

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Ray Charles*

Years: *1954-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

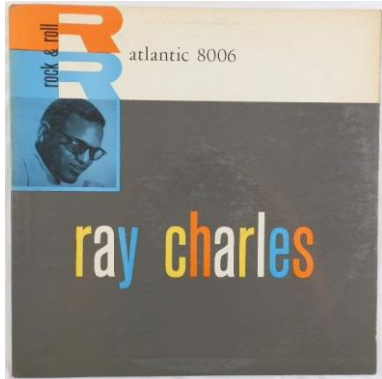
RAY CHARLES



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1949-2004</i>	<i>Classic soul</i>	<i>Sinner's Prayer (1954)</i>

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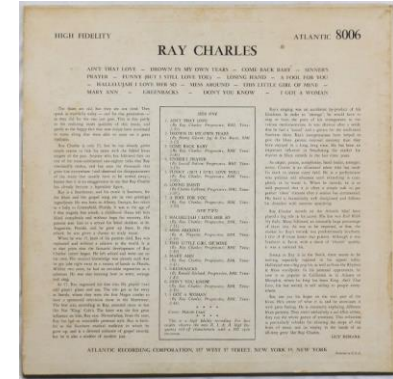


RAY CHARLES

Album released:
June 1957

V A L U E
4 5 5 5 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) Ain't That Love; 2) **Drown In My Own Tears**; 3) Come Back (Baby); 4) Sinner's Prayer; 5) Funny (But I Still Love You); 6) Losing Hand; 7) A Fool For You; 8) Hallelujah, I Love Her So; 9) Mess Around; 10) This Little Girl Of Mine; 11) Mary Ann; 12) **Greenbacks**; 13) Don't You Know; 14) I've Got A Woman.

REVIEW

Although Atlantic Records could hardly be accused of spoiling their artists with too many LP offers, it still took Ray Charles a staggerin' five years in between his first 45" record for Atlantic and his first LP for the same label — in between which he'd already become one of America's best known musical names just on the strength of several big R&B hits: 'Mess Around', 'I've Got A Woman', 'A Fool For You', 'Drown In My Own Tears', 'Hallelujah I Love Her So'... all of which are assembled on this LP and, consequently, make it the single best Ray Charles LP ever made. Because even if he did go on to vastly expand his vision, carry out several important cross-overs, write and perform many more hook-filled tunes, give us 'Hit The Road Jack' and 'Georgia On My Mind', etc. etc., it is really with these early Atlantic records that he truly shook up the musical world, just like Elvis had his single biggest impact with the early Sun-era recordings. In the mid-Fifties, Uncle Ray invented a whole new musical genre — soul — and in the forty minutes allocated for this LP, you may and will not only witness that birth, you might even want to admit that none of the adepts of the Father of Soul could take better care of the Father's baby in the half century that followed.



Somewhat ironically, the first of these big hits was also the least innovative — it is ‘Mess Around’, «written», or, more accurately, ripped off by Atlantic’s president Ahmet Ertegun from a fairly old boogie-woogie / jump blues melody that goes all the way from Cow Cow Davenport in the 1920s to Big Joe Turner’s piano player Pete Johnson in the 1930s. However, it took Atlantic’s modernized production values, its hyper-energetic rhythm section, and, most importantly, Ray’s aggressive playing style to turn the tune into something genuinely wild — topping it off with the brass players, whose parts slide in and out of the general fury like chainsaws slicing in and out of a tree trunk. And then there is that voice — Ray’s unmistakably mysterious «old man’s voice trapped inside a young man’s body», announcing the birth of a raunchier, more exuberant and less restrained style of dance music than the R&B of the previous generation as represented by Big Joe Turner (ironically, Big Joe himself only started recording for Atlantic one year prior to Ray, but, of course, he’d already been a big star of the jump blues circuit since the 1930s).

As awesomely fun as the fast boogie of ‘Mess Around’ is (and only the Animals could ever do the tune sufficient justice with their own cover), Ray truly made the grade one year later with ‘I’ve Got A Woman’, his first #1 hit on the R&B charts and *the* textbook example on the birth of soul — all you have to do, as it turns out, is to take an old spiritual and replace gospel lyrics with secular ones. Could the song have enjoyed comparable success if he sang "it must be Jesus" instead? Never in a million years. That said, its «novelty» aspect should not, and did not, detract from the power and precision of the arrangement, or from the unique qualities of Ray’s voice: in this particular case, the only other cover version that mattered was Elvis’, whose voice quality was no slouch either. However, Elvis delivered most of his lines in a gruff, brutal manner, so much so that his "never grumbles or fusses, just treats me right" became an assertion of (toxic?) masculinity — Ray, on the other hand, still preserves the spiritual roots of the tune, with far more softness and admiration in his voice for the ladies to swoon over. (Which is hardly to suggest that Ray and Elvis held seriously different opinions on the fair sex — after all, the song does declare that "she knows a woman’s place is right there in her home", and there is no reason to think that either of the two ever doubted the truthfulness of this statement. In the end, smoothness and gruffness are two sides of the same coin).

As if to drive that point even further home, two years later Ray repeated the formula and made it even more obvious with ‘Hallelujah I Love Her So’, whose title just screams *blasphemy!*, especially since Ray Charles in 1956 could hardly have been suspected of pushing forward the idea that Jesus might have been a woman. The difference from ‘I’ve Got A Woman’, though, is that the tables have been turned: the music now is purely secular (similar in style to Ike Turner’s ‘Get It Over Baby’), while the lyrics clearly evoke religious imagery all the way ("when I’m in trouble and I have no friends, I know she’ll go with me until the end"). Had anybody, prior to Ray, ever confessed his love for his girl so loud and proud to the whole

wide world the exact same way one would express his love for the Savior? Even if they did, Ray still did it better, because whoever you are, you can only do it worse than Ray.

And yet again, though, even if it was this fast style of delivery that made Ray Charles into a household name, you do not truly begin to «get» Ray Charles until you get into the slow, moody, soul-searching stuff — songs like ‘A Fool For You’ and ‘Drown In My Own Tears’. To properly appreciate the latter, listen to it in the [original recording](#) by Lula Reed — a nice, but not particularly impressive piece of blues-pop. Why? Because the singing does not even begin to properly explore the emotion inherent in the lyrics: Lula Reed sings that she’ll drown in her tears but feels rather as if she is quarreling with a customer while waiting on tables — and it doesn’t help that the accompanying piano and guitar are just lazily spinning chords in circles in a casual everyday manner. Cue Uncle Ray, who somehow saw through the facade to open up the song’s true potential — and turned it into a true anthem of heartbreak from the opening lines. This is friggin’ method acting here, as the man genuinely lives through each line, making it meaningful. Just savor that little nasal crack of "...into my e-e-eyes", where it seems he just got detracted by having to wipe one of those tears off, or the little extra terrified determination he brings into the word "realize" (because he just began to realize!), or the epic importance he gives to the line "my pouring tears... *are runnin' wild*"... you could probably write a whole psychological treatise around the emotional spectacle he gives us in this song, and I have not even mentioned the piano playing: sparse, laconic, with heavy punchy emphasis on each chord that suggests a heavy, gloomy attitude, rather than mere background lounge entertainment. To top it off, the Cookies (one of Atlantic’s girl groups that provided backing vocals for Ray prior to the formation of his own «Raelettes») enter almost at the very last moment to steal the song title out of Ray’s very lips — to his "I guess I’ll..." they add their own "drown in my own tears!" from somewhere up in the air, like a supernatural Greek choir mediating between man and gods. At this point, entertainment crosses over into the world of high art, even if not everyone realised at the time.

And these are just the hit singles — the tracks you are most likely to know through greatest hit compilations or through such classy retrospectives as **Atlantic Rhythm And Blues 1947-1974**. But what makes this self-titled LP truly outstanding is that its «deep cuts», i.e. the less successful singles and B-sides are just as strong — in fact, out of the 14 tracks included here there is not one I could describe as filler, though, admittedly, some of them are melodically similar to some of their bigger brethren without sharing the same grip on the listener. For instance, the melodic and emotional flow of ‘Ain’t That Love’ clearly exposes it as a lesser companion to ‘Hallelujah I Just Love Her So’ (but it does have extra girl harmonies!). And the B-side to ‘I’ve Got A Woman’, the slow-burning, passionately-pleading ‘Come Back (Baby)’, is a slightly more old-school generic predecessor to ‘Fool For You’ (but is still totally worth it if only for the gut-wrenching, throat-gurgling *yeeaaaaah*

before the final "let's talk it over, one more time"). And 'Don't You Know' would later be remade better with a big band arrangement as 'Let The Good Times Roll', but it is still nice to hear this «home demo version» with just a few horns and Ray chillin' at his piano in between all the turn-your-lamp-down-low rhetorics.

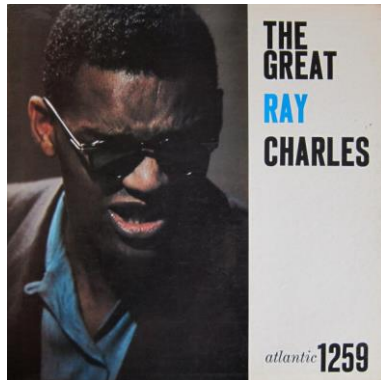
Yet there is at least one downright terrifying masterpiece among these deep cuts: 'Sinner's Prayer', a cover of an older blues tune by Lowell Fulson and Lloyd Glenn which Ray had, once again, elevated to epic status with a wave of his hand — more precisely, by squeezing the darkest emotion possible out of the bass end of his piano, and by engaging the instrument in a call-and-response session with his voice which all but mimicks the dialogue between a tired, tormented man and his inner conscience, or perhaps even God himself. I remember first hearing the song as a cover on Eric Clapton's **From The Cradle**, where it was one of the many highlights (and had the advantage of Eric's own God-voice in the carefully picked menace of his guitar chords) — but the double punch of Ray's piano and singing was and is unbeatable, not back then, not ever. Next to this performance, everything else on the record feels a bit light and shallow.

Then again, speaking of light and shallow, nothing is wrong with light and shallow if it produces mini-gems such as the Latin-influenced dance number 'This Little Girl Of Mine', or, especially, 'Greenbacks', the comic tale of Ray's imaginary (or was that real?) meeting with a lady of the night which ended in a major disappointment — probably the funniest number in the man's catalog and a good reminder that he could really be anything and anyone you wanted him to be, even Louis Jordan when and if the time called. Trivia note: The song is credited to Renald Richard, Ray's trumpet player and informal musical director, who also co-authored 'I've Got A Woman' and is said to have later left the band in protest of Ray's rampant drug usage — so if you want, you might actually read a subtle warning against abusing life's temptations into the lyrics of 'Greenbacks', even if its subject matter is loose women rather than drugs. Whatever it is, though, the lines "I left the place with tears in my eyes / As I waved Lincoln and Jackson a last goodbye" beat out Leiber and Stoller as the funniest verbal shit to hit the pop market in the Fifties.

In the end, compilation or not, this is song-by-song one of the most fabulous LPs of the decade — if I really wanted to, I could rant about these numbers for ages. It really condenses all the main sides of Ray into one package — the playful and exciting, the sweet and sentimental, the serious and the tortured — and provides a major insight into the birth of a whole new musical direction. And it simply has no equal. For rock'n'roll, you would be very hard pressed to pinpoint just one album from the Fifties as essential — Elvis, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry all capture different sides of the genre which have to be added up if you want something comprehensive. But in the sphere of soul music, Ray's only competition back

then might have been James Brown, who (a) came much later and (b) performed almost exclusively «body music», putting him in a very separate category (I've always found the «Godfather of Soul» nickname inappropriate — more like the «Godfather of Libido», if you ask me). At the very least, if you limit Fifties' soul to Atlantic Records, it is clear that nobody who worked with Atlantic in the 1950s came even remotely close to producing an LP of such quality and intensity. Be sure to hear and digest *every* song on it, not just the stuff that ends up on best-of packages.





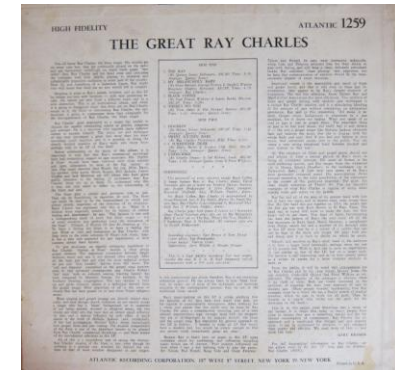
THE GREAT RAY CHARLES

Album released:

June 1957

V A L U E
2 2 2 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) The Ray; 2) My Melancholy Baby; 3) Black Coffee; 4) There's No You; 5) Doodlin'; 6) Sweet Sixteen Bars; 7) I Surrender Dear; 8) Undecided; 9*) Dawn Ray; 10*) The Man I Love; 11*) Music, Music, Music; 12*) Hornful Soul; 13*) Ain't Misbehavin'; 14*) Joyride.

REVIEW

I know that it is essentially unfair to compare this record with something like Paul McCartney's **Liverpool Oratorio**: whereas Paul was anything but a professional classical composer and simply carried out an experiment in an unfamiliar genre (where any *a priori* chances of success were minuscule even for an aging genius), Ray started out as a jazz musician, albeit always with a pop entertainment angle, and the music recorded on this album was not altogether different from stuff he'd played in bars and town halls for at least half a decade before landing on Atlantic. In other words, he feels totally at home with these instrumental performances, supported by a small jazz band and recorded over three different sessions in New York City. And yet, next to the songs on **Ray Charles**, this material does not feel more «serious» or «complex» — it just feels... boring.

