Brown's spiritual journey excited some level of public attention in his hometown.

These scattered pieces of evidence spanning the years from Brown's childhood to his public re-engagement with organized Christianity in 1979 constitute an important conceptual thread woven throughout his life and career. Musically, artistically, professionally, and personally, in various phases of his life, Brown maintained either tenuous or tight connections with gospel music and with various church congregations. As Brown began to spend more time in Augusta in the 1980s and 1990s than in previous decades, he became more deeply involved with the gospel music community in that city.

### Brown's Social Relationships with Augusta Gospel Musicians, 1980s–2006

Brown's social relationships with several Augusta gospel artists in the 1980s through the early 2000s gave him the chance to enact the unusual role of consumer and fan. The first and most significant of these relationships was with the Swanee Quintet, the gospel group Brown had met in the late 1940s and toured with in the 1960s. Although the group stopped touring with Brown in the late 1960s, the quintet's relationship with Brown continued to thrive in local contexts in subsequent decades. For example, Brown usually attended the quintet's annual anniversary concert, which occurred in October at a large Augusta civic auditorium, and he was often interviewed about the concert by the *Augusta Chronicle*. From 1991 to 2006, Brown sponsored a turkey giveaway on Thanksgiving Day to benefit Augusta's underprivileged citizens (Figure 1). The Swanee Quintet performed gospel music at this event every year, even singing on the rare occasions that Brown was unable to attend.<sup>26</sup> In the early 1990s, Brown once performed gospel music on *Parade of Quartets* with Percy Griffin. (Other members of the quintet were absent from the television studio that day).

Despite his declining health in late 2006, Brown was still involved in the quintet's activities. In September 2006, Brown described the quintet's annual anniversary to the *Augusta Chronicle* as a time "when old acquaintances come together." He hoped "everybody [would come] out [to the group's anniversary], and . . . have a very good, good time and just enjoy it and rejoice in each other and rejoice in the Lord."<sup>27</sup> Several weeks later, when Griffin announced his impending retirement, Brown tried to dissuade him, telling the *Augusta Chronicle* that "we hope [Griffin] changes his mind some day and comes back [to the quintet]."<sup>28</sup> In November

<sup>26</sup> Samantha C. McKeive, "Many Show Up for Free Turkey: Event Lets Brown Reunite with Friends," *Augusta Chronicle*, 22 November 2004, <http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2004/11/23/met.435281.shtml>; Dena Levitz, "Sharpton Stands in for James Brown," *Augusta Chronicle*, 25 November 2004, <http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2003/11/26/met.395627.shtml>.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Norton, "Percy Griffin, through the Years: Singer Looks Back on His Career in Music with Swanee Quintet," *Augusta Chronicle*, 30 September 2006, <http://old.chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/09/30/rel.98674.shtml>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; Griffin interview.



**Figure 1.** James Brown and Percy Griffin at Brown's annual Thanksgiving turkey giveaway, Augusta (Photo credits: Annette Drowlette/*Augusta Chronicle*).

2006, Brown mentioned to Griffin ideas for album repertoire that would “put [the quintet] on top of the world.”<sup>29</sup> He died a few weeks later.

After Brown's death, the quintet memorialized him publicly through musical performance, public discourse, and artifacts, beginning with their performance of “Dr. Jesus” at Brown's Augusta funeral. At the two quintet anniversary programs I attended after Brown's death in October 2007 and 2008, Griffin mentioned Brown's support of the quintet several times from the stage, and memorabilia documenting the quintet's role in Brown's funeral was sold in the lobby. In May 2008, the quintet performed at the Payback James Brown Festival in Augusta, the town's first civic event that posthumously honored Brown.<sup>30</sup> The group opened the festival with an hour of gospel music, just as they did while on tour with Brown more than thirty years earlier. Forty-five sweaty minutes into the set, Griffin asked those of us in the audience “if it's all right if we sing some of those old Swanee Quintet songs for y'all.” Following the audience's enthusiastic response, he added, “Y'all don't know how hard it was back then for James Brown and the Swanee Quintet, but God made a way for us.”<sup>31</sup>

After this verbal cue, the guitars and keyboard that usually accompanied Griffin's stage patter ceased their restless humming and tuning, and the bass drum began

<sup>29</sup> Griffin interview.

