

**Collective Creativity: An interview with  
Contessa Brown**



Cafe S.O.U.L is an open mic night created by the incomparable Contessa Brown and Janne't Brown, affectionately known as Momma Brown. I recently sat down with Contessa Brown to talk about Cafe S.O.U.L. and its importance in the community.

**Damont Combs (*Motif*):** For those who don't know, what is Cafe S.O.U.L.?

**Contessa Brown:** Cafe S.O.U.L. is a portal of collective creativity, integrating, healing, education, sanctuary, music, art, and inter-connectivity. It creates the experiences of the spirit of giving continually through the multicultural expressions of artists through many mediums of art (eg, spoken word, authors, motivation speakers, business owners/entrepreneurs etc.). We classify this as a multi-dimensional platform to allow people to creatively express their individuality, and continue to pursue their living dream. Allowing the expression of one's passion, using many diverse art forms as tools, allows one to continue the spirit of giving and each voice to be heard. We present commerce: Cafe S.O.U.L. as a vehicle for insight and for action in the aid of creating a better world.

**DC:** How has Cafe S.O.U.L. lasted more than 10 years as an open mic and therapeutic outlet for artist?

**CB:** First and foremost, it is a vision and assignment given from God. I am a firm believer that anything that you do for the Lord and His Kingdom will last. Cafe S.O.U.L. was birthed out of a need to provide a safe space for persons of all walks of life to come and express themselves, come to share their gifts, talents, businesses, testimonies, etc. You name it! Because of our genuine service in the community, people continue to come and support Cafe S.O.U.L. As they say, word of mouth spreads fast. It is the experience that people remember. Our goal is to leave an indelible mark on each soul that encounters our healing and expressive space.

**DC:** How has Cafe S.O.U.L. expanded beyond being just an open mic?

**CB:** Over the years, we have seen Cafe S.O.U.L. become a birthing ground of visions, dreams and businesses from published authors and business owners to amazing collaborations between creative and professional people. We also noticed that certain nights would be an intimate healing session for an individual or individuals. Once I noticed this trend, this urged me to want to take it a step further and seek a degree in holistic clinical mental health counseling. The next goal is to have a private practice under the umbrella of Cafe S.O.U.L.

**DC:** Let's talk about you Contessa. Can you tell me more about yourself?

**CB:** Well where do I began? I am a renaissance woman who wears a lot of hats. I have passion for people and a desire to see people become the best version of themselves. I am a motivational speaker, spoken word artist, business owner and soon-to-be-published author. I also enjoy hosting poetry expression and writing workshops as well as personal branding and holistic healing workshops. I am a very self-motivated person and I just want to achieve all God has purposed for me as well as become all that God desires me to be. I love LOVE. My favorite holiday is Valentine's Day and my favorite color is red — for love and passion. I enjoy nature; my favorite park is India Point Park. I enjoy writing; I have a lot of journals. I also recently started painting again as a way to heal, express and relax.

**DC:** What inspires you?

**CB:** God. I know it seems simple, yet it is really Him that gives me the strength to keep going even when I do not feel like going. Even when things do not appear/seem to be going in the direction He has

spoken to me. I hold on to those words, I write them down and I reflect on those words in hard times. Also, my mom. She has been my strength through the ups and downs in many aspects of my life — personally and professionally.

**DC:** I know that you're deeply rooted in your love of God and have overcome some obstacles in the church. Can you tell me more about that?

**CB:** Well, I had to go through a lot of healing. I endured church hurt and had to totally rely on God. People can disappoint you no matter what title they may hold. That is why it is important not to put them on pedestals and realize they too are fallible and make mistakes. I had to learn that in my walk with God. This journey I have scribed in a book that will be released in 2021. A few scriptures to hold onto while going through trials in this Christian walk are:

- To whom much is given, much is required. **Luke 12:48**
- I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. **Philippians 4:13**
- Work with excellence as though working for God and not for man. As man will certainly disappoint you **Colossians 3:23**

**DC:** Have you found it hard in this industry to be treated equal to your male counterparts?

**CB:** Honestly, I never noticed in it the business entrepreneur sector. I feel what God has for me is for me and who I am meant to reach I shall reach. We all have our own lanes and we each do it uniquely and differently. Now I know in corporate America, being a Black woman statistically we get paid less. But I don't pay it no mind. I get what is mine and what is due to me, 100 times fold.

**DC:** You had a poem published in Motif last month that really speaks to current society. What does that poem mean to you?

**CB:** "Dear Black Brotha Part Deux" is a reflective and healing piece. I originally wrote a poem back in 2017 titled "Dear Black Brotha," and it was my expression about my experience with dating Black men. It was valid and it was raw. Throughout the past few years, I have gone through a healing journey and come to see my Black brothas from a different lens. I started to see how generation patterns and upbringing/ surrounding environment(s) can impact how they view and treat woman — respectfully and/or disrespectfully. I also began to see the many Black men who love and respect the women in their lives, who are faithful and take care of their kids. I feel like when we lean in with curiosity and truly take a moment to learn new perspectives, the filters in our lens begin to change and widen. We are able to see more peripherally. That is what happened with me during my healing process with being hurt by both church and by Black men.

**DC:** Any messages you want to relay to the youth of today?

**CB:** Be you and never compare yourself to anyone. Your destiny and your path are unique to you. I don't care about what your family's history may have been — good or bad — your destiny is your destiny. Surround yourself with like-minded people now. Friends will come and go. Not everyone is going to like you or get along with you and that is okay. Just be respectful and stay focused on what you are called to do. Don't strive for the likes on your social media pages. Strive to make an impact within your community and society that will have a long-term effect that will last longer than the 24-hour stories posted in your Instagram or Facebook pages.

**DC:** What is next for Cafe S.O.U.L?

**CB:** The next step is to own our own commercial building that will house my private practice, lounge and my mom's bistro all under the Brand of Cafe S.O.U.L. I am excited for what is to come next!

**DC:** When did you fall in love with poetry?

**CB:** Well, I have been writing in journals since I was young. First starting with my mom encouraging me to always write down any complex words I didn't understand in a notebook. She also encouraged me to express my emotions in a diary. I then come to learn about writing poetry in high school. It wasn't until I met my boy Yunus Quddus back in the early 2000s that I was introduced to the whole phenomenon of spoken word poetry. I recall going to my first open mic ever at Black Rep and being enamored by the word play of the lyricists on stage. I attempted my first slam at AS220 and kind of bombed. But I kept learning from the greats like Christopher Johnson, Yunus, Lawrence Nunes, Marlon Carey, Rudy Rudacious and Ryk McIntyre. I then started to create my own flow and style, incorporating song and poetry. I gained confidence enough to perform spoken word at various open mics around the New England area and developed a business from the love of poetry expression. The rest is history on a continuum.