



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 a music career of nearly sixty years, he embraced rhythm & blues, jazz, pop, and country music equally. He is widely known as the “Genius of Soul,” but he also has a unique and powerful place in country music. Charles often recorded country songs and introduced country music to new audiences. On many occasions, he worked with country artists and musicians—onstage, on television, and in the recording studio.

Born Ray Charles Robinson in 1930, in Albany, Georgia, he grew up in tiny Greenville, Florida. As a boy, he heard many musical sounds: gospel songs in church, the blues played by local musicians, and country songs broadcast on the Grand Ole Opry. At age five, he began losing his sight, and he was completely blind by age seven. He attended the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, where he learned to read and write in Braille and to play the piano and clarinet. It’s also where he began to write music.

Charles left school at fifteen and began his musical career, but he had trouble finding songs that matched his style. In the 1950s, he began writing his own music, though he didn’t believe this was his gift. “I am not a true writer,” he said. “I wrote because maybe I heard an idea, or somebody said something, or I needed some material.” His early hits included “I’ve Got a Woman,” “What’d I Say,” “Drown in My Own Tears,” and “Hallelujah I Love Her So.”



In time, he started performing songs written by other people that he could sing in his own style. He looked for songs that, as he said, “I can put myself into.” In 1962, he released the album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. His record label tried to talk him out of it, thinking he would lose Black fans singing “white” country music at a time when the United States was deeply divided by race. Instead, the album became very popular. Even though most country radio stations didn’t play Charles’s “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” the song reached #1 on the pop chart. That album—along with

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LISTEN

“Georgia on My Mind,” “What’d I Say,” “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” “Seven Spanish Angels”



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his next album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music, Volume 2*—is credited with expanding country music’s audience.

In the early 1980s, Charles recorded some country music albums in Nashville. In 1984, he made *Friendship*, an album of ten duets with country stars, including Johnny Cash, George Jones, and Merle Haggard. His duet with Willie Nelson, “Seven Spanish Angels,” was a #1 country hit.

Charles was a member of the first class of musicians inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. In 2004, he died, at age seventy-three, at his home in Los Angeles. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2021.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

- As a child, where did Ray Charles hear country music?

- Circle the word “embraced” in paragraph one. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of the word. Based on the context clues, what is the meaning of the word?

- Explain Ray’s impact on country music in your own words. Highlight evidence for your answer in the text.

