

# JEWEL BROWN:

*“There’s a light  
in my life  
shining over me”*

*By Dina Kesbeh*

All photos courtesy of Eddie Stout  
and Dialtone Records.



*“I was nine years old . . . I prayed  
and I asked the Lord, ‘Please  
show me, direct me in a way to be  
able to help my mom and dad.’”<sup>1</sup>*

Most kids that age today worry about what features the next iPhone will have, but not Jewel Brown. She had aspirations and aimed high to succeed. She wanted to become a singer, and so she did.

Jewel Brown was born on August 30, 1937, in Houston’s Jeff Davis Hospital. Her family lived in Third Ward in a shotgun house, which she described as “loads of fun and multi-loads of love.” Her father worked long hours but still made time to play with his six children when he came home. Brown’s mother did sewing for the neighbors. She loved to garden and helped her husband with their vegetable garden where they grew the family’s food.

Brown attended Blackshire Elementary and remembers being caught by the assistant principal asleep at her desk. When he asked the class who she was, they all responded, “Jewel Brown.” In her dream, though, she had heard someone asking what she wanted to be when she grew up, so she woke up and exclaimed, “A singer!” The whole class laughed at her, but little did they know what the future held in store.



*A portrait of Jewel as a young woman on the mantel at her Third Ward home.*

Jewel joined the Rose Hill Baptist Church choir and performed at the age of nine at the Masonic Temple in Fourth Ward. That year she met Nat King Cole when he performed at Fifth Ward's Club Matinee, a defining event that helped her realize what she wanted to do with her life. At twelve years old, she sang at the Eldorado Ballroom. All of those who heard her soulful voice were astounded to learn her age; and from that moment on, the crowd identified her as a professional singer. At thirteen she sang with Lionel Hampton in the Auditorium, and sat on Bobby "Blue" Bland's knee to sing with him in Dickinson.

Brown had her first professional singing job at the Manhattan Club in Galveston. Her late brother, Theodore, who was called Thiddle, played in Henry Hays's band with Elmo Nixon. As Jewel stood in the doorway watching her brother and the rest of the band get ready to leave, her brother asked Henry if she could come with them. Henry said they did not have room, but when Thiddle offered to let her sit in his lap, Henry relented, adding that he could not pay her.

After Jewel sang with them during the show, Henry informed the band members, "The owner has said that we can have this gig six nights a week and the other band can have it one night a week if we can bring Jewel." After confirming that the Browns' mother approved, Henry accepted the job. The band agreed to pay Jewel a dollar a piece from their share to compensate her since she was responsible for their good fortune.

