

RAY CHARLES

Interview 2/15/1994

ELWOOD: As Elwood Blues allow me to welcome Mr. Ray Charles to the House of Blues Radio Hour.

RAY CHARLES: Hey, Hey...

ELWOOD: It is great to see you again, sir.

RAY CHARLES: Why thank you, it is truly a pleasure, believe me when I tell you.

ELWOOD: Now, you were such a big part of the Blues Brothers Movie and I don't think people realize that you gave me and Jake such a hand in helping us with our vocal styles, helping us learn how to sing...

RAY CHARLES: 'LAUGHTER...' Oh come on now, no no no... what really was the truth of the matter is, is that I was the one that got all, all, all the help, believe me, talk about being out of my league, I know nothing about movies, you know, I was really out of place. I do try to sing songs and play the piano, but making movies is completely way out in left field for me, so, I mean you guys really guided me and made me feel really at home and I had a marvelous time. That was a great time for me.

ELWOOD: Well, thank you again sir, and thank you for being with us today. Right now we've got a radio show going on.

RAY CHARLES: All right!

ELWOOD: ... and what we're doing here on the House of Blues Radio Hour is showing people where Rock and Blues and Soul and Rhythm & Blues all come together and we've interviewed so many people over the last several months, James Brown, Robert Plant from Led Zeppelin, all these people and so many of them have said that the place where they get their inspiration is from you, Ray Charles.

RAY CHARLES: Oh, that's nice. Well, that's very kind of these wonderful people to say such a thing and I really do, really do appreciate that a lot and you know, I've been around quite a long time and it's good to know that somebody's paying me some attention. 'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: I guess the question for you is where did you get your influences from. I mean where did you...

RAY CHARLES: I think that for me it was a variety of things. That's why, I probably like to think of myself as a utility musician because I'm not a specialist in anything, in other words I'm not say a Blues singer, I'm not a Jazz singer, I'm not a Country & Western singer, but what I am is I'm a singer that can sing the Blues, I'm a singer that can sing Jazz, I'm a singer that can sing love songs, you see, so what I call... I think of myself as being a utility person and where that came from as a kid, of course, I was around the Blues in my neighborhood, of course that's where you heard Muddy Waters and Tampa Red and Blind Boy Phillips and you know, Big Boy Crudup and people like that; and of course that's one influence. And then, of course, we were, my parents were Baptist and, of course, we went to the Baptist Church and I went to all the revival meetings and the BYPU and that sort of thing; and, of course, naturally you had that type of influence which would influence what you do also. And then, of course, being in the South just about the only stations you could get was Country stations for the most part, now I'm sure you could hear some Glen Miller and stuff like that, but for the most part you got the Country stations, so I became very much in love with a with Country music and on Saturday night my mom would let me stay up so I could hear the Grand Ole Opry. So what I'm saying to you is that, you know, my music came to me from a different sources and then of course, the gentlemen who lived next door to me Wiley Pitman who started me off when I was very... just a little tot, two or three years old. He was an excellent Boogie Woogie pianist so I got to hear a lot of that, you know, and so all these little different aspects of music I say had an influence on me when I was very young and that's what was important.

ELWOOD: Now, what does it take to be a good Blues singer?

RAY CHARLES: Oh, well, that's a great question, because you know, you can't just say any one particular thing. First of all, let's be honest about it, it's important that one have a little talent, I mean, that, that would help, let's face it. But I think that to have to be any kind of singer I think you have to have feeling there, and feeling cannot be taught. You can teach a person notes, you know, just like in music, you know, you can teach a person to play the piano, play an instrument or you can teach a person... they can go to voice school and you can teach him how to sing. But the one thing you can't teach is you can't teach feeling, you see and that is the key I think to any kind of singing... can the person, and what feeling is is to make that they're saying so real that you believe whatever they're singing about must have happened to them because they've got so much feeling in their voice. The same as an actress who plays a part on the screen is so real you forget that's it's just a play, but you become so involved... to me that's what feeling is all about, is to make yourself, whatever you're singing about believable and of course I don't think you can teach that. I think the person either has to have it or they don't have it.

