RAY CHARLES

It would be stretching things quite a bit to call Ray Charles' music "rock & roll," even in the broadest sense of the term. Charles' sophisticated music and world-wise lyrics have always appealed to an older audience and seemed more at home in nightclubs and concert halls than on *American Bandstand*. In his autobiography, *Brother Ray*, Charles recalled, "I never considered myself part of rock & roll... My stuff was more adult, filled with more despair than anything you'd associate with rock & roll."[i] Nonetheless, his rise to popularity coincided with the rise of rock & roll, and he was *the* seminal figure in the development of soul music and a profound influence on singers and artists in nearly every field.

Once called "the only genius in the business" by no less an authority than Frank Sinatra, Charles made a career of ignoring musical and cultural boundaries. As a singer, songwriter, arranger, pianist and bandleader, he drew from the entire spectrum of popular music—rhythm & blues, gospel, jazz, swing, country & western, mainstream pop, romantic ballads, showtunes, easy-listening music and patriotic anthems—to create wholly new possibilities and lend them an immediate authenticity with the conviction of his voice and vision.

Charles was and remains one of the truly great musical stylists of our time: the only label that really fits Ray Charles' music is "Ray Charles' music." In his prime, he made every song he sang his own—imbued each with the fascinating blend of icy cool detachment and intense emotion that characterizes both his music and his personality. And though his later career has been marked by a move toward rather bland, middle-of-the-road material, he can still summon an unexpected depth and meaning from even the most mundane song, and lift it into realms undreamed of by its composer and previous interpreters.

Background: The South to Seattle

Ray Charles was born Ray Charles Robinson in Albany, Georgia on September 23, 1930, and moved to Greenville, Florida with his family while he was still an infant. (He later dropped his surname to avoid confusion with boxer Sugar Ray Robinson.) Desperately poor, his early life was marked by heart wrenching traumas. At five, he watched his brother drown in a large washtub: "I was trying to pull him out and he had all his clothes on and they were too heavy... it took me a long time to get over that."[ii] A short time later, Charles began losing his sight to glaucoma. His family couldn't afford the available treatments and the disease progressed, leaving him totally blind by the time he was seven. He was sent to a state school for the blind in St. Augustine, Florida, where he remained until his mother's death in 1945.

With the onset of his blindness, music became the center of Charles' private world and his link to the larger one. The greatest early influence on his singing came from the Baptist church he attended regularly; his early piano style, on the other hand, was based on jazz and barrelhouse boogie-woogie, while his musical heart was firmly rooted in the blues. Charles also developed a rather surprising fondness for country music—the other end of the southern musical spectrum—and was particularly drawn to the Grand Ole Opry radio broadcasts: "Every Saturday night, I never did miss it. Although I was bred in and around the blues, I always did have an interest in other music, and I felt like it was

the closest music, really, to the blues. They'd make those steel guitars cry and whine, and it really attracted me."[iii]

Charles learned to "read" music at St. Augustine and began writing his own songs and big band arrangements by dictating the notes, one line at a time, to anyone willing to write them down for him. He also received some classical piano instruction, though his access to the school's pianos was hampered by the fact that they were on the "white side" of the segregated school. (The segregated BLIND school!) Orphaned at 14, Charles left school and played in clubs around Jacksonville until he saved enough to move to Seattle—"as far away from Florida as I could get." He played for a time with 15-year-old trumpeter Quincy Jones, then formed a piano, guitar and bass trio modeled after that of his idol, Nat "King" Cole. Charles patterned his sound, to the point of imitation, on the smooth West Coast club blues of Cole and Charles Brown and, on the uptempo dance numbers, the jump blues of Louis Jordan. After four years of moderate success on the small Swing Time label, Charles signed with Atlantic Records in 1952 and began the search for his true voice.

The Atlantic Years (1952-1960)

Charles was, from the start, given great artistic license at Atlantic and encouraged to experiment. "Mess Around," a boogie-woogie dance number written by Ahmet Ertegun, is a standout from his first Atlantic sessions. Backed by an all-star Atlantic house band, including Sam "The Man" Taylor on tenor sax, Mickey Baker on guitar and Connie Kay on drums, Charles blasts through "Mess Around" in classic barrelhouse style, displaying his formidable piano technique and a new-found vocal confidence.

