

# The career of ray charles music essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ray Charles has been described by many of his contemporaries, Such as Frank Sinatra, who said, Ray Charles is the only genius in the business. I am going to discuss to what extent Ray Charles contributed to popular music. Ray grew up alongside both gospel and country music and was heavily influenced by these two genres. I am going to discuss how through his integration of gospel and rhythm and blues in releases such as “I Got a Woman” helped Ray create his own musical identity but ultimately helped to create a whole new musical style – Soul. Finally I will discuss how his fusion of white country music through “Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music” helped to break barriers and introduced country music to a mainstream audience.

Nat King Cole and pianist-singer Charles Brown, much to similar style of Cole had a great effect on Ray Charles. Ray closely imitated these artists as a teenager and during his time with Swing Time Records, headed by Jack Lauderdale. However, for Ray too be more successful he would have developed his own musical identity. During the 1950's Ray Charles would begin to blend R&B and secularise gospel styles, which would ultimately lead to birth of Soul. He would begin to incorporate the chord changes, song structures, call and response techniques, and vocal screams of gospel. The influence gospel had on Ray is present from an early age. Ray grew alongside church music and would listen to “Wings Over Jordan” and the “Golden Gate Quartet”. During his time at school he would regularly sing in a choir and also organise his own informal singing group, which would sing rhythmic gospel music.

In 1953 Whilst recording for singer Tommy Ridgeley at the J&M Studio, New Orleans, Ray would play a couple of tunes after the session. He performed “

“Feeling Sad” – funeral march and Guitar Slim’s and Ray’s “ I Wonder Who.” His performance is characteristically blues, as ray ” weeps his way through the lyrics as horns drone sombre chords.” However as Micheal Lydon states that after “ re-listening, Ray opens his voice in baby steps, exploring how to shade his vocal textures”. This recording shows that Ray would need to push himself further with his emotional range. Around his birthday after Ray begins to widen his emotional range his friends in New Orleans would notice a change – he began to sound like a gospel singer. Trumpeter Wallace Davenport recalls “ The first time I heard him I thought he was Charles Brown, then he started getting into that church thing.”

As Ray began to incorporate gospel into his music he would listen to gospel radio and read the Braille bible he carried. Renald Richard explained how ” Ray loves the blues singers like Joe Turner, but most of all he loved gospel singers...He used to talk about Archie Browne, the lead singer with the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, how much he liked them.” He would then begin to sound like them by turning and playing around with his notes, which would be much to the enjoyment of the audience. Later on in December 1953 whilst with Atlantic Records, Armet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler would listen to four arrangements Ray had made on radio station, WDSU. In this you can hear three distinct elements: Jazz, Deep Blues and fervid Gospel, coming together in an early stage, not a sound which is fully refined but one that sounds like Ray Charles.

If there was a single turning point in the career of Ray Charles, it probably occurred on November the 18th 1954 at a radio station in Atlanta. It was here Ray and his recently formed band would record “ I Got a Woman”. This

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was his first hit Ray had with a gospel influence. In October 1954, Ray was touring with his first band toward Indiana. Whilst searching the radio stations he would stop when he found a gospel station. Renald Richard remembered vividly a gospel tune that came on with a good groove and started singing. Ray sang something like “ I got a woman” and I answered “ yeh she lives cross town” then “ she’s good to me.” Renald then wrote the song for the next morning to the satisfaction of Ray. “ I Got a Woman” is an archetypal 16 bar secularisation of “ My Jesus is all the World to me.” Others have seen it as a straight rewrite of “ I Got a Saviour.” The songs Ray had performed before like “ The Sun Gonna Shine” had the hortatory tones of a preacher in the pulpit. “ I Got a Woman” was a preacher at a picnic. “ Light heartened gospel spiritual joy into sexual delight”. It would lift the listener with each of its 4 bar chord change, confirming his optimistic lyrics. Just as the church would joyfully celebrate the glory of God. “ I got a woman’ was a record for every happy couple in America, black, white and in-between.”

The band first performed “ I Got a Woman” for Ahmet and Jerry as they arrived at the Peacock club in Atlanta. Ahmet described how “ the power and precision had stunned Jerry.” Jerry stated that “ something fantastic had happened, Ray had hatched, ready for fame.” Through blending gospel with blues, Ray had the first time fused two strict idioms. In the African-American community the blues and gospel are both part of their culture. However a blues singer didn’t sing gospel and a gospel singer didn’t sing the blue. It was taboo. Many people believed that it was “ sacrilegious to mix blues with spirituals” says Big Bill Broonzy – and American blues singer. However, it quickly rose to the top of the charts in early 1955, the success of “ I got a

woman" being down to good attention from both white and black markets. Before, Ray had recorded songs like " Mess Around" by Ahmet Ertegün, which were big in the R&B charts but not the white charts. A year after its first recording, Elvis Presley would confirm the impression it made by his own cover of " I Got a Woman" at RCA. In Jan 1955 Billboard quotes as " I Got a Woman' as one of the most infectious blues sides to come out since the summer".