ELWOOD: One of the people sighted as someone who you listened to when you were young was Louis Jordan... a lot of people pointed to Louis Jordan. What made him special?

RAY CHARLES: Well, a, Louis Jordan I think was first of all he was a very... he did a lot of music that was very very comical... he did 'There Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens' and 'Run Joe', a lot of fun music with Louis Jordan, and above all, the main thing about Louis Jordan, and it's what I always tell people today, when you heard two bars you knew it was Louis Jordan. What I am trying to say is he had a style of his own, he did not sound like anybody. It's just like Nat Cole would sing two words and you knew, Frank Sinatra sing two words, or Barbra Streisand or Aretha Franklin sing two words and you know. You see, this is the key, and Louis Jordan... he had the 'Tympani Five' this little band that he had and it was very unique, I mean it was very different, nobody around at the time was doing what Louis Jordan was doing and that's what I feel really was his trademark.

ELWOOD: Now your first hit had sort that same kind of humor 'It Should Have Been Me', I mean had that same kind of humor maybe that Louis Jordan had and at the same time it had that syncopated Chicago Blues ...

RAY CHARLES: Well, it was blues. That's it, that's right. You see, that's the thing, you know, when you're getting into music it's so much you can do with music, man... that's what makes it such a beautiful art, cause it's so many many things that you can do with it. There is so much you can draw from it, you know, you can go in any kind of direction you want, you can be very dramatic, you can be very, you can be very humorous or you can be, if you decide, you can be very sentimental about... whatever you want... there is some music to really set the tone of what you want to do with yourself and of course, when we did 'It Should Have Been Me' it was like going into the studio and saying, hey man, let's have some fun and, which in, you know, 'It Should Have Been Me' is kind of like what they talk about Rap today and that's why I tell people I don't want to hear nothing about no Rap, I was doing Rap years ago... 'It Should Have Been Me' and, and 'Green Back Dollar Bill' ain't nothing but talking. 'LAUGHTER...'
'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: 'LAUGHTER...'
'LAUGHTER...'
You got some criticism early on for taking gospel music and secularizing it. How did you feel about that? Do you think it was accurate?

RAY CHARLES: My feeling was, is that, I could understand what people were saying, they did... you're must... for me anyway... I feel that many times people, if they don't know, they just don't know, at least that's what my mom used to

always say... If you don't know, you don't know... period!

(interruption)

My thing is that with a, when I started out, as I said to you early in the interview, one of my great influences was the church, so naturally when I started to sing in my own way in my style, naturally that influence came out, just like the Blues in me came out. You know, whatever's in you is going to come out if you if you know, and the way I came up around the Blues, I came up around spiritual music and so when I sing, you know, some people felt that oh he's bastardizing religion and all, but you know, it just shows you about how times... after a while the next thing I know everybody was doing it, you know, and they start calling it soul music, I say uh-huh! 'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: 'LAUGHTER...' 'What'd I Say' that's a great story about how that song came to be.

RAY CHARLES: Oh, it's kind of a simple story, we, we in the 50s, the 50s (boy, that sounds like I'm ancient) but in the latter part of the 50s we were, we were playing dances in those days, you know, we didn't play too many concerts like you do now and the dance would start at about ten O'clock until two, or nine to one, something like... always four hours anyway. So to make a long story short, usually we play the first two and a half hours then you have a half hour intermission, then you come back and you play that last hour. So, one night we had, we got back and after intermission I went on the stage and I sang and sang and I, when I'd sung everything I thought I could think of and we still had fifteen minutes to go so I said, we, tell you what guys, whatever I play y'all just follow me, girls whatever I say you just say it; and we just started doing....

