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Ray Charles,
His Orchestra and The Raelets
SAT., 27 SEPTEMBER, 1969
9 p.m.
Management: HAROLD DAVISON LTD.

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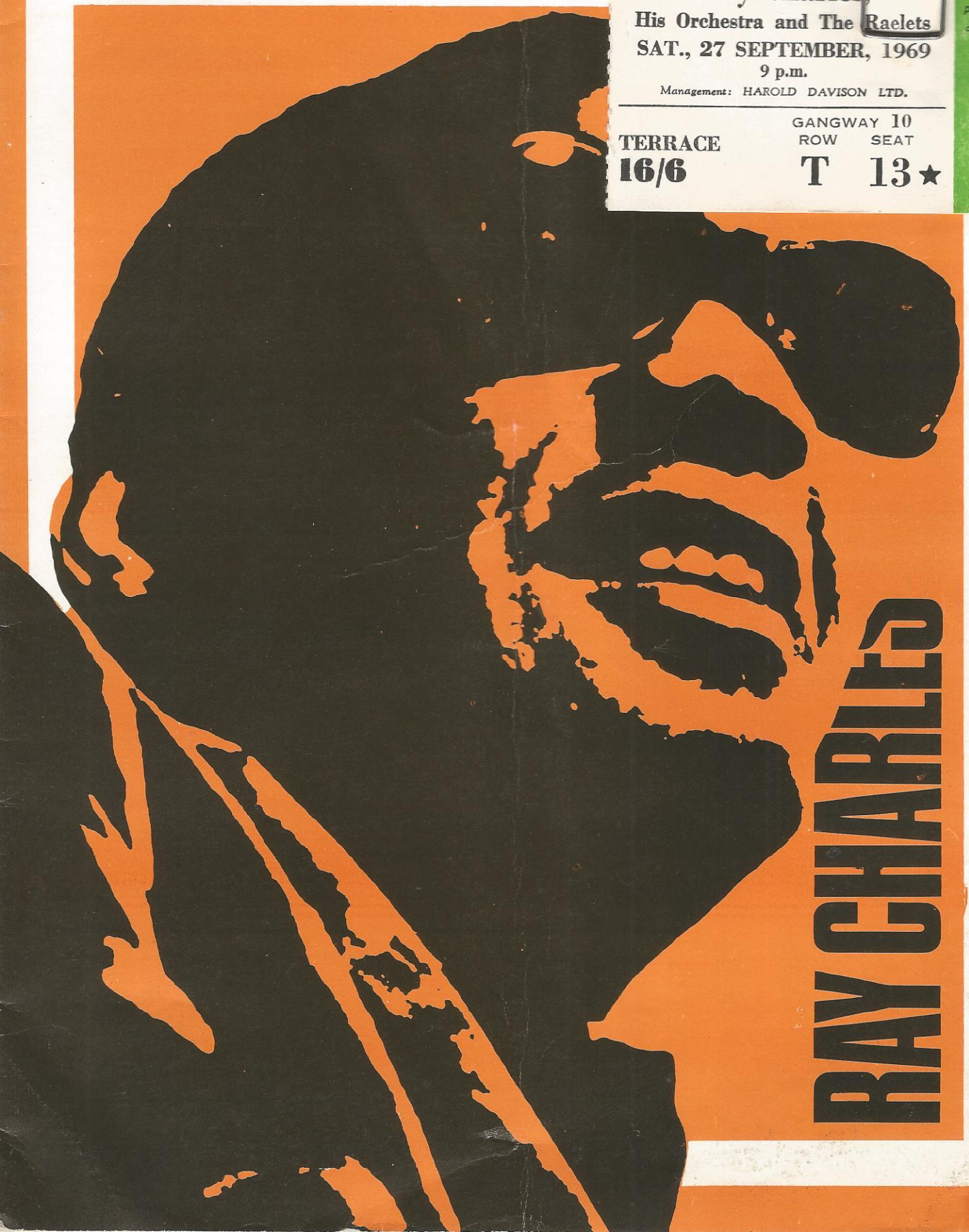