The thing is, Ray Charles *is* a great piano player, there is no doubt about it in my mind. But nobody and nothing is great «per se», outside of any context — and just like Chuck Berry was a great guitar player when he played 'Johnny B. Goode' but wouldn't make any sense standing next to Wes Montgomery or Jimi Hendrix, Ray was a great piano player when he used the piano in conjunction with his voice (see my remarks in the previous review on the terrifying dialog between the singing and the playing on a song like 'Sinner's Prayer'). He was not a virtuoso; he had little talent for long stretches of creative improvisation; he relied on stock phrasing rather than trying to invent his own — and none of this should come off as a criticism *as long as* we are talking about his many soul hits (or «deep cuts»). But once we go into the realm of instrumental

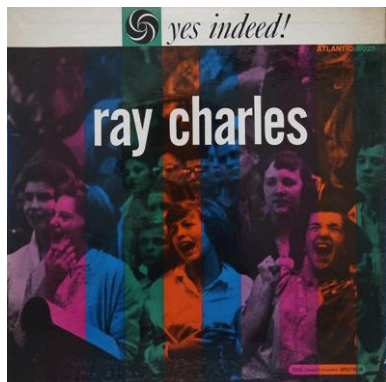
jazz, Ray Charles is no Thelonious Monk, no Art Tatum, and no Bud Powell. He ain't even no Fats Waller, whose 'Ain't Misbehavin' was also recorded during those sessions, in a slow, dragged-out, yawn-inducing version.

None of these tunes — mostly instrumental renditions of well-known jazz-pop standards — will be likely to attract your attention. They are passable, mildly enjoyable as background atmosphere while doing chores or old-fashionably relaxing with a glass of wine; turn the volume down a bit and you end up with a perfect accompaniment to Frank Sinatra's round of stand-up jokes in some Vegas hotel. 'The Ray', contributed by none other than Quincy Jones himself, plays out at the beginning as a relaxed 4-minute introductory fanfare but is so smooth and toothless that taking it as some sort of symbolic representation of Ray Charles' essence is impossible. Perhaps the most telling moment is 'Sweet Sixteen Bars', Ray's own piece which is essentially an instrumental variation on 'Drown In My Own Tears' — and is barely listenable when compared to the vocal version: slow, quiet, uninteresting, interminable. What a difference a voice makes.

Of course, not being the hugest jazz fan in the universe, I could not technically explain what is so cool, for instance, about Horace Silver's original recording of 'Doodlin' and what is so hum-hum about Ray's interpretation (though he must have been proud of it, since he actually put it out as a single). But really, that's just it: even if Ray's reproduction of the theme and his own piano solo match up to the original, they certainly do not surpass it or lead it into any particularly interesting and unexplored territory. This is simply not the kind of stuff with which Ray was able to work his magic, and while it is quite commendable that he *did* try to establish himself as a jazz musician when there was no financial or other pressure on him to do so, it is quite instructive for all of us to see how gloriously (or ingloriously) he failed in this matter.

For the record, those sessions actually produced material for *two* entire LPs: the second, unscrupulously titled **The Genius After Hours**, was put together by Atlantic from outtakes already after Ray had left the label — today, most of the tracks that went on it are usually joined with **The Great Ray Charles**, making for a fairly excruciating one-hour listen with no surprises other than seeing that most of the new tracks are credited to Ray himself (including 'Joyride', which is at least fast and lets you evaluate the genius' skills at playing speedy runs all over the keyboard — honestly, though, I think Amos Milburn and Pete Johnson were more fluent when it came to this stuff).





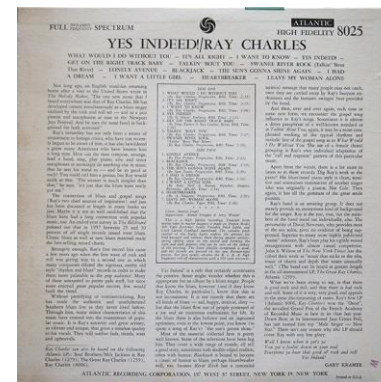
YES INDEED!

Album released:

October 1958

V A L U E
4 4 4 3 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) What Would I Do Without You; 2) It's All Right; 3) I Want To Know; 4) Yes Indeed!; 5) Get On The Right Track Baby; 6) Talkin' 'Bout You; 7) Swanee River Rock; 8) **Lonely Avenue**; 9) Blackjack; 10) The Sun's Gonna Shine Again; 11) I Had A Dream; 12) I Want A Little Girl; 13) Heartbreaker; 14) Leave My Woman Alone.

REVIEW

This is more like it — once again, we have Ray Charles in his natural habitat, blasting off three-minute long R&B singles instead of hopelessly competing with the monsters of jazz. The only problem is that **Yes Indeed!** is, in fact, just another compilation, following exactly the same model as **Ray Charles** — and, second time around, it is not nearly as efficient. Curiously, if you look at Ray's chart history, you will quickly notice that 1957–58 marked an odd lull in his commercial fortune: in between 'Ain't That Love' in early 1957 and 'Night Time Is The Right Time' in early 1959, he did not manage to place anything in the top 10. Given that the same period coincided with his investiture into jazz (besides **The Great Ray Charles**, there was also **Soul Brothers**, a collaboration with the wonderful vibraphonist Milt Jackson, in mid-1958), it may be assumed that during these years, he was genuinely trying to get himself into the league of «serious musicians», and consequently paying less attention to the quality of his «lightweight» R&B material. Once that alternate career failed to properly take off, the Father of Soul would quickly be back with 'Night Time' and 'What'd I Say' — doing precisely what he was born to do.



In the meantime, **Yes Indeed!**, released in the fall of 1958, did a fairly good job of putting together four of Ray's most recent A-sides along with most of the corresponding B-sides, and further padding out the LP with leftovers dating all the

way back to 1953 (although a few of these still ended up left behind and had to wait until **What'd I Say** next year). Since the bulk of the album still consists of 1957–58 recordings, playing it back to back with **Ray Charles** will most likely yield the same result it yields for me — *good*, not *great*. Out of these 14 tracks, I think that only ‘Lonely Avenue’ has managed to become a stone cold classic, though ‘It’s All Right’, ‘Talkin’ ’Bout You’, and ‘Leave My Woman Alone’ were also popular enough with UK audiences to deserve being covered by many British R&B bands.

Let us, therefore, start by focusing our attention on that particular song, one of the earliest successful compositions by Doc Pomus. It is highly unusual in terms of its overall rhythmic structure, but whenever I start to think if there is anything else it reminds me of, my association train always leads me to ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ — not just because both songs explore identical emotional territory, but also because both do it with the aid of the same pounding *ka-boom, ka-boom, ka-boom* rhythm, with its relentless thick bass attack on the strong beat. The difference is that ‘Lonely Avenue’ further pursues this in the vocal performance, which Ray persistently chops up in mini-segments aligned with the beat — “now my *ROOM...* has *GOT...* two *WIN-*dows... but the *SUN-*shine *NE-*ver... comes *THRU...*” At the very least, this is an intriguing, previously unheard-of manner of singing that just grabs your attention. At most, it is a daring impersonation of a sort of *post*-emotional state, as of one choking down on one’s very voice already after having ruined oneself with anger, rage, hysteria, and sobbing. Only the backing vocals by the Cookies provide a slightly more emotional vocal counterpoint to this ruthless monotony — but it works fine until the very end. Because of this sacrificial self-restriction, ‘Lonely Avenue’ is hardly the place to study all the subtleties of Ray’s vocal strategies, but it is another brilliant example of his versatility and love for all sorts of out-of-the-box tricks at the peak of his career.

The B-side for that single couldn’t be more different, though: ‘Leave My Woman Alone’ was placed last on this LP, in the exact same spot as ‘I Got A Woman’ on **Ray Charles**, to finish off the whole thing with a fast ecstatic blast of energy and exuberance — except that ‘Leave My Woman Alone’ throws in an extra aggressive punch, being just a tad darker and angrier (“if I ever see my little girl in your new car, I’m gonna do some work on you” and all that). This time, there is no space left for even a sax solo — the entire last minute is given over to Uncle Ray raving and ranting, with the Cookies as his steady anchor in the background. This is the humble beginning of the «soul trance» ritual which Ray obviously nicked from the gospel tradition and introduced to the three-minute pop single — and one year later, he would finally dare to turn an entire three-minute pop single into such a ritual, with ‘Talkin’ ’Bout You’, which is just a straightforward gospel rocker converted into a love anthem with minimal adjustments to the lyrics. In fact, part of the reason why ‘Talkin’ ’Bout You’ did not chart might have had to do with people mistaking the song for a bona fide gospel number because of its title — and not being

particularly interested in supporting Uncle Ray's gospel ambitions, much as they were unenthusiastic about supporting his jazz crossover earlier. (This is just speculation on my part, but it would be fun to see myself proven right!)

Notably, 1957 also witnessed Ray's very first experiment in adapting old standards to his new style — the cover of 'Swanee River', instructively retitled as 'Swanee River Rock'; this path would eventually lead him to 'My Bonnie' and then, of course, to his general interest in reshaping the old folk and country traditions, black and white alike. It's hardly a classic, more of a solid stepping stone on the road to something bigger, but it does stand out among other recordings of golden oldies by contemporary Atlantic artists — just by explicitly *not* being a respectful homage to the musical tastes of older generations, but rather a smashing attempt to appropriate the musical legacy of older generations and make it bend and adapt to the changing standards of a new world. Much in the same vein comes the title track, 'Yes Indeed', adapted from a pre-war jazz composition by Sy Oliver (best known in Tommy Dorsey's version): again, not one of Ray's most inventive or stunning performances, but rather an important statement of self-affirmation.

The problem is, the farther back in time we go with this LP, the more self-repetition we encounter. For instance, 'Blackjack' is a cool old blues tune with a fine sample of Ray's piano playing, but it largely has the same melody and vibe as 'Sinner's Prayer', which was unquestionably superior — it is understandable why Atlantic did not put both tunes on the same album, even if 'Sinner's Prayer' was originally a B-side and 'Blackjack' was the A-side (instead, **Ray Charles** had 'Greenbacks', the B-side to 'Blackjack', which was clearly a far more original creation). And 'What Would I Do Without You', the B-side to 'Hallelujah I Love Her So', is basically an inferior rewrite of 'Drown In My Own Tears', utilizing the same tempo and piano riff to somewhat weaker effect. Meanwhile, the oldest songs on this collection are, well, old enough to remind us of Ray's beginnings as an imitator rather than innovator: 'The Sun's Gonna Shine Again' (his second Atlantic single) sounds more or less like early blues-de-luxe era B. B. King, and 'Heartbreaker' (a B-side from the same year of 1953) is old-fashioned jump blues in the style of somebody like Wynonie Harris (though, amusingly, in the piano intro Ray manages to insert some of the chords from 'Mess Around', probably because his first hit was still so fresh in his memory).

None of this, of course, is a big problem: nobody should expect every second recording by Ray to be a groundbreaking masterpiece. The average «age of relevancy» for a solid 1950s artist was about 2-3 years anyway, making Ray one of the few unbeatable record setters by any accounts; even so, he was still a commercial entertainer, somewhat restricted and directed by market laws of the time, and would remain in this capacity until the end of his days — which means, by definition, the need to constantly satisfy the demand for «we want more of the exact same thing!!» Indeed, if you are a major fan who

genuinely wants more of the exact same thing, **Yes Indeed!** is the perfect second album after you have worn out your copy of **Ray Charles**, memorizing every last note of it. Or, like me, you could just go, "hey, this is the one with 'Lonely Avenue' and 'Leave My Woman Alone' on it, that's quite enough for a passing grade already". Or you could just admit that, like any Ray Charles record from that era, it all just sounds excellent, and that instead of wasting our life debating whether 'Sinner's Prayer' or 'Blackjack' is the better song, we could go help recycle some plastic or plant a tree.





AT NEWPORT

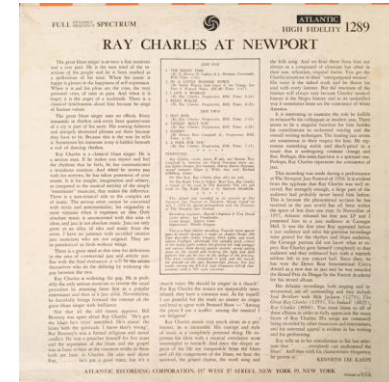
Album released:

V A L U E

November 1958

3 4 4 3 5

More info:



Tracks: 1) Night Time Is The Right Time; 2) In A Little Spanish Town; 3) I Got A Woman; 4) Blues Waltz; 5) Hot Rod; 6) Talkin' 'Bout You; 7) Sherry; 8) A Fool For You.

