

Ray Charles

An excerpt from Lilian Terry's forthcoming publication, *The Way They Were: Portraits & Conversations with Jazz Masters*

In July 1968, Joe Adams, business assistant and manager to Ray Charles, had set up an appointment for me to meet the artist in New York as I wished to interview him for the Italian National Radio network. Some days later I was in Ray's hotel suite, sitting beside him on the sofa, hugging my portable tape recorder. Proposing that we start with an afternoon snack he favored, he had reached for the phone by the sofa ordering pineapple ice cream for two, plus a serving of hot French fries. That odd combination had been amusing

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enough to relax me and we had chatted while waiting for room service. He had been curious about Italy, about Rome, and especially the Vatican and the history of the Papacy. In truth, through the ten years of friendship that followed, the history of the Vatican had been a recurrent subject.

When it was time to start taping, Ray had grabbed my recorder with curiosity and, examining it with his fingertips, had told me



Ray Charles, North Sea Jazz Festival, The Hague, 1983.
Photo credit: Rob Bogaerts (ANEFO).

to go ahead with the questions while he took care of the technical side. It was more of a relaxed conversation than an official interview and, when we had stopped recording, over an hour had flown by. I learned that he was a Libra born on September 23, 1930, in Albany, Georgia, but the family had moved to Greenville, Florida when he was but a few months old.

His passion for music had begun thanks to the next-door neighbour, a boogie-woogie pianist who had encouraged Ray at age 5 by teaching him simple chords. At the Saint Augustine Institute for the Blind in Florida, he had been further assisted in his music lessons. His first "professional" public appearance had been at age 13.

Asked what essential advice he would give to young blind students, he had answered firmly, declaring that the drawbacks of blindness were minute. His deaf and blind friends at the Institute had all emerged according to whatever desire or passion they had. Today



Ray Charles, Montreal International Jazz Festival, 2003.
Photo credit: Victor Diaz Lamich.

one man was a jeweler; another girl was a seamstress, and so on. He had declared most strongly, however, that the parents should not shelter their blind children, but to develop their attitude positively, enabling them to lead a normal life. They were not to nurture their self-pity but encourage them to fight for what they wished to become. He had stated:

“Parents need to instill in the child the fact that he may have lost his sight, but not his mind.”

During the ten years of friendship with Ray Charles, we were able to tape six “conversations” where he always enjoyed being my technician. Today, listening to them all, I cannot help but remember his patient kindness while he accepted and answered all kinds of questions relating to his private life and his private feelings.

“Ray, If I’m not mistaken it is now 30 years that you have been in the music business...?”

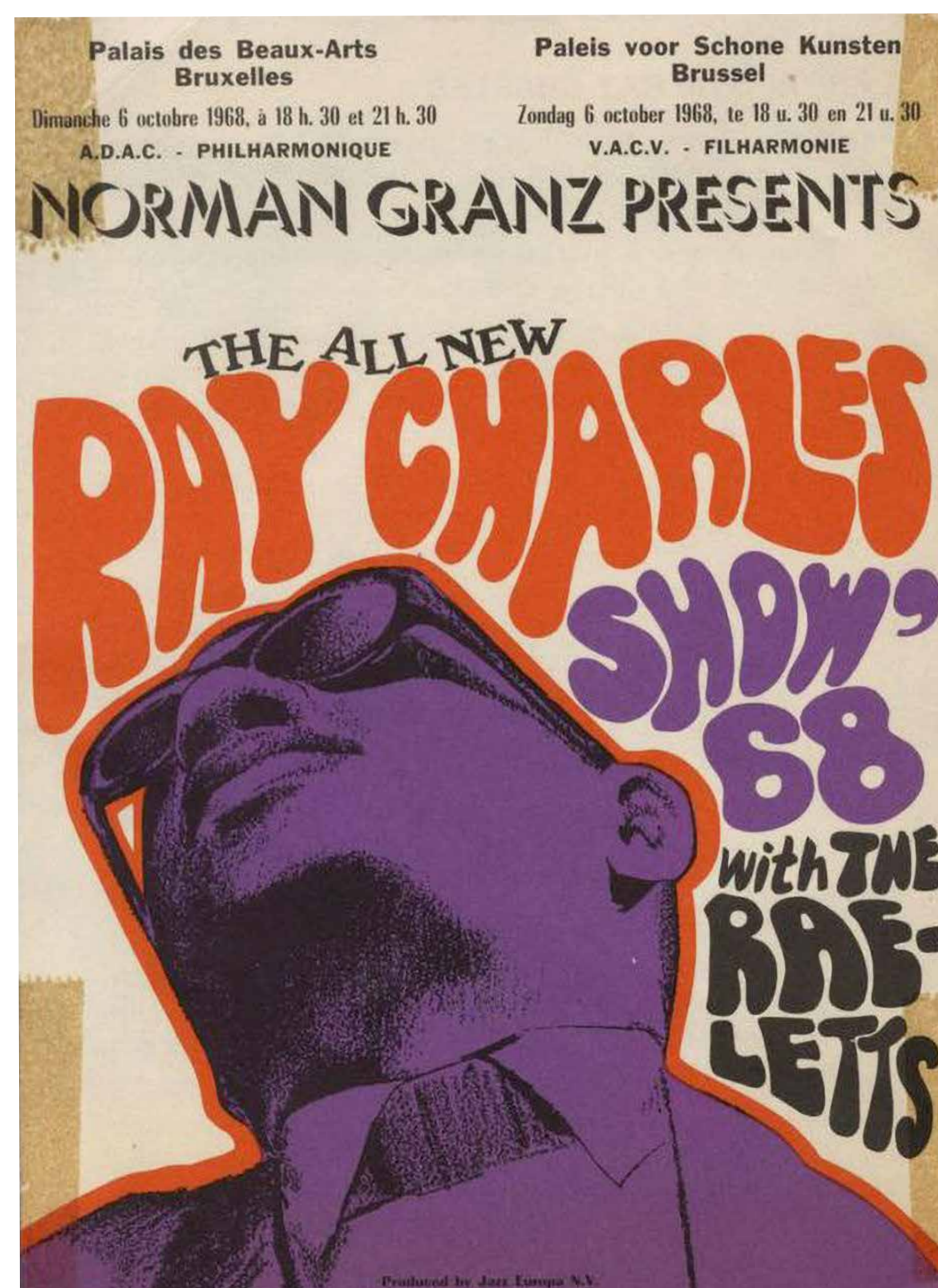
“That’s right.”