HAROLD DAVISON
in association with NORMAN GRANZ
presents

RAY CHARLES

HIS ORCHESTRA & THE RAELETS

promotion direction: JACK L. HIGGINS

RAY CHARLES

programme notes by BENNY GREEN

Judging from the evidence, the safest way to go about becoming a successful singer is to learn an instrument first. Louis Armstrong and Jack Teagarden are only two of many examples in jazz of the way in which an instrumental technique helps to fashion the shape of a vocal style. Nor is this surprising. The singer who attempts to lend a jazz flavour to his work approaches the task in exactly the same way as an instrumentalist, or at least he should do. He is trying to mould somebody else's raw material, the song, into the contours of his own musical personality, and to do this, he has either to be born with a one-in-ten-million gift for understanding instinctively the movements of chords whose names he does not even know, or he has to have equipped himself with the background of improvising experience which only an instrumentalist can acquire. There are the exceptions, of course. Billie Holiday could play no instrument but her own incredible temperament, but then, she was a true phenomenon which nobody else can afford to copy. There is also James Rushing, but then even that great blues shouter spent the early, comparatively slim days of his youth as pianist with a travelling show.

Because singing in the jazz idiom requires this kind of background, very few people ever master the art. If we were to make a short list of all the really effective artists on each instrument since the emergence of jazz, the list of singers would be the shortest of all. Apart from the traditional blues shouters, almost all the truly important singers from Armstrong and Fats Waller to Teagarden and Nat Cole, have been masters of some keyboard or another, and it is to the younger instrumentalist that we usually have to look in order to find the new vocal talent. The fact that in the beginning, and sometimes right through to the end, vocal performance is a sideline in the instrumentalist's career is beside the point. Even if Armstrong and Teagarden had not been devoted to their singing, regarding it as a form of musical relaxation, we should still treasure the results.

It is to this long and honoured tradition of the player-singer that Ray Charles belongs. Indeed, it is quite impossible to separate the musician in Charles from the singer, so interwoven have the strands become. At various stages of his career he has been regarded primarily as a pianist, then as a singer and later as a songwriter. However, because these activities are really part of the same thing, it would be unwise to make too much of these three compartments. Basically Charles is a musician who has extended the musician's activity beyond the usual scope. But when we hear him sing, or listen to one of his songs interpreted either by himself or by somebody else, we would be wise to keep in our mind's eye the image of the pianist responsible for the music.

Any doubts that Charles should be regarded first as a musician are very effectively dispelled by the realisation that this is how Charles regards himself. In any reported statements he has made about his work, the theme of jazz and the names of jazz musicians loom large. Most singers asked to name their favourite artists would produce a roll-call of rival singers. Charles, on the contrary, talks of the great pianists of jazz, and one in particular, as we shall see. The list of his favourite men in jazz may seem a little surprising in terms of style and approach, knowing what we do of Charles' own style and approach, but from the viewpoint of innate ability, the choices Charles has made are unimpeachable.

He was born in the small town of Albany, Georgia (population 55,000), and in early childhood suffered the accident which made him blind. Soon after this tragic incident, his family moved out to Florida and it was here that he received his first elementary education, at the St. Augustine School for the Blind. At St. Augustine's his teachers were perceptive enough to take note of his instinctive gift for music, and he was lucky enough to pick up the rudimentary knowledge which was later to serve as the basis of his professional life. His progress must have been very rapid indeed, and at an age when most schoolboys are still worrying about how to avoid doing their homework, Charles was already earning money from music. He received his first wages as a musician when he was fifteen years old, doing gigs in local halls and clubs. At this stage the second of the two tragedies struck him. He found himself orphaned, which meant that his music was now, not only the possible hint of a career, but the sole means at his disposal to feed himself and keep himself alive. Charles later remarked that he realised that all that stood between him and a wretched existence with a tin cup was his love of and flair for music. He now proceeded to fight for his life in a most resourceful and persistent way.

Musicians as young as Charles was at this time are essentially copyists. Their own personalities not yet fully formed, they are obliged to seek for models among the established players, and it is when we come to examine Charles' early inspiration that we get the first of our surprises. The name concerned is that of Nat 'King' Cole. There can be no doubt about this for the excellent reason that Charles himself is most emphatic about it. Cole was his first and best-loved hero, at which point we should ask ourselves why this choice should be surprising at all?