REVIEW

For some reason, there is no existing live footage of Ray Charles' performance at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival — even if this is precisely the same festival that was filmed for Bert Stern and Aram Avakian's masterful documentary *Jazz On A Summer Day* (an absolute must-see even for those with only a passing interest in jazz). The argument that Ray did not play «jazz» as such does not count, because (a) as we can see from the album, Ray *did* play jazz, and (b) the movie did its best to showcase the diversity of the performances, including clips of Big Maybelle singing R&B, Mahalia Jackson singing gospel, and even — goodness gracious! — Chuck Berry playing rock'n'roll, which pissed off a bunch of purists at the time but was enthusiastically received by the general crowd all the same. So I am going to have to assume that either the crew ran out of tape by the end of Saturday, July 5, or that they had some beef with Atlantic Records, who were unwilling to share their top prize.



Atlantic Records, however, had no beef with the Newport Jazz Festival, and went to the trouble of recording Ray's set in superb sound quality and putting it out as a live album later in the year — not just Ray Charles' first live album, but the very first live album released on the Atlantic label, and possibly even the very first live R&B album ever made, though about this I cannot be 100% certain. In any case, the historical importance of both the album and the event itself cannot be denied. If

Chuck Berry's performance at the Festival, most likely, was generally perceived as a bit of lightweight entertainment to set the stage for the really serious artists, then Ray, judging by the rave reviews of the event, got the serious jazz public to accept soul music and R&B as a respectable form of art — among the slowly, but surely growing white-crowd respect for the African-American spiritual traditions.

There was another extremely important, if a bit more technical, side to the concert and the record: it gave Ray a chance to really stretch out, ditching the restricting format of the three-minute single and being able to play his songs — or, more precisely, to perform his rituals — for as long as he wished, at whatever tempo he wished, and with (almost) as much emotional freedom as he wished. Of the four songs previously released as singles, three are extended by a good two minutes or so, while 'A Fool For You' is extended by a good *four*, and not even because of extra verses or instrumental passages — no, by simply slowing the tempo down to a crawl, letting each note and each vocal inflection sink in properly. Inside the studio, R&B still had not received the same privileges that jazz music got almost instantaneously after the invention of the LP format — five-to-ten minute long LP jazz tracks were nothing special by 1958 — but the live format changed all that, so here is just one more reason why **At Newport** went such a long way in bringing respectability to the genre.

That said, Ray did not exactly step on that stage as a self-conscious iconoclast and revolutionary. As we all know, **The Great Ray Charles** had already launched a parallel jazz career for him one year earlier, and for his Newport setlist the Genius had split his forty-minute set equally between extended versions of his R&B hits and completely instrumental jazz compositions — for one of which, 'Hot Rod', he even ditches the piano and switches to saxophone (not coincidentally, it is Ray in his sax-holding pose, rather than Ray at the piano, captured on the album sleeve). This is both a classic case of Ray's genre-bending versatility *and* a sort of humble when-in-Rome homage to the Festival (though probably more of the former, since a brief look at Ray's average setlist from 1958 shows him frequently performing the same jazz numbers whenever he went at the time, even at New York's Apollo Theater).

Predictably, the jazz numbers are only impressive if you *really* appreciate Ray's jazz side and think that he rightfully belongs next to the average jazz greats of the time. But at least they are diverse. 'In A Little Spanish Town' has absolutely nothing to do with the classic schmaltzy versions of Paul Whiteman, Virginia O'Brien, Bing Crosby etc., but is completely re-written as an energetic, danceable cha-cha-cha number with a quirky stop-and-start structure and tightest discipline from the entire band. Max Roach's 'Blues Waltz', on the other hand, is played much closer to the original, albeit with predictably larger emphasis on Ray's mini-army of brass players. The above-mentioned 'Hot Rod' is a bebop piece played at breakneck

speed; and 'Sherry', credited to Ray's musical director Hank Crawford, is relaxing mid-tempo lounge entertainment with Ray back at the piano, clearly enjoying himself. I cannot get too excited at any of these pieces, but they certainly couldn't be the worst ones played at the Festival — though nobody would probably list them among the best, either.

Clearly, want it or not, the real meat is in the R&B stuff. 'Night Time Is The Right Time', opening the set, was not even recorded in the studio until several months after the show — most people heard it for the first time on this album, along with Margie Hendricks' crown minute of glory, when she takes the lead over Ray and almost literally sings him under the piano. (If you want an even more overwhelming vocal performance, you can check out the earlier version by Nappy Brown, though it is less interesting in all other respects than the vocals). The song is the first of several classic Ray numbers to more or less literally transfer the mechanics, emotions, and sensations of the sexual act to music — at a sparingly slow tempo, for now, without the acrobatic energy of 'What'd I Say', but *arguably* more realistic than the latter (I mean, it would be easier to synchronize the old in-and-out, in-and-out to 'Night Time' than it would be to 'What'd I Say', right? *right?* okay, maybe I'm getting too old or something). I do feel a little sorry for Mrs. Elaine Lorillard, though, if she actually had to attend that particular part of the show...

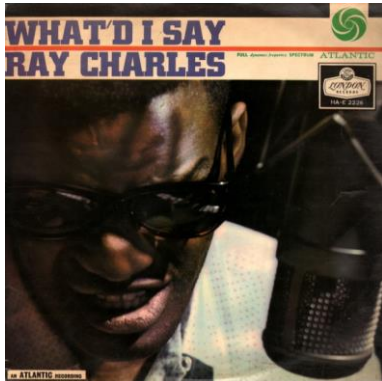
For 'I Got A Woman', Ray pulls out the old fake-start trick, introducing a seemingly slow, soulful, epic ballad and then, 30 seconds later, steering it right into the uptempo giddiness of his signature song — and then letting it ride on and on, piling up ecstasy and ad-libbing his way through three extra minutes without missing a single bar. The Raelettes do not join him on this solo showcase, but they do for 'Talkin' 'Bout You' — the definitive version of this rave, with the classic uh-huh-huh introduction (so nicely interpreted by Eric Burdon and the Animals years later) and a slightly sped-up tempo, compared to the relatively timid studio original.

Still, I would say that Ray wisely saves his best for last: 'A Fool For You' is stretched out to seven minutes, with the Raelettes gone and the big backing band reduced to drums, bass, and a laconically atmospheric brass following — essentially, it's just Ray and his piano, introducing the ladies and the gentlemen of the audience to "something that we're sure that each and everybody can understand — and that's the blues". It's not necessarily a better version than the studio recording — it's more like a magnifying-glass version of the song, slowing it down in real time rather than artificially, allowing us to scrutinize every pimple and wrinkle on Ray's worn-out old soul. You don't even have to like it, no more than you «have to» like some intentionally stretched out camera take in an arthouse movie; it is more than enough to simply acknowledge its existence — the right of an artist to directly expose the epicness concealed within his 3-minute single, especially in front of an audience

that is hardly likely to take a 3-minute single seriously in the first place. I know I myself get a little bored here, waiting for the punchline — but when Uncle Ray hits that final desperate wail before the very last line, reprising it from the studio version, it is *still* that perfect payoff we'd all been waiting for, made even more precious by the lengthy waiting time. And the enthralled audience explodes in rapture.

As far as Ray's live albums go, **At Newport** is clearly not the perfect first choice for the newbie, who would do much better with 1965's **In Concert** — more songs, more hits, even better sound quality, and none of those oddball jazz numbers that will only confuse those who are quite happy with the Father of Soul staying within everybody's comfort zone. For the quasi-Hegelian historian of musical Spirit, though, **At Newport** will naturally be *the* single most important Ray Charles live album, if not one of the most important live albums ever released — capturing one of pop music's greatest innovators in the very middle of his transformative magic, rather than accepting a respectable and safe existence in the sanctified shrine of stardom. The latter might very well be far more entertaining, but the former will probably be far more inspirational — so take your choice depending on what you're after in this day and age.





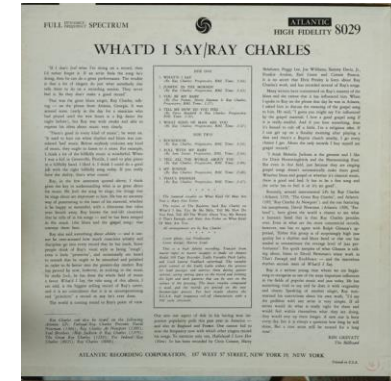
WHAT'D I SAY

Album released:

October 1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *What'd I Say*; 2) *Jumpin' In The Mornin'*; 3) *You Be My Baby*; 4) *Tell Me How Do You Feel*; 5) *What Kind Of Man Are You*; 6) *Rockhouse*; 7) *Roll With My Baby*; 8) *Tell All The World About You*; 9) *My Bonnie*; 10) *That's Enough*.

REVIEW

As was already mentioned in the review of **Yes Indeed!**, 1958 was not a very good year for Ray in terms of commercial success — the best memory from that period lies with his Newport performance rather than his studio recordings for Atlantic. Picking up where we left off, the first single released in the fall of 1958 was ‘*You Be My Baby*’ — a bit of a novelty throwaway (“*you look so tasty, like quick-cream pastry*”) contributed by the Pomus-Shuman songwriting team, a song arguably more memorable because of the silly-sounding backing vocals of the Raelettes than due to Ray’s own effort. Fun, but we tend to admire Ray for his soul and energy rather than cutesy, shallow pop hooks — at least something like ‘*Greenbacks*’ could be hilarious (*and rockin’!*), whereas ‘*You Be My Baby*’ is, at best, a quirky toe-tapper.



Historically more important was the B-side, where Ray gave the old boy scout campfire classic of ‘*My Bonnie*’ the full-on R&B treatment — important both for himself, as one more step in his longstanding program of modernizing the old musical traditions for contemporary audiences, and for the overseas, since it is likely, given the Beatles’ overall admiration for Ray’s material, that his version was at least an inspiration for their own recording with Tony Sheridan. Besides, this is where Ray

actually goes for some real soul — if only the song weren't so clichéd and hard to take seriously, Ray's raspy pleading of "bring my Bonnie back to me" could be really moving. The valiant attempt to turn the song into a soul epic — culminating in the extended last line of each verse, with an intense call-and-response interplay between Ray and the Raelettes — surely deserves a tip of the hat, at the very least. The public was hardly impressed, though.

In Charles' experimental fashion, the record was followed by a two-part instrumental blues shuffle, 'Rockhouse' (curiously, *this*, not 'What'd I Say', was the first of his compositions to be cut up for two sides of the same single). Compared to some of his instrumental work on his jazz-oriented albums, 'Rockhouse' is almost defiantly simplistic; the main piano theme is pleasant and cocky, but not technically impressive or sonically inventive. It's basically something like «Ray Charles Takes A Sunny Morning Walk Through The Neighborhood», nothing particularly «rockhousish» about it at all. If I were Ahmet Ertegun, I certainly wouldn't have greenlighted it as a single (it is so much more of an LP-only filler track), but who can really know how a record executive's mind worked circa 1958?

Then the magic finally struck with '(Night Time) Is The Right Time', released just in the nick of time (December 1958) to at least give Ray a well-deserved Christmas hit for the year — but since it would only be included on his *next* LP, we'll put it off until then. (The B-side was 'Tell All The World About You', a short and not tremendously inspired re-write of 'Hallelujah I Love Her So' with perfunctory impressive vocals from Ray and little else). Then the magic quickly settled back to formula with 'That's Enough' (March 1959) — a good, but rigid soul ballad with few surprises — and its B-side, 'Tell Me How Do You Feel', a generic piece of jump blues for which Ray switches to organ and echoey production, but deems it unnecessary to add any extra special touches.

And then, finally, come June, Ray Charles provides the world with one more foundation stone for his mausoleum. So much has been said and written about 'What'd I Say' — a song that simply *begs* to be the stuff of myth and legend — that I am at a bit of a loss for words here; but let me just remark, in the context of all those singles that preceded it, how ironic it is that one of Ray's biggest commercial and artistic successes began life as a simple concert improvisation, and was allegedly never even intended to be shaped into a record until people began asking where they could buy it. Another contextual observation could be that the classic opening Wurlitzer piano melody is not any more sophisticated at all than what Ray played on 'Rockhouse' — but nobody remembers, and nobody really needs 'Rockhouse', whereas life without 'What'd I Say' now feels virtually impossible. Is it just the fast tempo? The dark, blurry tone of the Wurlitzer? The flashy flourish of eighth notes at the end of each verse? The syncopation? All of it together?

Regardless of the reasons for this magical effect, the objective truth is that before 'What'd I Say', this kind of sound simply did not exist — and after 'What'd I Say', its variations and reverberations would become so commonplace — like, for instance, when you listen to the Beatles' 'I Feel Fine', you're really listening to 'What'd I Say' — that it is as hard to imagine a world without 'What'd I Say' as it is hard to imagine a world without Internet memes. One often hears references to the song as a key link in the evolution of soul music, but somehow I keep feeling that discussions of Ray Charles as one of the progenitors of «soul» should rather be held around 'I've Got A Woman' or 'Hallelujah I Love Her So', if only because those songs are actually sung with «soul»; 'What'd I Say', even if some of its roots also lie in the gospel plain, is all about pure lust, mischief, and rock'n'roll. It was certainly not for its «soul» that it would later be covered by Jerry Lee Lewis...

