

# RAY CHARLES

## A SOULFUL VOICE IN COUNTRY MUSIC

Ray Charles overcame barriers of race, class, and disability to transform American popular music and become one of the most admired and recognized entertainers in the world. Over the course of a career that lasted nearly six decades, he embraced Rhythm & Blues, jazz, pop, and country music with equal affection. He is widely known as the “genius of soul,” but he also has a unique and powerful place in country music. Charles frequently recorded country songs and introduced country music to new audiences. He collaborated with country stars, on national television and in the recording studio.

Born Ray Charles Robinson on September 23, 1930, in Albany, Georgia, he grew up in tiny Greenville, Florida. As a boy, he absorbed many musical sounds: gospel songs sung in church, the blues played by local musicians, and country songs he heard on broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry radio show. At age five, he began losing his sight, and was blind by age seven. For the next eight years, he attended the St. Augustine School for the Deaf and the Blind, where he developed his piano skills and learned to read and write music in Braille.

He left school at fifteen and began his lifelong career in music, dropping his last name to set him apart from popular boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. At first, in the 1940s and early '50s, he imitated the smooth piano blues of African American performers Nat King Cole and Charles Brown, but he soon developed his own style.

In the 1950s, he began scoring major hits such as “I’ve Got a Woman” and “What’d I Say” on the Rhythm & Blues (R&B) chart. These recordings established him as the primary inventor of soul



music, a mix of gospel music style and secular (or nonreligious) lyrics.

In 1962, Charles recorded an entire album of country songs, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. His record label tried to talk him out of it, thinking he would lose Black fans singing what many often considered “white” music at a time when the United States was sharply divided by race. Instead, the album was wildly popular. Charles’s version of “I Can’t Stop Loving You” reached #1 on the pop and R&B charts.

Charles continued to play country songs from the 1960s onward. In the years following *Modern Sounds*, he recorded dozens of country tunes as well as an album of duets with country stars. One of those duets, “Seven Spanish Angels” (featuring Willie Nelson), went to #1 on the country chart.

A member of the first class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Charles died in 2004 at the age of seventy-three.

### SOURCES

*American Songwriter*; Biography.com; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* by Diane Pecknold; the *New York Times*; *Rolling Stone*