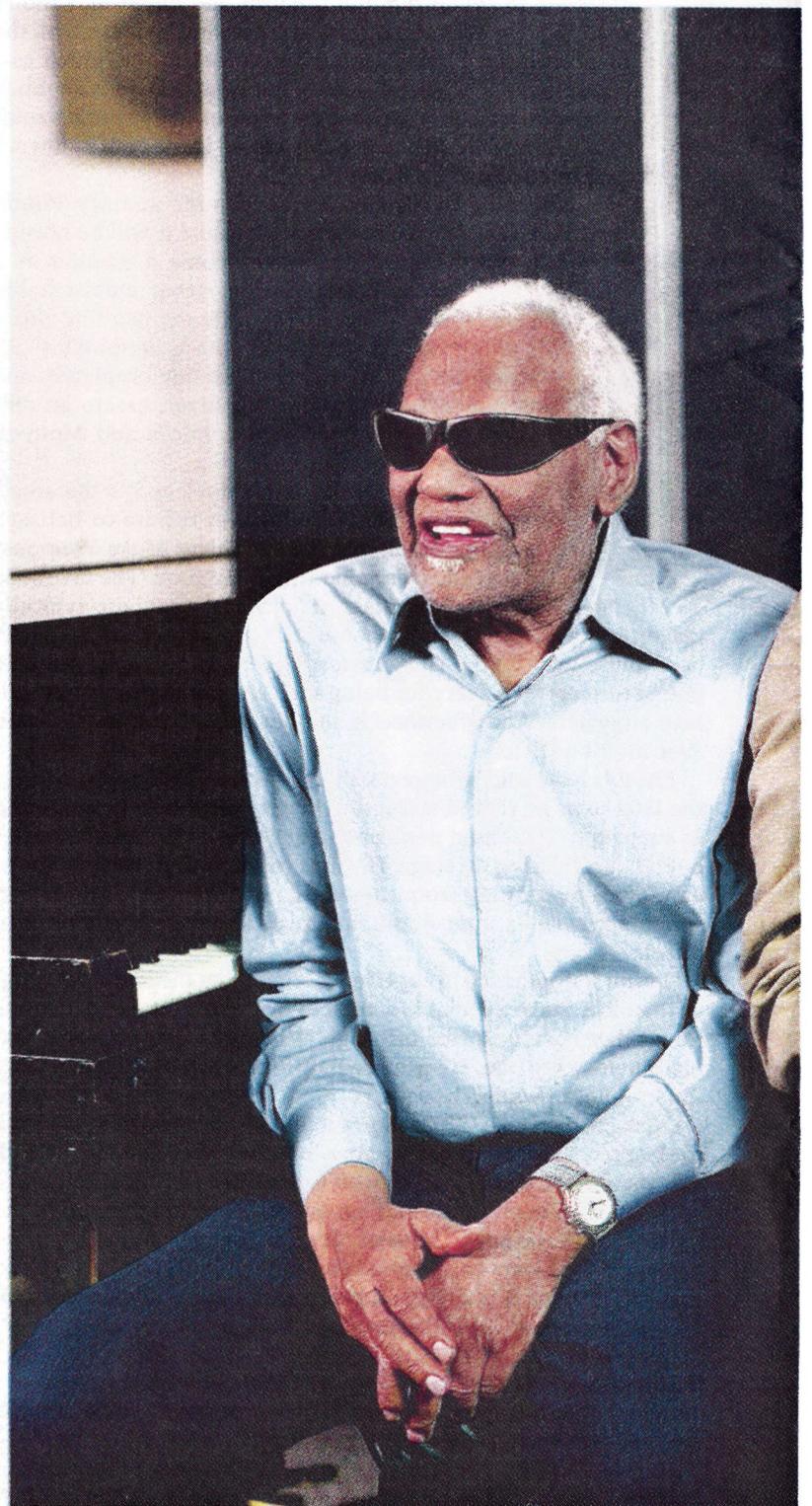


# THE REAL RAY

'Dynamic ... intelligent ... clearly didn't suffer fools ... the most invincible person I have met'. **Taylor Hackford**, whose biopic of Ray Charles opened yesterday, shares his first-hand impressions of the extraordinary musician



