James Joseph Brown was an American singer, songwriter, dancer, musician, record producer and bandleader. A progenitor of funk music and a major figure of 20th-century music dance, he is often referred to by the honorific nicknames "Godfather of Soul", "Mr. Dynamite", and "Soul Brother No. 1". Wikipedia

Born: May 3, 1933, Barnwell, SC

Died: December 25, 2006, Emory University Hospital Midtown, Atlanta, GA

Instruments: Vocals; keyboards; drums; harmonica; guitar

Spouse: Adrienne Rodriguez (m. 1984–1996), Deidre Jenkins (m. 1970–1981), Velma Warren (m. 1953–1969)

Children: Teddy Brown, James Joseph Brown II, Yamma Noyola Brown Lumar, Vernisha Brown, Deanna Brown Thomas, LaRonda Pettit, Daryl Brown, Larry Brown, Terry Brown,Lisa Brown

."James Brown was feeling good. Regally sprawled in the back of his limo, the vest of his well-cut black suit drawn tight over his barrel chest, he was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning. The date was June 5, 1997, and Brown was making a pilgrimage back to the old King Records building on Brewster Avenue in Evanston. The singer was still rebuilding a career derailed by the time he'd given the state of South Carolina (15 months in prison, 10 months on work-release) for his 1988 conviction on assault and weapons charges. But on this sunny late-spring day, all that was forgotten. Brown was basking in his happiest memories of King Records and Cincinnati.

King Records was where, in 1956, a Georgia sharecropper's son began to reinvent himself as Soul Brother No. 1, the Funkiest Man Alive, the Hardest Working Man in Show Business, the Godfather of Soul—JAAAAAAMES Brown! Working with—and sometimes against—King owner Syd Nathan, Brown had created an unprecedented body of work. King Records was where Brown's intense passion transmuted R&B into modern soul and where he almost single-handedly invented funk.

Now Brown was going back to where it all started, his first visit to the King site in almost 30 years. Dwight Tillery, a city councilman at the time, was spearheading an effort to transform the King Records building into a community center/recording studio/technical training facility. The plans were fluid at best, and the funding nonexistent. But to pump up interest (and donations), Tillery was bringing in the biggest gun imaginable.

The idea of Brown helping Cincinnati's inner-city kids wasn't new. The first time I met Brown—backstage between shows at Bogart's in the early '80s when I was music editor at The Cincinnati Post—he was having his "process" refreshed by his personal hairdresser, a wizened, motherly black woman who was hovering over him when I was admitted to the room. Brown, looking surreally comical with his hair in curlers, immediately revved into a 15-minute discourse about how wonderful Cincinnati was, how important King Records was to the career of "James Brown" (he referred to himself in the third person) and how "James Brown" wanted to give something back, to do something for the kids.

On the way to King records, the curlers were gone but the riff remained the same, delivered in the same trademark staccato, sandpaper-and-charcoal voice. I was the only journalist sharing the ride—an honor due, I'm sure, to the fact that I used my music column to beat the drum for Cincinnati's music heritage in general and King Records in particular. As we rode, Brown reminisced about his good old days with "Mr. Nathan" and talked about reviving King. It could be a place where he'd record more hits; a place where under-privileged kids could get a shot at the music business. James Brown was making a comeback; so could King, he believed.

As we pulled into the dead end street where Brewster Avenue overlooks I-71, Brown morphed into a kid himself. Shaking with excitement, he pressed his face against the limo's side window. "There she is! There she is!" he shouted, pointing at the weathered brown building.

He got out, discreetly deposited a wad of gum in the outstretched hand of one of his minions, and greeted a small crowd of media, politicians, and fans. ("Now that's the real sign of a superstar," I remember thinking, "your own personal gum handler.") Brown spoke just a few words but conveyed the excitement he felt on this historic occasion. Had his rose-colored glasses been less thick, however, he might have tempered his glee when he saw the weeds growing through the cracked sidewalks and the peeling, crap-brown paint covering the building's Spanish mission facade. If he noticed any of those things, they made no impression. Brown strode into 1540 Brewster as if it was 1968 inside.

