

= What 'd I Say =

" What 'd I Say " (or " What I Say ") is an American Rhythm and blues song , by Ray Charles released in 1959 . As single divided into two parts , it was one of the first soul songs . The composition was improvised one evening late in 1958 when Charles , his orchestra , and backup singers had played their entire set list at a show and still had time left ; the response from many audiences was so enthusiastic that Charles announced to his producer that he was going to record it .

After his run of R & B hits , this song finally broke Charles into mainstream pop music and itself sparked a new subgenre of R & B titled soul , finally putting together all the elements that Charles had been creating since he recorded " I Got a Woman " in 1954 . The gospel and rhumba influences combined with the sexual innuendo in the song made it not only widely popular but very controversial to both white and black audiences . It earned Ray Charles his first gold record and has been one of the most influential songs in R & B and rock and roll history . For the rest of his career , Charles closed every concert with the song . It was added to the National Recording Registry in 2002 and ranked at number 10 in Rolling Stone 's " The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time " .

= = Background = =

Ray Charles was 28 years old in 1958 , with ten years of experience recording primarily rhythm and blues music for the Downbeat and Swingtime record labels , in a style similar to that of Nat King Cole and Charles Brown . Charles signed with Atlantic Records in 1954 where producers Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler encouraged him to broaden his repertoire . Wexler would later remember that Atlantic Records ' success came not from the artists ' experience , but the enthusiasm for the music : " We didn 't know shit about making records , but we were having fun " . Ertegun and Wexler found that a hands @-@ off approach was the best way of encouraging Charles . Wexler later said , " I realized the best thing I could do with Ray was leave him alone " .

From 1954 into the 1960s Charles toured for 300 days a year with a seven @-@ piece orchestra . He employed another Atlantic singing trio named the Cookies and renamed them the Raelettes when they backed him up on the road . In 1954 Charles began merging gospel sounds and instruments with lyrics that addressed more secular issues . His first attempt was in the song " I Got a Woman " , based either on the melodies of gospel standards " My Jesus Is All the World to Me " or an uptempo " I Got a Savior (Way Across Jordan) " . It was the first Ray Charles record that got attention from white audiences , but it made some black audiences uncomfortable with its black gospel derivatives ; Charles later stated that the joining of gospel and R & B was not a conscious decision .

In December 1958 , he had a hit on the R & B charts with " Night Time Is the Right Time " , an ode to carnality that was sung between Charles and one of the Raelettes , Margie Hendricks , with whom Charles was having an affair . Since 1956 Charles had also included a Wurlitzer electric piano on tour because he did not trust the tuning and quality of the pianos provided him at every venue . On the occasions he would play it , he was derided by other musicians .

= = Composition and recording = =

According to Charles ' autobiography , " What 'd I Say " was accidental when he improvised it to fill time at the end of a concert in December 1958 . He asserts that he never tested songs on audiences before recording them , but " What 'd I Say " is an exception . Charles himself does not recall where the concert took place , but Mike Evans in Ray Charles : The Birth of Soul places the show in Brownsville , Pennsylvania . Shows were played at " meal dances " which typically ran four hours with a half @-@ hour break , and would end around 1 or 2 in the morning . Charles and his orchestra had exhausted their set list after midnight , but had 12 minutes left to fill . He told the Raelettes , " Listen , I 'm going to fool around and y 'all just follow me " .

Starting on the electric piano , Charles played what felt right : a series of riffs , switching then to a

regular piano for four choruses backed up by a unique Latin conga tumbao rhythm on drums . The song changed when Charles began singing simple , improvised unconnected verses (" Hey Mama don 't you treat me wrong / Come and love your daddy all night long / All right now / Hey hey / All right ") . Charles used gospel elements in a twelve @-@ bar blues structure . Some of the first lines (" See the gal with the red dress on / She can do the Birdland all night long ") are influenced by a boogie @-@ woogie style that Ahmet Ertegun attributes to Clarence " Pinetop " Smith who used to call out to dancers on the dance floor instructing what to do through his lyrics . In the middle of the song , however , Charles indicated that the Raelettes should repeat what he was doing , and the song transformed into a call and response between Charles , the Raelettes , and the horn section in the orchestra as they called out to each other in ecstatic shouts and moans and blasts from the horns .

The audience reacted immediately ; Charles could feel the room shaking and bouncing as the crowd was dancing . Many audience members approached Charles at the end of the show to ask where they could purchase the record . Charles and the orchestra performed it again several nights in a row with the same reaction at each show . He called Jerry Wexler to say he had something new to record , later writing , " I don 't believe in giving myself advance notices , but I figured this song merited it " .

