

Oscar Brown, Jr. died six weeks after this meeting in his Chicago home. It was his last interview. He remains an overlooked American poet.

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Oscar Brown, Jr. is sitting at the cluttered dining room table in the third-floor Bronzeville apartment he shares with his wife, Jean Pace. A northern light beams through a nearby window, casting a shadow across Brown's face.

At 78, Brown remains a spiritual prism of Chicago culture, which he reflects in different ways. Look into his blue eyes and you see a poet. From another angle, his is the face of a jazz singer. From the left, he's a playwright. But hear his songs, and you hear the living sound of the city.

Brown remembers when he was playing Kick the Can in alleys near 22nd and Michigan, and the sounds he heard on the streets -- sounds that became some of his signature R&B hits in the '60s.

"I remember 'The Watermelon Man' cry. That was a song to me," he says. "There were a lot of cries like that going on" -- and then Brown sings, "'Sheeecago Deeefender!' That's how the paper boys would sell the paper. The ice man had a cry: '... Ice, Ice Man!' The vegetable man -- each one had its own personality. During the summer they came every day. It was embedded in you. As I grew up I was socially conscious of wanting to reflect my culture, the way I saw singers reflecting cultures in other parts of the world.

"I thought the cries of the vendors in Chicago were every bit as exotic as the ones from the Caribbean that were being done by Belafonte."

Now Brown is enjoying a career resurgence. Last October he performed at the opening of "Jazz at Lincoln Center" in New York City. "Music Is My Life, Politics My Mistress," a 110-minute documentary about Brown, premiered last month in Los Angeles. His soulful jazz-folk albums -- such as the 1960s classic "Sin and Soul" -- are being rediscovered by a new generation.

All that leads to Brown's unique appearance Thursday night at the Hideout in Chicago. The hipster vocalist will appear with his daughters, Maggie and Africa Brown, backed by a trio in a candlelight setting. To celebrate spring, artist Kathleen Judge printed tickets on packs of flowers and vegetable seeds, an idea from Chicago singer Kelly Hogan, who encouraged Brown to perform at the alt-country club.

Brown is the template for modern-day soul-jazz artists, such as Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets. The great Mahalia Jackson recorded Brown's ballad "Brown Baby," written about his first child. Playwright-painter Lorraine Hansberry called Brown "a startling genius for rendering sense and nonsense into acutely succinct and brilliant summaries of life as we live it." Brown even was a cast member of the 1990-'91 television series "Brewster Place" starring Oprah Winfrey. But music remains central to Brown's creativity. As he might ask, "How does this thing swing?"

"Music will come like a shadow with the words," he answers. "It doesn't work in reverse. I can come up with a melody, but lyrics don't necessarily suggest themselves from that melody. The word is the person. The music is the shadow."

Brown read Langston Hughes and Lord Byron in college in 1943 as a pre-law student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "If they asked for a hundred-word theme, I'd write a hundred-word poem," he says. "In fact, I got an A-plus in English composition and flunked every other thing." He soon changed his major to English.

As an artist, Brown developed during the late '50s-early '60s folk revival of Odetta, the Weavers and early Bob Dylan. He played Chicago coffeehouses and folk rooms such as the Gate of Horn and the Earl of Old Town. (The Hideout is a 21st-century folk room.) This narrative folk genre appealed to Brown, "so I started pulling on the stuff I grew up hearing -- the 'Signifying Monkey,' some of the jokes that had been part of my culture. I'd get lines from comedians I saw at the original Regal, like Dusty Fletcher."

Kelly Hogan met Brown last November when they taped a special for a WBEZ-FM arts show at the Hideout. She was a fan of Brown's during the late 1980s when she lived in Atlanta. Her former band, The Jody Grind, used to cover Brown's songs. "I knew the Sheila Jordan versions of Brown's 'Dat Dere' and 'Hum Drum Blues,'" Hogan explains. "Like Mr. Brown, I'm very lyrically oriented, and I love the English language. I also like his background of trying to sing in noisy clubs; it's almost like developing a muscle in your confidence where you can put your suitcase down anywhere -- on the street, in the grocery store. I'm always trying to be a better singer. Every day."

Hogan once turned on a young Atlanta jazz-pop vocalist to Brown's music. Hogan said he replied, "'When I put the needle down on the record, it was like seeing the ocean for the first time.' It opened up his whole world."

Brown's world opened up after the inspiration of actor-activist-folk singer Paul Robeson. Brown's family were devout fans of this former college football All-American.

"I studied 'Othello' Robeson's signature role at the University of Wisconsin," Brown says. "We just finished that study the day he, Uta Hagen and Jose Ferrer came to the Union Theater right next to where I was living. Paul would always come to

Chicago and talk to the young artists and writers, precisely about the point of using our art duty to the betterment of mankind or to the liberation of our people and to fight for peace. He practiced what he preached. He was a major influence in my life, along with Chicago author Dick Durham who wrote 'The Greatest' with Muhammad Ali."

Brown also was friends with fellow South Side resident Lorraine Hansberry (who died of cancer at age 35 in 1965). In 1958, Hansberry's "Raisin in the Sun" opened in Chicago. Her husband was songwriter Robert Nemiroff, also the manager of a music publishing firm. Brown brought some demos for Hansberry to give to her husband, and in that bunch was "Brown Baby." "Mahalia Jackson heard that and recorded it," Brown says. "I don't think I had met her yet. Subsequently, I did -- she lived out south at 83rd and Indiana. That was a big help. That's when I was looking for a future in this business. That was a carrot."

While "Brown Baby" examined the soul, Brown hits like "Hazel's Hips" checked out the body.

"Hazel was a barmaid at the 411 Club," he says. "I used to get marijuana at the club from Walter Rhodes. I was 18, 19 years old. I had gone to Englewood high school with Walter. Sometimes Walter wouldn't be there, so you'd have to sit at the bar and wait. So I'd be watching Hazel's hips.

"She never knew I wrote that" -- and Brown recites his lyrics -- "Hazel's hips are a concert of contours and curves/As she slips to and fro' round the tables she serves ... I wrote that as a poem called 'Assets,' but I could never figure out if I should spell it with two S's or three.

In October 1962, Brown met his wife at an all-night party at Redd Foxx's house in Los Angeles. She was a dancer in an L.A. nightclub revue. Brown was in town appearing at the Crescendo night club and appearing on "Jazz Scene U.S.A." with Steve Allen.

"It was the very worst night of the Cuban missile crisis," Brown says. "I was very depressed. She cheered me up." Sitting at the end of the table Pace adds, "I thought he was very cute. I thought his blue eyes were very interesting. I liked him, but I didn't want him to know it."

What was it about Pace that cheered up Brown? Before he can answer, she says, "My assets."