<sup>30</sup> The Swanee Quintet was followed by secular artists such as the Modern Skirts, the Doobie Brothers, and Branford Marsalis. Held on 3 May 2008 at the outdoor Commons in downtown Augusta, the event coincided with the opening of a three-year James Brown exhibit at the Augusta History Museum.

<sup>31</sup> Author's transcription of performer's onstage remarks during the Payback James Brown Festival, 30 May 2008, Augusta.



to beat a slow 4/4 dirge. The deep thud rolled across the trampled brown grass of the Augusta Commons, silencing the audience. For the only time during their performance that day, the quintet sang in a cappella four-part harmony over the drumbeat, an anachronistic style reminiscent of mid-century gospel quartet singing. The song they performed, "How I Got Over," has been a central part of the black gospel canon since the 1940s. The refrain, trumpeting victorious arrival after a hard journey, is notable even in a genre marked by triumphalism: "You know, my soul looks back and wonders how I got over." The quintet's choice of an archaic arrangement of a traditional gospel song to memorialize its relationship with Brown hinted richly at Brown's complex interactions with his hometown's gospel music tradition.

Although the Swanee Quintet resolutely performed only sacred music, Brown's friends and local gospel artists Flo Carter and Leon Austin were more similar to Brown in their willingness to perform both sacred and secular music simultaneously in their careers. Flo Carter, an Augusta native and longtime *Parade of Quartets* performer, enjoyed a close musical and social relationship with Brown. Although she is primarily identified as a Southern Gospel artist, like Brown she has sung sacred and secular music throughout her long career. In the 1950s, she sang sacred and secular songs on *Today in Dixie*, an Augusta television variety show she hosted. From 1956 to 1958 she sang rock 'n' roll at Augusta's Bon Air Hotel with her band and recorded a pop album. For the past twenty-five years, she and her family have performed gospel music monthly on the *Parade of Quartets*. She has also made gospel recordings and often performs gospel music in Augusta's black and white churches and at civic events. In the 1980s and 1990s, she and Brown often performed both gospel and secular music at local events, sometimes singing duets. Carter's memories of Brown extend from the professional (he admired her family's performances on *Parade of Quartets*) to the personal (he once crooned "As Time Goes By" to Carter and her husband when he ran into them during their anniversary dinner at a restaurant). She described Brown to me as "deeply spiritual," an outstanding interpreter of gospel music, and an avid supporter of local gospel artists.<sup>32</sup>

Leon Austin, an Augusta gospel and R&B musician and Brown's childhood friend, also remained close to the singer in his final years. Their relationship centered on music, beginning with Austin's teaching Brown to play the piano and sing certain gospel songs in the 1940s. Austin eventually became a respected musician, touring with notable gospel artists such as James Cleveland and The Caravans in the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> About the same time, Austin and Brown collaborated on secular musical endeavors: Austin and his R&B group, Leon and the Buicks, occasionally opened shows for Brown, and he recorded solo repertoire such as "I'm a Man," "Real Woman," and "Georgia Peach" as part of the James Brown Enterprise Production Company.<sup>34</sup> In the 1980s, Austin continued his local gospel career, playing the organ on *Parade*

<sup>32</sup> Author's interviews with Flo Carter, 13 and 17 September 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Don Rhodes, "Leon Austin, Longtime Associate of James Brown, Dies at 74," *Augusta Chronicle*, 12 June 2008, <http://augustachronicle.com>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 2.** Northeast Augusta chapter of the Gospel Music Association of America, Inc., cleans up Brown's childhood neighborhood (Photo credits: Todd Bennett/*Augusta Chronicle*).

of *Quartets* for most of that decade.<sup>35</sup> Brown often publicly credited Austin with having a great deal of religious and musical influence over him. In a joint interview with Austin in a 1992 *Parade of Quartets* episode, he described Austin as “so talented; he’s sanctified and got a ‘religion’ feel to him.”<sup>36</sup>

