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Chadwick Boseman, Best Known For Black Panther Starring Role, Dies at 43

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Chadwick Boseman By. JORDAN STRAUSS/INVISION/AP

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Chadwick Boseman, who played Black American icons Jackie Robinson and James Brown with searing intensity before inspiring audiences worldwide as the regal Black Panther in Marvel's blockbuster movie franchise, died Friday of cancer. He was 43.

Boseman died at his home in the Los Angeles area with his wife and family by his side, his publicist Nicki Fioravante told The Associated Press.

Boseman was diagnosed with colon cancer four years ago, his family said in a statement.

“A true fighter, Chadwick persevered through it all, and brought you many of the films you have come to love so much,” his family said. “From Marshall to Da 5 Bloods, August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and several more - all were filmed during and between countless surgeries and chemotherapy. It was the honor of his career to bring King T’Challa to life in Black Panther.”

Born in South Carolina, Boseman graduated from Howard University and had small roles in television before his first star turn in 2013. His striking portrayal of the stoic baseball star Robinson opposite Harrison Ford in 2013’s “42” drew attention in Hollywood and made him a star.

A year later, he wowed audiences as Brown in the biopic “Get On Up.”

Boseman died on a day that Major League Baseball was celebrating Jackie Robinson day. “His transcendent performance in ‘42’ will stand the test of time and serve as a powerful vehicle to tell Jackie’s story to audiences for generations to come,” the league wrote in a [tweet](#).

Expressions of shock and despair poured in late Friday from fellow actors, athletes, musicians, Hollywood titans, fans and politicians. Viola Davis, who acted alongside Boseman in “Get On Up” and an upcoming August Wilson adaptation, tweeted: “Chadwick.....no words to express my devastation of losing you. Your talent, your spirit, your heart, your authenticity.”

“This is a crushing blow” actor and director Jordan Peele said on Twitter.

Disney executive chairman Bob Iger called Boseman “an extraordinary talent, and one of the most gentle and giving souls I have ever met. He brought enormous strength, dignity and depth to his groundbreaking role of Black Panther.”

“Captain America” actor Chris Evans called Boseman “a true original. He was a deeply committed and constantly curious artist. He had so much amazing work still left to create.”

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden tweeted that Boseman “inspired generations and showed them they can be anything they want — even super heroes.”

His T’Challa character was first introduced to the blockbuster Marvel movies in 2016’s “Captain America: Civil War,” and his “Wakanda Forever” salute reverberated around the world after the release of “Black Panther” two years ago.

“I don’t think the world was ready for a ‘Black Panther’ movie before this moment. Socially and politically, it wasn’t ready for it,” he told AP at the time.

The film’s vision of Afrofuturism and the technologically advanced civilization of Wakanda resonated with audiences, some of whom wore African attire to showings and helped propel “Black Panther” to more than \$1.3 billion in global box office. It is the only Marvel Studios film to receive a best picture Oscar nomination

Boseman said he more easily identified with the film’s antagonist, played by Michael B. Jordan, who had been cut off from his ancestral roots: “I was born with some Killmonger in me, and I have learned to T’Challa throughout my studies,” he told AP while promoting the film.

“It’s the place where you start. All African Americans, unless they have some direct connection, have been severed from that past. There’s things that cannot be tracked,” he continued. “You were a product, sold. So it’s very difficult as an African American to connect at some points directly to

Africa. I have made that part of my search in my life. So those things were already there when I got into the role.”

The character was last seen standing silently dressed in a black suit at Tony Stark’s funeral in last year’s “Avengers: Endgame.” A “Black Panther” sequel had been announced, and was one of the studio’s most anticipated upcoming films.

Even at the outset of his Hollywood career, Boseman was clear-eyed about — and even skeptical of — the industry in which he would become an international star.

“You don’t have the same exact experience as a Black actor as you do as a white actor. You don’t have the same opportunities. That’s evident and true,” he told AP while promoting “42.” “The best way to put it is: How often do you see a movie about a black hero who has a love story ... he has a spirituality. He has an intellect. It’s weird to say it, but it doesn’t happen that often.”

In addition to Robinson and Brown, Boseman portrayed the future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in 2017’s “Marshall.” He humanized the larger-than-life historical figures with the same reserved dignity — interrupted by flashes of sparkling wit — that he would later bring to T’Challa.

He took on his first producing job in last year’s action thriller “21 Bridges,” in which he also starred, and was last seen on-screen in Spike Lee’s film “Da 5 Bloods” as the leader of a group of Black soldiers in the Vietnam War.

Boseman completed one last performance, in an adaptation of August Wilson’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” The Netflix film finished shooting last summer.

It took some time for Boseman’s moment to come. He first got into theater, acting and writing plays as an undergrad at Howard. He visited Africa for the first time during college with director and theater professor Mike Malone, working in Ghana to preserve and celebrate rituals with performances on a proscenium stage. He later called the trip “one of the most significant learning experiences of my life.”

Unknown,” but before “42” he had only acted in one film, 2008’s football drama “The Express.”

Asked about his own childhood heroes and icons, Boseman cited Black political leaders and musicians: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Marley, Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest and Prince. Deeply private and often guarded in his public appearances and interviews, he made clear that he understood the significance of his work and its impact on the broader culture.

At the 2019 Screen Actors Guild Award, “Black Panther” won best ensemble, electrifying the room. Before an auditorium full of actors, Chadwick Boseman stepped to the microphone. He quoted Nina Simone: “To be young, gifted and black,” and put the moment in context.

“We know what it’s like to be told there isn’t a screen for you to be featured on, a stage for you to be featured on. ... We know what’s like to be beneath and not above. And that is what we went to work with every day,” said Boseman. “We knew that we could create a world that exemplified a world we wanted to see. We knew that we had something to give.”

Written by AP's Ryan Pearson. AP Film Writer Jake Coyle contributed to this report.

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