

Ray Charles

As a native Georgian, I have long appreciated the music of our own native son, Ray Charles. I remember hearing *Georgia On My Mind* played every summer at the Stone Mountain Laser Light Show growing up. His classics *What'd I Say*, *I Can't Stop Loving You* and *Hit the Road Jack* will live long after his passing. Charles displayed his genius by combining elements of gospel and blues into a fervid, exuberant style that would come to be known as soul music. His is a rags-to-riches story of the American Dream. Ray overcame blindness, prejudice, poverty and drug addiction to become one of the best-known performers in the world.

Born Raymond Charles Robinson, in poverty in Albany, Georgia during the Great Depression. His family moved to across the state line to Greenville, Florida, where he was raised. Turned on to the piano at an early age by a neighbor, Ray worked at it diligently. But just before his seventh birthday, Ray contracted glaucoma, which eventually left him blind. His parents sent him with what little money they had to the St. Augustine School for the Deaf and the Blind for nine years. Charles studied composition and a variety of instruments, piano and saxophone primarily among them. He remarks in his autobiography, "Music was one of my parts... Like my blood. It was a force already with me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me - like food or water." He learned to compose and arrange music in his head, telling out the parts, one by one.

When his mother, Aretha died, Ray left the school and started out on his road to fame. He began to build himself a solo act, imitating Nat "King" Cole. When he knew it was time to head on, he went to Seattle, WA. For Ray Charles, this was the turning the turning point. Away for the segregated South, Ray formed a local trio act with two other performers. He became a minor celebrity in local clubs. There he met future star musician, Quincy Jones, whom he took under his wing. Ray went to Los Angeles to cut records. He shortened his name to simply "Ray Charles" in deference to famed boxer "Sugar Ray" Robinson. While cutting a record, a studio executive noticed how much Ray's style sounded like Nat King Cole. He asked Ray to show him the real Ray Charles. Ray cut loose with his own gospel/blues style that would become his signature and it launched his career. He formed a group and played with singer Ruth Brown. He played the famous Apollo, the showcase for black talent. He even played Carnegie Hall, the apex of musical fame and success.

Ray formed his own band in the '50s and had his first big hit single, *I Got A Woman*. A string of hits followed: *Georgia On My Mind* (When the Legislature adopted *Georgia* as the official state song in 1979, its resolution specifically named the version recorded by Ray Charles), *Hallelujah I Love Her So*, and *What'd I Say*, featuring his female backup singers, *The Raeletts*. By the early '60's Ray Charles had come of age musically. He'd made it to Carnegie Hall. His hits kept climbing to the top of the charts and he toured Europe for the first of many times. His album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* topped the Billboard chart for 14 weeks in 1962. Ray's fame continued in the early-'60s with hits like *Unchain My Heart* and *Hit the Road Jack*, which solidified his pop stardom.

Ray Charles remained extremely popular through the mid-'60s, scoring big hits like *Busted*, *You Are My Sunshine*, *Take These Chains From My Heart*, and *Crying Time*, although his momentum was in 1965 when he was arrested for marijuana and heroin. This resulted in an almost year-long absence from performing. A frequent drug user since the age of 16, Ray immediately entered into a sanitarium in California where he overcame his addiction. He went on to influence pop music of all genre's including country, rhythm & blues, and Jazz. His influence on the rock mainstream is as apparent as ever in the styles of rock icons like: Van Morrison, Joe Cocker and Steve Winwood.

Ray's exposure to racism in the South invigorated him to take public stands. He was sued by one promoter in Augusta, Georgia when he disagreed with the racial segregation of the concert hall and refused to play. He joined Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent movement to end racial segregation. He deferred to not stand on the front lines of the movement because, as he said, "First, I wouldn't have known when to duck when they started throwing broken bottles at my head." Not limiting his activism to the American South, he took a public stand for world Jews and received the Beverly Hills Lodge of B'nai Brith's tribute to its "Man of the Year" in 1976.

Although Ray's hits came fewer and fewer as the years passed he made his stamp on another American musical generation in the 1980's featured in the movie, *The Blues Brothers* movie and in the 1990's by singing several ads for Diet Pepsi ("You Got the Right One Baby!"). His soulful, free-wheeling rendition of *America the Beautiful* played at the Republican National Convention in 1984 has become an historic musical moment. The song also became a patriotic staple in the weeks that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Ray Charles won many musical awards over his lifetime including 12 Grammys, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and numerous other trophies for his varying styles of music. He has been dubbed The Father of Soul, having personified the true essence of soul music in all his performances. Ray made his 10,000 career public performance in April, 2004. His health was going down hill as he fought a losing battle with liver disease. He succumbed to it in June 2004. Ray was both a national treasure and an international phenomenon. His story is the classic epitome of the American Dream who started out from nowhere; years later became a global sensation.

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