In addition to evidence that Brown maintained friendships with several local gospel artists, other anecdotes confirm the star’s social involvement with Augusta’s gospel tradition. In the 1990s, *Parade of Quartets* producers Karlton and Henry Howard were honored for their work in local gospel music with an appreciation ceremony at Mount Calvary Baptist Church. Brown surprised them by appearing at the church with gifts of \$500 engraved watches.<sup>37</sup> Brown’s contributions to Augusta’s gospel community were formally ratified in 1999 when the North East [sic] Augusta chapter of the Gospel Music Association of America, Inc., sponsored a beautification project of Brown’s old neighborhood (Figure 2). The predominantly black group claimed that “the reason we chose [James Brown Boulevard] . . . is that a lot of things James Brown has done have gone unnoticed. Not by the Lord, and not by us.”<sup>38</sup> Far from being a distant celebrity to Augusta’s gospel musicians in the

<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview with Karlton Howard, 7 September 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*; interview with Brown on *Parade of Quartets*, 26 May 1992; Sylvia Cooper, “Local Musicians Mourn Loss,” *Augusta Chronicle*, 27 December 2006, <http://old.chronicle.augusta.com/stories/122706/met.110128.shtml>.

<sup>37</sup> Howard interview, 7 September 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Norton, “Groups Want to Keep the Streets, Spirits of City Clean and Beautiful,” *Augusta Chronicle*, 20 March 1999, <http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/1999/03/20/ent.256725.shtml>.

1980s and 1990s, Brown was a well-known figure who enthusiastically supported their musical efforts.

### James Brown and *Parade of Quartets*

Brown's support of, and participation in, local gospel music later in life included frequently viewing and occasionally appearing on the *Parade of Quartets* (POQ). The POQ has played a major role in the religious, musical, and political life of Augusta's African American population since 1955.<sup>39</sup> Brown's performances on the Sunday morning program during the 1980s and 1990s were viewed by a largely African American audience with strong connections to various predominantly black churches in Augusta, particularly Baptist churches. In fact, many African American viewers consider the program to be either a precursor to, or a replacement for, attending Sunday morning church services, a perception prevalent among viewers who are sick and shut-in, hospitalized, imprisoned, or working night shifts.<sup>40</sup> When Brown sang and spoke on the program, he was broadcasting to an overwhelmingly religious and overwhelmingly African American audience that perceived the program as a mediator of authentic religious content and rituals.<sup>41</sup> Surviving footage of Brown's appearances, therefore, reveals significant aspects of how he presented himself to Augusta's black church community.

Flo Carter recalled that shortly before Brown's death "he frequently watched the *Parade of Quartets* TV show that airs on WJBF on Sunday mornings that I and my family sing on, and he came to sing on the show quite a few times. The host, Henry Howard, thought the world of him."<sup>42</sup> According to current producer and host Karlton Howard, Brown sang or granted interviews on the program approximately four or five times from the early 1980s until his death.<sup>43</sup> Footage of only three of these episodes appears to have survived, all dating from the early 1990s.<sup>44</sup> During his POQ interviews, Brown discussed the need for African American role models for troubled youth, the unrealized artistic and economic potential of Augusta's black population, his Christian faith, memories of segregated Augusta, and the talent of Augusta's gospel musicians. Brown was childhood friends with Henry Howard, and the interviews often reflected their shared reminiscences.

Brown's musical performances on the program included spirituals such as "Old Ship of Zion," funk-influenced gospel numbers such as "When That Evening Sun Goes Down," nineteenth-century Protestant hymns such as E. F. Blandy's "Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow," and a gospelized rendition of the Tin Pan Alley

<sup>39</sup> Allen, "When the Praises Go Up" and "A Mighty Long Way."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Don Rhodes, "James Brown Was Deeply Spiritual," *Augusta Chronicle*, 30 December 2006, <http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2006/12/31/aik.110442.shtml>.