The answer lies in the great contradiction, at least on the surface, between Cole's style and the sound we have come to associate with Charles. Cole was always the epitome of smoothness. His silky vocal tones skated over the surface of the melody with a finesse so fine that eventually he drifted out of the jazz orbit altogether. Charles, on the other hand, preserves in his singing the raw cutting edge of realism. Where Cole went for a gentle, persuasive brand of singing, Charles has always preferred to be a rough vocal diamond, using the impurities of voice, the growls and the slurs, as deliberate dramatic effects. And yet Cole was the prime mover in the process which animated Charles into becoming a singer at all. One can only conclude, therefore, that the similarities between Cole and Charles outweigh the contradictions, so we would be well advised to try to discover what those similarities are.

The first thing to remember is that at the time he was so impressed by Cole's work, Charles was not a singer but a pianist-singer. This is a vital distinction, because the most important aspect of technique which every singer-pianist has to work out is how to arrive at a point of balance between vocal and instrumental performance. The art of accompaniment is probably the most underrated in all popular music. When done well it sounds simplicity itself, and yet no art could be more difficult to master. Here, I think, is the first reason why a player like Cole would appeal so strongly to an apprentice like the fifteen-year-old Charles. Cole, perhaps more than anyone of his generation, hit off the perfect compromise, in his trio, between the singer and the pianist. The balance was perfect, and anyone who wanted to follow the dual path could do a lot worse than examine Cole's methods.

The other point worth taking into consideration is that at the time Charles seized on the figure of Cole as the focal point of his inspiration, the latter was much more of a jazz figure than he later became. Before he launched out on his so successful career as a commercial ballad singer, Cole was much more highly respected as a jazz pianist than some people realise today. Inside the jazz world he was indeed rated as one of the very best practitioners of the right-hand razzle-dazzle pioneered by Earl Hines and later developed by Teddy Wilson. Had he been born without any vocal chords, Cole would have gone down as one of the outstanding jazz pianists of the 1940s. Any doubts on this score can be dispelled by reference to the events of 1942, when Cole went into a studio with the great Lester Young and cut four sides, '*I Can't Get Started*', '*Tea For Two*', '*Indiana*' and '*Body And Soul*'. Cole's playing in this exalted company was quite outstanding.

One further proof of Cole's piano ability can be found in a forgotten recording of 1947, when a group of pollwinning musicians cut a side called '*Sweet Lorraine*'. The group included Coleman Hawkins and Johnny Hodges among others, and Cole's playing, particularly his four-bar modulatory phrase to usher in the vocalist, was a model of wit and precision. This was one of the last occasions on which Cole was ever to perform exclusively as an instrumentalist, and the great irony is that the vocalist he was accompanying was another singer destined for great things, one Frank Sinatra.

But just as there is a great gulf between Cole's singing and Charles', so there is a like gulf between the piano playing of the two men, and once again the difference is texture. Where Cole was nimble and ingenious, Charles has always been direct and dramatic. At the risk of being accused of resorting to jargon, of the two men Charles is the one who sounds funky, or soulful, or whatever other adjective one cares to use to describe a direct emotional assault on the sensibilities. But after all, the story of one man copying another, only to emerge in the fulness of time into an independent life, is common enough in jazz, from Rex Stewart's worship of Louis Armstrong to Getz's of Lester Young. In time, Charles was to pass through his Cole stage to find himself.

For the moment, though, Charles remained faithful to his model. Two years after beginning his professional career, he formed his first group. He was still only seventeen years old, and naturally he followed the Cole formula and decided on a trio. In fact when this original Ray Charles Trio did its first professional engagements, in Seattle, Washington, on a local television network, many veteran jazz fans who happened to be viewing, detected marked similarities between this unknown group and the by now well-known style of the Nat Cole trio. Those people who are interested enough in this fascinating problem in influence and cross-influence may be well rewarded by hunting out the very earliest Charles recordings. The evidence of these sides shows how close to the truth those fans in Seattle, Washington, were, when they claimed to detect overtones of Cole's work in Charles' first group.