The Atlantic Records studio had just purchased an 8 @-@ track recorder , and recording engineer Tom Dowd was familiarizing himself with how it worked . In February 1959 Charles and his orchestra finally recorded " What 'd I Say " at Atlantic 's small studio . Dowd recalled that it did not seem special at the time of recording . It was second of two songs during the session and Charles , the producers , and the band were more impressed with the first one at the session , " Tell the Truth " : " We made it like we made all the others . Ray , the gals , and the band live in the small studio , no overdubs . Three or four takes , and it was done . Next ! " In retrospect , Ahmet Ertegun 's brother Nesuhi credits the extraordinary sound of the song to the restricted size of the studio and the technologically advanced recording equipment used ; the sound quality is clear enough to hear Charles slapping his leg in time with the song when the music stops during the calls and responses . The song was recorded in only a few takes because Charles and the orchestra had perfected it while touring .

Dowd , however , had two problems during the recording . " What 'd I Say " lasted over seven and a half minutes when the normal length of radio @-@ played songs was around two and a half minutes . Furthermore , although the lyrics were not obscene , the sounds Charles and the Raelettes made in their calls and responses during the song worried Dowd and the producers . A previous recording called " Money Honey " by Clyde McPhatter had been banned in Georgia and Ahmet Ertegun and Wexler released McPhatter 's song despite the ban , risking arrest . Ray Charles was aware of the controversy in " What 'd I Say " : " I 'm not one to interpret my own songs , but if you can 't figure out ' What I Say ' , then something 's wrong . Either that , or you 're not accustomed to the sweet sounds of love . "

Dowd solved the recording issues by mixing three versions of the song . Some call @-@ outs of " Shake that thing ! " were removed , and the song was split into two three @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half minute sides of a single record , titling the song " What 'd I Say Part I " and " What 'd I Say Part II " . The recorded version divides the parts with a false ending where the orchestra stops and the Raelettes and orchestra members beg Charles to continue , then goes on to a frenzied finale . Dowd later stated after hearing the final recording that not releasing the record was never an option : " we knew it was going to be a hit record , no question . " It was held for the summer and released in June 1959 .

= = Reception = =

Billboard magazine initially gave " What 'd I Say " a tepid review : " He shouts out in percussive style ... Side two is the same . " The secretary at Atlantic Records started getting calls from distributors , however . Radio stations refused to play it because it was too sexually charged , but Atlantic refused to take the records back from stores . A slightly sanitized version was released in

July 1959 in response to the complaints and the song hit number 82 . A week later it was at 43 , then 26 . In contrast to their earlier review , Billboard several weeks later wrote that the song was " the strongest pop record that the artist has done to date " . Within weeks " What 'd I Say " topped out at number one on Billboard 's R & B singles chart , number six on the Billboard Hot 100 , and it became Charles ' first gold record . It also became Atlantic Records ' best @-@ selling song at the time .

" What 'd I Say " was banned by many black and white radio stations because of , as one critic noted , " the dialogue between himself and his backing singers that started in church and ended up in the bedroom " . The erotic nature was obvious to listeners , but a deeper aspect of the fusion between black gospel music and R & B troubled many black audiences . Music , as was much of American society , was also segregated , and some critics complained that gospel was not only being appropriated by secular musicians , but it was being marketed to white listeners . During several concerts in the 1960s , the crowds became so frenetic and the shows so resembled revival meetings while Charles performed " What 'd I Say " that the police were called in , when the organizers became worried that riots might break out . The moral controversy surrounding the song has been attributed to its popularity ; Charles later acknowledged in an interview that the beat was catchy , but it was the suggestive lyrics that attracted listeners : " ' See the girl with the diamond ring . She knows how to shake that thing . ' It wasn 't the diamond ring that got ' em . " " What 'd I Say " was Ray Charles ' first crossover hit into the growing genre of rock and roll . He seized the opportunity of his immense newfound success and announced to Ertegun and Wexler that he was considering signing with ABC @-@ Paramount Records (later renamed ABC Records) later in 1959 . While he was in negotiations with ABC @-@ Paramount , Atlantic Records released an album of his hits , titled What 'd I Say .