At the following recording session for Atlantic in Miami. Ray's defining sound would be clearly and precisely heard. Ray recorded four charts, two straight blues and two gospel charts. The gospel songs " This Little Girl of Mine" and " A Fool For You" would reiterate Ray's push of his gospel influence. " This Little Girl of Mine" is an up tempo shouter with a rhythmic Latin feel based on the gospel song " This Little Light of Mine". " A Fool For You" is a 6/8 double time waltz with Ray's sanctified singing but without the heavenly lyrics, accompanied by piano gospel licks and preaching horns. Although, like " I Got a Woman" these two gospel and R&B charts was seen as sacrilegious, the mix Ray had created appealed to so many audiences across the nation, and introduced a new music that would have a lasting effect, which would be later labelled as Soul music.

As the 1950s progressed vocal groups following Ray Charles, began to add a sense of urgency and meaning- ' Soul', to their style of music resulting in the groups of Motown and others, including groups like the Chicago based family band called the ' Staple Singers' who had hit songs which were centred around Gospel and R&B. Their success followed on into the 1970's. In the late 1950s into the 1960s girl groups joined male Doo-Wop and R&R groups,

which resulted in groups like “ The Shirelles”, “ Marvelettes” and “ The Supremes.” Their material was largely written by the “ Brill Building” writers and received hit records but never usually lasted.

As Ray Charles added the gospel influence to his music, such as the call and response backing vocal groups like the “ Raylettes” so too did Aretha Franklin. She reinfused her female backing groups with a gospel influence, which are present in her mid 1960s Atlantic recordings. Other artists like James Brown, who started his career as a singer with the “ Gospel Starlighters”, following the style of Reverend’s Julius Cheeks and Claude Jeter added R&B to their style. “ The vocal urgency and syncopated dance rhythms of gospel along with top notch R&B house bands came together most clearly in the music of James Brown. Combining a Little Richard- style act with other theatrics from Joe Tex and a pleading version of Ray Charles gospel/soul. He then recorded his hit “ Please, Please, Please”.

In 1959 Ray released “ What’d I Say”, a song that became a top ten pop hit and would be one of his last singles with Atlantic before his move to ABC. There are clear gospel influences combined with the sexual innuendo in the song made it not only widely popular but very controversial to both white and black audiences. In the middle of the song. 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. This improvised interchange between himself and the “ Raylettes” and between the band and audience is much like that of a Preacher and his congregation. Ray also uses gospel dialogue with “ unuh-

uhnnh” over Charles’ moans and cries. He also uses phrases like “shake that thing” and “I feel alright”, and expression for the body instead of the lord.

During Ray’s early life the influence of country and western music is ever present. When Ray Charles was growing up, the south was full of Country or Hillbilly music. Ray explains how there wasn’t a single Saturday night that he wouldn’t listen to the “Grand Ole Opry” on the radio. “I loved Grandpa Jones and other characters. I could hear what they were doing and appreciate the feeling behind it.” Ray would listen to Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, Hank Snow, Hank Williams and later Eddie Arnold. “I listened to them all the time, I certainly dug it and paid it some mind.”

In 1948 Ray joined a Hillbilly band called the “Florida Playboys”. It took just one audition to convince the Playboys that Ray could play country music with genuine flavour, and they hired him, no questions asked about race. For seven months he gigged with the band, playing current country hits of the day like “Kentucky Waltz” and “Anytime” in white honky-tonks in and around Tampa, learning to yodel and singing, “Waiting All for You.” Even as black, blind man, Ray was accepted and applauded just like anyone else by the audience. “I could play the music right and I could do country music with as much feeling as any other southerner.... I had been hearing it since I was a baby.” “Long before the birth of his own country music, Charles looked back with pride on his stint with the Playboys.” Lydon. In an outtake of a 1950’s recording, Ray plays a limpid country lick. The producer chuckles over the studio intercom and says that he didn’t know Ray could play Nashville. Ray then replies “Man, Didn’t you know I gigged with the Florida

Playboys” His time with the Florida Playboys, though brief would plant a seed in his mind that would rise during the 1960’s.

