

Remembering Ray: a tribute

16 June 2004

I did not know Ray Charles. But I remember 1954, and the first time I heard a recording of Ray singing “I Got A Woman” on the radio! The experience was shattering. Suddenly, all the parameters of 1950s pop music disintegrated, and a new kind of beast prowled the airwaves.

The top five recorded hits in 1954 were “Hey There” (Rosemary Clooney), “Wanted” (Perry Como), “Little Things Mean a Lot” (Kitty Kallen), “Sh-Boom” (Crew Cuts), and “Make Love to Me” (Jo Stafford). All these singers, and groups, were fine and capable musicians, comfortably at home in a live performance, or in a studio where more musical accuracy was required. Of course they were all white (no surprise there), they were all very good, and they were all...kind of boring.

CNN’s posting of Ray’s obituary (6/11/04) mentions that he once told the Associated Press, “The way I see it, we’re actors, but musical ones. We’re doing it with notes, and lyrics with notes, telling a story.” In hindsight, it was Ray Charles the “actor,” through his extraordinary singing, playing, and orchestrating, who absolutely blindsided me with a delight I can still recall. Each cut of almost every album became a thundering new play...sometimes intensely sad, or blue, or sexual, or happy or just plain crazy! But always, always, from a depth of experience and pain no pop star dared to plumb!

In Bob Herbert’s column “Loving Ray Charles” (*New York Times* Op-Ed, 6/14/04) he speaks of Ray’s music: “And we reveled in the fact that it was unquestionably subversive.” Yes, Ray’s music was! The fighting in Korea had only stopped the year before. McCarthyism was rampant. Hundreds and hundreds of artists, teachers, professionals in every field were hounded, arrested, fired, even jailed for daring to think for themselves. Blacklists abounded in film, television, and the music industry as well.

Any expression that did not involve love of country, family values, and the status quo was excised from

popular culture. Books were still banned in Boston. Contraception devices were illegal in Massachusetts. Lynching still occurred (Emmett Till’s death would happen the next year). The fifties were not “fabulous” and they did not involve too many “happy days.” And along came Ray.

Science and technology produce new and remarkable devices every day. But each invention creates a whole new set of rules of behavior, for which the creators had nary a clue. The music industry ridiculed the Internet and its ability to download music with MP3 files, and other devices. They have paid dearly for that attitude. Similarly, the current administration had no idea that a lot of its young soldiers in Iraq carry laptops, digital cameras, and cell phones (that take pictures, no less!). The thousands of photos of torture at Abu Ghraib took only a few weeks to spread over the entire world.

Ray Charles began recording just as the Long Playing Record (LP) began its explosive commercial development. While the single (78 had changed over to 45) still ruled in AM radio, the LP became the choice of the home consumer. Now you could spend 30 to 45 minutes with the same artist, as if you had your own private concert. And if that artist was Ray Charles, you were simply overcome with his talent, breadth of emotion, mammoth ability to home in on every contemporary style and his ability to change from Hamlet into the Devil within one song. That’s “acting”!

Watch David North’s remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

I did not know Ray Charles. But I remember him. Boy, do I remember him...!

Joseph Dean
New York City



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