

## RAY CHARLES Biography

A recent magazine article noted resurgence in absolute standards in American culture. While not returning to the old, hardheaded rigidity of yesteryear, people are coming around to the idea that some things apply across the board. There is such a thing as good and bad, especially when it applies to abstract concepts like aesthetics.

The “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” axiom still holds, but in every field, art, fashion, music there are some things that are of such undeniable quality that there’s no room for discussion or interpretation. The artistry of Ray Charles is one of those things.

“In music you just can’t escape when something is beautiful,” said the legendary singer/pianist/composer. “Like a good song, you can’t get away from a good song. You have a good song, and it will still be beautiful, even when somebody with a bad voice sings it. I love the old writers, who wrote beautiful love songs. I came up on those kinds of songs. But I have just as much love for blues and jazz too. It’s like Duke Ellington said; there are only two kinds of music - good and bad. And you can tell when something is good.”

That observation can apply to anything in Charles’ extensive catalog. From country to blues to jazz to R&B and even funk, the 71-year old Charles has set the aesthetic standard for more than 50 years, earning fans across the globe and setting standards that his legion of fans – in and out of the entertainment industry aspire to. More often than not he isn’t called by his name – or even his longtime nickname “Brother Ray” his is simply “The Genius.”

His career has borne that title out. He has won 12 Grammys, and garnered a star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. He has been inducted into four music Halls of Fame- Jazz, Rock and Roll, Rhythm and Blues, a testament to his inescapable influence on all genres. Few artists, living or not, can claim to have had such a wide ranging impact on the music we love, and even fewer have altered the course of so many musical streams – from his soul-jazz combos to his crucial R&B bands, to his landmark country music recordings “Modern Sounds in Country Music.”

That tradition continues with “Thanks for Bringing the Love Around Again,” his first release of new material in six years. Charles produced the new album, as he does most of his projects (though he has worked with other producers in the past, like Quincy Jones). “Love” is being released on Charles’ own label, Crossover Records. He started the label, originally called Tangerine Records, back in the ‘70s. “I decided to change the name, because I liked the idea of doing different kinds of music on the label, instead of it being just a blues or jazz or a soul label. I wanted to include everything.”

Dissatisfied with the promotional push he received for his past projects, Charles decided to revive the label and go it alone. “Working with big companies, they pay you, but they don’t promote you like they should” he said. “That is my assessment. So I thought, I had that record company back about 30 years ago, why not re-open it? That way I could do my own promotions and everything, and if it works, it works.”

And the new album is a summation of Charles’ legendary career, from jazzy blues (“Mr. Creole”) bouncing soul-funk (“Can You Love Me Like That”) to love ballads (the title track). The disc kicks off with a re-tooled version of his classic hit “What I Say?” is a standard for life.

“I used an arrangement that a gentleman named Jerry Hey did for a Japanese beverage commercial back in 1997. They liked that arrangement so much it turned out to be a hit. Even though they owned that tune they were nice enough to let me use it on my album.”

Then there is the heart wrenchingly soulful “Mother.” “And surely I still do miss my mother doesn’t matter how old that I grow/Mothers’ love will stay with me all through life no matter where I go.” Everyone that has heard that song has sworn that it is a hit,” Charles said. “We played that song at a meeting and grown people just started crying when they heard it. That caught me off guard, because these were some hard nosed people and they just don’t cry over anything.”

But that's the effect a real soul singer has. "Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight or Stevie Wonder – the ones who make you feel something when you hear them sing."

Only modesty keeps him from saying the obvious – that his name sits at the top of the soul singers list. Ray Charles Robinson was born in Albany, Georgia on September 23, 1930 (he shares a birthday with another musical icon, John Coltrane). Charles was not born blind – he lost his sight to undiagnosed glaucoma at age seven.

He enrolled in the St. Augustine (Fla) School for the deaf and blind, where he developed his enormous musical gift. After his mother's death, he set out as a solo act, modeling himself after Nat "King" Cole. Soon he found himself in Seattle, Washington, where he met a young Quincy Jones, and established a name for himself in clubs.

It was then that he dropped the "Robinson" from his name to avoid confusion with the legendary boxer. Starting his recording career in 1949, Charles soon began experimenting, mixing genres. That came to the head in 1955, when he released "I Got a Woman." Charles reworded the gospel tune "Jesus is all the World to Me" adding deep church inflections to the secular rhythms of the nightclubs, and the world was never the same. That song is widely credited as being the first true "soul" record.

"You can't run away from yourself," Charles said. "What your are inside is what you are inside. I was raised in the church and was around blues and would hear all these musicians on the jukeboxes and then I would go to revival meetings on Sunday morning. So I would get both sides of music. A lot of people at the time thought it was sacrilegious but all I was doing was singing the way I felt."

That wellspring of deep emotion – tempered by one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most keen musical minds – long ago made Charles an American cultural icon. An artist instrumental in the creation of rock and roll yet just as home with the music of Gershwin.

Everyone remembers Charles singing "Georgia" "Born To Lose," "Hit the Road Jack," "I Can't Stop Loving You." Or, the Beatles' "Eleanor Rugby" and "Yesterday." Even more remember his epochal rendition of "America The Beautiful."

Now with his new label, Charles is planning to add some more embellishment to his permanent bust in the American cultural pantheon.

"Right now it's just me on the label. As far as anything else, like signing other artists, well, I'll just wait to see how the album does. And if it does the way I feel it will, then I will go to Plan B."

In other words, yet another chapter in the ongoing story of a musical legend. Ladies and Gentlemen --- Ray Charles.

Tony Green.