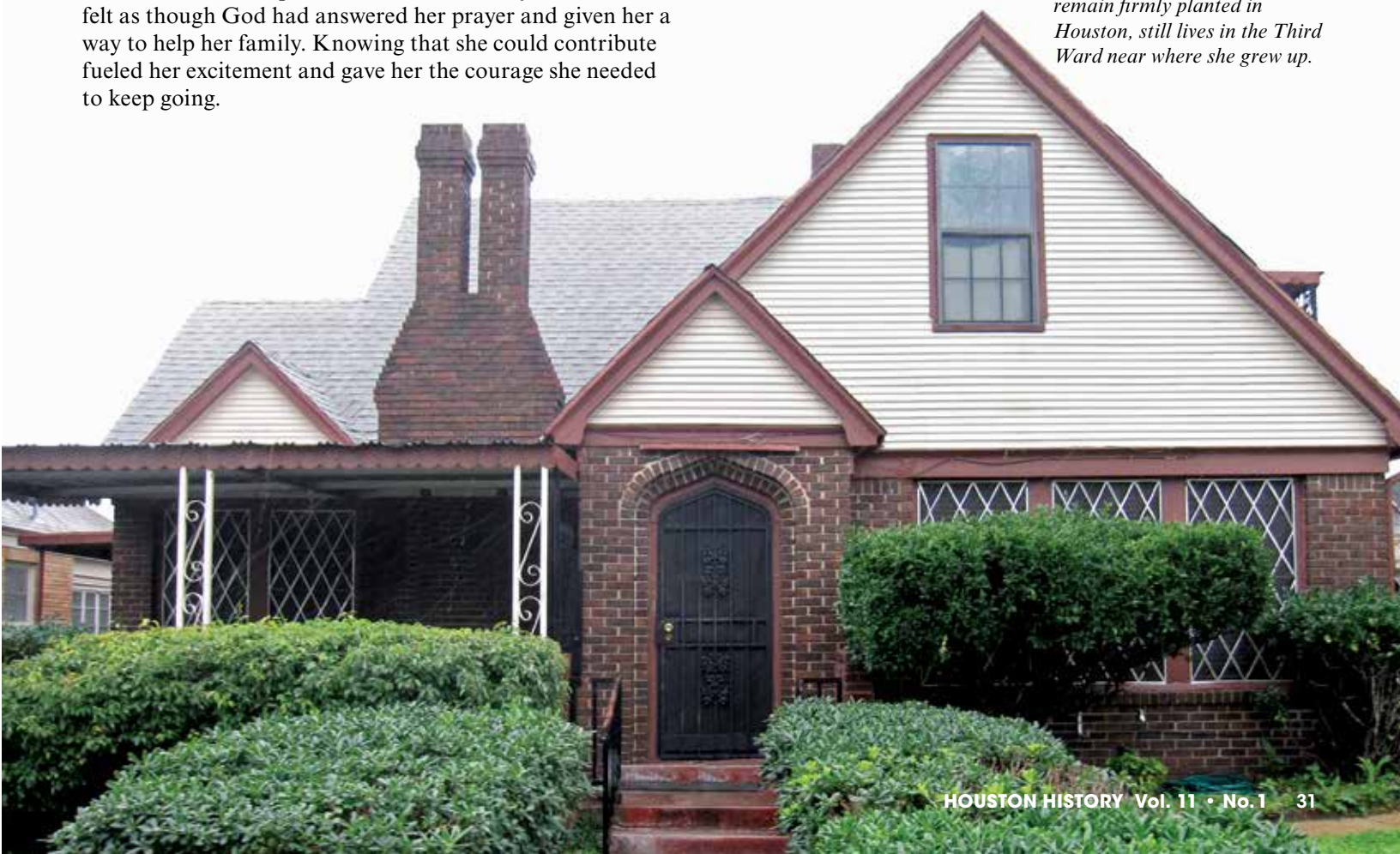
Jewel Brown became a hot commodity after her first appearance. Her talent helped her pocket five dollars here and ten dollars there from patrons' tips, making her eager to get home and show her parents how much money she made. She felt as though God had answered her prayer and given her a way to help her family. Knowing that she could contribute fueled her excitement and gave her the courage she needed to keep going.

In her teens, Brown went to Jack Yates High School, which the community referred to as Jack Yates University because of the quality of the teachers who "made sure you got it." She recalled one algebra teacher, who was a large woman, stepping on students' toes if they did not do the work, "It was funny but it still hurt. We didn't take it as a viscous thing. We took it as 'you better get your lesson or that woman would step on your toe.' It was just fun really." Today, she lamented, it would be considered abusive. She continued performing during high school but put school ahead of music until she graduated.

The singer grew up listening to jazz and blues, which originated in African American communities in the South. To many artists, blues became a form of expression. The heart and soul of blues music comes from within the artists. Standing on stage in front of the crowd with their eyes on her, Jewel seemed to wake the room almost effortlessly with her talent. Brown reminisced on the importance of Dowling Street in her Third Ward neighborhood and its history to those who valued the art of blues. Dowling represented the hot "night spot" where all kinds of entertainers shared their talent with the community, a local version of Harlem's Apollo Theater. Some of the hidden talent discovered in Houston included Illinois Jacquet, Arnette Cobb, and Hubert Laws (see Andrew Vodhin's article on jazz in this issue).

