

RHYTHM AND SOLE

By John Bryant

My ride pulls up to the hotel in Denver and I notice a young black man standing next to his drums. He waits for a cab, ready to leave. I get out, carry my drums toward the entrance behind him. We eye each other, knowing what's happened, though neither of us speaks. I walk closer and he gives me a thin smile that telegraphs gloom, frustration, and defeat.

"Good luck, man," he says. I hope you come out better than I did."

This was my introduction to working for Ray Charles. The musician I was about to replace had been chewed up and spat out by a music legend whose taste for perfection thrilled the world but challenged his musicians to his last days. Ray Charles was a genius who knew exactly what he wanted and demanded it from everyone around him.

I played drums for Ray in 1974 and '75 on recording sessions, TV shows, and on tour in the United States, Canada and Europe. During his last ten years I was sometimes summoned to fill in for his regular drummer, in addition to being his contractor for hiring orchestra musicians for some of his symphony concerts. I'm not really sure why Ray and I seemed to hit it off so well, but I think it may have something to do with his left foot.

My perspective on Ray Charles comes from the best seat in the house -the drum throne. From there I saw it all: the glare of the lights, the band all around, the eager audience, and the backside of his female singers, the Raelettes. But most important of all, I had to see Ray's left foot.

"I don't change !" sayeth Brother Ray. The declaration applies to both his musical idiosyncrasies and his lifestyle. And it's the first commandment you learn on the job. For the drummer, it means Ray always expected you to watch his feet. When that leather soul hit the floor, you're talking ground zero. The downbeat and the right beat. The tempo and the dynamics. The beginning, middle, and end of RC's musical expectations were conducted by his left foot. And for drummers, that's where the trouble starts.

From day one, all drummers learn that tempo is their responsibility. All musicians are expected to play with good rhythm, but an experienced drummer's inner clock has been honed to a fine degree of precision, and

instead of worrying about melody and harmony, his game is all about the time keeping--every millisecond of fast to slow. Even though all musicians must follow the leader, any drummer worth his salt knows that the band will have one eye on the star, one on the music, and at least one ear for the drummer. And Ray Charles knew that better than anybody.

"Look man, you go with me and the band will follow," he once said to me. "As long as you and I are playin' together, that's what matters---they have to go with us ! "

And so we're back to that left foot. When he set up, the drummer had to make sure he could see Ray's feet. Ray couldn't watch a conductor, and he wasn't able to look into the eyes of his musicians to send a message. Instead, Ray's feet declared his stomp of approval. His left foot effectively served as his conducting baton. He knew that if the drummer is dancing right along with those feet, all is right with the world. And drummers knew if they were not precisely with his feet, especially the "downbeat" left foot, they were entering a musicians' hell.

Ray Charles came from the real "old school", where you show what you're made of on the bandstand. There, your experience and knowledge, your art, comes out for all to judge, and you could count on veteran musicians like Ray to write a report card as soon as you handed in your lessons. Who have you studied? How well do you know the music of Charlie Parker, Nat King Cole, Count Basie, Big Boy Crudup, Billie Holiday, Hank Snow, Bach and Beethoven? Ray knew this music intimately, and he wasted no time with those who didn't.

With Ray's generation of jazz musicians, every time you got on a stage it was a contest to see who could cut it and who couldn't. There was no forgiving or forgetting. Ray's Rules demanded that a musician had to play with his tempo and dynamics, plus be able to read music and improvise. You had to be comfortable with rock, pop, blues, country, and most importantly, jazz.

And so, there was a price to pay if you hit a wrong note, played too loudly, or if you're the drummer, failed to attach your mind and soul to his feet. The punishment was immediate, usually delivered with a quick upper body turn in a burst of fury. He combined hot directives with a look that burned a hole through you and made you freeze at the same time. If the drummer listened to his own clock instead of watching those size 10's... look out! That's why drumming for Ray was considered to be a hazardous endeavor. And since Ray had to know whether you were watching him, he was known to speed up or slow down, just to make sure you were with him.

On Ray's stage, it had to be played his way. During a concert one spring night in Germany in 1975, I was feeling a bit cocky and decided to change the beat on one of Ray's best known hits, "What'd I Say". Not a good idea. This drum beat is very important in the history of R&B and rock 'n roll. Its New Orleans funkiness and distinct Latin cymbal technique can make a Baptist dance on the tables. So when I attempted to leave my mark on this Rock of Gibraltar, Ray recoiled like he had been shot in the back, immediately firing some well-worn words in my direction that everyone heard. I jumped back on track, but it was too late. The song ended the show, and also, I feared, my career with Ray. The road manager came over and said RC wanted me in his dressing room right now. When I walked in, Ray was hot.

"How could you do that, son ? Don't you know that beat is written in stone?" It can't be played any other way! You ever do that again, and you'll be on the side of the road! "

Officially on probation, I had to earn back his trust. There came a testing point in France. We were rehearsing a new piece of music that Ray had never heard before, and that's when you could appreciate his musical genius, and subsequently, his memory. After the band played the arrangement a couple of times, RC started to put his signature on it.