The trio format worked well for Charles in his early years. He stayed with it for a long time, waiting for the opportunity to expand, but biding his time with no noticeable show of impatience. Time was, of course, on his side, and though the waiting game seems in retrospect to have gone on for a depressingly long period, we have to remember how young Charles was when he started. After all, he was still only twenty-two years old when an opening occurred in 1954 which enabled him to form his first large orchestra. Ironically, the chance arose through factors not very closely connected to Charles' own ability. That excellent and underrated singer, Ruth Brown, required a big band background as an accompaniment, and Charles formed his first large group specifically for this job. The Ruth Brown episode worked very well indeed, so much so that Charles managed to hold the group together.

This was a considerable achievement, especially when we remember the musical climate

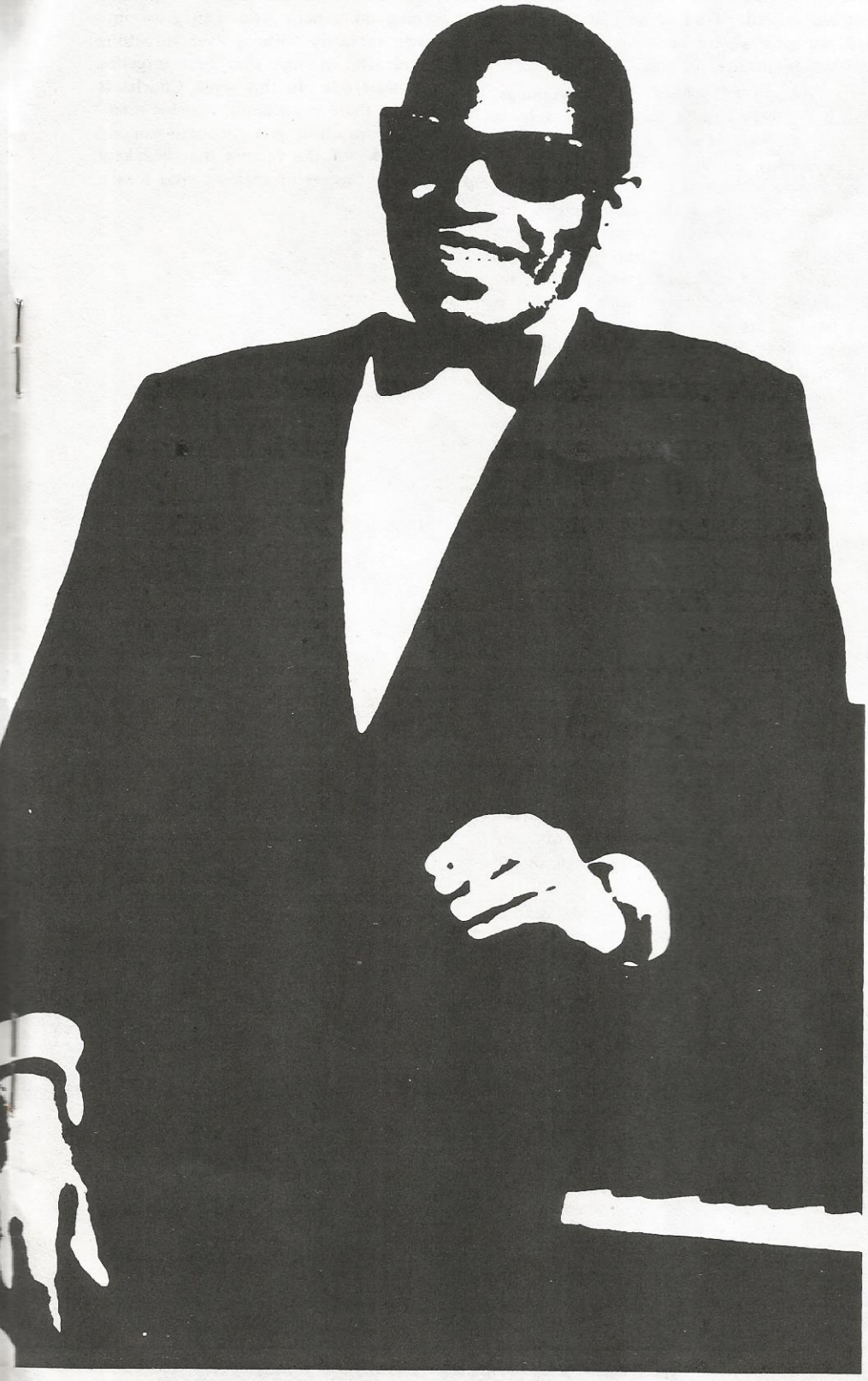
of the time, which was the same as our own today in at least one aspect, the belief that the day of the big band was over. But the obstacles were not all surmounted yet. The only road to real success was through the recording studios, and at first there appear to have been no takers. Not until 1957, three years after the formation of the Charles band, did anybody venture to put it on to a long-playing record. The results were spectacular, to say the least.