= = Legacy = =

Michael Lydon , another of Charles ' biographers , summarized the impact of the song : " ' What 'd I Say ' was a monster with footprints bigger than its numbers . Daringly different , wildly sexy , and fabulously danceable , the record riveted listeners . When ' What 'd I Say ' came on the radio , some turned it off in disgust , but millions turned the volume up to blasting and sang ' Unnnh , unnnh , ooooooh , ooooooh ' along with Ray and the Raelets . [It] became the life of a million parties , the spark of as many romances , and a song to date the Summer by . " The song 's impact was not immediately seen in the U.S. ; it was particularly popular in Europe . Paul McCartney was immediately struck by the song and knew when he heard it that he wanted to be involved in making music . George Harrison remembered an all @-@ night party he attended in 1959 where the song was played for eight hours non @-@ stop : " It was one of the best records I ever heard . " While the Beatles were developing their sound in Hamburg , they played " What 'd I Say " at every show , trying to see how long they could make the song last and using the audience in the call and response , with which they found immense popularity . The opening electric piano in the song was the first John Lennon had ever heard , and he tried to replicate it with his guitar . Lennon later credited Charles ' opening of " What 'd I Say " to the birth of songs dominated by guitar riffs .

When Mick Jagger sang for the first time with the band that would become the Rolling Stones , he performed a duet of " What 'd I Say " . Eric Burdon from the Animals , Steve Winwood of the Spencer Davis Group , Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys , and Van Morrison counted the song as a major influence on why they were interested in music and incorporated it into their shows . Music historian Robert Stephens attributes the birth of soul music to " What 'd I Say " when gospel and blues were successfully joined ; the new genre of music was matured by later musicians such as James Brown and Aretha Franklin . " In an instant , the music called Soul comes into being . Hallelujah ! " wrote musician Lenny Kaye in a retrospective of Atlantic Records artists .

In the late 1950s , rock and roll was faltering as its major stars dropped from public view . Elvis Presley was drafted , Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran died in 1959 and 1960 respectively , Chuck Berry was in jail , and Jerry Lee Lewis had been disgraced by press reports that he married his 13 @-@ year @-@ old cousin . Music and culture critic Nelson George disagrees with music historians

who attest the last two years of the 1950s were barren of talent , pointing to Charles and this song in particular . George writes that the themes in Charles ' work were very similar to the young rebels who popularized rock and roll , writing

By breaking down the division between pulpit and bandstand , recharging blues concerns with transcendental fervor , unashamedly linking the spiritual and the sexual , Charles made pleasure (physical satisfaction) and joy (divine enlightenment) seem the same thing . By doing so he brought the realities of the Saturday @-@ night sinner and Sunday @-@ morning worshipper ? so often one and the same ? into raucous harmony .

" What 'd I Say " has been covered by many artists in many different styles . Elvis Presley used the song in a large dance scene in his 1964 film Viva Las Vegas and released it as a single with the title song on the B @-@ side . It became a gold record . Cliff Richard , Eric Clapton with John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers , the Big Three , Eddie Cochran , Bobby Darin , Alvin and the Chipmunks , Nancy Sinatra , Sammy Davis , Jr . , Trini Lopez , Roy Orbison , Johnny Cash and June Carter , Rare Earth and The Ronettes all put their own style on the song . Checkmates , Ltd. released a version of the song as part of a medley on their 1967 debut album , Live ! At Caesar 's Palace . Jerry Lee Lewis found particular success with his rendition in 1961 , which peaked at number 30 and spent eight weeks on the charts . Charles noticed , later writing " I saw that many of the stations which had banned the tune started playing it when it was covered by white artists . That seemed strange to me , as though white sex was cleaner than black sex . But once they began playing the white version , they lifted the ban and also played the original . "

Charles later spoofed this double standard on the television comedy show Saturday Night Live in 1977 . He hosted an episode and had the original band he toured with in the 1950s to join him . In one skit , he tells a producer that he wants to record the song , but the producer tells him that a white band named the " Young Caucasians " , composed of beaming white teenagers , are to record it first , which they do on the show , in a chaste , sanitized , and unexciting performance . When Charles and his band counter with their original version , Garrett Morris tells them , " Sorry . That 'll never make it . "

Charles closed every show he played for the rest of his career with the song , later stating , " ' What 'd I Say ' is my last song onstage . When I do ' What 'd I Say ' , you don 't have to worry about it ? that 's the end of me ; there ain 't no encore , no nothin ' . I 'm finished ! "

It was ranked tenth on Rolling Stone 's list of " The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time " , with the summary , " Charles ' grunt- ' n ' -groan exchanges with the Raeletts were the closest you could get to the sound of orgasm on Top Forty radio during the Eisenhower era " . In 2000 , it ranked number 43 on VH1 's 100 Greatest Songs in Rock and Roll and number 96 on VH1 's 100 Greatest Dance Songs , being the oldest song in the latter ranking . The same year it was chosen by National Public Radio as one of the 100 most influential songs of the 20th century . A central scene in the 2004 biopic Ray features the improvisation of the song performed by Jamie Foxx , who won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Charles . For its historical , artistic , and cultural significance , the Library of Congress added it to the U.S. National Recording Registry in 2002 . The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame featured it as one of 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll in 2007 .