**T**he first time I met Ray Charles, I thought I was the victim of a hoax. It was 1989 and I'd been asked to visit the man they called The Genius, by his son, Ray Charles Jr, who had admired the biopics I'd made of Chuck Berry and the Latino rock legend, Ritchie Valens. He thought I might be interested in making a film about his father. So I went to Ray Charles's studio in Los Angeles, was shown into his office, and there I waited for one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century, the man who had contributed so much to modern popular music.

At that stage, I knew his music well but I didn't know much about his life. I was aware, of course, that he was blind, yet I was curious to discover how he would enter the room. I imagined that, like most blind people, he would use a guide dog, a white stick or even have an assistant. The outcome, however, was to be my first lesson in what was to develop into a long, close relationship and one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life.

The door opened and Ray Charles walked in alone - there was no stick, no dog, no assistant. He avoided about four items of furniture, walked straight up to me, stuck out his hand and said: "Hey Taylor, I've heard a lot about you - put some skin in the pocket." The "pocket" was the palm of his hand. Then he avoided three other objects in the room, walked around his desk, sat down in his chair and started talking about a baseball game he'd "seen" on television the night before.

He was wearing his characteristic dark glasses and I couldn't see anything behind them; they were like a dense black shield around

his eyes. But I started to think that this man could obviously see, albeit only partially. There seemed no other explanation for his unerring ability to walk so confidently and precisely around the room.

I was, of course, totally wrong. Ray had been born sighted, but he had suffered from glaucoma since childhood. He had one eye taken out when he was seven and the other when he was 14. He had been blind, living alone in a world of darkness, since the age of six.

There was absolutely no sense of frailty or vulnerability in Ray Charles, though. The idea that I should treat him differently because of his blindness – that I'd make allowances or be nicer to him in some way – was absurd. He had no resentment, regret or hatred; the last person who would ever complain or ask you to feel sorry for him was Ray Charles himself.

I was impressed by the man from that moment and continued to be for the next 15 years. At that first meeting, we talked about his life and about sport, politics and the issues of the day. He was dynamic, engaging and intelligent, and he clearly didn't suffer fools. He was so sharp in the way he looked and spoke; I couldn't take my eyes off him. He seemed to be a man totally in control of his life and his environment. I walked out of that meeting electrified and certain of one thing: that I had to make a film of Ray's life.

It was, naturally enough, the story of his music that I concerned myself with first. Its importance can hardly be overstated. Ray had started out in the late 1940s very expertly copying the voice of Nat King Cole and other popular singers of that era, and by the early 1950s he had begun to discover and define his own sound. It was as if he reached down into his experience and found his own voice.

His sound now had depth, expression and emotional range.

It was the release of *I Got A Woman* in 1954 that changed his life – and the course of American music. A song that for the first time provocatively and seductively fused the blues with gospel music, both overlaid with Ray Charles's rich and infectiously gravelly vocals, *I Got A Woman* created a revolution from which pop music would never recover.

The song caused enormous controversy. In 1954, blues singers simply didn't sing gospel and gospel singers definitely didn't sing the blues. Gospel music was sacred, holy, the sound of God; the blues was secular, earthy and infused with the words of the devil. Ray Charles was integrating sexual delight with spiritual joy, and some sections of black America did not like it. Preachers accused him of blasphemy and sacrilege; even members of his band walked out on him.