The smash success of 'What'd I Say' — Ray's first #1 on the R&B charts since 1956, and his first and only Top 10 entry in the overall pop charts — was a strong signal for Atlantic that another LP had to be rushed out as quickly as possible, and they weren't wrong: when issued four months after the single, **What'd I Say** became Ray's first ever LP to register on the charts as well. Unfortunately, there was a bit of a problem: Uncle Ray was not in the mood to get off his lazy ass and record any new material — meaning that most of the album would have to be assembled from the above-mentioned singles, none of which could even hope to approach the excitement level of 'What'd I Say'. Well, '(The Night Time Is) The Right Time' probably could, but they apparently felt that it deserved its own LP, so that was precisely the song they left off.

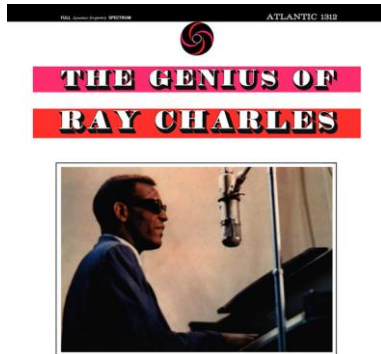
To pad out the record, they had to reach as far into the backlog as 1952-53, from where they fished out two decidedly old-fashioned tunes: 'Roll With Me Baby' is a typical old-school slow-moving R&B romp, and 'Jumpin' In The Morning' is an utterly generic, if admittedly energetic, 1940s-style jump blues number you'd expect from somebody like Wynonie Harris — particularly anticlimactic, if you ask me, when it becomes the second track on the LP, directly following the title track. It's almost like a bugle call of «okay, boys, fun is over, now we're getting back to the tried and true!».

To complete the picture, the album includes 'What Kind Of Man Are You?', the original B-side to 'Talkin' 'Bout You' that was probably not included on **Yes Indeed!** because it only features Ray on piano — all vocal duties here are handled by the Raelettes, including Mary Ann Fisher on lead vocals. It's quite a decent track, actually — not just from a feminist perspective (considering Ray's well-known sexist attitude to his singing ladies, it is at least nice to know they were allowed to «retort» in this specific manner), but from a musical as well, with a fun and quirky vocal arrangements where Fisher feels like she's being carried up and down on the waves of her colleagues' voices (and the vocal harmonies are apparently seductive enough to have the song later been remade by the Hollies as 'What Kind Of Girl Are You?'). However, it is clearly

also a piece of filler in this context, as nice as it is to not have it disappear completely out of sight.

In short, if there ever was one album in Ray's classic repertoire clearly centered around one track and one track only, it is this one — most of the casual listeners probably won't even recognize any of the other song titles on here. But at least it does roughly correspond to a certain chronological chapter in Ray's life: if you throw out the old 1952–53 filler and arrange everything else in chronological order, then what you get is an informative look at the «lull» of late 1958 / early 1959, followed by the smash «awakening» of 'What'd I Say' — still a pretty curious and intriguing musical journey, especially for the much-maligned «interim period» between the first wave of rock'n'roll and the British Invasion.





THE GENIUS OF RAY CHARLES

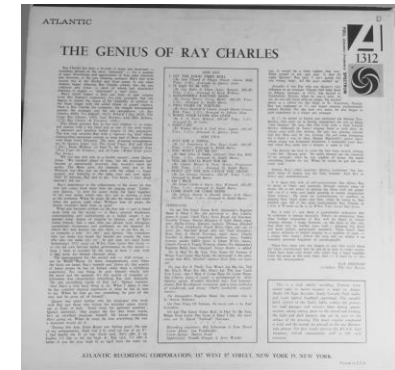
Album released:

November 1959

V A L U E

2 2 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) *Let The Good Times Roll*; 2) *It Had To Be You*; 3) *Alexander's Ragtime Band*; 4) *Two Years Of Torture*; 5) *When Your Lover Has Gone*; 6) *Deed I Do*; 7) *Just For A Thrill*; 8) *You Won't Let Me Go*; 9) *Tell Me You'll Wait For Me*; 10) *Don't Let The Sun Catch You Cryin'*; 11) *Am I Blue*; 12) *Come Rain Or Come Shine*.

REVIEW

Perhaps a more apt title for Ray's last album on the Atlantic label might have been **The Genius Of Ray Charles Moves In Mysterious Ways** — in fact, I'm pretty sure those Atlantic executives were considering it, but it was either spray that title all over the front sleeve and remove Ray's photo altogether, or leave things the way they are. And you know just how beautifully the magnetic attraction of Uncle Ray's shades works for those sales numbers... an album like this one simply couldn't have made it into the Top 20 without them.



All right, futile attempts at humor aside, **The Genius Of Ray Charles** was a pretty controversial record — the equivalent of Metallica's **Black Album** for its time, if you wish — that, even upon release, kept alternating between being panned and praised, and continues to split audiences up to this very day. The problem as I see it is that nobody except Ray himself is able to properly understand *why* he recorded it. The cynical point of view is that he substituted his classic brand of raw,

sweaty soul and R&B for big band and orchestral arrangements of all those Tin Pan Alley songs in order to increase his fanbase, appealing to the musically conservative white middle-class listeners — which is at least true in terms of the overall commercial result. Amusingly, in stark contrast to his previous sales numbers, the LP charted significantly higher than the accompanying singles: people were not out there to scoop up copies of ‘Let The Good Times Roll’ (which barely made it into the Top 100) or ‘Just For A Thrill’ (which did not chart at all), but they *did* buy the album — and if an LP in the 1950s sold better than the singles, this means it was purchased by people who were pretty loaded, which sort of largely excludes young African-Americans, if you catch my drift.

The alternate, more generous point of view is that Ray was simply expanding his horizons. He’d already been different from all the other Atlantic artists by having at least two parallel careers — one in R&B and one in jazz — and his constant striving to cross-pollinate different styles of music (‘My Bonnie’ alone must have given out quite a sign) would sooner or later have led to something like this, if not on Atlantic, then on any other label that’d be glad to have him. Let us not forget that the late Fifties were the age of **Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Great American Songbook** — many black artists with their distinctly African-American styles were encroaching on «white man’s territory» not because they were sucking up to their oppressors, but because they sincerely liked that kind of music and wanted to put their own stamp on it, see what happens as a result... and yes, if it also makes them a bit of extra cash on the side, why is that even a problem?

If there *is* an actual problem, it is that Ray has to make certain sacrifices for this project. Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, after all, were just singers, not known for much of anything other than their vocal talent and stage presence; whether they sang the black man’s blues or the white man’s schmaltz (to paraphrase Bon Scott), they could invest in what they were doing 100%. Ray Charles, however, was also a player, an arranger, a bandleader, a composer, and a rule-breaker — and on his finest records from the 1950s, he could display all these strengths simultaneously. Placing himself squarely in the hands of Quincy Jones, responsible for the big band arrangements of Side A, and Ralph Burns, orchestrating the strings on Side B, Ray intentionally drops *most* of his own creativity. He still plays some piano (mostly on the ballad side), but he does not do a lot of creating here — where a song like ‘My Bonnie’ was essentially reinvented by him to fit his own paradigm of R&B, most of the songs on **Genius** are played in a conservative manner, certainly not in the same ways as they were performed originally, but nowhere near close to the ideals of «Atlantic R&B», either.

Essentially, it’s really all up to Ray Charles as a singer here — which, really, is almost always the deal with the Great American Songbook, about which I have written way too many times (most commonly, I think, in my old reviews of Billie

Holiday) that those songs themselves are of fairly little worth outside of their individual interpretations. Here, personal and subjective taste rules supreme; on my own scale, I would probably say that these performances generally outweigh Frank Sinatra but do not quite reach the unique level of Billie Holiday — even if, intuitively, I think that Ray is more often rooting for the latter than the former (note, for instance, how his slightly sneering intonation on the word "lover" in 'When Your Lover Has Gone' mimics Billie's, certainly not Frank's). The biggest issue, however, is that Ray's vocal talent alone, even when multiplied by the pompous brass arrangements on Side A or the swooping string flourishes on Side B, is unable to get any of these songs to either the level of frenzied ecstasy attained on 'I Got A Woman' or 'What'd I Say', or the level of bone-crushing psychological depth attained on 'Sinner's Prayer' or 'I Believe To My Soul'.

Years ago, such a judgement would be sufficient for me to take an album like this down as «bad» — I mean, I have always been and remain allergic to Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood musicals, and it wasn't until I got interested in Billie Holiday that I even began to treat any of that material seriously. Today I know a little better than that, and I can certainly appreciate all the work that went into, say, the magnificent arrangement of 'Let The Good Times Roll' — it's actually amazing how Quincy Jones goes all Vegas on us while at the same time making his band sound *gritty* rather than *glitzy*, if you catch my meaning. Likewise, I can appreciate the subtlety of backup vocal arrangements on Side B (on 'Am I Blue?', they sometimes develop almost psychedelic, proto-Beach Boys overtones), enough at least to say that some fairly exquisite work has been performed here, enough to elevate the record over the «average level» of the usual LP of standards as recorded by innumerable jazz vocalists in the 1950s. So in any case, it is certainly not «bad».

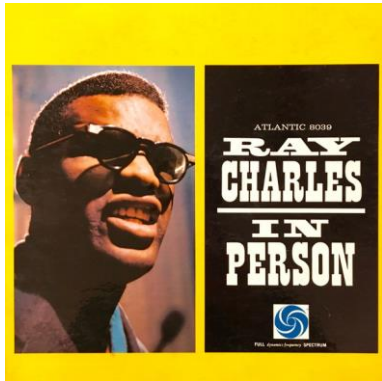
But neither am I going to lie and say that I frequently — or, in fact, ever — get the inclination to replay it if I'm in the mood for some Uncle Ray. 'Let The Good Times Roll', his swaggery tribute to Louis Jordan, is the only exception (and it is not surprising that only this and 'Don't Let The Sun Catch You Cryin', the other Louis Jordan tune on Side B, would be performed by Ray and his band at Newport in 1960); its liveliness, bragginess, stop-and-start structure and monumental brass fanfare make it perhaps the most compatible tune on here with Ray's legacy as a whole. You can easily take away the brass, if you wish, and imagine it replaced with Ray's banging on the piano (which is, by the way, *much* more prominent on the [live Newport version](#)); no such thing is easily imaginable for, say, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band', where Ray is almost drowned out by all the overproduction (give me Bessie Smith over this any time of day).

On the balladeering side, I cannot actually vouch for any highlights or lowlights. 'Just For A Thrill' and 'Come Rain Or Come Shine' were released as singles, but they aren't really better or worse than any other of the melancholically tinged

ballads on here. They all sound *nice*, and *maybe*, just *maybe*, Ray's croaky, husky, gospel-rooted vocals give them a slightly exquisite tinge of world-weariness, but not nearly enough to mutate them into sonic crocodiles *à la* Tom Waits. Were we talking here about an artist of lesser caliber — a *singer* as such — I would be content with a vote of «pretty good, but not my thing»; with Ray, it is barely possible to perceive these recordings outside of the general context of his career, and I think that there was simply not enough work done on them to fully justify the need for such an album. At least **Modern Sounds In Country And Western Music** would have the «stun» effect on the listener with its bold and brash reinventions of honky tonk classics; **The Genius Of Ray Charles** simply tells you «hi, I'm Ray Charles, the man who brought you 'What'd I Say' and 'Hallelujah I Love Her So', and I also like show tunes, just like your mama does».

Then again, it *may* have been necessary in 1959 to say something like that, so I certainly don't blame him. But the fact remains that Ray recorded a ton of great stuff in his lifetime — most of it in the 1950s, but some of it in the 1960s and even later — *and* he recorded quite a bit of schlock as well; and the first signs of that generally boring side of his later day career appear on this very album. Only a premonition, mind you, because the arrangements are largely tasteful, and the songs... well, there's lots of much blander songs hanging around than 'Just For A Thrill' or 'When Your Lover Has Gone'. Even so, I'd trade this entire album for one copy of 'I Believe To My Soul' — and Atlantic didn't even bother to package that one on an LP until two years later.





IN PERSON

Album released:
July 1960

V A L U E
2 3 4 2 4

More info:



Tracks: 1) The Right Time; 2) What'd I Say; 3) Yes Indeed!; 4) The Spirit-Feel; 5) Frenesi; 6) Drown In My Own Tears; 7) Tell The Truth.

REVIEW

Unlike **At Newport**, Ray's second live LP was largely a product of a sheer lucky combination of accidents. According to most sources, it was recorded on May 28, 1959, «on a rainy night in Atlanta, Georgia» (I guess some Brook Benton fan must have slipped this poetic reference into the Wikipedia page), at Herndon Stadium; with the concert sponsored by the local progressive radio station WAOK, its leading DJ Zenas "Daddy" Sears captured the performance from the audience through a single microphone. Later on, Sears sold the tapes to Atlantic, it is rumored, for enough cash to help put his twin kids through college; given that Ray continued to thrive after his move to ABC Records, Ahmet Ertegun was understandably hungry about any recordings from the backlog he could lay his hands on — and, astonishingly enough, the label probably recouped the losses, since **Ray Charles In Person** ultimately ended up charting higher (at #13) than *any* other Ray Charles LP on the Atlantic label.



My blind guess is that this may have happened about two months after the release, bluntly prompted by the smash success of 'Georgia On My Mind' — for a short while, Uncle Ray really was the hottest thing in the country — because the album did not exactly acquire a legendary status afterwards. In fact, it was out of print for a long time, before being re-released on CD, together with **At Newport**, as the double-album combo **Ray Charles Live** in 1987; and although just about any account

of the album that you are going to read will always mention the unusually high quality of the recording (for an audience tape, that is), and the great form in which Ray and his band were on that night, I think that today only truly obstinate completionists and devoted Ray aficionados come in regular contact with the record.