The crucial turning point for Charles proved to be an extended stay in 1953 in the musical hotbed of New Orleans, where he recorded his next hit, "Don't You Know," in Cosimo Matassa's J&M Studio and worked with the legendary Studio Band. He also served as arranger and pianist on the recording sessions that yielded Guitar Slim's "The Things That I Used to Do." The whole experience confirmed Charles' own yearning for his musical roots and inspired him to form his own band and make the final leap to—or back to—the emotional gospel style that was his most natural voice. "Nothing was more familiar to me, nothing more natural. Imitating Nat Cole had required a certain calculation on my part... I loved doing it, but it certainly wasn't effortless. This new combination of blues and gospel was. It required nothing of me but being true to my very first music."[iv] His next recording session, hastily arranged at an Atlanta radio station, yielded "I Got a Woman" and revealed the fully-formed "new Ray."

Hallelujah!

Based on the gospel song "My Jesus Is All the World to Me," "**I Got a Woman**" combined the musical structure, celebratory spirit and emotional delivery of gospel with the instrumentation, dancebeats and earthy sexuality of rhythm & blues. Charles took the tune, feel and 16-bar structure of the gospel song and added "profane" lyrics, a sax break, jump blues stop-time sections and dance band that answers the Charles' calls. The integration of gospel and R&B that had been hinted at by earlier singers and groups was now made explicit: backed by a jazz-laced R&B septet (two trumpets, 2 saxophones, bass, drums and Charles' own piano), Charles embellished his shouting blues with

falsetto shrieks, "oh yeah!"'s and other expressive devices lifted from the unrestrained vocal style of the Southern Baptist church, and sang the praises of his Woman in a style and with a passion that was previously reserved for praises of the Lord.

"I Got a Woman" provoked a considerable outcry within the black community from people who felt that the blues and gospel, the Devil and the Lord, should never mix. "Many folks saw my music as sacrilegious. They said I was taking church songs and making people dance to 'em in bars and nightclubs."[v] Charles was unmoved by the criticism—the record sales spoke a lot more—and remained convinced that the two styles had musical and emotional links that made some sort of fusion inevitable. (Elvis Presley covered "I Got a Woman" on his first television appearance, adding a further strand to the song's fabric of styles.)

Charles followed the model of "I Got a Woman" and based a number of his Atlantic recordings on a gospel songs: "Nobody but You, Lord" was transformed into "Nobody But You," "I've Got a New Home" into "Lonely Avenue," "This Little Light of Mine" into "This Little Girl of Mine," and so on. Even when they weren't based on a specific models, his songs were always informed by the liberating union of gospel and R&B that "I Got a Woman" had announced. Highlights of Ray Charles' Atlantic years include the delightfully playful mood of "This Little Girl of Mine," which introduced the Latin rhythms and flavor that became another key ingredient of his style, the brassy strut of "Hallelujah, I Love Her So," and the tortured, bluesy reading of "Drown In My Own Tears," which featured the first appearance of the female backing group, the Raeletts, who became a prominent part of his sound and live show.

"What'd I Say"

Charles was an R&B star through the late fifties but did not reach the pop charts until 1959, his last year at Atlantic. "What'd I Say" fleshed out the baptized abandon hinted at in "I Got a Woman." Ironically, Charles' biggest fifties hit began life as an improvised keyboard riff and a call-and-response singalong "written" merely to kill time at the end of a show. "I had about fifteen more minutes to go and I couldn't think of nothing else to play, so I just told the guys, 'you guys just get a groove going when I tell you to come in,' and I told the girls, 'whatever I say, you all repeat after me,' and we started to do it and the people started really dancing and going crazy over it. So we tried it in a few other towns, and finally somebody asked me, 'Do you have a record of that?' So we went in and did the song, and today it's kind of like our anthem."[vi]