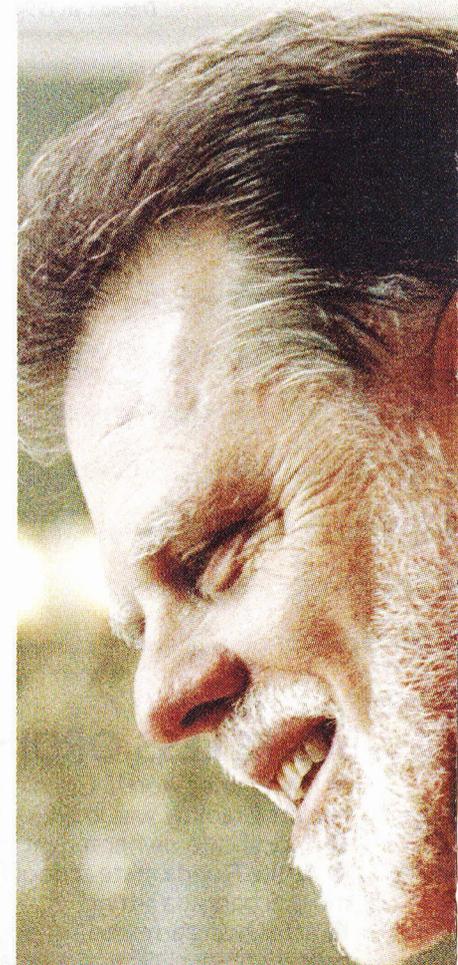
Young white America, too, had never heard anything like it. Not only did the song lay the foundations of what would subsequently become soul music, but it also had a wider cultural impact. Like the songs of Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Bo Diddley, and interpreters such as Elvis and Bill Haley, *I Got A Woman* brought unadulterated black music into the bedrooms of white teenagers – as their music of choice. These were the years – 1954 and 1955 – that R&B took over pop, the years that gave birth to rock 'n' roll. Ray Charles played an integral role in those times.

He would continue to blend musical idioms throughout his life – from blues to jazz, rock, gospel, country, classical and pop, sometimes all in the same song – and transcend them with a voice and a style that seemed to touch universal emotional truths. Frank Sinatra described him as “the only genius in our business”.

In 1962, he released an album called *Modern Sounds In Country and Western Music*. By this time he had enjoyed great success with such records as *What'd I Say*, *Georgia On My Mind* and *Hit The Road Jack*, but his record company, ABC, thought the project would ruin his career, that it would alienate both his black and his white audiences.

Ray Charles was not a man to be easily dissuaded; he was determined and absolutely sure of himself. He had grown up listening to country music on the radio, and loved it, and he went ahead with a heartfelt selection of his favourite Nashville tunes. The album and its single, *I Can't Stop Loving You*, were the biggest-selling records of the year. Ray Charles taught me another important lesson: trust your instincts.

- Left: Ray Charles and Jamie Foxx.
- Below: Taylor Hackford, who directed Foxx in Charles's biopic





**T**hese records defined the times and a generation, and they had an enormous impact. Ray Charles unified America through his music; he built bridges between communities and changed the culture. It's my belief that Ray Charles and the other black artists of that time did as much for integration in America as all the civil-rights activists and new legislation.

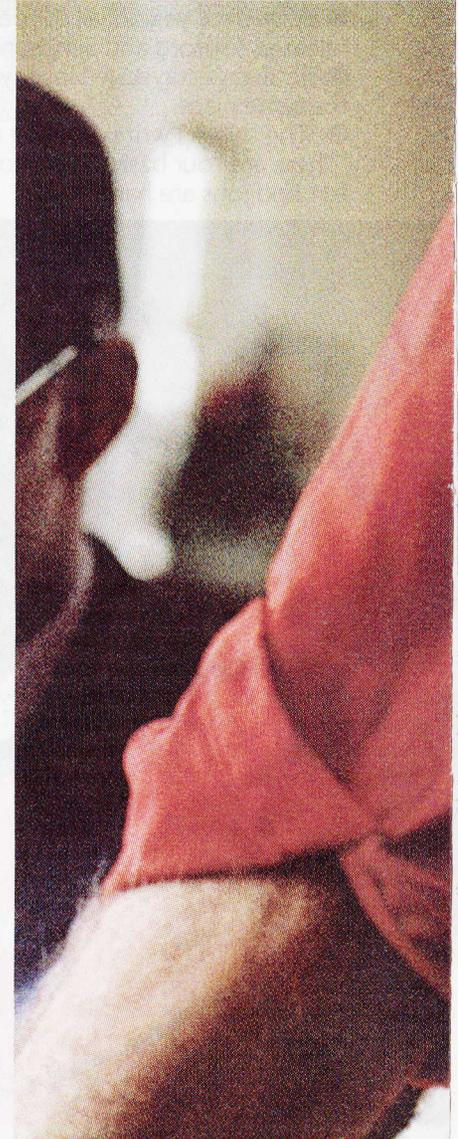
He also went one step further. Although he always saw himself primarily as an entertainer, and would often say that he was a musician not a politician, Ray was the first major black R&B performer to refuse to play gigs where black and white audiences were segregated. It hurt him financially and even led to promoters enacting an unofficial ban on him performing in Georgia, the state in which he was born.

