

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Ray Charles, a Genius with Grit

Born 90 years ago this week, the singer and pianist surmounted daunting obstacles to forge a singular soul sound.

by John Edward Hasse

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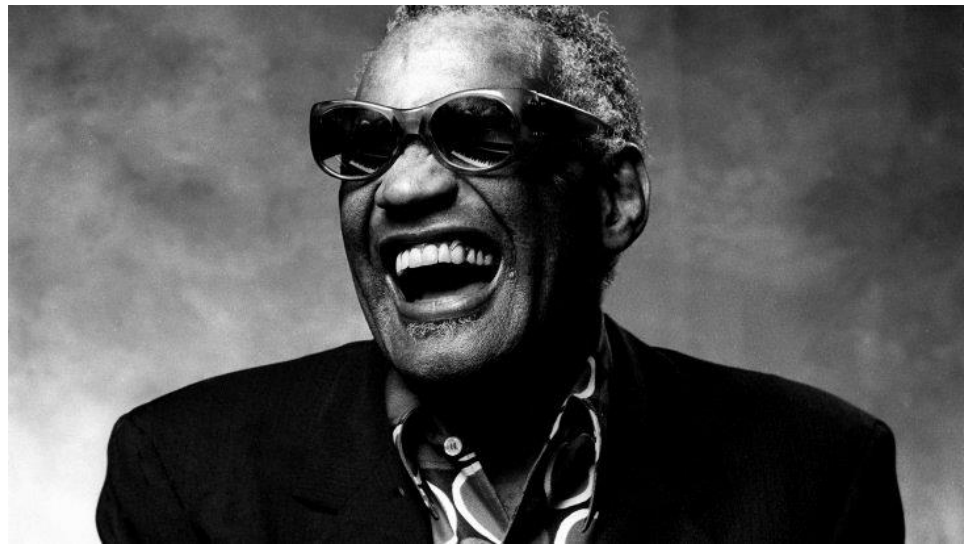
Ray Charles was never one to abide by barriers, norms, or expectations. In his music, as in his life, he shattered them all.

It seemed everything was going against him: He was born poor and Black in the Jim Crow South and was blinded by glaucoma by age 7. His father was rarely around; his mother died by the time he was 15.

Yet despite obstacles that would have stymied nearly anyone, Charles triumphed as an epochal, heartfelt musician who moved millions beyond creed, class and color. In the dictionary, the word “grit” should include his image.

Born on Sept. 23, 1930, he was raised in Greenville, Fla. As a lad, his ears were a sonic sponge, absorbing everything he heard: hymns at his Baptist church, barrelhouse and swing on the jukebox, and the Grand Ole Opry on the radio. In school, he learned to read and write music in Braille, and to play Chopin and Mozart. After dropping out when his mother died, he became a professional musician, performing for a spell with a white country music band. He nurtured high-definition hearing.

Refusing to use a cane or seeing-eye dog, abhorring the idea of being pitied, he became eminently self-sufficient. Quincy Jones told me of visiting Charles then living alone in Seattle and doing quite well at dressing, shopping and cooking. But when a pretty woman was around, Mr. Jones recalled, Charles would bump into furniture and walls so she'd hold his arm to help him.



He made his first commercial recordings at age 18 in the style of Nat “King” Cole. By the mid-1950s, Charles found his own sound that fused the fervor of gospel music with the earthiness of the blues, paving the way for soul music. In fact, Charles secularized gospel music—then little-known to white Americans—by mainstreaming its melismas, call-and-response patterns, stylized inflections and percussive chord progressions. When he transformed the gospel songs “It Must Be Jesus” into “I Got a Woman” and “This Little Light of Mine” into “This Little Girl of Mine,” he scandalized Black churchgoers by crossing the then-contentious line between the secular and the sacred.

His explosive 1959 Atlantic recording “What I’d Say” innovated by combining boogie-woogie figures, a 12-bar blues structure, a gospel feel, sizzling syncopations, Latin percussion rhythms, and electric piano, while doubling the usual running time of singles. The erotic back-and-forth exclamations between Charles and his female backup quartet, the Raelettes, helped the song attract a wide pop audience.

He soulfully reimagined Hoagy Carmichael’s 1930 standard, “Georgia on My Mind,” and broke precedent with two hit albums of country music (“I like the stories,” he said). A fine and bluesy pianist/organist, he also made jazz records with arranger Quincy Jones and vibraphonist Milt Jackson. Charles recorded Beatles songs like “Eleanor Rigby” and left a lasting influence on such rock singers as Joe Cocker, Steve Winwood and Van Morrison.

For Charles, genres were just commercial constructs: He excelled at transcending musical styles, personalizing the Gershwin brothers (“Porgy and Bess”); Rodgers and Hammerstein (“Oh, What a Beautiful Morning”); and “America the Beautiful.” Declared songwriter Tom Waits: “Your collection could be filled with nothing but music made by Ray Charles, and you’d have a completely balanced diet.”

To paraphrase critic Henry Pleasants, if Frank Sinatra was a wizard with words, Charles was a virtuoso of vocal sounds. His full-throated singing employed an entire repertory of tones, shadings and colors—whispers, guttural growls, soft moans, slides, whoops, shouts, yodels, falsettos—all expertly conveyed for expressive ends. His singing delivered so much deeply felt emotion that he mesmerized his audiences.

A tough businessman, in 1959 he negotiated a virtually unheard-of deal with ABC Records allowing him to own his master recordings, and in 1962 he formed his own record label, Tangerine Records. Charles became a millionaire superstar, but struggled in private with drug addiction; in 1965, with characteristic courage, he quit, cold turkey.

Charles’s legacy includes some 10,000 live performances; hundreds of recordings, including “Hit the Road, Jack,” “I Can’t Stop Loving You” and “Busted”; and the Ray Charles Foundation, which has channeled \$45 million toward education and hearing disorders. “Ray,” a vibrant biopic, was released in October 2004, earning Jamie Foxx an

Academy Award for wondrously summoning the singer's style and soul. Charles had died that June, but lived long enough to hear the movie's final cut.

The following year, his estate donated memorabilia to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, where I curated an exhibition that included his stage clothing, Braille-coded Yamaha keyboard and Braille edition of *Playboy*. (He really did read it for the articles!) I worried, however, that we'd get complaints from church groups or unhappy parents—we never heard a peep. Instead, I witnessed an older Black man standing in front of the display, proudly telling his young grandson who Charles was and why he was important.

—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution. His books include *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (Da Capo) and *Discover Jazz* (Pearson).