It *does* sound pretty awesome for an audience recording in 1959, I must say, and I have a faint suspicion that they might not be telling us all there is to this story, but then again, it's probably not *that* important to waste lots of time on fact-checking. (Now if, perhaps, Uncle Ray had set fire to his piano on that night or something like that, we'd be singing a totally different song here...). What *is* important is that this is another half-hour of music that captures Ray in his absolute prime, *and* that only one song here overlaps with the Newport setlist ('The Right Time') — although there's also a little bit of cheating involved in that the performance of 'Yes Indeed!' here is actually smuggled in *from* the Newport outtakes, though fairly seamlessly (if you listen really hard, you can notice a subtle improvement in recording quality). The contents of the show do seem to match the constitution of the Newport program: there's a few rabble-rousing, energetic R&B hits, a couple of instrumental numbers highlighting Ray's passion for jazz in all of its varieties, and an extended, slowed-down, arch-soulful rendition of a deep soul ballad ('Drown In My Own Tears', this time in the place of 'A Fool For You') — but with the near-total lack of overlaps, **In Person** does become a perfectly respectable soulmate companion to **At Newport**, despite, for all of Zenas Sears' efforts, still sounding inferior on a purely technical level.

Some sources claim that it was at this particular show that Ray first presented the finished version of 'What'd I Say' to a live audience, one month before the single's official release, but this is probably an exaggeration — more accurate would be the statement that this is chronologically the very first live recording of 'What'd I Say' we'll ever be able to hear. As you may guess, this one's pretty close to the original, a little more tight and restrained than it would become at later dates, but still, already with enough subtle vocal and instrumental variations to be worth checking out.

In stark contrast, 'Drown In My Own Tears' here is clearly already a song that has lived long enough to deserve an extra-epic treatment — played at about 0.75 speed of the original, with the supporting brass band and Ray himself drawling out each note as if emotionally frozen in time. It's grand, but I think I'll still take the original tempo over this additional display of theatricality. I mean, when he sings "*why don't YOU... come on home now?*", it feels as if he's jumping down a deep well with that *YOUUUUU*, only to magically appear at the other end a few seconds later with the *come on home*, and the feeling veers dangerously on the hilarious rather than the empathetic. It is a little dangerous to overload your soulful creations with too much soul — sometimes, soul is like cholesterol, you know.

For the Ray Charles expert, the most curious numbers would probably be the instrumental ones. ‘The Spirit-Feel’ is a Milt Jackson number which, if I am not mistaken, Ray and Milt did not actually record together in the studio (despite their active collaboration in their Atlantic years); it’s a solid performance by Ray’s band, but Ray himself is only felt here as a bandleader, not actually heard, which is a pity since [Milt’s original](#) leaves plenty of space for piano playing, let alone the fact that Milt Jackson’s compositions without Milt Jackson’s vibraphone are kinda like Eric Clapton’s songs without Eric Clapton’s guitar playing — you have a social obligation to acknowledge that they have a right to exist in such a state, but you’ll always end up running to the Dark Side to bitch about how boring they are.

A bit more interesting is Ray’s take on the old Latin classic ‘Frenesí’, which he attempts to revert from its «Hollywoodish» treatment by Artie Shaw and Glenn Miller back to its Mexican roots, though without actually restoring the marimba it was originally written for by Alberto Domínguez Borrás. The «cha-cha-cha» rhythmic of the main theme contrast nicely here with the more African jazzy brass improvisations, and the overall groove is sexy and fun. If it simply weren’t the fact that the two jazz numbers, in between them, occupy about a third of the record’s already extra-short running time, I’d welcome them as nice temporary diversions from the R&B formula. But honestly? I’d rather have all these nine minutes given away to showcase the talents of Marjorie Hendricks, who is given the roaring spotlight on the three-minute long ‘Tell The Truth’ (a cover of a recent hit by The "5" Royales), and, just as she does on ‘The Right Time’, almost manages to upstage Uncle Ray himself with her cocky manners.

In the end, I would say that **In Person** does really work better as a set of high-quality bonus tracks, appendable to **At Newport**, than it does on its own, so if you own the 1987 CD edition of **Ray Charles Live**, you’re all set, and if you do not, you’re not getting any major revelations about the man and his stage spirit here that you did not already get with the Newport album. Even so, it is impossible for a Ray Charles live album capturing Ray Charles in his prime years to not be enjoyable — and with the relative dearth of such material, **In Person** will hardly ever feel like overkill in your collection.





THE GENIUS HITS THE ROAD

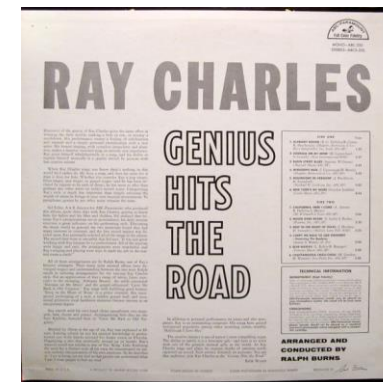
Album released:

V A L U E

September 1960

3 2 2 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Alabamy Bound; 2) *Georgia On My Mind*; 3) Basin Street Blues; 4) Mississippi Mud; 5) Moonlight In Vermont; 6) New York's My Home; 7) California, Here I Come; 8) Moon Over Miami; 9) Deep In The Heart Of Texas; 10) *Carry Me Back To Old Virginny*; 11) Blue Hawaii; 12) Chattanooga Choo-Choo.

REVIEW

Surprisingly, Uncle Ray did not hit it right off the bat after signing up with ABC-Paramount: his first single, released in January 1960, was not even that much of a song, more like a typical warm-up jam for himself and the Raelettes. It's like he walked into the studio, sat down at the piano, quickly improvised something along the lines of 'I Got A Woman' and 'Talkin' 'Bout You', and then the clueless studio executives picked it up, decided that it was a completed product, called it 'Who You Gonna Love?', and put it out for fans of the master. It probably did not happen that way, but the record bombed anyway. At least it *does* have the classic Ray Charles R&B vibe, and the B-side, 'My Baby (I Love Her So)', is another of those awesome Ray / Margie Hendricks duets, though it adds little to the legacy of 'The Night Time Is The Right Time'. (There's a [well-preserved live version](#) from the Newport Festival of 1960, which illustrates the connection between Ray and Margie just a tad more realistically than Jamie Foxx and Regina King do it in the *Ray* movie).



Second time around was much more convincing, with Ray picking up a recent recording by fellow Georgian Titus Lee Turner, a catchy little mix of Latin rhythms with R&B called 'Sticks And Stones', and adding an extra level of sophistication

to it with a couple of 'What'd I Say'-style piano solos. This was far closer to what the people needed, and the record nearly shot to the top of the R&B charts — boosted as well by the B-side, a moody and vocally epic interpretation of the old classic 'Worried Life Blues', albeit slightly spoiled by the corny vaudeville intro in which a seemingly clueless white guy begins by addressing the singer: "say Ray, you sure look mighty sad". "Yeah man", Ray responds, "that's because I have the blues". Thus do we learn, in our belated day and age, what it really means to have the blues. Ironically, the person to insult our intelligence is reported to be none other than Sid Feller, Ray's principal conductor and arranger throughout the ABC years, who would be equally responsible for much of the class *and* the cheese on what would be coming.

Interestingly, both sides of the single would be eagerly picked up by UK fans overseas, who did their best to improve upon Ray's performances: 'Sticks And Stones' would become one of the finest early R&B recordings by the Zombies (chiefly since it gave Rod Argent a good chance to display his fluency and virtuosity on the organ, definitely «out-rocking», if maybe not «out-souling» Ray), and 'Worried Life Blues' would be elevated to further heights by the Animals, with Eric Burdon and Alan Price adding even more aesthetic and psychological layers to the song. (The difference being that for Charles, it was probably «just another blues number», whereas the Animals set about to transform it into an «art song»). This just goes to show how much in line these recordings were with Ray's old Atlantic R&B sound — something that, unfortunately, would not apply at all to his first full-fledged LP for the label, which, in contrast, yielded almost no «role models» for the aspiring British disciples overseas.

I do not know if it was Ray himself who came up with the concept of making a «travelog album», or if the concept was suggested to him by some other «genius» at ABC, be it Sid Feller or somebody else. This is hardly important, though. What *is* important is that the record was clearly supposed to highlight the *towering* status of «The Genius» over everybody else in the business: by singing twelve different songs about twelve different American states, Ray would look like the spiritual conqueror of all these places. *Move over, Uncle Sam, 'cause Uncle Ray is movin' in*. The idea of the man with the golden touch, an artistic genius who can put a deep personal imprint on any form of musical or verbal art he chooses to approach, could reach a true pinnacle here, and ABC put all the necessary resources at Ray's disposal.

The bad news is that, as a rule, megalomania is not the best thing for one's artistic health (let alone psychic and physical health, which depends very much on one's inborn constitution). **The Genius Hits The Road** largely adopts and expands the approach already tried out on Ray's *previous* «Genius» album, which basically ended up burying the «genius» in question under thick layers of musical makeup that had nothing to do with «genius» in the first place. Had Ray decided to

write those songs about the various US states *himself*, or at least commissioned new creations from contemporary Brill Building songwriters, things might have been different; but all of these tunes are oldies, mainly out of the vaults of various white Tin Pan Alley composers (only 'Basin Street Blues' is associated primarily with Dixieland), and Sid Feller's production of them strictly concentrates on Ray Charles as the suave singer in a ballroom jazz band, downplaying his piano skills and almost completely foregoing the wild energy of his classic R&B recordings.

My main problem with this album, actually, are not the big band arrangements per se; my main problem is that the big band arrangements almost completely neutralize the differences between these songs. What is the point of namedropping twelve atmospherically, culturally, spiritually different locations all across the USA if you do not even strive to reflect those differences in the music? When 'Moonlight In Vermont' is reflected across your living room at the exact same angle as 'Moon Over Miami', and when the musical celebration on 'Basin Street Blues' is barely distinguishable from the welcome ceremony of 'California, Here I Come', then how exactly does this concept rise above the status of a mere promotional gimmick? I fail to discern anything properly Hawaiian about 'Blue Hawaii', anything specifically Texan in 'Deep In The Heart Of Texas', and when a song like 'Mississippi Mud' gives off the scent of a Las Vegas casino rather than any actual Mississippi mud, you know you're in for a classic, proverbial Artistic Failure.

I wouldn't want to imply that somebody like Ray Charles could be altogether unqualified to put out a large conceptual album about America. After all, he did tour all across the country, and as we know, lack of one particular sense (vision) is often compensated by intensification of all other ones, so that the sounds, smells, tastes, feels of all those places he sings about could very well be imprinted in his mind and soul. But he does absolutely nothing here to make us sense these imprints, leaving most of the musical direction to Sid Feller and, for the most part, just feeling happy being his usual Ray Charles self. When Gordon Jenkins wrote his '[Manhattan Tower](#)' suite back in 1946, or when Sammy Davis Jr., with his own long story of Broadway work, sang it [back in 1956](#), this made perfect sense. When Ray Charles complains about St. Louis, singing "*let's face it, it hasn't got the opera in The Met, it hasn't got a famous string quartet*", it sounds ridiculous. As in, utterly and completely ridiculous. Why not 'Autumn In New York' at least, pitting Ray against Billie Holiday, rather than a song that directly clashes with both the concept and Ray's own spirit?..

Occasional attempts at extra humor are no good, either: on 'Deep In The Heart Of Texas', for instance, Feller keeps trying to engage in a «dialog» with Ray ("*The stars at night are big and bright...*" – "*Where does that happen, Ray?*"), posing as a certified idiot ("*The coyotes wail along the trail...*" – "*Did this happen in New York, Ray?*") in order to turn the song into

an official bit of musical comedy; but the effect is not funny, it is annoying, and the whole thing sounds like a mockery of the Lone Star rather than a tribute — and even then, in name only, because the lumbering brassy arrangement is not reminiscent of Texas in *any* way possible, unlike, say, the classic [Gene Autry version](#) (and I am quite indifferent to Gene Autry in general, but at least here we can talk about certain authenticity).

Every once in a while, Ray does hit on a nice vibe; a bunch of these tracks could probably be salvaged and make decent inclusions on any *non*-conceptual record where they would simply be enjoyed by themselves, rather than become inevitably diminished by their status as parts of a bulky unconvincing whole. The vocals are particularly friendly and inviting on the closing ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’, for instance; and the change of pace for ‘Carry Me Back To Old Virginny’, with emphasis on Ray’s piano rather than horns and with the Raelettes providing a suitable gospel backing, is very welcome — it is probably the only song on here that truly sounds like classic, «authentic» Atlantic-era Charles. Omitting all of the song’s controversial original references to "*darkies*" and "*laboring so hard for old massa*" that were way too much for black artists back in 1960, Ray pretty much turns "old Virginny" into an allegory for Heaven itself (not that this wasn’t the original composition’s intention, of course), and it works out beautifully for him — and for us.

