

Ruth Brown

Ruth Brown (born **Ruth Weston**, [January 12, 1928](#)^[1] in [Portsmouth, Virginia](#) - [November 17, 2006](#)) was a [singer](#) who brought a [popular music](#) style to [rhythm and blues](#) in a series of hit songs for [Atlantic Records](#) in the 1950s.

Early life

Ruth Brown's father was a [dockhand](#) who directed the local [church choir](#), but the young Ruth showed more of an interest in singing at [USO](#) shows and [nightclubs](#). In 1945, Brown ran away from her home in Portsmouth along with a [trumpeter](#), [Jimmy Brown](#), whom she soon married, to sing in bars and clubs. She then spent a month with [Lucky Millinder](#)'s orchestra, but was fired after she brought drinks to the band for free, and was left stranded in [Washington, D.C.](#)

Career

[Blanche Calloway](#), [Cab Calloway](#)'s sister, also a bandleader, arranged a gig for Brown at a Washington [nightclub](#) called Crystal Caverns and soon became her manager. [Willis Conover](#), a local [DJ](#), caught her act and recommended her to Atlantic Records bosses, [Ahmet Ertegun](#) and [Herb Abramson](#). Brown was unable to audition as planned though, because of a serious car accident that resulted in a nine-month hospital visit. In 1948, however, Ertegun and Abramson drove to Washington from [New York City](#) to hear her sing in the club. Although her repertoire was mostly popular ballads, Ertegun convinced her to switch to rhythm and blues. His productions for her, however, retained her "pop" style, with clean, fresh arrangements and the singing spot on the beat with little of the usual blues singer's embroidery.

In her first audition, in 1949, she sang "So Long", which ended up becoming a hit. This was followed by [Teardrops from My Eyes](#) in 1950. Written by [Rudy Toombs](#), it was the first upbeat major hit for Ruth Brown, establishing her as an important figure in R&B. Recorded for [Atlantic Records](#) in New York City in September 1950, and released in October, it was on [Billboard](#)'s [List of number-one R&B hits \(United States\)](#) for 11 weeks. The huge hit earned her the nickname "Miss Rhythm" and within a few months Ruth Brown became the acknowledged queen of R&B.^[2]

She followed up this hit with "I'll Wait for You" (1951), "I Know" (1951), "5-10-15 Hours" (1953), "(Mama) He Treats Your Daughter Mean" (1953), "Oh What a Dream" (1954), "Mambo Baby" (1954) and "Don't Deceive Me" (1960). She also became known as **Little Miss Rhythm** and **the girl with the teardrop in her voice**. In all, she was on the R&B [charts](#) for 149 weeks from 1949 to 1955, with 16 top 10 blues records including 5 number ones, and became Atlantic's most popular artist, earning Atlantic records the proper name of "The House that Ruth Built."



Cover of 1993 album

Later life

During the 1960s, Brown faded from public view to become a housewife and mother, and only returned to music in [1975](#) at the urging of [Redd Foxx](#), followed by a series of comedic acting gigs, including a role in [sitcom *Hello, Larry*](#) and the [John Waters](#) film *Hairspray*, as well as earning a [Tony Award](#) for her [Broadway](#) performance of *Black and Blue* and a [Grammy award](#) for her album *Blues on Broadway*, featuring hits from the show.

Brown's fight for musicians' rights and [royalties](#) in 1987 led to the founding of the [Rhythm and Blues Foundation](#). She was inducted as a Pioneer Award recipient in its first year, 1989. In [1993](#), she was inducted into the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#), as **The Queen Mother of the Blues**.

According to an article in JazzImprov Magazine by Stephen Thanabalan, she has become an iconic symbol to many black women for later generations, where she is also a favorite artist and inspiration for later blues artists such as [Bonnie Raitt](#). Brown recorded and sang along with fellow rhythm and blues performer [Charles Brown](#), a member of the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#), and toured with Raitt on Raitt's tour in the late 1990s, "*Road Tested*".

In [2006](#), [Hummer](#) used her song "[This Little Girl's Gone Rockin'](#)" in one of their [H3](#) commercials.

Her nephew is the legendary rapper [Rakim](#).

Death

Ruth Brown passed away in Las Vegas on November 17, 2006, at the age of 78 from complications following a heart attack and stroke she suffered after surgery in October 2006.