His victorious grin dropped the moment he stepped into the shabby semi-darkness. There were no offices, studios, or anything else that had been King Records. The building that housed what many consider the 20th century's most important American independent record label was stripped to the bare brick walls; it was nothing but a dusty, rundown warehouse.

The tour only took a few minutes, but by the end Brown seemed to have aged a decade. Trailing behind him with a small troupe of photographers and reporters, I could see his shock deepen with every step. He practically raced up the rickety stairs to what once had been his personal office; it was empty, his massive "JB" monogrammed desk long ago junked. By the time he emerged back into the sunlight, the eternally upbeat music legend looked like a broken man.

"They destroyed it. They destroyed it. It's gone," he moaned, slipping back into his limo to avoid reporters. Then the Godfather collapsed onto his seat and did not look back.

TRUE, WHAT JAMES Brown was mourning was only a building. But Cincinnati currently faces a much more far-reaching and devastating cultural loss—the legacy of King Records, and with it our hard-earned status as one of the world's most important music cities.

In the years since the late music legend visited King, the city still has done almost nothing to acknowledge the label. There's not even a historic marker on Brewster Avenue. At a time when virtually everything ever recorded is available on CD or digital download, little of the music King released from 1943 to 1968 has been reissued in the United States. And most tragically, as our collective memories grow dimmer, we are daily losing King's most important non-renewable resources—the musicians, producers, engineers, and office workers who created the music and built the label. James Brown died in December 2006 at 73; in 2007, we lost Brown's co-vocalist and right-hand man Bobby Byrd, as well as Ron Lenhoff, who engineered many of Brown's hits. When the Cincy Blues Society paid tribute to King at its 2007 festival, few original King stars could be found; even fewer were in shape to perform.

Cities like Memphis, New Orleans, St. Louis, and even Cleveland have mined their musical heritage to create tourist attractions and brand themselves as historic music meccas. Can Cincinnati afford to landfill this piece of our past? Can we afford to ignore the good things our musical history says about us as a city? As recently as December, an article in The Columbus Dispatch focused on Cincinnati's repressive reputation, citing the 2001 riots and dredging up such golden oldies as the Mapplethorpe trial and Marge Schott's racist soundbites. King Records represents a very different Cincinnati, one where the mid-century creative class—dozens of young white and African-American musicians and technicians—worked together in one of the city's first integrated businesses, creating a musical and cultural revolution that still resonates.

If we ever needed to remember King, it's now. Only problem is, very few folks around here seem to know it happened.

IF YOU CARE about these kinds of things, it probably will not surprise you to hear that the legend of King Records has not gone unrecognized outside Cincinnati. Syd Nathan, the company's founder and owner, was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997. (Also inducted that year was Bootsy Collins, the city's most visible King supporter, who started working at the label in 1966 as a 15-year-old bass wunderkind.) In 2006, Nathan was also inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Association's Hall of Fame. He's the only non-performer enshrined in both halls—a tribute to the incredible musical diversity of King.

In more than 20 years covering music for The Post, The Cincinnati Enquirer, and The Commercial Appeal in Memphis, I've witnessed the resilient power of King firsthand. When I was interviewing Peter Frampton in April 2001, the British rock star was a brand-new Cincinnatian, having moved here the previous summer. Like nearly every other guitar hero of the 1960s and '70s, he'd teethed on Eric Clapton's early recordings, including "Hide Away," Clapton's first featured cut with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. Frampton knew "Hide Away" and even knew the original Freddie King version. But he didn't know it had been originally recorded for King's subsidiary label Federal in his new hometown. Asked to record that guitar showpiece with the original drummer—Cincinnatian Philip Paul—for Hidden Treasures, a benefit album for the Inclusion Network, Frampton jumped at the chance, happily donating his time.

In October 2007, I was at Ricky Skaggs's showcase at the International Bluegrass Music Association's annual gathering in Nashville, where the bluegrass phenom spent about five minutes extolling the great bluegrass records made at King. He spoke with feeling about how important the recordings of the Stanley Brothers and Reno & Smiley were to him, and recalled listening to King artist Wayne Raney broadcasting over WCKY when we he was a kid. After his homage to King, Skaggs and his Kentucky Thunder band tore through a pair of Stanley Brothers classics recorded for King—"How Mountain Girls Can Love" and "A Lonesome Night." Another King side cut by the Stanleys, "A Man of Constant Sorrow," was the model for the Grammy-winning version George Clooney lip-synched in the Coen Brothers film O Brother Where Art Thou?. Ralph Stanley was also on that 2000 soundtrack, winning the best male country vocal Grammy for his eerie "O Death."