In 1958, *Downbeat* magazine gave Charles its 'New Singer' award, a bauble whose title conveniently ignores the fact that by the time it ended up on Charles' mantelpiece, this 'new singer' had been working away for at least ten years. From 1958 can be dated the start of the Charles international career proper, the success of several more albums, the solo vocal hits, and above all the spread of Charles songs through the vocal fraternity generally. Today it would be impossible to compute how much of his music is being used by other singers, but all his contemporaries keep a sharp eye out for the kind of material they have learned from experience he can produce.

Charles' success in the last ten years has taken a very unusual form indeed. He is one of the very few current entertainers whose work crosses the great divide between jazz and popular music without enraging the supporters of both sides. Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald spring immediately to mind as others who have pulled off this almost impossible trick, but Charles is the most recent of this group to appear. For this reason it is sometimes difficult to know which platform to stand on when trying to get an overall view of his output. Is he a jazz musician who happens to have appealed to the far wider non-specialist audience? Or is he basically a popular artist with jazz-tinged phrases colouring his work? Probably the truth lies in the first proposition, for it is certain that the qualities which lend authenticity to his piano playing are the same ones which have caught the ear of a younger generation which claims to care little for jazz. Those qualities are an earthiness of approach and a ruggedness of presentation. But in any case, Charles the jazzman and Charles the popular entertainer are one and the same, as a glance at his music shows.

If I had to nominate one Charles composition to stand for all the others, it would probably have to be '*Halleluyah, I Just Love Him So*'. My reasons would be that the song could only have been produced by a musician saturated in jazz, and particularly the blues, and that it has survived its introduction by Charles to become a standard theme. He originally wrote it to fit his own vocal style, and indeed for a time he alone sang it. Gradually, however, more and more other singers began to use it, until today people have almost forgotten its origins. '*Halleluyah*' is an interesting piece because it has all the appeal needed for popular success and yet is built on a firm base of jazz thought, which is in a way a definition of the man responsible for its composition.

'*Halleluyah*' is one of those songs which possesses that indefinable but instantly recognisable quality which makes it harder for a singer using it not to swing than to swing. It has an invisible rhythmic dynamo cunningly built into its structure, and this explains its popularity with other singers as well as with the general public. It has been built by somebody with an instinctive feel for the syncopated punctuation of jazz and for the impact of jazz-orientated phrasing. When an orchestrator is faced with it, he finds that the tune practically phrases itself,



right down to the rhythm stops and the background figures. It is by no means the stock output of a conventional songwriter, but the special brand of song which only the jazz performer could have conceived. That is why it has all the hallmarks of the Charles persona, and why I would select it as representative of what is by now a vast output.

There have, of course, been times, especially in the earlier stages of the Charles career, when the jazzman has dominated over the entertainer. Fortunately enough of these have been preserved on record to ensure Charles' jazz reputation. One curious fact emerges from this evidence. On those albums where Charles has used himself exclusively as a jazz pianist, with players like Milt Jackson in particular, one can hear very clearly that he gains his pianistic effects, not through the possession of a remarkable conventional technique, but because of the undiluted saltiness of his style. Charles on such albums is taking jazz piano back to an earlier emotional stage in its development, when the rent parties of James P. Johnson and the rest of that brilliant school of Stride pianists were making the instrument a device for creating rhythmic

effects not too sophisticated to have an instant impact. To put it another way, Charles the jazz pianist is an intuitive artist rather than a technical master.