But it certainly wasn’t ‘Carry Me Back To Old Virginny’ that would become Ray’s defining moment from this album — the song is way too old, creaky, and controversial for that. If, on the other hand, you happen to have grown tired and weary of the ubiquitousness of ‘Georgia On My Mind’, re-appreciating the song after it’s been done to death in a million ways *after* Ray’s version might be a little easier if we go all the way back to the *pre*-Ray versions — starting with [Hoagy Carmichael’s original](#) and including, for instance, Billie Holiday’s [rather light take](#) on the song, or Jo Stafford’s [somewhat more pompous](#) delivery — and realize that it was Ray and only Ray who finally realized all of its potential. The simple truth is that nobody, not even the song’s own composer, ever had the right idea of how to sing the line "*No peace I find*" until Ray came along and showed us all what it really means to not be able to find any peace.

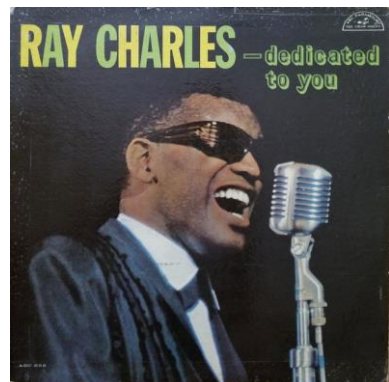
There’s a lengthy historical debate about the song — of whether it was really written about the state of Georgia or about Hoagy Carmichael’s sister — but in reality it was written about the exact same thing as ‘Carry Me Back To Old Virginny’: the idea of an unreachable ideal of beauty, a coveted Platonic state of bliss that may not even exist in reality but feels perfectly real in one’s mind. It’s a millennia-old artistic trope, of course, but all great artists have their own ways of expressing it, and all musical works that use it wait for the perfect artist to come along and express it. Here, even Sid Feller, a guy for whom I do not feel that much love, to be honest, gives the song a perfect extra touch with that opening heart-tugging string intro —

old-fashioned, yes, Hollywoodish, yes, but how many songs that open with old-fashioned Hollywoodish strings are instantly recognizable in the first two seconds? And the real reason we love Ray's version is precisely because it puts so much emphasis on the *here and now* of it, on the *where we are* rather than where *we'd like to be*. In his vision, it is not a song about Georgia, whoever and wherever she is — it is a song about *his mind* and the state it is in: weary, worn-out by toil and disappointment, only finding salvation in an unattainable dream which he knows very well is unattainable, but as long as he is free to dream that dream, it's something worth living for. All of this was, at best, implied in the previously recorded versions of the song; much of it, I think, remains poorly understood and thought out by people who spam the YouTube comment section with happy outbursts of "*hey, I'm a 50-year old Georgian and I love this song!*", but I don't doubt for a second that their basic emotional reaction to the song is exactly the same as mine.

It's actually quite instructive to compare 'Georgia On My Mind' with some of the other slow, sentimental ballads on the album — like 'Moon Over Miami', for instance. All the ingredients — strings, backing vocals, soulful lead — are essentially the same, but the final result is, at best, «pleasant» in a background-muzak kind of way, and at worst, «detestable» in a corny-sentimental kind of way. This is because there is no depth to the song, open or hidden, and Ray is unable to find any interesting approaches to make it come to life. It's just a generic crooning serenade, and he cannot make it extra sexy, or extra ironic, or extra angelic (as, perhaps, the Beach Boys could have). When the opportunity arises, few people in the world can sing about looking for a break from hundreds of years of trouble and toil as fine as Ray. But singing about people who know not what trouble and toil is in the first place? Better leave that to white California kids, Brother Ray.

All said, **The Genius Hits The Road** is, at the very least, an interesting and — as you might already have guessed — quite a thought-provoking misfire. Even if I won't ever be putting more than two songs off it (you already know which ones) on my general Ray Charles playlist, the concept itself and the reasons for its poor realization are a useful-and-fun topic for analysis. And, at the very least, it shows that Ray's search for new ways of making music and expressing himself was anything but done with his transition to a bigger, more lucrative label — and, as it happens, a great artist's failures can sometimes be far more impressive than a mediocre artist's mediocre stability.





DEDICATED TO YOU

Album released:

V A L U E

February 1961

1 2 2 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Hardhearted Hannah; 2) Nancy; 3) Margie; 4) Ruby; 5) Rosetta; 6) Stella By Starlight; 7) Cherry; 8) Josephine; 9) Candy; 10) Marie; 11) Diane; 12) Sweet Georgia Brown.

REVIEW

The year 1961 was extremely prolific for Ray — no fewer than six different LPs appeared over but a 10-month long stretch in between the ABC, Atlantic, and Impulse! labels, albeit all of the Atlantic releases were, of course, pulled from 2-3 year old archives. Over that stretch, fans would refresh their image of Ray as a blues man, a soul man, a jazz man, a Vegas man, a ladies' man, and, overall, a total Renaissance man — someone who saw it all, felt it all, and could offer musical guidance to just about anybody.

Unfortunately, every silver cloud has a dark lining, and quantity rarely, if ever, aligns with quality. Both **The Genius Of Ray Charles** and **The Genius Hits The Road** had confirmed the sad truth that «kings» and «geniuses» usually produce their best work *before* they begin to be regularly addressed as «kings» and «geniuses», or, at least, prior to becoming fully comfortable with the idea. As both of thos albums stormed up the charts, Ray himself and his labels could not have left unnoticed the obvious: Uncle Ray as a glitzy bandleader, all dressed up in flash and bombast, attracted the record-buying public much more than Brother Ray as a deep soul practitioner, hunched over his piano in an age-old voodooistic haze. And what the record-buying public likes, the record-buying public gets: I do not think there was



too much disagreement between Ray and his music industry bosses when it came to that maxim. Brother Ray was no hermit, after all — he liked his money, his women, his good food, and his fancy clothes.

Consequently, there is no shirking off the artistic responsibility for Ray's first (and, alas, far from the last) openly *bad* album of his career. The concept behind **Dedicated To You** was nowhere near original — for instance, **Bill Haley's Chicks** from 1959 had already been constructed around songs that mention twelve different girls by their names, and I'm sure there were others as well. But apparently, it felt sort of natural to follow an album that namedrops 12 different states with one «dedicated» to 12 different ladies — and there is even a slyly intelligent link between the two in that 'Georgia' has made a crossover from the state of Georgia to a woman's name ('Sweet Georgia Brown'). Alas, this is pretty much the only genuinely smart thing about this sorry excuse for a concept album.

All of the songs here — *all* of them — are decades-old Tin Pan Alley standards, ranging from the 1920s to the 1940s, and all of them are arranged in two different sub-styles only: (a) the glitzy-bombastic-in-yer-face loungy Vegasy showtune, with big fat horns and bulky booming drums competing over whose size matters the most; (b) the sweet syrupy sentimental orchestrated ballad, with fluffy strings and angelic choirs competing over who gets to be more seductive for Uncle Ray. They are very evenly distributed (six tunes in each category) and regularly interchanged, rather than split up to make a «hard» and «soft» side; unfortunately, this still means that there are only two different moods set through the entire album — the sleazy-playful-by-day and the starry-romantic-by-night — and truly, once you've heard the first couple of songs you can safely turn the album off because that is all you're gonna get.

At least **The Genius Hits The Road**, when it came to its best songs ('Georgia On My Mind' and 'Carry Me Back To Old Virginny', primarily), still had traces of what made us all adepts of the St. Ray Church — a gospel-shaped batch of deeply emotional vibes. Visions of paradise and redemption, «return» as «repentance», that sort of thing. Lowbrow mixed with highbrow in such a way that the latter could make the former a little more tolerable by its very presence. **Dedicated To You**, on the contrary, does not have even one whiff of the highbrow; it is 100% about vaudeville entertainment and corny sentimentalism. It has about as much depth as Sinatra at his worst — in fact, it is hardly ever trying to be anything other than Sinatra at his worst. And the last thing we might all need in our lives is Ray Charles trying to sound like Frank Sinatra.. although, obviously, mainstream American public circa 1961 would disagree.

Both of the album's moods were perfectly illustrated by the accompanying single. The A-side was 'Ruby', the theme song from a 1952 King Vidor movie with Jennifer Jones that was apparently much more dark and disturbing than its musical

theme; perhaps the tiniest of tiny hints at this darkness is given by the opening strings, but in about fifteen seconds the song straightens itself out and becomes just a ballad, good enough for those who love schmaltz *or* who faint at the very sound of Uncle Ray's sexy rasp but hardly for those who would want to continue to hear those things that Uncle Ray does better than anybody else. *This* stuff is as generic as it comes.

The only advantage that 'Hard Hearted Hannah', the B-side, has over the A-side, is that it «rocks» — in a big band, Vegasy sort of way, of course, to which we add a bit of playful humor... straight out of 1924, that is. I don't understand what it is that Ray adds to the song that everybody from Lucille Hegamin to Ella Fitzgerald have not already added. At least he gets to add a piano solo — short, sparse, not one of his best.

And there is absolutely nothing I could add to these non-descript descriptions: the other five vaudeville numbers all sound like 'Hard Hearted Hannah', and the other five ballads all sound like 'Ruby'. Oh, 'Josephine' is actually an instrumental, with about two minutes of Ray soloing over a relatively quiet jazzy background, so I suppose that it is, by definition, *the* best song on the album, even if it's not saying much.

Of course, «opinions are like assholes», and yours might theoretically align more comfortably with the rave write-up offered on the *It's All About Ray Charles* website: "*Ray achieves his most stately, profound music yet... his voice just sounds so emotional, drawing in the listener, that one begins inevitably – happily – to see things his way. The arrangements are a major reason that **Dedicated To You** manages to enrapture the listener, who is invited into the mysterious and sonorous world of Ray Charles' soul*". While I am generally happy with the fact that art is not science and does not even pretend to believe that there is only one correct way to reach the truth, sometimes the idea that it is always possible to write the most gushing and over-the-top evaluation of the most generic piece of musical twaddle and get away with it brings on a whiff of sadness. But, of course, do not take my word for this — try out a couple of pieces of this «mysterious and sonorous world of Ray Charles' soul» to see for yourself if it manages to enrapture you or not.





GENIUS + SOUL = JAZZ

Album released:

V A L U E

February 1961

2 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) From The Heart; 2) I've Got News For You; 3) Moanin'; 4) Let's Go; 5) **One Mint Julep**; 6) I'm Gonna Move To The Outskirts Of Town; 7) Stompin' Room Only; 8) Mister C; 9) Strike Up The Band; 10) Birth Of The Blues.

REVIEW

There was nothing reputationally questionable for Ray Charles to sign a special contract with a different record label for his side projects in jazz... particularly since the freshly formed Impulse! Records, which would become especially notorious for releasing all those classic Coltrane albums, was a daughter label of ABC-Paramount anyway. However, I do question the weird title of the album, abusing the population's trust in simple arithmetics to shameful effect. I mean, if **Genius + Soul = Jazz**, wouldn't that automatically imply that **Jazz - Soul = Genius**? That's, like, doing *both* genres a terrible disservice, when you come to think of it — and with a record like this, Ray Charles was actually trying to appeal to the *thinking* part of his fanbase, so the title does leave a lot to be desired.



In any case, this is arguably the most famous *and* the most efficient of all of Ray's forays into jazz territory, for the simple reason that it does not stray *too* far away from the Ray Charles Big Band formula first put into effect on **The Genius Of Ray Charles** — in fact, this record is a straightforward inheritor to that one since, just like it was back there, half of the tracks are arranged and produced by Quincy Jones and the other half by Ralph Burns, except that this time around they are interspersed rather than separated, nor is there any strict distinction between «Quincy Jones brass» and «Ralph Burns

strings» sub-styles. But the actual jazz numbers covered by Ray are usually arranged as (relatively) catchy pop numbers, and there are even a couple vocal numbers thrown in for diversity's sake. Both would later be released as the A- and B-side of a separate single: Roy Alfred's 'I've Got News For You' sounds like a slowed-down, sludged-up cousin of 'Let The Good Times Roll', with a lengthy, if not particularly exciting, organ solo in the middle — and the old blues standard 'I'm Gonna Move To The Outskirts Of Town' is distinguished by a nice creative touch from Quincy, who concludes each of Ray's «threatening» verses with an atmospherically coherent explosion of brass fanfare. (Which, actually, makes this more of a Quincy Jones number than a Ray Charles one — but that's hardly bad news, is it?).

As usual, Ray throws in a small bunch of his own compositions, none of which strike me as being particularly «modern» — certainly more in the vein of Count Basie than the beboppers, although I do appreciate that at least the tempos for all three are different: 'From The Heart' is slow and carefree, 'Mister C' is a mid-tempo bluesy shuffle, and 'Let's Go!' is appropriately speedy, with Ray barely able to keep up with the band, though he does manage a respectable enough solo. He sticks to the organ all through the record, by the way, which is a little problematic — things ultimately get quite monotonous, and since Uncle Ray, whatever the fanboys might object, is *not* a bonafide virtuoso on his instrument, he sets pretty much the same general mood whenever he steps into the spotlight. Once again, we are reminded that Ray's playing always works best in the company of his singing — and that having him compete with the likes of Oscar Peterson or, in fact, Count Basie himself is like having some great basketball player compete with some great wrestler.