That's an awfully big slice of the world's music—James Brown, the Stanley Brothers, Freddie King, Eric Clapton, Peter Frampton, Ricky Skaggs, Bootsy Collins—all linked to King Records. And yet Dwight Tillery's original idea—a museum and community center memorializing King—seems to have gone up in smoke. There are some true believers fighting to keep the King name alive. Radio host Lee Hay has been interviewing original King musicians and playing their old records on WVXU; Brian Powers, a reference librarian at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, is organizing a symposium and exhibition for the downtown branch in May to celebrate the label's 65th anniversary; and Collins, his wife, Patti, and several others—including Shake It Records' Darren Blase and Cincinnati State Development Director Elliott Ruther—formed Cincinnati USA Music Heritage Foundation late last year. The nonprofit group intends to raise awareness of our city's place in music history; one early idea includes an exhibit at a new downtown restaurant that Collins and restaurateur Jeff Ruby are talking about opening.

But that's not much, considering what our neighbor to the north has accomplished with far less history to work with. In Cleveland, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum has become part of the city's brand—the lens through which it promotes itself. "Had Cincinnati gotten its act together," says Hall president Terry Stewart, "it probably could have made a play for the Rock Hall."

THE MORE YOU know about music history, the more important King Records and Cincinnati become. In the 19th century, the same Ohio River that brought goods and commerce also brought fiddlers, banjo pickers, and blues guitarists. Meanwhile, the printing tradition of our German founders evolved into a huge music publishing industry around the turn of the 20th century. In 1894, Billboard magazine first rolled off the presses here, covering the burgeoning circus, minstrel show, and vaudeville circuits, and eventually growing into the bible of the recording industry.

In the 1920s, a Cincinnati-born performer, Mamie Smith, scored a hit with "Crazy Blues," becoming the first African-American to record a blues vocal, and New Orleans master musician Jelly Roll Morton came here to cut piano rolls for the Vocalstyle company on Sixth Street. In the 1930s, thanks to business-friendly Herbert Hoover, WLW had a 500,000-watt signal—carrying the sound of the Cincinnati music scene all over the nation. By World War II, WLW's Midwestern Hayride had become the Grand Ole Opry of the nation's midsection and debuted on the fledgling medium of television by 1951.

Stewart says that Cincinnati's fertile music scene in the middle of the 20th century compares favorably to what was going on in New Orleans and Memphis at the time. There were two different kinds of music bubbling up: the "hillbilly" records coming out of Appalachia and the "race music" of black America. At King Records, Stewart says, "Syd Nathan was in many ways putting those pieces together and cross-pollinating rhythm-and-blues and country-and-western."

That cross-pollination paved the way for a hybrid called rock and roll. Black and white have always been the primary colors of American music and nobody mixed them up like King. It was American independent labels that led the original rock revolution. The best known example is Sun Records in Memphis, the recording company that gave the world Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and many other first-generation rockers. But King predated Sun by almost a decade. When Elvis recorded "Good Rockin' Tonight" in 1954, he was covering Wynonie Harris's 1948 hit on King's R&B label, Federal.

“When you’ve got a label that had Wynonie Harris and James Brown and all those vocal groups and great rockabilly, you had the two sides of the coin,” says Stewart. He ticks off the great independent record labels of the 1940s and ’50s: “Modern, Atlantic, RPM, Imperial, Dot—you still don’t have the magnitude of what was coming out of Cincinnati.”

Darren Blase, co-owner of Shake It Records in Northside, puts it even more bluntly. King, he says, “is the egg and the seed of rock and roll.” He concedes the validity of Memphis’s claim to be the “Birthplace of Rock and Roll,” but says that King artists—people like rockabilly pianist Moon Mullican, blues shouter Wynonie Harris, and jump blues singer Roy Brown—inspired rock’s freshman class. “Take Moon Mullican away from Jerry Lee Lewis and take Wynonie Harris and Roy Brown away from Elvis Presley, and those guys wouldn’t have made the records that they made at Sun Records,” Blase says. Listen to them today, and you can hear where rock came from.