"John, when we get to the chorus, I want you to play, 'Boom, bop - bop, boom,'" he said to me.

In drummers' terminology, this translates to bass drum, snare drum, snare drum, bass drum. In Ray's terms, it becomes left foot stomp, knee slap, knee slap, left foot stomp.

Okay, I've got it. I play it, and Ray grins out, "That's it, honey, just like that, every time! "

That night I fully expected Ray to put this new piece of music in the concert while it was fresh in the mind, but it didn't happen. Not the next night, or the next. Anyone who knew Ray will tell you that he was an excellent chess player, and so about two weeks later, Ray made his move and called up the song. As the band cautiously dipped its big toe into these unfamiliar waters, Ray was doing back flips off the high board. Just before we got to the chorus, Ray interrupted his physical undulations, held perfectly still, and cocked his left ear towards me.

"Boom, bop - bop, boom," shout the drums.

Ray returned to his swaying and playing, satisfied that I was paying attention. No name calling, no expressions of disgust, no expletives. Back to business as usual, lesson learned.

I loved nearly every moment of my time with Ray. If you played by his rules, you were allowed to take part in his genius, a gift beyond words that I will always treasure. But later in 1975, I realized the only way I could regain my control as a drummer was to leave Ray. I simply had to get back to my inner clock and find my own path. I knew he could understand.

Fast forward to 1996. I was called to come back into his world to play a concert in Hartford, Connecticut, and I was anxious about how it was going to go. The last time I had played with Ray he was 44. He, already a legend. Me, fresh out of the highly respected jazz department of North Texas State University, learning the difference between school and "Ray's School".

This time around, I was a little smarter, a bit more confident. A whole lot more appreciative of the talents of Ray Charles. He had a head of gray hair, the high notes were a little tougher to hit, but I was sure that everything else was exactly the same. I decided to let RC know that I knew this as soon as I could.

In the hour just before the concert, Ray sent word for me to come to his dressing room. He received me with that famous, broad smile mixed with laughter and lots of handshaking, touching, and nudging. We quickly rekindled our memories of the past that made us laugh and appreciate how long it had been since we had played together, and then I saw an opportunity.

"Well Ray, you know, some things never change."

"Amen," intoned Brother Ray, with an expression that told me he knew that I knew: Watch his left foot. Play his music the way it has always been played.

My name was announced, I walked out to center stage and bowed to the audience, then took my place in the midst of a sixty piece orchestra, behind the drums, behind where RC would be seated. As I sat down on my drum throne, I looked in front of me to the spot where Ray's left foot would be dancing. My heart skipped a beat. There perched an alto saxophone on its stand, innocently interrupting my view of Ray's exclamation point. Ray occasionally played sax on a number, but I didn't expect it to be there of all places. Twenty-one years previous, I would have panicked and called for a

stagehand to move it. This time I stopped to think about it.

I realized that it's not really about seeing that foot hit the floor. It has more to do with knowing where it's coming from. This time around, I was willing to gamble that I was a better musician. That I could play with Ray rather than react like a heat seeking missile. One thing was for sure, it wouldn't take long to find out --- one song would do it.

" Ladies and Gentlemen, Raaaaay Charles ! "

The band hits the intro, the crowd goes wild, and as soon as Brother Ray is seated behind the piano, he absorbs every bit of attention that this concert hall can offer. The first song goes by without a hitch. We settle into the second one and my anxiousness begins to fade. By the time we get to "Georgia...", the only thing on *my* mind is the beauty of the moment; how wonderful it is to be able to go back, and be in the present, all at the same time.

Ray's way was uncompromising, maybe because he loved the music more than anything. His blindness brought focus to his control: first, he listened to his inner voice; then, he sang out for himself, played piano for all, and talked to the drummer by foot.

During his last few months I heard that he was very ill, and the news of his death made me think Ray had put his foot down for the last time. I was wrong. In his final interview with David Ritz in Rolling Stone magazine, Ray addressed his own mortality by removing his suit of armor and acknowledging the price of his purpose.

" '...I hurt some musicians. ...Looking for everything to be perfect. ...You know me, man. I'm always [expletive] with the drummers. If they don't get my time, I pitch a bitch. Treat them bad...I know I hurt people. ...Tell them I have feelings, too. I can feel their feelings, man. Tell them I appreciate them...just tell them Brother Ray loves them.' He started crying... "

Ray never played encores. He would never pretend at the end. Yet for me, his apology to the drummers with whom he constantly jostled, served as the encore that he reserved only for those who saw and heard everything he did - his musicians. But had he recovered, his apology doesn't mean that he would have done anything differently. The same heart that couldn't lie about the music, would have always beat at a tempo that would challenge and inspire us all. My time with Ray, from fast to slow, will always be with me. Some things do not change, and Ray Charles' left foot would never let you forget it.



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