Ray was certainly no angel, however, and my film doesn't shy away from showing the less attractive aspects of his character. He became a heroin addict at the age of 18, and he was a committed yet fully functioning dope user for the next 17 years. Heroin could make him erratic, irritable, manic, withdrawn and mistrustful, and it nearly killed him. Yet he continued to maintain an exacting schedule, and he never missed a gig or recording date.

He was very frank with me when we discussed why he used it. He spent long periods in the 1950s and 1960s touring, and I think he often felt acutely and frighteningly alone in the world. The drug experience gave him a way of inuring himself to the pain of that loneliness, and at the same time it also gave him the feeling of being part of a hip group, an in-crowd. Heroin seemed like a cool thing to do at that time - Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday and all the jazz musicians he revered did dope - and he told me that, anyway, he liked it. Ray dug dope.

He never proselytised about heroin, but he found he could take it and, mostly, still function as a musician, bandleader and businessman. It was only after he was busted in 1965 and faced both a potential jail sentence and the end of his hard-won career that he decided to kick the addiction.

He was also one of the most dedicated womanisers in the history of pop music. He was married twice (his first marriage was



## A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

- Ray Charles won 12 Grammys, including a lifetime achievement award in 1987. His last Grammy was in 1993 – best R&B vocal performance for *A Song For You*.
- A local café owner taught him basic piano technique.
- At the Florida state school for the blind he sometimes memorised 2,000 musical bars at a sitting.
- After being arrested for possession of marijuana and heroin, he checked himself into a clinic and was said to have rid himself of his habit in four days.
- He spent a year in jail for heroin possession. When he was released, he released Ashford and Simpson's *Let's Go Get Stoned*.
- He always stayed in Holiday Inns while on tour so that everything would be in the same place.
- "The things I write and sing about concern the general Joe," he once said. "There are four basic things: love, somebody runnin' his mouth too much, having fun, and jobs are hard to get."



annulled after only six months) and was with his second wife, Della Bea, for more than 20 years. Yet he had countless lovers and mistresses throughout his life, and fathered 12 children by various women.

It was almost as if he was addicted to sex as well as heroin. Ray Charles was a very sensual person – maybe more so as a result of losing his sight. You can hear that in his music, in such incredibly passionate songs as *The Night Time Is The Right Time*, but he played out that desire in life, too.

He was unabashed about his appetite for sex and his love of women, and he talked about it a lot. He was an unswerving Casanova and he liked to experiment with different women. He had a string of relationships with members of his backing singers, the Raelets, so much so that it led to a joke: "To be a Raelet, a lady must let Ray." He would play his women off against each other and there was plenty of heartbreak. He had an affair with one Raelet, Pat Lyles, only to take up with her mother, Mae, with whom he had a child.

Yet women loved Ray. He was a rich and good-looking "jiveass celebrity", as he once called himself, and he was a very hip dresser – he chose all his own fabrics, preferring fine wools and raw silk, and his suits and tuxedos were always bespoke.