IN THE 1940s, Nathan, who was then a dry goods salesman, had been having success selling used records in his downtown store. Customers were mostly the newest Cincinnatians, working-class Southern blacks and whites drawn here by the good-paying factory jobs of the WWII boom. In 1943, Nathan decided to make his own records to fill that demand, and enlisted a couple of country singers from Midwestern Hayride, Grandpa Jones and Merle Travis. Renting a studio, he recorded them as “The Sheppard Brothers.” Those first King records didn’t sell, but Nathan knew he was on to something. In 1945, after raising funds from family and friends, he leased an old icehouse in Evanston and launched his label.

Nathan was a virtuoso businessman. His first masterstroke in opening King was the realization, derived from his days as a downtown shopkeeper, that there wasn’t that much difference between working-class whites and blacks. He was able to make the connection between down-home blues and down-home country and successfully cross-marketed songs he published in both genres to both markets. The second was his decision to create King as an entirely self-contained record company. The Brewster Avenue facility included studios, offices, pressing and mastering plants, printing presses for labels and album covers, an art department and photo studio, a music publishing company, and loading docks. Nathan had his own fleet of trucks to deliver

his records and a network of three-dozen branch offices nationwide, which allowed him to get his product out faster than the competition.

It was a winning strategy in the 1950s, the heyday of the "cover" record, when producers would take a tune originally sung by a black artist and have it recorded by other—usually white—performers. It's a practice that most students of pop music history regard as racist, but then as now, the most important color in the record business was green. And Nathan knew how to make money. His distributors would tip him off about a regional R&B hit that was starting to sell; Nathan would get a copy and have one of his artists replicate it—black or white, whoever he thought would sell. Then he'd ship the finished product to his distributors immediately, beating the original into stores, onto jukeboxes, and to the top of the charts. With King's copies priced at bargain rates and pushed by Nathan's network of distributors, they often outsold the originals.

King artists themselves were often covered by other labels. Otis Williams had been a sophomore at Withrow High School when the success of his vocal group at local talent shows drew Nathan's attention. More interested in sports, Williams reluctantly agreed to record for King only after Nathan convinced his mother it was a good idea. He was the lead singer of The Charms when they scored a hit with "Hearts Made of Stone" in 1954. Then they saw the Fontaine Sisters, a white pop group, ride a Dot Records version to the top of the charts the following year. But Williams's group had enough of a hit with it to go on the road and play the "popcorn circuit"—black movie theaters featuring live music between films.

"He bought us a car, bought us some clothes, gave us some money and said, 'Go,'" Williams remembers of Nathan. The gesture was not as magnanimous as it sounds; those expenses were taken out of their royalties.

NATHAN CONTROLLED EVERY aspect of the business, and that often meant marathon recording sessions that ran until he was satisfied that he'd gotten what he wanted. "You were there 20 hours a day," recalls singer Jimmy Railey, who recorded in the early 1960s with Hank Ballard, originator of "The Twist."

“Syd would tell you ‘I don’t care how long it takes. We’re gonna make a record today,’ ” recalls former King session drummer Philip Paul. “We would have to do it maybe 20 times, but we would get it.”

Nathan’s first goal was to maximize profits, and he didn’t care how he did it. At its worst, that strategy led to the cutthroat business practices that made enemies of rival companies and resulted in poor-sounding records due to his practice of recycling shellac to make King 78s. But it also brought social change. Nathan wanted men and women who could make and sell the most King records and he didn’t care what color they were. His right-hand man from the late-1940s to 1960—the label’s most productive years—was an African-American, Henry Glover. Along with Glover there were African-Americans in lower-level management positions, as producers and arrangers, as well as office and pressing plant workers, making King arguably the first integrated record label, as well as one of Cincinnati’s first integrated companies of any kind.