"What'd I Say" is a righteous blend of gospel, boogie, blues, Latin rhythms and jazz band R&B. The song begins with a simple 12-bar blues outline from Charles' electric piano—the inspiration for many rock riffs to come—and expands until the entire band has joined the festivities, with the horns punctuating the rhythm and answering the vocals. At what appears to be the song's end, the "live" genesis of "What'd I Say" is recalled as the backing band and Raeletts turn into a crowd of dancing partygoers urging a reluctant Ray to keep the music going. Sufficiently inspired, Charles plunges back into the song and into a lascivious call-and-response with the Raeletts that is filled with enough grunts, groans and ecstatic moans to drive radio programmers completely crazy. The extended climax of "What'd I Say" sounds like a Pentecostal revival meeting gone berserk—the frenzied worshippers suddenly gripped by the Devil (in the form of a 12-bar blues) and plunged into an orgy of earthly desire, with the "Right Reverend Ray Charles"

(as Aretha Franklin liked to call him) presiding over the High Church of Sexuality. As Charles later recalled, "They said it was suggestive. Well, I agreed. I'm not one to interpret my own songs, but if you can't figure out "What'd I Say," then something's wrong. Either that, or you're not accustomed to the sweet sounds of love."[vii]

Movin' On

Ray Charles enjoyed a remarkable degree of creative freedom at Atlantic and was encouraged to follow his muse in any direction it led. He concentrated on albums as well as singles and surrounded himself with excellent musicians, most notably tenor saxophonist Dave "Fathead" Newman, who took most of the solos in Charles' songs. He made a triumphant appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival and recorded two jazz albums—*Soul Meeting* and *Soul Brothers*—with Modern Jazz Quartet vibraphonist Milt Jackson. (The musical connotation of the term "soul" originated in the '50's jazz community, where it signified a rootsy, blues and gospel-derived authenticity and a reaction against the West Coast "cool" jazz style.)

Three songs recorded in 1959, the year of "What'd I Say," reflected the range of his talents and the direction of things to come: "I'm Movin' On," "Let the Good Times Roll" and "Just for a Thrill." All three were old standards from distinct musical traditions—C&W, R&B and Popular—and together they signaled a shift of focus away from songwriting towards song interpretation. "I'm Movin' On," a 1950 hit for country star Hank Snow, added a pedal steel guitar to his blues-gospel mix and was a foreshadowing of the "country soul" that would later earn Charles the biggest success of his career. Charles recorded "Let the Good Times Roll" in classic big band style, building on Louis Jordan's famous 1946 recording of the song and supplementing his own band with the large Quincy Jones Orchestra (Charles also shared arranging chores with his old friend from the Seattle days). "Just for a Thrill," on the other hand, was a move to the middle-of-the-road, with a lush string arrangement inspired by Nelson Riddle's arrangements for Frank Sinatra. "Let the Good Times Roll" and "Just for a Thrill" were released as singles and included on an album, *The Genius of Ray Charles*, that paired a side of big band arrangements with a side of string-laden ballads and showed Charles clearly moving away from the dancehall fervor that inspired "What'd I Say."

ABC Records (1960-1973)

Charles left Atlantic at the end of 1959 and moved to ABC Records, drawn by a lucrative offer and the promise of continued artistic freedom. Although his biggest popular successes were still ahead of him, he would only fitfully achieve the type of innovative brilliance that marked his Atlantic tenure. Nonetheless, Charles' association with ABC started on a high note with his definitive version of the Hoagy Carmichael's "**Georgia On My Mind**." Charles delivered the ode to his home state with a melancholy longing that is as good a definition of "soul" as any, though sweetened a choir of voices and soaring violins that helped make "Georgia On My Mind" the first Ray Charles release to do better on the Pop than on the R&B charts. The record sold mainly to an adult audience and set the tone for the soulful reinterpretations of old and new classics that enabled this wider and whiter audience to appreciate his expressive twists within a

familiar context. Charles' increasingly middle-of-the-road output came to include songs like "Old Man River," "Over the Rainbow," "Sentimental Journey," "Yesterday" and "America the Beautiful," but even the blandest material was sung with great dignity and with a emotion that remained rooted in gospel and the blues.