Do papa do, dodoom do wah do, Do papa do, dodoom do wah do
And the people started dancing and going crazy and stuff, and so I say wow, how exciting this is, you know, and we did this a couple of nights, you know, and somebody said to me... 'hey man, you guys have a record on that, cause that's great, man, people love to dance...' I said, no it ain't there's no record, it's just something we do on the stage so I call Ahmet the next day and said man I'd like to come in and record a song because we're playing this thing out here on the road and the people love it, and he said, well hey, come on in and do, you know. One thing about when I was with Atlantic I had all the freedom I wanted, anything I wanted to do musically, they never hassle me, they just said, anything you want to do Ray, you do it; they never got in my way. It was very very nice, but that song it was an accident, truly an accident; because I was just trying to kill time and I got to the 'Oohh' and the girls when 'Oohh' and then we just followed each other, and if you listen to the lyrics of "What'd I Say," I'm sure you know, that the lyrics make... that there is no continuity at all, they're just lines thrown together, just verses, I mean there is no story line, I mean there's nothing makes sense, you know, I'm just saying lines, just rhyming lines, you know; but it

worked and the reason that it worked is not because it's a great song, but I think because it had such a great beat.

ELWOOD: Before you were talking about Rap there from "What'd I Say." Anyway it's the House of Blues Radio Hour and I'm Elwood Blues and with us is the genius the great Ray Charles. Now this is a radio program and you actually recorded some of your early songs at the radio station. How did you do that?

RAY CHARLES: Right, down in Atlanta we did, I believe 'I've Got A Moment' was recorded down there and it was very strange man and we were trying to record and the guy was trying to give the news and we had stop and break and let the man give the news. 'LAUGHTER...' It was, it was a very very fun thing... yes we did a, as a matter of fact, I think we recorded at two radio stations, one in Atlanta and, I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that we also recorded at a radio station in Miami, also.

ELWOOD: Yeah, yeah, WBF something, I have it here.

RAY CHARLES: Well WGST. That's in Atlanta, that's the one in Atlanta, I remember that.

ELWOOD: Now it must be incredible for you to see music go through all these changes, I mean technology has gone through all these changes from recording at a radio studio to go into a 48, 50, 90 track.....

RAY CHARLES: Yeah, yeah, yeah,

ELWOOD: Do you find that it helps or hinders your ability....

RAY CHARLES: It doesn't affect me one way or the other. You know, and the reason I say that is because I grew up as... you see, I started out, I'll tell you something... the first... it wasn't licensed or anything like that... but the first little recording I made was done on a wire recorder. I bet you haven't heard of a wire recorder, have you?

ELWOOD: Well actually I have...

RAY CHARLES: You have??? Oh??? Oh well that's a surprise. [Clapping] Okay, well don't tell nobody, okay. But anyway and from wire recording, of course, then we, of course, we had these big, these big round discs that they was recording when I started recording professionally... transcriptions is that what they call them.

ELWOOD: [INAUDIBLE] [INAUDIBLE] talking over Ray...

RAY CHARLES: ... you record on that, then tape came in and you had mono, you see everything, and I remember, then I did that, then I remember stereo. Stereo was the safety and the mono was the one they used to put out the record which was very strange back in those days. So I came up with this stuff. I remember from the mono to the 2-track to the 4-track, 8-track to the 16-track, now they've got a 24-track and now you have the digital with the 48-track, you know. I tell you something, I don't care how many tracks you have, if you don't get it, you know, if you don't get it down to the ear where and right now the best we can do is stereo I guess from what I hear, and that's one-side to the other; but if you don't get the music down and you don't get no feeling into it, it doesn't matter about the tracks, you know. People, you know, we, people who are into the technical end of it, we get hung up about it... we want so many EQs, we want the discs and we want the echo chamber, we want the bah, bah, bahbahbah, bahbah. But in the end, that's all fine for the engineers and that, but in the end it's what the public hear; that's what it comes down to, man. You can record in your bathroom and if the music is right, the people don't know nothing about all this other...hey man, so it was recorded on a digital 48, so what, what did it sound like, man? I mean, could I snap my fingers to it, could it make me cry, did I get an emotion from it, that's what it's all about. But you know, I'm not knocking technology, don't get me wrong, I'm just saying that, you know, that the, you can have all that stuff, but the end results is still left up to what the artist does to it. And, I'll tell you, I'll leave you with this last little thought, too, is that for me, there is still in spite of all the, you know, where you go in and you do your tracking and you have your people who come in and the string section come in now and the trumpet section come in later and all this stuff. You can do all of that and you get a cleaner sound and I understand all of that, but you know what, one of the, one of the greatest things today is to go into the studio and do everything live. I mean, that a, pardon the expression, that's a 'B', it is really something to go in, because if the feeling is, you don't get that, when you, when you, you know, when you do tracking, when you, you know, when you go in and you put the rhythm on and then you put the trumpets on and then you put the this on... I mean, I, I, know you get a cleaner sound and I know it's all pure and all this stuff, but man, it ain't nothing like getting that real, you know, feeling of having live people in the studio and everybody moves together. Whatever happens it happens spontaneously, although it gets the engineers crazy, I mean it drives them up a wall and stuff because they can't control everything like they want to. But it's nothing like a live performance, still even today.