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Karlton Howard, 5 May 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Extant POQ footage featuring Brown was taped and broadcast on 26 May 1992, 16 May 1993, and an unspecified date in the early 1990s. The first two episodes are in the *Parade of Quartets* Collection in the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection in the University of Georgia Library. The undated footage from the early 1990s was shared with me by Joel Walker of The Brewsteraires.

standard “That Lucky Old Sun.” Occasionally Brown performed alone on the program, but more often he spontaneously sang with gospel musicians who were also performing on that day’s episode, most of whom hailed from the program’s viewing radius (western Georgia and eastern South Carolina). As some of the only extant footage of James Brown singing sacred music, all three surviving episodes yield rich insights into his relationship with sacred song and with Augusta’s gospel music community. These relatively unexplored dimensions of his public persona were particularly evident in one of his impromptu televised performances on the program.

One Sunday morning in the early 1990s, Brown surprised The Brewsteraires, a South Carolina gospel quartet, by appearing at the WJBF studios and requesting to sing with them on that day’s episode.<sup>45</sup> According to Joel Walker, lead singer of The Brewsteraires, the quartet sang nearly every weekend on the show in this period, and Brown claimed to be an ardent fan. Walker described how Brown approached them and suggested songs for that morning’s telecast:

[One] Sunday morning Henry Howard said, “Look . . . last Sunday James Brown was here . . . and he said he wouldn’t come down here anymore unless y’all would be here”—and sure enough, about two weeks later, we got a phone call and [Mr. Howard] said “Look, make sure you be at the television station ’cause he’s coming, and he wants y’all to be there. . . .” When we walked through the door, he just stopped [rehearsing] . . . like we was the celebrity. . . . [Brown] says he watches [us on *POQ*] every Sunday morning, which I didn’t believe him. . . . In about ten, fifteen minutes it was time for this program to come on; so he asked me did I know a certain song [“Old Ship of Zion”] and . . . we went right on air with him without even practicing the songs.<sup>46</sup>

During the episode, James Brown performed three sacred songs with The Brewsteraires: “Old Ship of Zion,” “Do You Know Him,” and “When That Evening Sun Goes Down,” all unrehearsed before the live television broadcast.

Brown’s slow sixteen-bar blues version of the spiritual “Old Ship of Zion” opens up a critical window into his sacred-secular negotiations and collaborative approach during gospel music performances. The song evokes deep cultural and historical resonance in African American Christian worship. The text sung by Brown and The Brewsteraires has its origins in the refrain of a popular spiritual dating from the mid-nineteenth century (and possibly earlier):

’Tis the old ship of Zion.  
 ’Tis the old ship of Zion.  
 ’Tis the old ship of Zion.  
 Get on board—get on board.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The Brewsteraires’ 2006 compilation DVD *The Brewsteraires: Yesterday, Today, Forever* contains footage of some of their *POQ* appearances in the 1990s, including the episode featuring Brown. Joel Walker stated that the episode with Brown dated from the early 1990s, and internal evidence from the footage confirms this estimate.

<sup>46</sup> Author’s telephone interview with Joel Walker, 25 August 2007.

<sup>47</sup> A rendition of “Old Ship of Zion,” observed in Cincinnati in 1850, marked one of the earliest historical documentations of a spiritual, according to Dena Epstein in *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977; reprint ed., 2003), 223. Erskine Peters has located three textual variants of “Old Ship of Zion,” attesting to the text’s popularity in the spirituals repertoire, in *Lyrics of the Afro-American Spiritual: A Documentary Collection* (Westport,

During their performance, Brown and the group interpolated a fragment of new text into this refrain, instructing the listener to “get on board *if you want to see Jesus, and follow me.*” This small but significant alteration Christologizes the spiritual, rendering it theologically and culturally consistent with gospel music (the figure of Jesus Christ is much more prevalent in the lyrics of gospel music than in the spirituals). The verse Brown sang twice during the performance was a variant of the popular spiritual:

It has landed many a thousand.  
It has landed many a thousand.  
It has landed many a thousand.  
Get on board, get on board.