I Can't Stop Loving You

Charles balanced his mainstream arrangements at ABC with R&B and jazz-laced uptempo songs, the best of which—"Hit the Road Jack," "Unchain My Heart," "Don't Set Me Free," "Busted" and "Let's Go Get Stoned"—rank with his Atlantic output. The biggest hits of his career, however, came from a rather surprising direction—country & western. His cover of Don Gibson's "I Can't Stop Loving You" and his album of country songs, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, both went to #1 in 1962, and were followed by other renditions of C&W favorites, including "Born to Lose," "You Are My Sunshine," Buck Owens' "Crying Time" and Hank Williams' "Take These Chains from My Heart." In contrast to the stripped-down R&B version of "I'm Movin' On," the ABC country recordings received the complete "modern Nashville" treatment, full of heavenly strings and choirs and slick productions that appealed to listeners who had never liked country music before. His incorporation of C&W, like his blend of gospel and R&B, seemed bizarre at first (a black man singing country?), then made perfect sense. Growing up surrounded by both the blues and the Grand Ole Opry, he'd always felt the close kinship between the two styles. Both were, above all, *real*: "I think the words to country songs are very earthy like the blues, see, very *down*. They're not dressed up, and the people are very honest and say, 'Look, I miss you darling, so I went out and got drunk in this bar.' That's the way you say it. Wherein Tin Pan Alley will say, 'Oh, I missed you darling, so I went to this restaurant and I sat down and I had dinner for one.' That's cleaned up, you see? But country songs and the blues is like it is."[viii]

Charles' country recordings obliterated the lines between Country, Pop and R&B and made him the most popular singer in the country in 1962 and 1963. The rough edges of Charles' sound were further smoothed over as his audience and concert venues grew more and more "respectable" (though he continues to anchor his concerts with a well-placed blues or two). He has been firmly entrenched on the black tie circuit since the end of the sixties, and seems content in the role of National Treasure. In a sense he has returned to his first professional style, playing sophisticated, jazz-laced pop music for a largely white audience, much as his first mentor Nat "King" Cole had done. His style and his success are all his own, however, and the story of his ascension into the pantheon of popular music is as inspiring as any before or since. Charles overcame his blindness and his country's racism to win a love and respect that even a well-publicized drug bust and battle with heroin addiction failed to tarnish (he kicked a nearly twenty-year habit in 1965).

Ray Charles' impact on popular music has been immeasurable: he has been a direct influence on generations of singers and pianists, of whom Joe Cocker, Stevie Winwood, Van Morrison, Eric Burdon, the Band's Richard Manuel, Charlie Rich are only the most obvious. More to the point, Charles he virtually invented soul music with his integration of R&B and gospel, and he laid the foundations for the church-based music of Aretha Franklin, James Brown, the Stax/Memphis singers and the Motown hit machine. When he is so moved, the old master can still erase all other versions of a song from

memory and stamp it with his inimitable style: "That style requires pure heart singing. Later on they'd call it soul music. But the names don't matter. It's the same mixture of gospel and blues with maybe a sweet melody thrown in for good measure. It's the sort of music where you can't fake the feeling."[ix]

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[i]Peter Guralnick, "Sweet Soul Music," p. 51

[ii]Dotson Rader, "Ray Charles Sees the Beauty," in *Parade* Magazine, Aug. 7, 1988, p. 4.

[iii]Ben Fong-Torres, "Ray Charles," in "The Rolling Stone Book of Interviews, 1967-1980," by the Editors of Rolling Stone, (New York: St. Martins, 1981), pg. 264.

[iv]ibid., p. 165.

[v]Ray Charles, "Brother Ray," p. 167.

[vi]from *Ray Charles* BBC documentary (Omnibus Films, 1988).

[vii]Ray Charles, "Brother Ray," 211.

[viii]ibid.

[ix]Ray Charles, "Brother Ray," (New York: Warner, 1978), p. 196.