

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

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WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 10 of an Ongoing Series

RUTH BROWN

1928 – 2006

Miss Rhythm — The House That Ruth Built — The Woman Who Fought Back

Built Atlantic Records from a struggling label into the premier R&B company — received virtually no royalties — drove a school bus and cleaned houses for fifteen years — Atlantic told her decades of reissues had generated \$785 in sales and that she still owed them money — threatened RICO prosecution — forced Atlantic to pay — founded the Rhythm and Blues Foundation to secure justice for 35 other artists

NOTE: This is the first report in the series where the artist's fight for justice changed the industry — and won.

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HER

Biography: The Girl with the Tear in Her Voice

Ruth Alston Weston was born January 12, 1928, in Portsmouth, Virginia — the oldest of seven children of Leonard Weston, a church choir director, and Martha Jane Alston. Her father directed the choir at Emmanuel A.M.E. Church and had little patience for what he called *"the devil's music."* She was singing at church functions by age four. She was first paid to sing at a wedding when she was approximately seven years old. By ten she was traveling to neighboring parishes to perform. **The gift was present before she was old enough to know what it was called.**

As a teenager she began sneaking out to sing for soldiers at USO clubs. She was sixteen when she left home professionally, eventually landing a job at Blanche Calloway's nightclub, the Crystal Caverns, in Washington, D.C. A Voice of America disc jockey named Willis Conover heard her there and tipped off Atlantic Records — a struggling young label that had not yet found its commercial footing. Atlantic's founders, Ahmet Ertegun and Herb Abramson, signed her in 1948.

On the way to New York to make her first Apollo appearance and record her first songs, she was in a near-fatal car accident. Both legs were broken. She was initially pronounced dead at the scene. She survived. She spent months in the hospital. Her husband abandoned her during her recovery. **She came to her first recording session in April 1949 on crutches.** She recorded ***So Long***, which reached number four on the R&B chart. In October 1950, she recorded ***Teardrops from My Eyes*** — which went to number one for eleven weeks and became her signature: the girl with the tear in her voice.

Between 1949 and 1955, her records stayed on the R&B chart for a total of 149 weeks. Five number one hits. Twenty-one top ten hits. Six million records sold during her peak Atlantic years. Atlantic Records — which had been a struggling independent label before she walked through the door on crutches — became *"the house that Ruth built."* That phrase was not invented as a compliment. It was the literal commercial truth. **She built Atlantic Records.** Atlantic Records did not build her.

◆ *The girl with the tear in her voice. I play the blues — the music that carries the tear, the break, the cry. It is the covenant sound: the human voice pushing past the boundary of what it can contain, reaching for something beyond language. Ruth Brown had that. She built a label on it. She drove a school bus for fifteen years when the label was done with her. And then she fought back. That is the part of this report that sets it apart from every other in this series: she fought. She did not resign herself like Little Richard. She did not die penniless like Big Mama Thornton. She stood up, found a lawyer, invoked the threat of federal racketeering charges, and made Atlantic Records pay.*

Born

January 12, 1928 — Portsmouth, Virginia. Oldest of seven children.

Father	Leonard Weston — church choir director; called blues 'the devil's music'
First recording	April 1949 — on crutches after near-fatal car accident; husband had abandoned her
Chart record	149 weeks on R&B chart 1949–1955; 5 #1 hits; 21 top-10 hits
Atlantic legacy	Built Atlantic from a struggling indie to the premier R&B label — 'The House That Ruth Built'
Atlantic's royalty accounting	Told her decades of reissues generated \$785 in total sales — and that she owed them money
Post-Atlantic years	Drove school bus, worked as housekeeper and teacher's aide for ~15 years; single mother of two sons
Legal action	Represented by Howell Begle; threat of RICO prosecution; Atlantic forced to pay ~\$20,000 + waive debts
Foundation	Co-founded Rhythm and Blues Foundation 1988; secured justice for 35+ other artists
Testified before Congress	Advocated for royalty reform legislation
Awards	Tony Award 1989 (Black and Blue). Grammy 1990. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 1993. Grammy Lifetime Achievement 2016.
Death	November 17, 2006 — Las Vegas, Nevada — complications from heart surgery — age 78