ELWOOD: Let me ask one more question... What, how would you define the Blues? Where does the Blues come from?

RAY CHARLES: That's a good question, I'd love to know the answer to where it

came from, but I don't. But I would think that the Blues per se came from people having trouble. I think the Blues came from people having hard times. I think the Blues came from people being mistreated. I think the Blues came from people having bad relations with their loved ones, you know. I think the Blues as I say, is, came from the human being when he's at some point at his lowest point, and he, it is a way of expressing how you feel inside because you can sing about it and you're expressing yourself and you getting it out of your system, you know, it's kind of like crying sometimes. If you could just cry and get it out, just bring it out, you know, it don't resolve a thing but it makes you feel a little better and I think that's what happened with the Blues. It's something that I feel started from trouble, from people being down and hurt, really being hurt whether by loved ones or being hurt mistreated or depressed or oppressed, you know.

ELWOOD: Yet it's a happy music, too.

RAY CHARLES: Yeah, yeah. Well, you see, but then that's life for you. You see everything can be a dual meaning, you can take anything and turn it around, but your question to me is where I think the Blues came from. I don't think the Blues came from happiness. Now, you might think that, but I don't.

ELWOOD: 'LAUGHTER...' 'LAUGHTER...'

RAY CHARLES: I don't think that's where it came from. I may be wrong because I told you up front I don't know where it came from, but my gut feeling tells me that I think the Blues came from trouble....

ELWOOD: All right... Thank you so much.

RAY CHARLES: It's a pleasure, my friend. 'LAUGHTER...' 'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: Oh, thank you very much. Now we have one more.

RAY CHARLES: You have to remember, I don't have no cue cards. You know, like everybody else got that little something, and I'm the host and you know I ain't got no cue cards I got to remember everything on that show and so I was asking the guys, I said man, what do I do, well, suppose I forget something and the guys said, just do what you normally do on stage. If you forget shit fake it... 'LAUGHTER...' 'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: 'LAUGHTER...' 'LAUGHTER...'

RAY CHARLES: That's no big deal. No they were beautiful, Belushi and Aykroyd both they were... I couldn't have gotten through that if it hadn't been for them,

really, cause again, you talking about that movie, but in that television thing, Saturday Night Live, that was the first thing I did with them. And then I was a wreck, you know, I was nervous and skittish. All I could think of was, oh man you've got millions of people watching this show and I don't have no cue cards, no nothing, suppose I forget, you know, but they just said, hey look, we're with you, don't worry about nothing, man, you just go out there and be yourself. And that was it and it worked, it really worked, man. You can tell him that, man. Well, he knows it, though. 'LAUGHTER...' 'LAUGHTER...'

ELWOOD: 'LAUGHTER...' That whole thing about vocal phrasing that I said at the beginning is what he spontaneously said about you. Because he said, we played your music a lot and he said, Ray Charles is such a gentlemen he helped us, he took us aside and walked us through this stuff.

RAY CHARLES: Yeah, Yeah, well turnabout was fair play, they did the same thing for me, so it just goes to show you, we help each other, baby. That's what makes it nice.