In the twentieth century, this spiritual took on new life as a notated composition in black hymnals including the *New National Baptist Hymnal* and the *African American Heritage Hymnal*.<sup>48</sup> Its cultural capital was extended to gospel music in 1950 when composer Thomas Dorsey wrote a gospel song titled “Old Ship of Zion.” Although his title recapitulated the spiritual’s central theme of a journey from danger to safety and drew on the cultural cachet of the older spiritual/hymn, Dorsey’s lyrics bore no resemblance to the spiritual’s text. Many white and black gospel artists have recorded some version of either the spiritual/hymn or Dorsey’s gospel composition, and black ministers such as C. L. Franklin have made recordings with their congregations in which they line out its text. Various incarnations of “Old Ship of Zion” thus have deep and old roots in black worship.

Aside from choosing such a culturally resonant sacred song, Brown historicized himself as part of the mid-twentieth-century black gospel tradition in his pre-performance remarks. Immediately before singing, he recited a litany of famous gospel singers, weaving himself into the list as a historical presence: “Well, you know everything starts right here, and *I remember* the Swanees from many years back, and go back to Julius Cheeks, go back to the Pilgrim Travelers—*I can do all those songs.* . . . Oh, Archie Brownlee was *my all-time.* And then . . . Clarence Fountain, and then Brother Joe May, and Reverend C. L. Franklin—so *we go way back together*” (author’s emphasis).

Three of the performers Brown named sang the lead part in popular black gospel quartets of the mid-twentieth century. Julius Cheeks was associated with the Sensational Nightingales, Archie Brownlee with the Blind Boys of Mississippi, and Clarence Fountain with the Blind Boys of Alabama. Along with the other groups Brown named, these quartets were extremely popular during the commercial peak of the quartet movement. All were known for their raw, “hard gospel” singing style and charismatic stage presence, and in the 1950s, Brown and the Famous Flames had been particularly influenced by the quintet and the Blind Boys.<sup>49</sup> By

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Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 185–86. All three variants share the same refrain, which is the text sung by Brown and The Brewsteraires.

<sup>48</sup> *New National Baptist Hymnal*, ed. R. H. Boyd (n.p.: Triad Publications/National Baptist Convention of the United States of America, 2001); *African American Heritage Hymnal*, ed. Robert Batastini (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> Hay, “Music Box Meets the Toccoa Band.”

highlighting his participation in, and consumption of, mid-century gospel quartet music, Brown was flashing his gospel music credentials to the largely church-based African American viewership of *POQ*.<sup>50</sup>

Having declared his intentions and qualifications to sing a culturally significant sacred song, Brown then interprets “Old Ship of Zion” as a slow sixteen-bar minor blues in which “sacred” and “secular” sonic signifiers intersect graphically. The blues influence is heard in the standard sixteen-bar harmonic progression and the deep pitch bending on an electric guitar, a sound reminiscent of the Delta blues guitar style after it was transformed through amplification in Chicago in the 1940s. Much like its role in the blues, the guitar here assumes the role of “respondent” in a call-and-response pattern, playing blues-based riffs at the ends of Brown’s vocal phrases. Other elements of the arrangement, however, evoke the soundscape of black sacred song, including the Hammond B-3 organ and the swinging 12/8 meter that is nearly inescapable in traditional (i.e., mid-twentieth century) gospel music.<sup>51</sup> Halfway through the performance, the background singers begin to repeat the phrase “old ship of Zion,” providing a textural foil against which the lead singers can improvise. The deployment of an ostinato by background singers has been common in gospel quartet arrangements since the 1940s. Cyclical musical and historical gestures signify on one another as Brown, who “made gospel music and its delivery style a permanent fixture in American popular music,”<sup>52</sup> once again bridges the gulf between the sacred and the secular—this time, in the context of singing gospel music.

Using multiple critical frameworks and analytical approaches, many scholars have engaged the porousness, nebulousness, or downright nonexistence of the stylistic and cultural boundaries between “sacred” and “secular” music in African American culture.<sup>53</sup> A recent addition to this discourse, and one particularly fruitful in interpreting these contested dimensions of Brown’s performance of “Old Ship of Zion,” is Teresa Reed’s *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*. Reed documents the fluctuating notions of “sacred” and “secular” throughout several epochs of twentieth-century African American culture. She argues that the meaning

<sup>50</sup> For the *Parade of Quartets*’ viewing demographics, see Allen, “A Mighty Long Way.”