On a trip with her family to visit her sister in California in 1957, the twenty-year-old Brown jammed with her sister's husband, who "blew saxophone," and his friend Louis Rivera, who played the piano. Rivera insisted that they

*Jewel Brown, whose roots remain firmly planted in Houston, still lives in the Third Ward near where she grew up.*







*Jewel Brown and Milton Hopkins performed in a "Centennial Celebration of Lightnin' Hopkins" at the Chicago Blues Festival in 2012.*

go to the club where he worked, and they headed to Club Pigalle on Figueroa Street in Los Angeles to continue jamming. Blues musician Earl Grant approached his boss at the club, Leroy Baskerville, about a job for Jewel. Without hesitation, he said, "Hire her." She accepted the unexpected job offer and soon watched her family head back to Houston without her.

Brown worked in Los Angeles for about a year before heading home to Houston. She had barely settled in before receiving a call to go to Dallas where she worked for Jack Ruby for over a year (yes, *the* Jack Ruby). At the same time, Tony Pappa, with the Associated Booking Corporation, was searching for a featured singer to perform alongside Louis Armstrong and his All Star Band. Pappa spoke to Joe Blazer who considered it important enough to fly from New York to see her show. The two men were deliberate in making a decision, but a good word from Brown's ex-husband caused the men to stop delaying and choose her.

Jewel remembered receiving the phone call and having just a few hours to get from Dallas to Houston to catch her flight. Driving back she had the "pedal to the metal" when a highway patrolman stopped her. She said, "I looked at that man with them big crocodile tears rolling out of my eyes letting him know I've got to get on this plane. He said, 'Ma'am

you go ahead on just be careful.' . . . I wish I knew him today if he was still living because he did me such a favor." She had a little help too from the skycaps at the airport who knew her from Club Ebony and led her through a short cut to the plane waiting for her on the tarmac. She went straight from the plane in New York to a bus for the first gig in Boston. "I didn't have time to think," she remembered. "I didn't have time to get afraid. I didn't have time for nothing. Just do it, do it, do it!" Brown and Armstrong toured together from 1961-1968 and collaborated on many songs, including their hit "Jerry."

Traveling around the world to Asia, Europe, South America, and Australia was great experience and kept Brown's career alive; but after her mother had a stroke, she made the decision to move back home to help her father. The headliner for a show called "Fillies de Soul" in Las Vegas, Brown told the producers that she had to leave. After all, her parents were her rock. She felt it was her duty to take care of them just as they took care of her as a young girl.

After Brown's mother passed, her father deeply mourned the loss of his wife, and Brown decided she could not go back on the road. She stayed with her father until he died. Over the years, she had done everything she could do for her parents and her son, at times selling insurance, taking



in sewing (trained by a designer who worked with Edith Head), and fixing hair. When Brown began receiving phone calls to tour Europe again, she said, “My mom passed, my dad passed. So there wasn’t anything for me to do but go on and live for myself and that’s what I do now. I take it all in stride.”

Today, Jewel Brown remains in the Houston community where she grew up. Although she travels to all parts of the globe, her heart remains in Houston. Her talent was born on the streets of Third Ward. Without it, she would not have her many memories nor would she have become the Jewel Brown who made everyone jump out of their seats with her soulful voice. Brown proudly explained, “Everything we had back in the day was an authentic pure thing. Illinois Jacquet, Arnette Cobb, that was purity. There’s still many people in the European countries that call them the purists because that’s what they like, they like authenticity. I guess that’s why I have more work because I don’t use gimmicks, falsettos, and all that kind of stuff. I’m just a flat foot floosey! Just belt out the real thing.”

Dina Kesbeh is an undergraduate student double majoring in print journalism and political science at the University of Houston.

*Jewel Brown visits with Roger Wood, author of Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues and Texas Zydeco.*

*Houston's Hermann Park*  
A Century of Community

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