

# R.I.P. Johnny Otis

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Johnny Otis who is considered to be the Godfather of R&B passed yesterday in his native California. Otis was a bandleader, songwriter, musician, singer, author, pastor, TV and radio host. He was a Greek man but determined at a young age according to his words that, "As a kid I decided that if our society dictated that one had to be black or white, I would be black." In the '40's he had his own band that had a hit with ["Harlem Nocturne."](#) He had 10 Top Ten hits in the '50's including the self-penned "Willie and The Hand Jive" that has been covered by Miles Davis, George Thorogood and Frank Zappa. He discovered Esther Phillips, Etta James, Willie Mae "Big Momma" Thornton, The Coasters, Little Willie John, Jackie Wilson, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters and Sugar Pie DeSanto. He wrote James' first hit song ["The Wallflower \(Roll With Me Henry\)"](#) in 1955. It was during the '50's that he started working in radio as a disc jockey and started "The Johnny Otis Show" that ran for eight years in California. He produced some of Little Richard's early recordings and had played or recorded with Big Joe Turner, Amos Milburne, Louis Jordan, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Joe Liggins and Roy Milton. His musicianship as a drummer was also utilized in the Count Basie Orchestra. Otis entered politics in the 1960's becoming Deputy Chief of Staff to Mervyn Dymally who eventually became a Congressman. In his lifetime he wrote three books including ["Listen To The Lambs"](#) about the 1965 race riots, ["Upside Your Head! Rhythm & Blues on Central Avenue"](#) and ["Johnny Otis – Red Beans & Rice and Other Rock 'n' Roll Recipes."](#) His creativity also was extended to making paintings, sculptures and wood carvings. The musician Shuggie Otis is his son.