After leaving Atlantic Records in 1959, Ray joined ABC and at the end of 1961. He asked Sid Feller to get together 40 country hits from the last twenty years with the idea to record a country album. Sid Feller had not know at the time that Ray liked County and Samuel Clark and Larry Newton – the executives at ABC Records were adamantly opposed to the idea that Charles brought to them. The ABC executives said, You can’t do no country-western things.... You’re gonna lose all your fans! However Feller believed that Ray understood Country music. He describes how Ray “ loved the simple plaintive lyrics, and he felt that giving the music a lush treatment would make it different”

‘ Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music’ is a dozen tunes that runs the whole scope of Nashville from the traditional ‘ Careless Love’ to the rock and roll ‘ Bye Bye Love’ and from Hank Williams to the B-side fail of ‘ I Can’t Stop Loving You’. The tracks alternate from big band to string and voice. However regardless of all the jazz and symphonic effects present, the heart of every arrangement is a simple strummed guitar. “ Ray’s bluesy melismas wring every tear out of the country weepers, all the poetry out of their monosyllabic lyrics.” ‘ I Can’t Stop Loving You’ has a folk song strength, major scale melody, marching up and down over 3 chords and operatic grandeur created by his baritone voice and orchestra. He also uses his trademark – letting the chorus lead the lyric with his voice following. Ray sings County in his own way, expanding the country sounds without distorting its colour. Ray’s own blend obscures the fact that ‘ Modern Sounds’

was his boldest album, which breaks many barriers. Invading white country music in the 1960's was something black pop-jazz singers didn't do. You had to be 'Country' in 1962.

After 'Modern Sounds' it became a major player in Ray's repertoire and on popular music. His unique blend of Country, Pop, Jazz and R&B introduced country music to people of the city and showed to record companies and producers how to arrange their music to reach a much wider audience. Ray Charles played a pivotal role in shaping the course of a seemingly very different genre of popular music. In the words of his good friend and sometimes collaborator, Willie Nelson, speaking before Charles' death in 2004, Ray Charles the R&B legend did more for country music than any other living human being. The landmark album that earned Ray Charles that praise was *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, which held at number 1 for 14 weeks and stayed in the charts for 2 years. His single release 'I Can't Stop Loving You' ruled at number 1 on R&B and Easy Listening charts for weeks in the summer of 1962 dipping to 3rd in July and beginning to fall in August. As Charles told Rolling Stone magazine a decade later, But Charles recognized the quality of songs like I Can't Stop Loving You by Don Gibson and You Don't Know Me, by Eddy Arnold and Cindy Walker, and the fact that his version of both of those country songs landed in the Top 5 on both the pop and R&B charts was vindication of Charles's long-held belief that There's only two kinds of music as far as I'm concerned: good and bad.

Following the massive commercial success and notice of *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, country music experienced an immediate increase in popularity. According to music writer Daniel Cooper, the album

raised the genre's profile, specifically Nashville sound, of which Charles had covered. Benefiting from this were songwriters, music publishers and country singers who covered the subgenre's material. As noted by Cooper, by the end of 1962, Nashville country publishers were being held as the hottest source of music material in the record business these days.

Ray Charles's success with the stylistic fusion of country and soul on *Modern Sounds* later lead to country soul efforts from performers, such as Candi Staton and Solomon Burke who were both greatly influenced by Charles's *Modern Sounds* recordings. Many country music artists, such as Willie Nelson and Buck Owens, have cited Charles's take on country music and *Modern Sounds* in Country and Western Music as their major influences. In an interview for Country Music Television, Nelson said of *Modern Sounds*'s influence that the album did more for country music than any one artist has ever done. *Modern Sounds* in Country and Western Music has also been perceived by many critics and writers as a landmark album in American music, as the record was the first to blend the two racially distinct genres of country and soul.

Ray Charles' all-embracing attitude toward music was one that he developed during his childhood and early career. Ray was immersed in the sounds of jazz, blues, gospel and country in his youth, playing in R&B bands and a Country Hillbilly band. Ray Charles pioneered soul music, which had a great effect on popular music. In secularising certain aspects of gospel music with R&B, Ray received his first gospel and R&B hit "I Got a Woman", which received attention from both black and white audiences. Subsequently, further releases like "What'd I Say" and the "Hallelujah I Lover Her So"

album attracted a large mainstream audience. His fusion of white country music earned Ray mainstream and crossover success, with his album “Modern Sound in Country and Western Music” which broke racial stereotypes and exposed country music to city dwellers. It also helped other country artists; particularly them orientated around the Nashville sound, reach a wider audience, raising the genre’s profile. To him, the boundaries between those styles of music were made to be crossed, and he made a career out of doing just that having a great effect on popular music.