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HER

The Exploitation — And Then the \$785

Layer One: Recording Costs Charged to the Artist

Atlantic Records charged Ruth Brown for touring and recording costs out of her own royalty account. The NPR account confirms: *"Ruth may have built Atlantic Records, but Atlantic didn't pass the wealth on down to Brown. She was required to pay for touring and recording costs out of pocket."* This accounting practice — standard in the industry of the era — meant that every studio session, every touring expense, every cost the label incurred in producing and promoting her records was charged against her royalty earnings before she saw a dollar. **The artist subsidized the label's costs from her own royalty account while the label captured the profit.** It was a debt structure dressed as an employment arrangement. The label fronted the costs. The artist owed the costs back. If the records sold well, the label recovered the costs from the royalties

before the artist was paid. If the records sold very well, the label recovered the costs quickly and the artist began earning — at the contractual rate. What the accounting records in Ruth Brown's case eventually revealed was that the costs were being managed in ways that kept the account perpetually in debt to the label.

Layer Two: The \$785 Accounting Statement

⚖ ATLANTIC RECORDS ACCOUNTING STATEMENT: Atlantic Records informed Ruth Brown that decades of reissues of her recordings had generated total sales of \$785 — and that she still owed them money from the expenses of recording her original sessions in the 1950s.

This is the most audacious accounting fraud documented in this series. Ruth Brown's recordings had been commercially exploited continuously since the late 1940s. Her songs had been reissued. Compiled. Licensed. *Teardrops from My Eyes* had been on the R&B chart for eleven weeks at number one. *Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean* had been one of the defining hits of the early R&B era. Six million records sold during her peak years. And Atlantic Records' accounting statement told her that the total commercial value her recordings had generated over decades of reissues was **seven hundred and eighty-five dollars** — and that she owed them more than that.

The Spontaneous Lunacy documentation is blunt: *"the company said during that time her total sales for countless reissues amounted to all of \$785 and that she still owed them money from the expenses of recording those songs in the fifties."* Atlantic Records had been using her music. They had been generating commercial revenue from it. Their accounting, when finally disclosed, claimed this revenue was \$785. **Caught in a lie too big to evade, with their accounting practices exposed, under threat of RICO prosecution,** Atlantic was forced to the table.

Layer Three: Fifteen Years Driving a Bus and Cleaning Houses

When Atlantic ended their professional relationship with Ruth Brown in the early 1960s, she had no savings to fall back on. The royalties that should have accumulated during a decade of hit records had been consumed by the recording cost accounting system. She moved to Long Island, New York. She spent approximately fifteen years driving a school bus, working as a housekeeper, and doing teacher's aide work to support herself and her two sons as a single mother. Her recordings fell into commercial obscurity. **The woman who had built a label drove a bus while the label continued to exploit her catalog.** This is not metaphor. Britannica confirms it directly: she *"spent the next decade driving a bus and cleaning houses while raising two sons."*

The NPR account adds the full scope: *"Ruth may have built Atlantic Records, but Atlantic didn't pass the wealth on down to Brown. She was required to pay for touring and recording costs out of pocket. When Atlantic ended their professional relationship in the early 1960s, Brown had no savings to fall back on."* Encyclopedia.com confirms she *"spent far too much of her hard-earned money trying to win back royalties from Atlantic Records."* She fought while driving the bus. She fought while cleaning houses. She never stopped fighting. This is the covenant detail that distinguishes her from every artist in this series: **she did not stop.** She drove the bus and kept the case alive.

SECTION THREE — THE FIGHT: WHAT SHE DID ABOUT IT

The Covenant Warrior — How Ruth Brown Changed the Industry

This section stands alone in this series. Every other report documents exploitation that was accepted, settled inadequately, or carried to the grave unresolved. Ruth Brown's report documents a woman who built a coalition, found legal representation, invoked the threat of federal criminal prosecution, stood on stages and gave interviews and wrote an autobiography and testified before Congress, and **forced a major label to pay and to change its practices.** The covenant does not end at the indictment. It ends at the verdict. Ruth Brown pursued the verdict while alive.

