

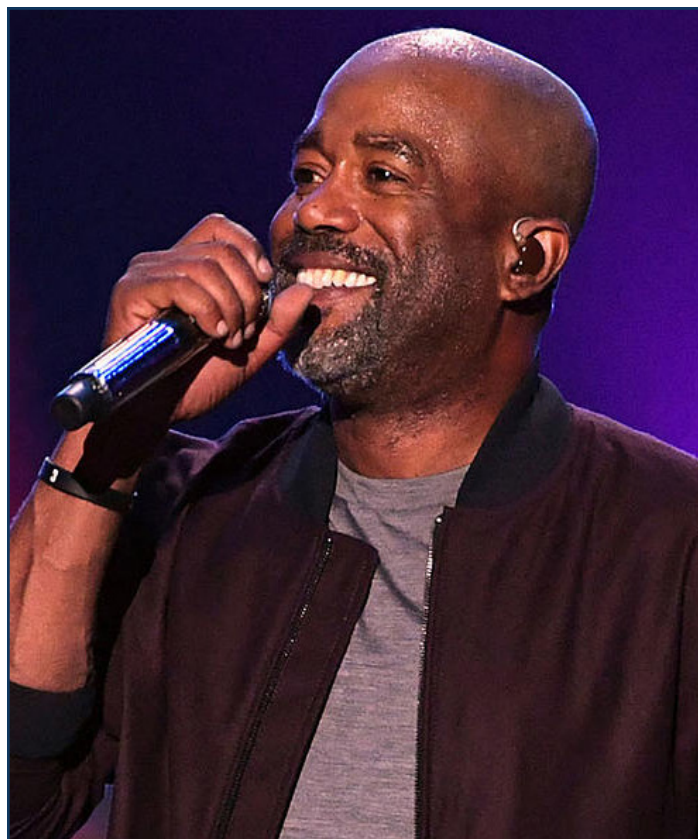
DARIUS RUCKER: COUNTRY'S BOUNDARY JUMPER

Darius Rucker is the rare artist who has had successful careers in two genres—first as the lead vocalist of the pop-rock band Hootie & the Blowfish and then, beginning in 2008, as a solo country singer-songwriter. As a Black artist who has achieved success in a largely white genre, he has helped break down racial barriers in country music.

Born May 13, 1966, in Charleston, South Carolina, Rucker was one of six children of a single mother who worked as a nurse. Growing up, he listened to such R&B icons as Otis Redding and Al Green, but he was just as drawn to country and pop music: “I think I just said to myself, ‘I’m never going to let anybody tell me what I can listen to.’ And I never did.”

In 1986, while enrolled at the University of South Carolina, he and three classmates formed Hootie & the Blowfish, a name inspired by the nicknames of two college buddies. With Rucker’s smooth baritone voice in command, the band’s melodic pop-rock sound proved wildly popular. The band’s 1994 debut album, *Cracked Rear View*, sold twenty-one million copies and remains among the best-selling records of all time. After four more albums, the band took a break in 2008, and Rucker decided to explore his love for country music.

Making the jump, though, meant overcoming the prevailing perception that country music excludes Black musicians; Charley Pride was the last major Black artist, and his stardom had peaked decades before. Rucker has been open about resistance that he has faced. “I was going into radio stations,” he says, “and being told that they didn’t think it was going to work because I was African American. That was tough.”



In fact, Rucker upended preconceptions, and his debut country album produced three straight #1 singles: “Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It,” “It Won’t Be Like This for Long,” and “Alright.” In 2009, he received the Country Music Association’s award for New Artist of the Year, and in 2012, he became only the third Black artist to join the cast of the Grand Ole Opry. He has gone on to score more #1 country singles, record five more solo albums, and, in 2020, co-hosted the *54th Annual CMA Awards* with Reba McEntire. Rucker’s Nashville experience, he says, has helped him grow