This brings us to yet another unpredictable factor in his make-up, his preferences among pianists. We have already noted the contrasts between his own work and that of his first model, Nat Cole. Now the contrasts are even greater, between his own piano playing and that of his named influences. The three names Charles nominated when asked which pianists have impressed him the most were Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum and Bud Powell, perhaps the three greatest technical virtuosi that jazz piano has ever known. Peterson's staggering command and facility, Powell's crystalline early modern solos, above all Tatum's incredible virtuosity, are not the sort of virtues one would imagine Charles would go for, and the contrast suggests that just possibly there was a time, back in the early days of the trio, before the singing and the songwriting became dominant, when Charles himself aspired to precisely this kind of command. Knowing what we do of Charles' work, it is difficult for us to imagine what he would sound like at the piano if he had that kind of technique, but it makes a very interesting might-have-been. And certainly in plumping for Tatum, Peterson and Powell, Charles was showing his good taste. No trio of pianists could better represent all the finest qualities of jazz piano over the last fifty years.

I may unintentionally have given the impression that in not evolving into a Tatum or a Peterson, Charles is no more than a lucky chancer who missed real mastery and who is not quite sure what he is doing. To counteract this impression, I relate a well-known anecdote involving Charles a few years ago. Charles was engaged in a recording session with the big band. All the orchestrations had been done by that clever writer Gerald Wilson, who begged to differ with Charles when the latter suggested that perhaps a note in one of the saxophone parts was wrong. Wilson checked the parts over. Charles was right. The offending note was amended, which tempted Wilson to say later in an interview, 'He's really something to work with. That's a man who really knows what he wants'.

Acceptance of Charles has now become so widespread that it is a commonplace to read of his praises. For this reason the reservations about his music stick in the mind. The most famous was the one voiced by the late Big Bill Broonzy, who, it must be admitted, appeared to be splitting a few non-existent hairs when he claimed, 'He's mixing the Blues with Spirituals and I know that is wrong'. Broonzy never explained why he knew it was wrong, and did not bother to cite examples, but it is interesting that at least he used the word 'Spiritual' in reference to Charles' work, which was very justified indeed. To find why it was justified, we must glance back for the last time at Charles' musical origins.

Once questioned about his beginnings, Charles, a very candid man on the subject of himself, was reported as saying, 'If I hadn't grown up in the Baptist Church I might have been more of a "pop" singer'. Others have talked of the 'sanctified' strain in Charles' work, sometimes resorted to words like 'soul' and 'funk' to express an idea so intrinsically musical that no words can really express it at all. But it is not hard to see what they mean. They are trying to say that there is a certain substance, a certain texture in his music which renders it distinctive against the background of his contemporaries, an element which sounds like sincerity of a particularly intense and earthy kind, and which stems directly from the Baptist Church background which Charles mentioned.

One last point about Charles. In his time he has been subjected, if that is the right word, to a barrage of favourable publicity, which need not be an altogether pleasant thing. The artist who reads his notices long enough will end up believing them, which would be disastrous for Charles, who, being an improvising musician, lives on a knife-edge between success and failure every time he begins another concert. He has his own methods for combatting this danger, the most effective of which is his own scepticism in the face of all the superlatives, and particularly the one which was attached to his name at a very early stage of his career.

In almost every context, the word 'genius' is absurd, and can make its claimants look very ridiculous indeed. Evidently aware of this, Charles put a bomb under his own ballyhoo right at the beginning. A reporter, perhaps hoping that Charles would trap himself, asked him how it felt to be a genius. This was Charles' reply—

I've been called a genius, but I don't go for that. Art Tatum was a genius—and Einstein—but not me.

What is especially touching about this denial is the way it brings Charles' musical experience full circle and arrives back at one of his first heroes, Art Tatum, perhaps the greatest keyboard master jazz has ever seen, or is likely to see. It suggests that since the days when he first began with his trio as a teenager, Charles' basic attitudes have changed very little. Naturally his technique has improved, and experience of diverse kinds has matured him, but behind the success of the last ten years lies the same musical attitudes. Most of the jazz musicians one knows are the same. They begin by leaning on a hero, and then grow into their own maturity without ever forgetting what and who it was that first impelled them to start out. In this sense Charles is typical, and there is no doubt that his retention of the youthful gift for hero-worship has been one of the factors that has kept him in the business of making vital music.

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