The Legal Strategy: RICO and the Lawyer Who Believed Her

Ruth Brown's lawyer was Howell Begle — a longtime fan who took her case and developed a strategy that the industry could not ignore. The Spontaneous Lunacy account documents the mechanism: *"Caught in a lie too big to evade with their disgraceful plantation practices exposed in the media and under threat of indictment under the RICO act which would embroil them as racketeers, the last of the 'original' independent labels that had dominated rock 'n' roll on the back of singers like Ruth Brown were forced to pay in very public fashion."*

RICO — the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act — is federal criminal law. Its invocation in this context was not a casual threat. It meant that if the pattern of fraudulent accounting across multiple artists over multiple decades could be established, Atlantic Records and its principals faced potential federal criminal prosecution as a criminal enterprise. **The \$785 accounting statement, held up next to six million records sold, was the evidence.** The pattern across dozens of artists was the pattern. The threat was credible enough that Warner Communications, which by then owned Atlantic, chose to negotiate rather than litigate.

The Settlement: \$20,000, Waived Debts, and the Rhythm and Blues Foundation

The settlement terms, documented across multiple independent sources: Atlantic paid Brown approximately \$20,000 and waived the debts it claimed she owed. It paid twenty years of retroactive royalties to Brown and approximately 35 other artists of her era. It contributed \$1.5 million to establish the Rhythm and Blues Foundation — a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing financial, medical, and advocacy support to pioneering musicians who had been undercompensated by the industry.

Brown did not accept the settlement only for herself. The BlackPast account documents: *"Atlantic waived unrecouped debts held by Brown and thirty-five other musicians of her era and agreed to pay twenty years' worth of retroactive royalties."* She used her leverage to secure justice for three dozen other artists who did not have her profile, her

lawyer, or her platform. **This is the covenant warrior using a personal victory for community benefit.** The Rhythm and Blues Foundation she helped establish went on to distribute millions of dollars to musicians in need. Other labels followed Atlantic's lead. MCA and additional conglomerates reformed their practices under the pressure that Brown's fight created.

Congress: Testimony for Legislation

Ruth Brown testified before Congress advocating for royalty reform legislation. She did not limit her fight to Atlantic Records. She took it to the legislative branch of the federal government. The Grokipedia documentation confirms: *"she later campaigned vigorously for artists' compensation, testifying before Congress and helping establish the Rhythm & Blues Foundation in 1987."* She stood before the legislative body of the country that had allowed these practices for fifty years and told them what had been done and what needed to change.

This is the Yehoshafat principle from the main covenant music document: **the singers go first.** Ruth Brown went first — before the lawyers were ready, before the foundation existed, before the legislation was drafted. She drove the bus and kept the case alive and when the moment came she was ready. **She was the Moses in this story: the one who had been through the wilderness and came back to demand freedom for the people behind her.** The Torah's framework for that role is not subtle. It is honored.

SECTION FOUR — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

WITNESS One: *NPR Music ('Ruth Brown, The Fabulous Miss Rhythm,' NPR national broadcast): confirms Brown built Atlantic Records through her hits; confirms she was required to pay touring and recording costs out of pocket; confirms she had no savings when Atlantic dropped her; confirms she spent years working low-paying jobs; confirms she leveraged Atlantic into paying back royalties and that 'the deal she cut with the label also allowed dozens of other musicians to recoup their earnings as well.'* This is national public radio editorial documentation.

WITNESS Two: *BlackPast.org (University of Washington contributor, peer-reviewed): confirms 'Because of her exploitation by Atlantic Records, Brown became an activist for musicians' rights'; confirms Atlantic 'waived unrecouped debts held by Brown and thirty-five other musicians of her era and agreed to pay twenty years' worth of retroactive royalties'; confirms Atlantic contributed \$1.5 million to establish the Rhythm and Blues Foundation; confirms Brown testified before Congress. Additionally: Spontaneous Lunacy confirms the \$785 accounting statement and that Atlantic faced potential RICO prosecution.*

WITNESS Three: *Britannica Encyclopedia (peer-reviewed): confirms 'Atlantic became known as the house that Ruth built'; confirms Brown 'spent the next decade driving a bus and cleaning houses while raising two sons'; confirms 'in the 1980s she eventually received some back royalties from Atlantic'; confirms she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1993. Additionally: Encyclopedia.com biography confirms 'she*

| spent far too much of her hard-earned money trying to win back royalties from Atlantic Records' and documents her lawyer Howard Begle's role in the settlement.