<sup>51</sup> Maultsby discusses the ubiquity of the 12/8 meter and triplet pattern in gospel music in “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> This issue forms one of the central inquiries in Samuel Floyd’s *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), in which the author names the ring shout as the foundational musical and cultural impulse underlying sacred and secular black music. Pointing to the spirituals and the blues as early incarnations of the “ring” impulse, Floyd argues that a binary division of “sacred and secular” cultural expressions was unknown in the worldview of Africans enslaved in the U.S. South. Several years later, Guthrie Ramsey focused his discussion of sacred-secular relationships on the ubiquitous manifestation of the “blues muse” in twentieth-century black music. In *Race Music*, Ramsey problematizes the complex intersection of sacred and secular modes of black music making in the twentieth century without arguing for a complete elision of these boundaries. The issue of sacred-secular exchanges within the particular genre of gospel music has also been discussed by Michael Harris in *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Jerma Jackson in *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), and Portia Maultsby in “The Impact of Gospel Music.”

of these terms for black audiences and performers has been historically contingent, not static, and was in a state of unprecedented fluidity in the era in which Brown and other soul singers came of age:

The 1950s was a highly volatile period, not only of social and political transition, but also of generational tension. . . . James Brown, for example, wedded church flavor to secular lyrics to such an extent that regardless of a song's message, the gospel ethos essentially remained intact. . . . Before the 1950s, the lines between God and the Devil were so dogmatically (if not clearly) drawn that religious consumers were never expected to patronize secular music. By the 1950s, however, the tide had clearly changed, a fact which suggests dramatically revised notions of good and evil where black music was concerned.<sup>54</sup>

According to Reed, the black popular music emerging from that generation, embodied by Brown, Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles, showed "a new willingness on the part of blacks to display the fusion of their sacred and secular identities without compromise."<sup>55</sup>

Brown's rendition of "Old Ship of Zion" was a sonic representation of exactly the sort of "identity fusion" that he forged in the popular music industry of the 1950s. By the standards of contemporary gospel music in the early 1990s, when this episode was taped at the WJBF studios, Brown's performance of "Old Ship" was decidedly anachronistic; its harmonies, instrumentation, and arrangement reincarnated the style of R&B ballads of the late 1950s. This publicly televised recapitulation of 1950s-style rhythm and blues (sung with a sacred text) recalled the transgressive music making of the Famous Flames, the genre-bending vocal group with whom Brown sang in the early 1950s. Brown's performance of "Old Ship of Zion" in the 1990s reified for the viewer the shifting of mid-twentieth-century perspectives on the categories of the sacred and the secular in black music. As he wails the text of a spiritual over the sixteen-bar blues changes, he also concretizes theologian James Cone's assertion that the blues, which Cone described as "secular spirituals," can convey existential hope.<sup>56</sup> In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Cone theorizes that the interdependence of the two genres lies at the heart of the musical, theological, and philosophical responses of African Americans to radical oppression.<sup>57</sup> Cone

<sup>54</sup> Reed, *The Sacred Profane*, 103–4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>56</sup> James Cone, Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary and ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is best known in American religious history for forging a distinctive "black liberation theology." His theory is part of a broader network of liberation theologies that seek to address political and economic oppression on Biblical terms. The core of black liberation theology is Cone's assertion that the Christian gospel, revealed in the Bible, aims at freeing humanity from political, economic, and social oppression. For Cone, this interpretation of Christianity had particular and empowering relevance for African Americans. The theory enabled a new model of critical engagement between African American experiences of suffering and Christianity by making the Christian gospel message relevant to the tangible, felt experience of many African Americans. Cone propounded the theory in his 1969 and 1970 books *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997 reprint ed.) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990 reprint ed.) and expanded on it in later works, often drawing on black cultural traditions (including music) as an integral part of his theological thought. Cone's work has heavily influenced both academic thought and the preaching of many ministers in historically black denominations.