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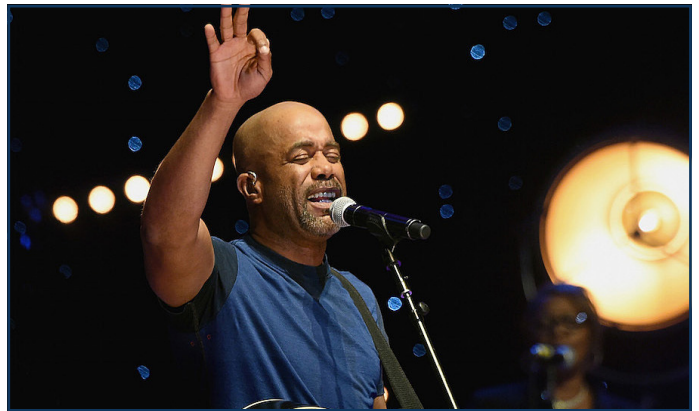
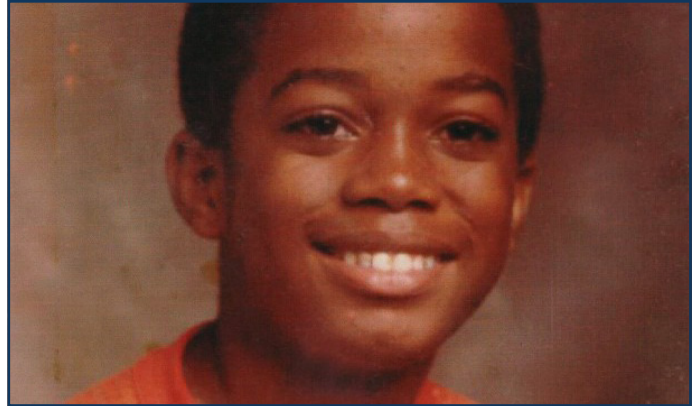
LISTEN

“Wagon Wheel,” “Come Back Song,” “Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It,” “Alright”

DARIUS RUCKER: COUNTRY'S BOUNDARY JUMPER (CONTINUED)

as a songwriter. “With Hootie, we would mostly just [each] write songs and then bring them to the band,” he says. “But with country, I started co-writing a lot.” He also used to wait for inspiration to strike, but scheduled writing sessions in Nashville taught him that “songwriting is not just an art here, it’s a business. That’s what people do.”

Switching genres as a songwriter has been less of a challenge. “For me, it’s really just music,” Rucker says. “We all put our own labels on it, and I understand that and live with it. But it’s really the same notes and the same words, just played a little differently.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Explain the perception that Darius Rucker had to overcome once he decided to record country music.

2. Describe how Rucker’s songwriting process changed once he moved to Nashville. How did it stay the same?

3. Describe Rucker’s greatest impact on music in your own words. Highlight evidence for your answer in the text.



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”



RAY CHARLES: A SOULFUL VOICE IN COUNTRY MUSIC (CONTINUED)

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

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

2. 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?

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



W. C. HANDY: FATHER OF THE BLUES

W. C. Handy is known as the “Father of the Blues” for introducing many people to a new musical style—the blues—and for helping make it popular. As a songwriter, bandleader, musician, recording artist, and music publisher, he played a big role in transforming the Black folksongs of his youth into soulful American blues.

Born in Florence, Alabama, in 1873, William Christopher Handy was the son of a minister and his wife, both of whom were former slaves. He was raised on Black hymns and spirituals, but he also was drawn to the music he heard on the streets and from traveling musicians. He learned to play the cornet as a teenager and soon began his career in traveling bands.

In 1903, he settled in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where he led a dance band, and one night while waiting for a train, he heard a local guitarist playing a sad song that reminded him of the folksongs he heard as a boy. Handy had thought of them as “simple,” but as he wrote in his 1941 autobiography, he “suddenly saw the songs with the eye of a budding composer.” Listening with new ears set him off on a mission to turn these old songs of “suffering and hard luck” into new music.

In 1914, while living in Memphis, he wrote what is considered his masterpiece, “St. Louis Blues,” and published it through the music publishing house he co-owned, Pace & Handy Music Company. The song sold a million copies of sheet music and brought Handy fame and fortune. He followed with hit after hit into the 1920s, combining scraps of old melodies and lyrics to



form complete songs. “Each one of my blues is based on some old Negro song of the South. Some old song that is a part of the memories of my childhood and of my race,” Handy told an interviewer. “I can tell you the exact song I used as a basis for any one of my blues. Yes, the blues that are genuine are really folk-songs.”

Continued on back

LISTEN

“St. Louis Blues,” “Memphis Blues,” “Beale Street Blues,” “Loveless Love,” “Hesitating Blues”



W. C. HANDY: FATHER OF THE BLUES (CONTINUED)

Handy continued his music publishing career in New York and, during the 1930s, composed several spirituals. His songs were sung and recorded by both Black and white artists, and they inspired many songwriters to follow his lead. When he died in 1958, it was a major news story in newspapers all over the country, and 150,000 people lined the streets of New York for his funeral.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What is the significance of the song that brought W. C. Handy “fame and fortune”?

2. Circle the word “composer” in paragraph three. 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?

3. Explain W. C.’s greatest impact on music in your own words. Highlight evidence for your answer in the text.