Additional corroboration: Wikipedia (Ruth Brown article); Vintage Inn detailed biography; The Groklopedia (sourcing Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and NARAS documentation); Study.com educational summary.

SECTION FIVE — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges and the Covenant Response

Charge One: Fraudulent Accounting — Vayikra 19:35–36

"You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am Yahweh your Elohim."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:35-36

Atlantic Records told Ruth Brown that decades of reissues of her recordings generated \$785 in total sales and that she owed them money. This is not merely an unfavorable accounting position. This is a false weight. **Six million records sold during her peak years. Continuous reissues. The accounting statement said \$785.** The Torah's standard of *moznei tzedek* — just scales — applies to every commercial transaction in which one party presents a measure to another. The measure presented by Atlantic's accounting department was false by orders of magnitude. ***I am Yahweh your Elohim*** — the reminder at the end of the command is not decoration. It is the covenant's declaration that every transaction is witnessed by the One whose standard is absolute. Atlantic's \$785 statement did not stand up to that witness.

Charge Two: Perpetual Debt as Oppression — Vayikra 25:39–41

"If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave... He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:39-41

The recording cost accounting system that Atlantic used against Ruth Brown was a debt structure that kept the artist permanently obligated to the label. Recording costs, touring costs, promotional costs — all charged to the artist's account, all recoverable from the artist's royalties before the artist saw a dollar. If the costs exceeded the royalties (by accounting, not by commercial reality), the artist remained in debt indefinitely. **This is the perpetual bondage the Torah prohibits.** Vayikra 25 establishes the Jubilee precisely as the mechanism of release from exactly this kind of indefinite debt servitude. The recording industry had no Jubilee. Ruth Brown's debt to Atlantic, under their

accounting, survived decades of commercially successful reissues. The Torah says this is forbidden. It says the worker must go free.

Charge Three: The Justice Due Her — Shemot 23:6

***"You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his lawsuit."
— Shemot (Exodus) 23:6***

Ruth Brown was, by the time she pursued her legal case against Atlantic in the 1980s, not a wealthy woman. She had spent fifteen years driving a bus and cleaning houses. She was fighting a major label with decades of legal resources, corporate infrastructure, and accounting systems designed to be opaque. **The justice due her in this lawsuit was the full accounting of what her music had generated and the full payment of what she was owed.** Shemot 23:6 does not require a perfect legal system to apply. It requires ****Yahweh****'s standard, which is: the poor person's lawsuit must not be perverted by the power asymmetry of the parties. The RICO threat was the mechanism that equalised the asymmetry enough to force Atlantic to negotiate. **Yahweh provided the mechanism through a lawyer who believed her and a federal criminal statute whose application was credible.** The covenant standard was vindicated. Justice arrived.

The Covenant Countercharge: What Ruth Brown Did Right

***"Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
— Tehillim (Psalms) 82:3–4***

The Psalm is a command. Ruth Brown obeyed it. She was the weak and the needy when Atlantic dropped her. She received justice. And then she used her platform, her settlement, and her voice to deliver justice to thirty-five others who did not have her platform. She founded a foundation. She testified before Congress. She continued to speak about the industry's exploitation on stages and in interviews until the end of her life. ***"Deliver them from the hand of the wicked."*** She did. **The covenant does not merely document the victim. It honors the rescuer. Ruth Brown was both.**

SECTION SIX — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

The \$785. I have come back to that number throughout this report because it is the single most precise demonstration of institutional lying in this series. Not approximate underpayment. Not the one-cent royalty that was at least mathematically derived from actual sales. Not the \$500 for two million copies that was at least a real number. **\$785 for decades of reissues of the recordings that built Atlantic Records** — while simultaneously telling her she owed them money. This is not negligence. This is not

creative accounting. This is a deliberate false statement delivered to a woman who had no independent access to the books, no legal resources at the time, and no mechanism to audit the claim. It is the false scale of Vayikra 19:35 at its most brazen.

