



A M A S T E R S V O I C E

# Conversations with

**Ray Charles isn't just a giant of American music. He is American music.**

AS A SINGER, SONGWRITER, KEYBOARDIST, AND BANDLEADER, CHARLES has left an indelible stamp on rock, R&B, blues, jazz, and country, often by single-handedly redefining the boundaries between them.

Born in Albany, Georgia, in 1930, Charles studied music at a Florida school for the blind before settling in Seattle in 1947. There he developed a jazzy style in the mode of Nat King Cole.

# Ray Charles

He also worked as an arranger, most notably on Guitar Slim's 1953 classic "The Things That I Used to Do," easily one of the most important blues tracks of all time.

But Charles really hit his stride with 1955's "I've Got a Woman," whose raucous, gospel-inflected style was a bold departure from his earlier, smoother style. Follow-up hits such as "What'd I Say" and "Hallelujah I Love Her So" cemented Charles's position as R&B's most important stylist. James Brown is the Godfather of Soul; Ray Charles is simply the father.

In the early '60s, Charles launched a second musical revolution: He demolished the wall between R&B and country music with such hits as "I Can't Stop Loving You" and "You Don't Know Me."

Charles is still going strong 50 years after "The Things That I Used to Do," thrilling audiences with one of the world's most recognizable and beloved voices. He also strives to improve the lives of hearing-impaired children through the Ray Charles Foundation.



**R&B, jazz, country, blues, rock and roll—you’ve influenced them all.**

The one thing that's kept my career going is the fact that I do all these different things. I'm not a blues singer in the same way you'd call B.B. King a blues singer. I'm a singer who sings the blues. Big difference! I don't call myself a jazz singer, but I can sing jazz. Anything I like, I can sing. I think the key to my longevity is the fact that I can do various types of music, and the people seem to love it.

**“It’s a great feeling when somebody loves what you’re doing so much that they want to imitate it.”**

**Some of your records changed the course of musical history.**

Well, sometimes music comes to you like something in a dream. You hear it in your head before you even do it. I hear music that way all the time. That's one of the main reasons I like a lot of these keyboards: You can get different sounds to fit the mood you're trying to create.

**Does a keyboard sound ever steer you toward a particular mood?**

No, everything I've done with music was entirely there

in my head first. That's why, when I try out keyboards, I go through them very thoroughly. A lot of these keyboards might have 200 sounds, but most of them aren't worth a quarter. Out of those 200 sounds I might find ten that are truly exciting, and things that I would use. So I search around for things that are suitable for me. I ask, will this sound bring something to the table? Will it enhance what I'm trying to do—yes or no?

**You’re associated with two instrumental sounds in particular: acoustic and electric piano. So what are some of the other colors that work for you?**

My Yamahas have great, great, organ sounds that are truly close to the real thing. They also have some Hawaiian guitar sounds that are very impressive when they're played right. But you have to know how to make the sounds come out the way you want them to come out. It's all in what you hear. I know I sound like a broken record, but I just have things built in my brain that I want to hear. It's got to satisfy me first. If a sound totally impresses me, then I'm happy.

**Any observations about the physical feel of your Yamaha keyboards?**

It's very close to a piano keyboard. The touch on a lot of synthesizer keyboards is much too soft for me. I'm used to playing hard on the piano—I like the keys to jump back at me. I can still play them when the feel is lighter, but that's not the point. The point is that I like to be happy while I'm doing it!

**Yet you’ve said that you do most of your arranging work away from the keyboard.**

That's right. I'm a piano player, but I don't necessarily have to be at the piano to write. I know the chord progressions. I know what I want the saxophones and trombones and trumpets to do. I know what I want from the bass. I used to have a fellow named Hank Crawford who was my copyist, and we would sit up all night and write music, with no piano in sight. If you hear this stuff in your mind and know how to write music, it's easy.

**You surprised a lot of people when you began incorporating country and western influences in the '60s.**

I just wanted to do something like what I used to hear when I was growing up. When I was a kid I used to listen to country music down in Florida, because

that's all the stations played. I'd hear Jimmy Dean and Ernest Tubb and folks like that, and my mom would sometimes let me stay up late so I could hear the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday. So I said to myself: “One of these days, I'm going to do some country music.” I loved the songs and the stories that they tell. They're very plainspoken—you don't have to be an Einstein to figure out the lyrics.

**Did your record label understand what you were trying to do?**

They thought I was going to lose a lot of fans. But I said, “If I work this right, I'll gain more fans than I lose.” And sure enough, it worked for me. We had hits like “I Can't Stop Loving You,” “Born to Lose,” and “You Don't Know Me.” But I wasn't trying to be a country singer. I was trying to be a singer who was singing country music.

**What inspires you to sing someone else's song?**

It has to do something to me inside. It's like when I did “I Can't Stop Loving You”—when I heard those words, the first thing that hit me was that a lot of people would know that feeling. Lots of people want to say that to somebody they love. And I loved the melody, the way it was coming back at me. You know, I've been very fortunate in that I never really had a producer, in the sense of someone who told me what to sing and how to sing it. I didn't come up that way, thank God. I was lucky to be with record companies who would just say, “Ray, you go into the studio and do what you want with your music, and we'll pay the bill.” You don't have that today. The record companies tell artists how to do things, what to do, and when to do it.

**Do you think music would be healthier today if more artists had a chance to work the way you did?**

I think so, but then I'm kind of old-fashioned. People tell me all the time, “Man, you're living in the past—it ain't that way no more.” But I know I'd have a hard time if I were coming up in today's music business, because I've always been so strong-willed when it comes to my music. I never liked anyone telling me what to do!

**Can you tell us a bit about the work you do with the Ray Charles Foundation?**

The reason I have the foundation is because I lost some of my hearing a few years back. That scared me so bad! I knew I couldn't be a Helen Keller—

I wouldn't be able to function if I lost my hearing. So I told myself, there's a lot of work being done for the eyesight, but I don't hear about nearly as much work being done for hearing. So that's what we try to do. We help underprivileged kids get cochlear implants. It's amazing to watch these kids who have never heard anything in their life get these implants, and a year or so later they can hear and talk. It gives you a great feeling. I love that, I really do.

**It's no secret that some singers have borrowed heavily from your style. Does that bother you?**

Well, I think it's rather nice! After all, other people influenced me too. When I was coming up, I dreamed Nat Cole, I slept Nat Cole, I ate Nat Cole, I drank Nat Cole. I loved the way he sang, but what I really loved was the way he'd do those little tasty runs on the piano behind his singing. So I can appreciate being influenced by other singers. It's a great feeling when somebody loves what you're doing so much that they want to imitate it. I don't have adverse images about anybody who wants to do that. I appreciate it! That's the ultimate, man. [Laughs.] If someone hears something in Ray Charles and tries to get as close to it as they can get, I'm for it!

**Anything else you’d like to mention?**

Yamaha has been very, very good to me. They give me a good shot to try out this stuff. Anytime I have a problem with anything, the rep is Johnny-on-the-spot to take care of it for me. You can't get better than that!

**“Sometimes music comes to you like something in a dream. You hear it in your head before you even do it.”**

I'm very proud to be associated with them.