A particularly good comparative example is offered by Ray's brave cover of Art Blakey's 'Moanin', which he and Quincy whittle down from the original nine minutes to three, retaining only the main theme and the keyboard solo (replacing Bobby Timmons' piano with Ray's organ). The original tune is a classic, featuring one of the most memorable themes in all of Fifties' jazz — and Ray does it full justice, preserving the thrilling, suspenseful mood of the opening piano riff while translating it from piano to organ, while Quincy beefs up the brass section, adding tightness, loudness, and bombast to its musical response. But there is nothing they can do about the middle section, in which Ray sounds totally generic and predictable next to Bobby Timmons' wild mood swings on the original. In the end, Ray and Quincy simply convert the song into high-class lounge entertainment, losing its «explorative» aspects — and is that any surprise?

What they probably *should* have done instead of trying to put their own stamp on contemporary classics is go ahead and «jazzify» some songs that had never been jazzy in the first place — because, indeed, their one and only stab at such a feat here is unquestionably *the* major highlight of the album: an instrumental cover of the old Clovers hit 'One Mint Julep'. You

know there just has to be something magical about a fully instrumental number that rises all the way to the top of the R&B charts (and even hits the Billboard Top 10), and indeed, Quincy's transformation of the song's original vocal melody into a tight-as-heck brass riff, strollin' across the boardwalk to a metronomically pulsating rhythm section, is almost magical — it takes the humorous, vaudevillian aspect of the original composition and mutates it into an assertive, proto-funky piece of swag. Ray's own organ part here is subdued and almost minimalist compared to the other recordings — "*just a little bit of soul now...*", he quietly, but audibly mumbles during one of the stop-and-start segments, immediately settling into a quiet and oddly pensive solo that Ray Manzarek must have idolized for all of his life (because this is almost precisely how he tends to sound during at least half of his improvisations on the Doors' live recordings).

To the best of my intuitive understanding, this isn't really «jazz» — more like «soul-pop» — but then again, barely anybody probably understood what «jazz» was back in 1961, and it's really a *good* thing that this album just keeps on violating all sorts of possible borders between jazz, blues, R&B, soul, and pop music. Of course, the very fact that you don't want to settle down into a strict, cozy formula does not automatically guarantee a win; thus, I can barely sit through the closing number — an excruciatingly meandering five-minute long dialog between directionless organ and rambling brass, which used to be an old standard called 'Birth Of The Blues' but here is more like 'Bureaucratization Of The Blues'. But the record's overall stylistic variety saves me from expanding that feeling across all the other tracks, at least.

Like most of Ray's work from the early Sixties, **Genius + Soul = Jazz** tends to get overpraised and overrated; once you get over the formal excitement of Soul Brother #1 laying his imprint on jazz legacy, it is not likely that you shall frequently return to it when you can instead enjoy the jazz legacy as such. (Who needs this, really, if you can just listen back to Art Blakey and Count Basie themselves?). But it definitely has lots more class and taste than the pure lounge entertainment of **Dedicated To You** — at least you do get to hear Ray Charles as an actual musician, with elements of both professionalism and spontaneity that his regular vocal recordings at the time tended to forego in favor of bombast and sentimentality. And as for the recording of 'One Mint Julep', yes, it is all the way up there with 'Hit The Road, Jack', 'Unchain My Heart', and any other of Ray's vocal pop hits of the epoch. The man may have been corrupted by fame and fortune, but, fortunately for us, that corruption was essentially skin-deep, never tainting the "*just a little bit of soul*" deep in the heart.





RAY CHARLES AND BETTY CARTER

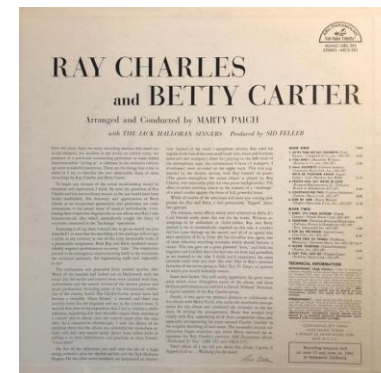
Album released:

August 1961

V A L U E

2 2 2 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye; 2) You And I; 3) Goodbye/We'll Be Together Again; 4) People Will Say We're In Love; 5) Cocktails For Two; 6) Side By Side; 7) Baby, It's Cold Outside; 8) Together; 9) For All We Know; 10) Takes Two To Tango; 11) Alone Together; 12) Just You, Just Me.

REVIEW

ABC Records picked up Betty Carter, who had already made a solid name for herself ever since joining Lionel Hampton's band back in 1948, some time around 1960, and she and Ray actually ended up sharing the same concert bill, so it was only a matter of time before somebody came up with the idea of pairing two of ABC's most renown artists on the same record. The idea was probably to try to emulate the tremendous success of the three records that Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald recorded in the late Fifties — after all, the reverence for Ray Charles' voice was hardly any less than for Louis, and Betty was considered to be a more «modern» type of jazz vocalist than Ella (her 1960 album was proudly titled **The Modern Sound Of Betty Carter**), so how could this fail?



Yet fail it did. Released in August 1961, the LP stalled on the charts, not even making it into the Top 50, despite all of Ray's previous jazz albums from the same year charting quite imposingly high. To remedy this situation, ABC put out the duo's recording of 'Baby It's Cold Outside' as a single for the Christmas season — and despite predictably heavy radio rotation, it

barely cracked the Top 100. (Some sources, including the album's Wikipedia page, parrot the strange info that 'Baby It's Cold Outside' had topped the R&B charts — but I can find no confirmation of this on any list of chart-topping R&B singles from either 1961 or 1962, and, frankly, given how thoroughly «pop» the song is, it's downright impossible to believe that it might have properly registered on the R&B market). Certainly compared to Ray's chart-smashing singles from the same time such as 'Hit The Road, Jack' and 'Unchain My Heart', **Ray Charles And Betty Carter** was a commercial disaster — and, honestly, I don't see any critical rush today to remedy that assessment.

First and foremost, there is the problem of musical arrangement. An album like **Ella And Louis**, no matter how fantastic the vocal parts are, could never yield the same feeling of class and taste without relying on its small jazz combo, in which every single musician was a genius in his own right (Oscar Peterson! Herb Ellis! Buddy Rich!) and Louis' own trumpet was the principal instrumental counterpart to the voices. Contrast this with Marty Paich's orchestral arrangements, drowning the singers in the usual syrupy violins, angelic harps, gospel choirs, and Vegas-y brass — everything perfectly professional, unbearably predictable, and completely devoid of individuality. With this kind of backdrop, a song like 'Cocktails For Two', at best, brings on visions of a generic Fifties' TV commercial, «for the perfect family». I wish there'd been at least *one* song on the record to shed the black suits and ties and evening cocktail dresses, but no. No luck.

Second, there is the issue of Betty Carter herself. Respected as one of the most versatile and innovative jazz singers of her generation, she was indeed able of sounding «modern» as heck even on her earliest records (she "*...took extreme rhythmic liberties with her material, sometimes offering such arcane reinterpretations of standards that one is tempted to include her among the jazz avant-garde*", according to Ted Gioia). But while her singing on these numbers is certainly far more individualistic and striking than the musical accompaniment, the emphasis here is not on anything even remotely arcane in nature. Instead, Betty sounds like a bit of a cross between Billie Holiday and Nina Simone (the latter in her «romantic» rather than «martial» mood), combining the thin, high-pitched fragility of the former with the moodiness of the latter, but somehow ending without the deep humanity of either. The effect is unfortunate, at least to my ears: I can admire the technical aspects of her singing, but remain completely unmoved by the tone and modulation.

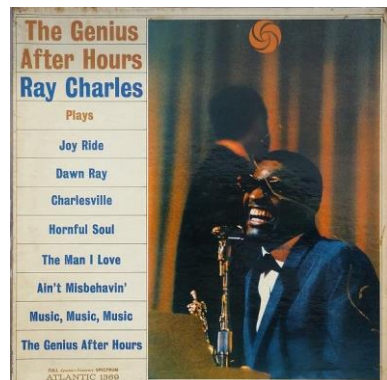
Whether she has any genuine «chemistry» with Ray's voice is up to subjective debate; personally, I'm not even sure *what* sort of male singing style would go well hand-in-hand with Betty's «cats-on-methadone» approach. Ray, as usual, feels comfortable, safe, and (more often than not) boring in his role of lazy, languid, suave high-society lover, but Betty seems to be vacillating between the roles of «starry-eyed innocent victim» and «strong-willed independent lady», and I hardly ever

get the feeling that the two are truly engaged in some sort of artistic dialog where they'd recognize and play off each other — not even on the above-mentioned 'Baby It's Cold Outside', which, of course, barely makes any sense if the singers are singing as if they have no business truly hearing one another.

Speaking of 'Baby It's Cold Outside', I am not sufficiently familiar with the history of the song's innumerable recordings to know if the «menacing» brass & piano opening theme to the song (later reprised a couple of times to spice up the mood) was specifically invented for this recording or not. Strange enough, with this little touch the song is introduced as if it were some creepy-ominous R&B anthem from Big Bad Ray — before subsiding, ten seconds later, into the tune's familiar and relaxing Christmas vibe. Ironically, this decision somehow ends up being in tune with the modern-day interpretation of the song as a predatory anthem (and who knows how Uncle Ray himself interpreted his character?), but most importantly, it is *at least* a bit of an experimental and intriguing approach to the song's presentation, which is more than I could say about any other number on here.

Perhaps it's all much simpler than what I am talking about and the record is just way too happy and fluffy for my taste; surely a little bit of heartbreak and pain couldn't hurt when it came to selecting the program, because the endless stream of purry, lovey-dovey numbers could easily cause diabetes in those with weak immune systems. But then again, **Ella And Louis** was hardly a downer, either; there certainly *are* ways to express happiness that feel genuine and natural, and do not require the use of romantic strings and harps or nostalgic singing styles hearkening back to the Golden Age of Radio. Worst of all, I believe that there may have been quite a few ways to ignite a properly exciting flame between Ray Charles, the master of soulful yearning, and Betty Carter, the queen of scat singing, but none of them were explored. Consequently, **Ray Charles And Betty Carter** may only be recommended if you plan upon throwing a *really* old-fashioned Christmas party, tuxedos and bow ties required and all.





THE GENIUS AFTER HOURS

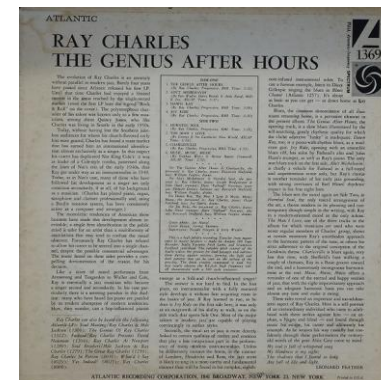
Album released:

October 3, 1961

V A L U E

2 2 2 2 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) The Genius After Hours; 2) Ain't Misbehavin'; 3) Dawn Ray; 4) Joy Ride; 5) Hornful Soul; 6) The Man I Love; 7) Charlesville; 8) Music, Music, Music.

REVIEW

We can keep this one fairly short, since a few of the tracks were already discussed in conjunction with **The Great Ray Charles**, and there is not much that can be said about this LP in general that has not already been said earlier. Clearly, Ahmet Ertegun was still keeping a close watch on the critical and commercial success of his former biggest star with ABC, and it cannot be a coincidence that **The Genius After Hours**, consisting of pretty old outtakes from the exact same sessions that yielded **The Great Ray Charles** back in 1957, was released in the same year that Ray rocked the singles charts with 'One Mint Julep' and had a pretty big LP success with **Genius + Soul = Jazz** as well. Interestingly, the Atlantic executives were not completely clueless in their decision: **The Genius After Hours** actually sold better than its predecessor, one of those curious rare cases when a record of outtakes finds more recognition than a «proper» record just because it happens to be released at the right time.



Even so, it was hardly a smash, and no individual compositions from it have managed to register in the public conscience. The big advantage of 'One Mint Julep' was that it was danceable, a half-jazz, half-pop arrangement of an R&B standard with a main theme that literally propelled you onto the dance floor. Back in 1957, though, those sessions at Atlantic were not

about commercial success — Ray was out there to prove to the world that he had what it takes to reach a more sophisticated audience, and, as we know, it didn't really work exactly the way he'd like it to work: **The Great Ray Charles** was of little interest to both fans of his R&B hits and «elitist» jazz listeners who (quite correctly) would refuse to line Uncle Ray up with the genuine jazz piano greats of the time. Over the next four years, little had changed: Ray was still revered as an icon of R&B and soul, but hardly along the same lines as Oscar Peterson or Bud Powell.

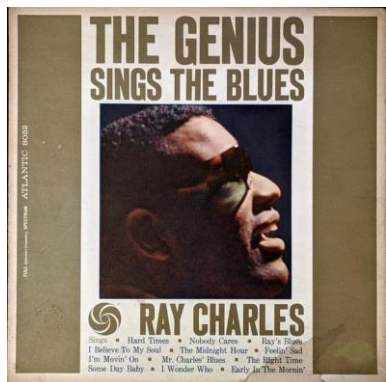
There is exactly one significant difference between the two albums: all but three of the compositions on **The Genius After Hours** are credited to Ray himself, whereas **The Great Ray Charles** only had one original credit ('Sweet Sixteen Bars'). This makes me suspect that at least some of these numbers might have been simply functioned as spontaneous warm-ups, little bursts of improvisation to tune up the band for the «proper» recordings. Consequently, this is actually a better place to go if you are deeply interested in Ray's improvisational talent and technique; there are some fairly dazzling runs on fast bebopping tracks like 'Joy Ride' and 'Charlesville' that should surely squash any complaints about Ray not really being an outstanding piano player — well, he may not be as truly outstanding as the guys who *invented* that playing style, but he sure took his lessons with all the diligence it requires.