◆ *I am a musician, a former firefighter, an elder of a Hebrew covenant assembly. I have read every report in this series and written every covenant charge. But the one that hits me hardest is the one where the label tells the woman who built it that her decades of reissues were worth \$785 and that she owes them. That is not exploitation in the general sense. That is a specific, deliberate, documented lie told to a specific woman who was driving a bus in Long Island to make ends meet. The lie was told because they believed no one would check. Ruth Brown checked. She found a lawyer. She invoked RICO. She made them pay.*

I want to say something about the Rhythm and Blues Foundation that does not appear in most accounts of it. Ruth Brown could have taken her \$20,000 and her waived debt and been done. She did not do that. She **made the deal contingent on Atlantic paying retroactive royalties to 35 other artists and contributing \$1.5 million to the foundation she co-created**. She used her leverage to cover other people. She expanded the scope of the settlement beyond herself deliberately and insistently. **This is covenant economics in action**. Not accumulation for herself. Redistribution for the community. The Torah's Jubilee principle applied in a secular legal settlement by a woman who had every right to be focused only on her own situation and chose not to be.

◆ *The Rhythm and Blues Foundation has distributed millions of dollars to musicians who would otherwise have died in poverty, without medical care, without dignity. It exists because Ruth Brown drove a school bus for fifteen years and did not stop fighting. As a musician, I owe her a debt that goes beyond what I can measure. As an elder of a covenant assembly, I recognize her as operating in the exact tradition the Torah describes: the poor who received justice and used it to deliver the poor from the hand of the wicked. That is not secular language dressed up in covenant clothing. That is Tehillim 82 walking in Long Island and Congressional hearing rooms and legal depositions.*

SECTION SEVEN — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Ruth Brown — Both the Wound and the Justice

This report carries two covenant sections: the indictment of the exploitation, and the recognition of the justice that was achieved. The covenant does not only record wounds. It records verdicts. Ruth Brown's case produced a verdict in her lifetime. Both are entered into the permanent record.

COVENANT INDICTMENT: Atlantic Records built its commercial identity on Ruth Brown's voice, charged her for the cost of producing that voice, kept her account perpetually in debt, and when she left produced an accounting statement claiming decades of reissues had generated \$785 while she drove a school bus to support her children. Every one of these acts stands in violation of Vayikra 19:35-36 (false weights), Vayikra 25:39-41 (perpetual debt bondage), and Shemot 23:6 (perverting the justice of the poor). The covenant indictment is entered.

✓ COVENANT JUSTICE: COVENANT JUSTICE: Ruth Brown fought. She found a lawyer. She invoked RICO. She exposed Atlantic's false accounting. She forced payment of retroactive royalties for herself and 35 other artists. She secured \$1.5 million for the Rhythm and Blues Foundation. She testified before Congress. She changed the industry. This is the covenant justice of Shemot 23:6 and Tehillim 82:3-4 fulfilled in a courtroom and a Congressional hearing room by a woman who drove a school bus for fifteen years and never stopped fighting. The justice is entered alongside the indictment. Both are permanent.

Atlantic Records eventually acknowledged what it had done. Ahmet Ertegun, to his credit, participated in the Rhythm and Blues Foundation and contributed to its establishment. The belated acknowledgment does not remove the indictment. It confirms it. **You do not contribute \$1.5 million to compensate artists you had treated fairly.** The contribution is the confession. The covenant record holds both. Ruth Brown died November 17, 2006, at age 78 in Las Vegas, following complications from heart surgery. She had recorded a song for a film soundtrack shortly before her death and was still touring regularly. **She went out working.** The woman who built Atlantic Records on crutches in 1949 was still on the road in 2006. The covenant musician does not retire. The zamar does not stop. She carried it until ****Yahweh**** called her home.

"Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 126:5–6

She sowed in tears. The car accident. The abandoned husband. The bus driver years. The \$785 lie. The years of fighting while working every job that would pay the bills. **She came home with shouts of joy.** The Tony Award. The Grammy. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The foundation that bore fruit for three dozen artists. The testimony before Congress. The autobiography that won the Gleason Award. The life fully lived to the very end. **She who sows in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.** This Psalm was written for Ruth Brown.

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 11 — Sam Cooke (1931–1964). The man who understood the system well enough to try to build his own label and publishing company — who was murdered at 33 under circumstances that have never been fully resolved — and whose business innovations, though cut short, changed what was possible for Black artists in the music industry.

Series roster: Reports 1–10 complete. Reports 11–16 pending: Sam Cooke, Mary Wells, James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Sam Moore, and the hip-hop era to 2026.

Selah.

*Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly · Pearl River, Louisiana · March 2026
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