

# RAY CHARLES

(RAY CHARLES PETERSON)  
LIVER DISEASE

**Born: September 23, 1930**

**Died: June 10, 2004**



Ray Charles's achievements are astonishing enough in their own right; but then factor in the start he had in life...

Born into a poor family in Albany, Georgia, Charles became blind by the age of seven, due to glaucoma; if that weren't bad enough, as a child he saw his younger brother drown, and both his parents died while he was in his teens. Undeterred—driven all the more, if anything—he enrolled at Florida's St. Augustine School for the Deaf and the Blind, where he studied music and Braille (which, in turn, helped him learn composition and arrangement).

"I met Ray when I was about fifteen and he was about eighteen," recalled legendary producer Quincy Jones, "and even then he was always so damn positive, like he could listen to a record of Billy Eckstine's 'Blowin' The Blues Away,' and he could tell you what everybody in the band was doing...It was Ray that taught me how to voice brass."

Having started out on the Florida club circuit as a singer and pianist with a laid-back, sophisticated sheen à la Nat "King" Cole, Charles drifted west to Seattle, making his first recordings in 1949. Atlantic Records picked him up in 1952, but he still hadn't found his voice on the R&B numbers he cut with them. That came after Charles worked with hell-for-leather bluesman Guitar Slim, who brought the fervor of gospel into secular song. Charles learned the lesson well, delivering an impassioned vocal on the driving "I Got A Woman" (1954, based on the hymn "Jesus Is All The World To Me"), soon covered by Charles fan Elvis Presley. He grafted more lyrics onto gospel songs to produce hits with "This Little Girl Of Mine" (1955, previously "This Little Light Of Mine"), and "Talkin' 'Bout You" (1957, hitherto "Talkin' 'Bout Jesus").

Unsurprisingly, many were shocked: "He's mixing the blues with the spirituals," Big Bill Broonzy carped. "I know that's wrong... he should be singing in a church." He dropped another stone-cold classic with 1959's "What'd I Say," an electric piano-driven stomper that nodded to rock 'n' roll, featuring call-and-response backing vocals (from The Raelettes) that derived from church meetings. (Rocker Eddie Cochran was another fan, and turned countless white audiences on to Charles by covering his "What'd I Say" and "Hallelujah I Love Her So"). Combining R&B rhythms with gospel passion, Ray Charles was laying the building blocks of soul music, though jazz was never far away (note the ballads and jazz-band arrangements of 1959 breakthrough *The Genius Of Ray Charles*).

He quit Atlantic for ABC in November 1959, with no immediate drop in quality. The warm mixture of weariness and love in his take on Hoagy Carmichael's "Georgia On My Mind" (1960) confirmed Charles as one of popular song's finest interpreters; he teamed up with ace arranger Quincy Jones and members of Count Basie's band to produce 1960's big-band bonanza *Genius + Soul = Jazz*; the comic, punchy "Hit The Road Jack" (1961) saw him play the part of a put-upon philanderer with gusto; and that same year he gave a performance of effortlessly charming innuendo on "Baby It's Cold Outside," a hit duet from 1961's *Ray Charles And Betty Carter*.

The singer was mixing and matching genres for fun now, but even for him his next move was a startling one. On *Modern Sounds In Country And Western* (1962, his only *Billboard* No. 1 album), he took inspiration from a genre that seemed utterly foreign to most

**RIGHT** Ray Charles in concert in 1966.





**LEFT** Memorial viewing at the Los Angeles Convention Center in June 2004.

**RIGHT** In concert at the Orleans Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, October 1999.

contemporary black artists, but the conviction and sensitivity of his vocals swiftly established the album as a milestone release, spawning a million-seller in the aching "I Can't Stop Loving You." The following year, Hank Williams' "Take These Chains From My Heart" provided another smash. In retrospect, of course, it made perfect sense: with its trademark tales of heartbreak, death, and hard-living, what was country music but white blues?

"I'm a musician, man," Charles told *Q* magazine in 1992. "I can play Beethoven, I can play Rachmaninov, I can play Chopin. Every now and then when I do dates with symphony orchestras, I play these things and I shock the hell out of people." Charles' eclectic approach to music making frustrated some—being "in every camp," as Quincy Jones described him—but he could spread the talent mighty thin. The early 1960s saw him consolidate his stature as one of popular music's giants, with a world tour in 1964, selling out Paris's Olympia Theatre ten nights in a row—an unprecedented feat for any American artist.

During the first half of the decade, he was voted best singer five times by critics in *Down Beat* magazine, though by the mid-1960s much of the bite and edge had gone and he became an "easy listening" artist. In truth, he'd already packed several lifetimes' worth of innovation into barely a decade. Moreover, he had other priorities: busted in 1965, Charles spent the next year kicking

a long-term heroin addiction (to hide the tracks on his arms, he always wore long sleeves).

Between 1957 and 1971, Charles racked up thirty-two Top 40 hits (his 1966 cover of Buck Owens' "Crying Time" received two Grammys). He showed no signs of letting up in the 1970s, with regular tours, including trips to Japan, almost every year. As with any artist whose career spans several decades, Charles was capable of wild inconsistency and gargantuan misjudgements of taste; he produced more than his share of schlock and recorded highlights became fewer over time. But his talent never deserted him—note his impassioned take on Stevie Wonder's "Livin' For The City" from 1975's *Renaissance*. A sparkling performance in *The Blues Brothers* (1980) movie proved his gift for comedy was intact, while a few years later he provided strong vocal support on USA For Africa's "We Are The World."

Liver disease finally claimed Charles in 2004, but even death couldn't stop him: the posthumous *Genius Loves Company*—an easy-going collaboration with a host of admirers including Van Morrison, B. B. King, Willie Nelson, and Elton John—picked up eight Grammys. (He also left behind him two marriages, and twelve children, by seven mothers.)

All in all, he was fully deserving of the epithet that Frank Sinatra bestowed upon him in the 1950s: genius.