John Rumble, senior historian of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, interviewed Glover many times before the former King executive’s death in 1991. A former trumpeter with big bands and the smaller jump-blues combos that followed WWII, Glover was as urbane and educated as Nathan was rough-hewn and streetwise. Glover’s specialty was working the fine line between country and rhythm-and-blues, co-writing “Blues Stay Away From Me” with the Delmore Brothers and Wayne Raney and producing the hit record of the song. He also worked with Moon Mullican, whose mix of country and boogie piano inspired Jerry Lee Lewis, as well as traditional country artists like banjo picker Grandpa Jones.

This is where Nathan’s recycling of King-published songs resulted in musical cross-pollination, Glover told music historian Arnold Shaw in the latter’s book, Honkers and Shouters. “You couldn’t sell [R&B singer] Wynonie Harris to country folk, and black folk weren’t buying [western swing singer] Hank Penny,” said Glover. “But black folk might buy Wynonie Harris doing a country tune.”

Playing drums on many of those sessions was Philip Paul, a New York musician whom Nathan drafted out of Tiny Bradshaw’s band to be King’s house drummer in the late

1940s. Paul—who is 82 and still plays every weekend at the Cincinnatian Hotel in the Billie Walker Trio alongside his partner from the King days, bassist Ed Conley—has fond memories of Nathan. He and his wife of more than 50 years, Juanita, a former dancer at the Cotton Club, Cincinnati's premier black nightspot of the 1940s and '50s, still live in the Evanston house that Nathan helped them buy close to the studio, so that Paul would be available for impromptu sessions.

Paul played on more than 350 King records—everything from blues, jazz, and doo-wop to bluegrass, country, and rockabilly. He remembers when James Brown first came to the label. "He and the guys were out in the hall singing 'Please, Please, Please' and Syd Nathan said, 'What is that shit they're doing?'" The song—Brown's first King single—was a major hit, proving that Nathan's instincts weren't infallible.

Nathan was often wrong when it came to his top-selling artist. When Brown wanted to release a live album recorded at Harlem's famed Apollo Theater, Nathan refused to pay for it. Soul music was singles-oriented; few fans bought LPs. A live album was even more risky, because the crowd noise and stage patter made it difficult to edit single cuts for radio. "It was unheard of at that time," says Brown's former road manager, Speedy Brown (no relation). "Plus it was extremely expensive compared to doing a studio set. But James was so sure of what he was thinking that [he said], 'Well, if you don't want to do it, I can.'" Released in 1963, Brown's Live at the Apollo was a huge hit and continues to be revered as one of the greatest live albums of all time.

THE 1960s BROUGHT a new generation to King. Nathan had taken a liking to a young Jewish kid he found in the charts department at the New York offices of Billboard and invited him to intern at King for the summer and live at Nathan's home. Today, Seymour Stein, who credits Nathan for turning him into a record man (see "Shellac in My Veins"), is known as one of the founders of Sire Records and a key player in the careers of Madonna, the Ramones, Talking Heads, and dozens of other artists. Around the same time, a teenage musician from the West End named William "Bootsy" Collins was making his way to King Records. Bootsy and his older brother Phelps (also called Catfish) were playing clubs at night and hanging out at King after school. Bootsy remembers the night they were approached during a club date by King producer Charles Spurling. "He said, 'Yeah, y'all guys got a real tight rhythm section. Why don't

y’all do a few demos with me, why don’t you come by King Records?’ And we were all like, ‘Wow, King Records!’ It was like Motown. It was, like, the big deal.”

Bootsy and Catfish went on to back such seminal King artists as Hank Ballard and Marva Whitney. Then, in 1969, they moved up to the big leagues, becoming James Brown’s backup band, the first incarnation of the JBs. It was a short but powerful—some would even say paradigm shifting—apprenticeship during which they recorded “Sex Machine,” among other massive funk classics, with Brown. (Indeed, as Rickey Vincent puts it in his book Funk: The Music, The People and the Rhythm of The One: “By the time Bootsy and Catfish left the band in March 1971, the JBs sound had elevated The Funk to an essential level of stanky groove.”)