Of the two main covers of the album, I am thoroughly disappointed with 'Ain't Misbehavin', which Ray and saxophone player Emmett Dennis turn into a late-night cocktail-lounge mood piece, vacuuming out all the mischievous cheerfulness of Fats Waller; but Ray does a damn good job on 'The Man I Love', finding just the right tempo, tone, and phrasing for his piano to bring out the same potential that Bille Holiday does on her vocal versions. However, this is not a matter of training or technique; it's actually a matter of soul, and 'The Man I Love' gets through here on the same kind of vibe that makes Ray's piano playing so lovable on his «simplistic» R&B hits. Meanwhile, the pensive improvisation on the slow, bluesy title track is technically more advanced — but feels boring and narcissistic when you give it a close listen.

'Hornful Soul' is the only one of these original numbers that sounds carefully pre-written — just because it has a structured main theme, indeed delegated to the horn section in the intro and outro, in between which we still have to bear with four minutes' worth of piano «doodlin'» (interestingly, I catch a whiff of 'One Mint Julep' in a few piano bars every now and then; apparently, Ray must have been a big fan of the song from the moment of its emergence). It's an okay theme, but I have to say that for the jazz standards of 1961, it must have already appeared pretty outfashioned — and that, in a nutshell, is the biggest problem of the album as such: jazz music had made such tremendous strides from the late Fifties to the early Sixties that outtakes from a 1957 Ray Charles session could hardly be of any value to the world at the time. I mean, in the

interval between the official release of **The Great Ray Charles** (1957) and **The Genius After Hours** (1961) we had **Kind Of Blue** (1959) and **Giant Steps** (1960) — what else can be said here? Even the title of the album gives out a subtle hint that this kind of stuff is *probably* more of a hobby for «The Genius» than a claim at major artistic relevance.

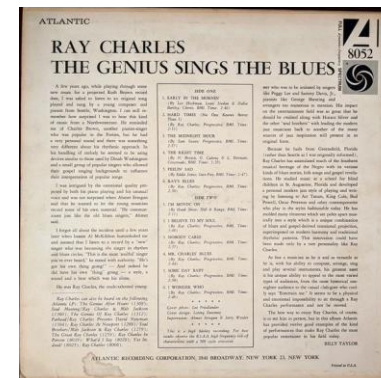




THE GENIUS SINGS THE BLUES

Album released: **V** **A** **L** **U** **E**
October 1961 **2** **3** **4** **2** **4**

More info:



Tracks: 1) Early In The Mornin'; 2) Hard Times (No One Knows Better Than I); 3) The Midnight Hour; 4) The Right Time; 5) Feelin' Sad; 6) Ray's Blues; 7) I'm Movin' On; 8) I Believe To My Soul; 9) Nobody Cares; 10) Mr. Charles' Blues; 11) Some Day Baby; 12) I Wonder Who.

REVIEW

With such a pool of brand new Ray Charles material from ABC Studios literally swamping the market all through 1961, it is ironic, symbolic, and instructive that Ray's best «new» record of the year would still come out on his old label — and consist of nothing but a chronologically scattered bunch of A-sides, B-sides, and previously unreleased demos and outtakes stretching all the way back to Ray's very first sessions with Atlantic and stopping right at his very last session for the house that Ahmet Ertegun built. Sure, a record assembled from this sort of scraps is always bound to have its share of second- or third-rate material; but this is Ray Charles safely staying on his natural turf, and this means even the third-rate material is going to be confident and meaningful — and, above all, never making you ask yourself that dreaded question, «*remind me, why exactly have I chosen to listen to this record of my own free will and accord?*» Because this, this is the kind of vibe you are simply not getting from anybody else in the business.



Neither the original pressing nor any of the LP and CD re-issues bothered to properly indicate the recording dates and overall pedigrees for any of the included songs; in fact, the original release even mislabeled some of the titles, presenting the

old-time classic 'Worried Life Blues' as 'Some Day Baby' and T-Bone Walker's 'I Got A Break Baby' as 'Mr. Charles' Blues', crediting the song to Ray himself. (As long as it really was, uh, *the blues*, who the heck cared back in 1961?). Nevertheless, with a little help from Web sources it becomes clear that the record is (slightly unevenly) divided in two major parts: the «pre-'I Got A Woman'» Ray Charles of 1952–1953, still struggling to find his own style and mission at Atlantic — and the «late peak era» Ray Charles of 1958–1959, already entertaining thoughts of relocating to a bigger ship than Atlantic.

All of that material is pretty much shuffled at random here, so here's a good correct track running for you to put your playlist in order, with brief (or not so brief) notes on most of the tracks:

(a) Sept. 11, 1952: 'The Midnight Hour' was the B-side to 'Roll With My Baby' (previously mentioned in the **What'd I Say** review), and although it is a super-slow, draggy blues ballad rather than a playful, danceable shuffle like its A-side companion, it still lingers on as a far more memorable song. There's just something genuinely spooky about that opening deep moan of "*the midnight hour... has found me lonely*", and something genuinely unsettling about how harmoniously the moanin' and groanin' overtones of Ray's voice and the background horns wash over each other. It's a good thing that Ray never locked himself into this after-hours nighttime lounge mode of functioning, but he was quite perfect at it before Ertegun managed to push him into dynamic overdrive.

(b) May 10, 1953: 'Some Day Baby' = 'Worried Life Blues'. A sort of random demo take that the Atlantic people probably pulled out by chance. Just Ray and his piano. Cozy and tasteful, but the tempo is a little too upbeat for my tastes — I think the ultimate version of this classic would be produced by The Animals a decade later, with Eric Burdon and Alan Price truly putting the «worried» back into the blues.

(c) Aug. 18, 1953: 'Feelin' Sad' and 'I Wonder Who'. From Ray's trip to New Orleans, these are two decidedly old-timey R&B numbers, recorded with a local band led by Edgar Blanchard, whose pleasant, but generic electric guitar is all over both of the tracks, completely overshadowing Ray's piano. Nothing too special, but Ray still turns in a mighty theatric performance, pretty much bursting into tears on 'Feelin' Sad' as if he *did* just bury his mother half an hour ago. Some might complain he really overdoes it, but hell, I'll take a weepin' Uncle Ray over a 'Cocktails-For-Two' Uncle Ray any day.

(d) Dec. 4, 1953: 'Ray's Blues', 'Mr. Charles' Blues' = 'I Got A Break Baby', 'Nobody Cares'. Another New Orleanian session (the same one that yielded 'Don't You Know' for his first LP); two desperate and one optimistic blues numbers that all sound good but just don't have that *really* special something — like a monumental, doom-laden piano riff, for instance — that makes 'Sinner's Prayer' such a terrifying masterpiece where all these other numbers are just, uhm, *moody*. Still, at least

the piano is consistently louder on this session, while Ray remains in tip-top vocal form. It's just that, you know, maybe Ray Charles and New Orleans aren't really the best possible combination.

Now skip ahead a whoppin' five years for the remaining five tracks:

(e) Oct. 28, 1958: 'Early In The Morning' and '(The Night Time Is) The Right Time'. Yes, this marks the first appearance of the original studio recording of 'The Right Time' on an LP, but we have already discussed that classic in the context of (equal or superior) live performances, so let me just add that, even if 'Early In The Morning' never lives up to the blunt and bawdy impact of its repetitive neighbor (and offers no lead spot to Margie Hendricks, which automatically makes it feel inferior), its weird polyrhythmic structure is certainly something to think about — the song proper is taken at a waltz tempo, but there's an extra percussion track on top (bongos?) that adds a «disturbing» African ritual vibe, so the whole thing is like a mix of black American blues, white American country, and the primordial tribal spirit. Does it work? Well, it didn't sell when Atlantic put it out as the first single off the «new» album, so people probably didn't know well enough what to do of it. I do believe it's a track that got a little mystery angle to it, as opposed to the in-yer-face declarations of 'The Right Time', but, as it so often happens, remain unsure about whether revealing the mystery will lead to enlightenment or not.

(f) Nov. 5, 1958: 'Hard Times (Nobody Knows Better Than I)'. No mystery here; a self-penned soul-blues tune that should have been one of Ray's calling cards — as great as any of his big hits for the label and possibly greater than most. The perfect combination of a soothing piano jazz vibe and a depressing blues vibe, with a great memorable chorus hook ("*who knows better than I?*") and an expert atmospheric build-up over its four verses. Not a 'Sinner's Prayer' — no hellflames licking at the heels of the singer this time, just a masterful transformation of the classic «my whole life's been one endless bout of suffering from birth to death» blues vibe into something epic and openly spiritual with very limited means (piano, vocal, and a gradually thickening horns section). Honestly, this should have been as big as something like 'A Change Is Gonna Come' — couldn't, though, because 'A Change Is Gonna Come' drops you a hint that things might get better in *this* lifetime, while 'Hard Times' clearly states that "*there'll be no more sorrow when I pass away*" and not earlier than that. (Ironically, it ultimately turned out that it was Ray Charles who was the protagonist of 'A Change Is Gonna Come' and Sam was the hero of 'Hard Times', but who could know it back then?).

(g) June 26, 1959: 'I'm Movin' On' and 'I Believe To My Soul'. The very last session for Atlantic, the last A- and B-side Ray originally recorded for the label, and two of his greatest performances in this whole wide world. As far as Ray's experiments with country music are concerned, I openly declare that I will take his version of Hank Snow's 'I'm Movin' On' over the

entirety of **Modern Sounds In Country And Western Music**, both volumes of it — *this*, as far as I am concerned, is the perfect synthesis of white country & western with African-American soul. Fast, groovy, rockin', but carefully preserving the seductive slide guitar melody of the original — then, at the end, taking it into pure transcendental spiritual groove territory where the battle cry of "*I'm movin' on!*" takes on a whole other significance. Of course, we could always interpret the song as Ray's own thinly-veiled goodbye to his record label: "*I warned you baby from time to time / But you just would not listen / Now pay me no mind... / You've broken your vow and it's all over now / So I'm movin' on*" — poor Ahmet must have been silently biting his lips in the studio corner. But for the non-historian, the performance will simply symbolize one of those «I'm breaking out!» vibes that we all get a craving for from time to time — culminating in that final short jam, when Ray and the Raelettes put that Hank Snow schtick into a rocket ship and shoot it into the stratosphere. This is angry, almost demented rock'n'roll at its purest: across the Atlantic, The Rolling Stones would be the first ones to see to the bottom of it and even crank the dial up a bit in their own live performances (their own version on **December's Children** is a mix of bass-heavy proto-metal with ecstatic slide guitar heaven — Uncle Ray must have been proud).

'I Believe To My Soul', which many, if not most people, will recognize as the source of Bob Dylan's familiar piano riff for 'Ballad Of A Thin Man' that he almost literally «sampled» from Ray, is unquestionably one of the best songs ever written about anguish and betrayal. I still feel torn between Ray's original and the sonically and emotionally perfect Animals cover, just because nobody in the world could capture the spirit of Ray Charles *and* enhance it as the dynamic duo of Eric Burdon and Alan Price could. (Note also, for the record, that the Animals politely removed the original "*I think I'm gonna have to use my rod*" line from the lyrics, while Uncle Ray, of course, would have no problem with it even all the way through his late-life performances). On the other hand, the Animals don't have the backing vocals that give the original such an eerie, ghostly feel during the chorus. In short, Uncle Ray was feeling mighty pissed-off that day in the studio, be it in fast rockin' mode or slow blueswailin' mode, and we're all the better for it in the long run.

And there you have it — a crazy mash-up of decent-to-mediocre «old school Ray» with a few untouchable masterpieces from the «peak Ray» phase. Averaging out the score really makes no sense here: anybody could easily do without the (a) to (d) groups (though I do insist that 'The Midnight Hour' is a bit of an early highlight), but the (e) to (g) ones are absolutely indispensable to those who want to know more about the foundations of popular music — or, which might be even more important, to those who just want to have themselves a mighty good time. Astonishingly, **The Genius Sings The Blues** sold far less upon release than **The Genius After Hours** — either the potential buyers got early wind of the album being more of an outtake compilation than anything else, or, more likely, Atlantic simply did not spend any resources on

promoting the record, unlike ABC, who were busy marketing Ray's jazz and vaudeville albums like crazy. This resulted in at least one good thing — Atlantic decided not to flood the market with any more dreg-from-the-vault releases — but it reflects rather poorly on the fate of little hidden jewels like 'Hard Times', though, granted, most people probably get their full servings of Ray Charles not through LPs, but through extensive compilations, most of which will never forget the brilliance of 'I Believe To My Soul' or 'I'm Movin' On'.

Anyway, the moral of the story is: in 1961, Atlantic-era Ray Charles was still the best Ray Charles money could buy, at least if we were talking in LP terms (after all, he *did* release both 'Hit The Road, Jack' and 'Unchain My Heart' on ABC that year). The Genius did a much better job of singing the blues, after all, than when working after hours.