He could be stubborn and ruthless in his business dealings, too. In an era in which performers and songwriters could be mercilessly exploited, Ray aggressively took charge of his musical affairs early on in his career. He negotiated contracts in which he would produce his own music and retain ownership of his recordings, started his own record label and studio, and even bought his own jet. In many ways he was the progenitor of all those bands – from The Beatles to U2 – who have subsequently taken control of their own destinies as artists. But while it may have been a template for creative freedom, it owed no small part to Ray's proclivity for secrecy and suspicion.

He was tough and hard-working, and he kept his business affairs close to his chest, surrounding himself with just a few trusted associates who were largely hired to minister to his bank balances, heroin addiction and ego. They were also dispensable. Ray was pragmatic, clearheaded and always committed to maximising his financial interests – it was once said about him that, for every hour he spent as an entertainer, he spent 10 as a businessman.

Partly, this was a result of the privations of his upbringing. Born Ray Charles Robinson (he dropped his surname in deference to the great boxer "Sugar" Ray) to a single mother in dirt-poor circumstances in Depression-era America, he had experienced more hardship by the time he was 14 than most do in a lifetime. At five, he witnessed his younger brother George drown in a washtub, and he started to lose his sight nine months later. At seven, he was sent to school for the deaf and blind, and he was orphaned when his

mother, Aretha, died in his early teens.

His desire for financial security may also have been a result of the pain of being the surviving sibling. Very often a child who has experienced the death of a brother or sister will take on a huge amount of guilt and responsibility – they feel they must accomplish for two in order to prove their worth in the world. Elvis was an only child from a poor family – his twin brother was born dead – and Richard Nixon’s brother died at an early age.

**T**he tragic loss of his mother hit him particularly hard. It was Aretha who taught Ray to fend for himself and convinced him that he could have a rich and full life. She thought that pity would only harm the boy, and believed in the maxim that “the Lord helps those who help themselves”. It was Aretha who realised that the only way Ray would get an education was if she sent her only surviving son away from her to a state school for the blind. After she had gone, he was utterly alone in the world.

Ray Charles credited almost everything he achieved to his mother. He told me that she was the most important person in his life, that he spoke to her every day – right up to his death, aged 73, in June last year.

She certainly empowered him. Not only did he have an amazing degree of self-belief, but he also had a tremendous power of asserting himself. He had the confidence to achieve anything he set his mind to. Ray Charles is easily the most independent and invincible person I have ever met. There was something heroic about the man.

It took me 13 years to find the financing for this film in Holly-

wood and, while it greatly pains me that Ray is no longer around to enjoy the film’s release, I’m glad he got to “see” a rough cut of the movie before he died. As well as praising the film, he endorsed Jamie Foxx’s brilliant portrayal of him. Throughout the filming, I had asked Jamie to wear prosthetics that covered his eyes and rendered him sightless. He agreed and during shooting he had to be led onto the set. It was an amazing level of commitment and brought a deep truth and authenticity to the part. Jamie didn’t imitate Ray Charles – he channelled him.

I’m also glad that we decided to end the film not in 1965, when Ray kicked heroin, but in 1979, when Georgia eventually overturned the ban that prevented him from performing in the southern state. That year he was invited to the state capital, Atlanta, where he was given a public apology, made the “favourite son” of the state, and was told that *Georgia On My Mind* had been made the official state song.

He described that day to me as the high point of his life. This was Brother Ray, a man who had started out barefoot, growing up the poorest of the poor in a segregated black enclave in Florida, who had overcome blindness and tragedy to become one of the most important and seminal figures in popular music. This was the Genius of Soul, the musician who had built up his own multimillion-dollar business, who had toured all over the world and performed for kings and queens, and who had been invited to the White House by seven US presidents.

But at that moment in Georgia, he told me, Ray Charles knew just how far he had really come. ♦

Taylor Hackford was in conversation with Philip Watson. *Ray*, Hackford’s film biography of Ray Charles, is in cinemas now