But by then, as a creative entity, King was no more. Syd Nathan died of a heart attack on March 5, 1968, and the label was quickly sold to Starday in Nashville; then Starday-King and its publishing companies were sold to Lin Broadcasting, which sold it again in the early 1970s. James Brown’s contract went to Polydor Records, while the rest of Starday-King was bought by the Tennessee Recording Corporation, a partnership of King’s vice president, Hal Neely, publisher Freddie Bienstock, and pioneering rock songwriters Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller. When this failed, the interests were again split up, the publishing going with Bienstock while the master recordings went to the International Music Group, which sporadically produces low-quality, bargain-priced King reissues to this day.

Recording continued at Brewster Avenue for a while after Nathan’s death, but King historian Jon Hartley Fox says that by the end of 1969, King was done in Cincinnati. Surprisingly, Nathan, whose desire to control every aspect of his business had resulted in his unique, all-under-one-roof record company, never owned that roof. He leased the building until the day he died. When the company was purchased by Starday, production left town.

The label was dead, but the music lived on and continued to influence young musicians. Chuck D., whose New York hip-hop group Public Enemy has dug deep into James Brown’s output on King Records for samples, remembers growing up in Roosevelt, Long Island, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, loving both the Reds and

King Records. “I was a big sports fan, so Cincinnati, to me, meant the Big Red Machine,” he told me before going onstage at the Madison Theater last December as part of a James Brown tribute show. “But I knew there were some funky records being cut around here. [So you had] Tony Perez and Johnny Bench, and James Brown and Hank Ballard.”

TALK OF BUILDING some kind of King museum persists, but for now it’s all ideas and no funding. However, it looks as if 2008, the 65th anniversary of those first King sessions and the 40th anniversary of Nathan’s death, will at least be a year of remembrance. Jon Hartley Fox’s King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records, is scheduled for publication this year by the University of Illinois Press. While Nathan’s label remains a huge part of Cincinnati’s music heritage, Fox thinks it goes much further than that. “King helped shape modern America,” he says.

Some want to use the hallowed ground of the original King building on Brewster Avenue for a museum facility. Given its condition and location, that seems doubtful, but other cities have overcome similar problems. In Memphis, historic Beale Street has been reborn, and the Stax Records building—torn down years ago—has been reconstructed as the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, the leading edge of a $100 million neighborhood revitalization project. Today, Memphis is a year-round music tourism destination.

There is, however, the possibility that we’ve waited too long to celebrate this missing link in the city’s cultural history. Can Cincinnati garner enough support for an exhibition, let alone an entire museum, honoring music that’s more than 40 years old? After his disastrous 1997 visit to Brewster Avenue, James Brown had little hope for King’s future as we drove away. “The intention was there,” he said. “But that is not coming back.”

But Eddie Stubbs, an announcer on WSM in Nashville, who inducted Nathan into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame in 2006, believes we need King now more than ever. “People are starved for substance,” he says. “And there’s a lot of substance in the grooves of those old King Records.”

That’s the view from Nashville. Closer to home, as our remaining King veterans get older, time is running out. King Records changed the world, paving the way for rock and roll and helping shape country music, bluegrass, soul, funk, and electric blues. Hundreds of hip-hop acts sample those old R&B records, while pickers the world over still copy those bluegrass sides. Shouldn’t this city have a pop culture temple where those musicians and their fans can come and worship? A half century ago, hillbilly tunes and race records collided on a side street in Cincinnati. It was a happy coincidence of time and place that transformed music forever. Maybe it’s not too late for those memories to transform the city, too.

Larry Nager

Death and Legacy

Brown passed away on December 25, 2006, after a weeklong battle with pneumonia. He was 73 years old.

Brown is unquestionably one of the most influential musical pioneers of the last half-century. The Godfather of Soul, the inventor of funk, the grandfather of hip-hop—Brown is cited as a seminal influence by artists ranging from Mick Jagger to Michael Jackson to Afrika Bambaataa to Jay-Z. Perfectly aware of his role in American cultural history, Brown wrote in his memoir, "Others may have followed in my wake, but I was the one who turned racist minstrelsy into Black soul—and by doing so, became a cultural force." And although he wrote widely and was widely written about, Brown always maintained that there was only one way to truly understand him: "As I always said, if people wanted to know who James Brown is, all they have to do is listen to my music."