<sup>57</sup> James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 97–128.

ultimately argues for recognition of the sacred amid the secular, whereas Teresa Reed's work often emphasizes the inverse of this relationship. Although both of these scholars argue for a *theoretical* collapse of the categories of the sacred and the secular in black song in certain historical epochs, Brown's "gospel blues" eloquently explodes these boundaries in *practice*—just as he did throughout his career when he helped forge R&B, soul, and funk using the gospel ethos as a stylistic foundation.

The performance of "Old Ship of Zion" also provides a rare insight into Brown's collaborative behavior in a noncommercial musical setting. The Brewsteraires' Joel Walker recalls that Brown was insistent that the two men alternate singing lead on "Old Ship": "Well, you know, it was just amazing, you know! Because . . . we started singing the song, and he would cue us when to come in, and all of a sudden, he reached in the background and caught me by the hand—you can see it on the tape—and pulled me up to take lead and he sung background. . . . I had James Brown singing backup for me."<sup>58</sup> At the moment in the footage that Walker described, Brown audibly sings, "Come on, young brother; come talk to me a little bit" as he coaxes Walker to the forefront of the television set. Later, when Brown wants The Brewsteraires to begin singing the ostinato, he sings the encouraging cue, "Now Brewsteraires, I want you to help me right here while I say it, one more time." Brown behaved similarly in other extant *POQ* footage, cheerfully encouraging other musicians to sing lead during a song, to join on a chorus, or to contribute an instrumental solo.

Brown's gentle sonic cues and insistence on egalitarian participation in the context of gospel music performance contrasts with his notorious domination of commercial recording sessions, rehearsals, and concerts.<sup>59</sup> The absence of tyrannical musical behavior in *POQ* footage suggests that in singing noncommercial sacred music, Brown was free of the egotism, fear, and competitiveness that characterized his secular, commercial collaborations. This view is supported poignantly by footage of Brown on *POQ* in the early 1990s in which he insisted that the program host address him as "James" rather than "Mr. Brown." In the clip, Brown laughs with visible relief as he explains that it had been too long since he had been called "James." (Throughout his career, Brown vehemently insisted he be addressed as "Mr. Brown" by reporters and other musicians.) He also calls the *POQ* host "Brother Howard" rather than "Mr. Howard." (Brown nearly always called even longtime band members "Mr.") With neither finances nor professional reputation at stake in

<sup>58</sup> Walker, interview, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Reports of Brown's dictatorial interactions with band members can be found in Philip Gourevitch's 2002 profile of Brown in the *New Yorker*, 29 July 2002, 46–62, and 64–65; Jimmy Leslie's 2005 interview with Fred Thomas, Ray Brundidge, and Bootsy Collins, "Made Men: Fred Thomas, Ray Brundidge, and Bootsy Collins with James Brown and the Hardest Working Man in Show Business," in *Bass Player*, March 2005, 30–34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44; Jonathan Lethem's 2006 article on Brown and his bandmates, "Being James Brown: The Godfather of Soul," in *Rolling Stone*, 29 June 2006, 52–62, 64, 80–81 (in which Lethem observed Brown's recording sessions in Augusta); and Fred Wesley's 2002 autobiography, *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). Brown's insistence on artistic control and his demeaning behavior and remarks caused key performers such as bassist Bootsy Collins and trombonist/arranger Fred Wesley to sever ties with Brown for years at a time.



his televised Augusta gospel performances, Brown was able to cede the social and artistic control that marked his commercial endeavors.

### Conclusion: The “Real” James Brown

Brown’s complex personal and musical relationship with gospel music was lived out on his own terms for more than six decades, with its later stages occurring primarily in the context of his hometown gospel tradition. Grounding Brown as a participant in Augusta’s sacred song tradition creates a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complicated musical trajectory of one of the primary innovators of global popular music. It is tempting to think of Brown’s musical journey as a relentless, teleological march through gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, and even hip-hop via sampling. In reality, however, his musical path was far more recursive and fluid, marked by a continuous relationship with gospel music that remained unconfined by strict stylistic, social, or historical boundaries.

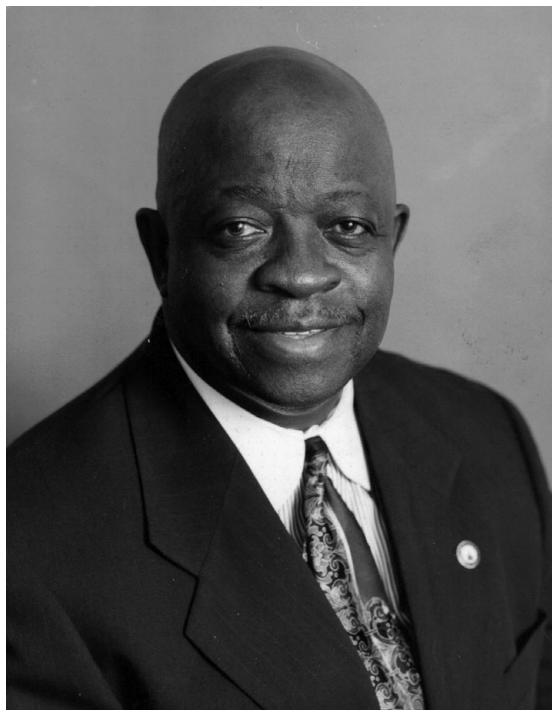
Further complicating Brown’s participation in gospel music and the church in his last two decades is the fact that his notorious legal problems persisted throughout these years. Brown was imprisoned from December 1988 to February 1991 for leading police on a high-speed chase in Georgia and South Carolina.<sup>60</sup> The tensions between Brown’s public professions of Christianity and this period of incarceration were highlighted in a 1992 *Parade of Quartets* episode, when Henry Howard (Figure 3) stated that “I just want say to all our viewers out there, that this is the real James Brown right here. And I say that because I know this man—I’ve known this man all my life—and this is the real James Brown.” Later in the episode, immediately before Brown performed, Howard stated, “You know . . . regardless of what you’ve seen of a person down through the years, God knows his heart. . . . Today is going to prove to many of you out there, regardless of what many of you out there feel, that he is a man, a man of wisdom of faith, a man of love. . . . Mr. Brown, do it the way you wanna do it.” Despite Howard’s 1992 remarks, apparently meant to convince skeptical viewers of the sincerity of Brown’s faith, in December 1994, Brown was arrested for domestic assault and battery.<sup>61</sup> The personal and public identity of the “real James Brown” was once again unclear.

The complex notion of a “real James Brown” was also articulated by Brown in his 1986 autobiography. In the book’s final words, Brown summarized his keen awareness of the many dimensions of his constructed identity—public, private, artificial, and authentic:

Where I grew up there was no way out, no avenue of escape, so you had to make a way. Mine was to create JAMES BROWN. God made me but . . . I created the myth. I’ve tried to fulfill it. But I’ve always tried to remember that there’s JAMES BROWN the myth and James Brown

<sup>60</sup> Nelson George and Alan Leeds, eds., *The James Brown Reader: Fifty Years of Writing about the Godfather of Soul* (New York: Penguin, 2008), xxviii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix. National press coverage of Brown’s legal troubles from the late 1960s until his death in 2006 was recently compiled by Nelson and Leeds in their *James Brown Reader*. The *Augusta Chronicle* ran local features, editorials, and letters to the editor regarding Brown’s encounters with Georgia and South Carolina police during these decades, although no items from the *Chronicle* were included in Nelson and Leeds’ reader.



**Figure 3.** Henry Howard (Photo credit: Howard family).

the man. The people own JAMES BROWN. That belongs to them. The minute I say “I’m JAMES BROWN” and believe it, then it will be the end of James Brown. I’m James Brown.<sup>62</sup>

In the last few decades of his life, Brown mediated several dimensions of this man-myth identity through social relationships with Augusta’s gospel musicians and local sacred song performances. These years, too, were part of the legacy of the “real James Brown,” the performer who always managed to simultaneously praise the Lord and sing the blues.

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<sup>62</sup> Brown and Tucker, *Godfather of Soul*, 267.

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