“Looking back at these 30 years, can you tell me off hand the first positive things these years have given you and - if any - the negative things?”

“Well, it’s better to start with the negative first because I want to end up on a good note, you know? It’s this...my being *Libra* or something.

I think the negative things that happened along the 30 years were in the beginning of my career because I, along with many other black people, ran into a lot of problems just because I was the colour I was, you know? It was very tough because we couldn’t go in restaurants, we couldn’t go in certain restrooms or lavatories. Sometimes, if you had a decent car and you looked OK, you were harassed by the police, you know?

These were some of the negative things that happened to me, but on the other hand these were things that taught me tolerance, you see? Because I had to learn how to deal with some of the worst conditions: I had to deal with poverty first. As a result when I was able to upgrade my life it also taught me how to appreciate the good things that...that were bestowed upon me.





Former President Bill Clinton sits with Ray Charles in the Blue Room prior to the ceremony to honor the 1993 National Medal of Arts Award recipients. Photo credit: Bob McNeely, White House Photograph Office Licensing.

So today I am grateful that I know both sides of life. I know how to live with something but I also know how to live with nothing. You can feel for people who are suffering because you know what it is to be cold, you know what it is to be hungry, what it is to be ragged, you know what it is when people talk down to you, and do things to you to injure your integrity.”

I think that in my 30 years of music it taught me how to treat people like I would like for them to treat me. In other words I don't care what you have in this world or how much you don't have in this world; the point is that every human being has feelings. A match will burn anybody, you know?

We then started talking about politics and his involvement, if any, in the Black Movement. He replied that all he wanted for black Americans was a right to dignity, an opportunity to make a living and therefore to be entitled to a good education the same as anybody else. He was definitely not in any kind of separatist movement. He considered it unworkable and unrealistic and explained why:

“You cannot live in a society that is controlled only one way – like this one in America is – yet you can't live apart from it, it's impossible.”

Therefore he was against violence, which he considered sadly hopeless and ridiculous, for it would be as if one side gathered stones and bricks to throw against the other side that handled machine guns and bombs. The only way would be through the courts, the legislation and through people getting together and talking to one another. He gave me an example:

“There are many people in this country that are not aware of each other; certain areas where



Former President Richard Nixon meeting with Ray Charles in the Oval Office, 1972. Photo credit: Oliver F. Atkins.

the white people are not aware what the black man is like and vice versa. So there should be more dialogue and more meetings, gatherings where people could get together and talk, and get to enjoy each other. There are a lot of tales about this person being this way, that way... There's no such thing, people are just people. If people communicate a little more, work together more; go to school together so they get to know each other better... This is the way to do it, because if the black man in this country starts a war it's impossible for him to win a violent type of thing.

In this country what power is...it's to be able to get into key positions. We have now a couple of black men who are mayors; one of a very big city like Cleveland, Ohio and one in Gary, Indiana. We have a senator and a few congressmen. This is the way to do it,

getting people into office, into politics, doing it politically. You can't do it with violence because the odds are against you."

We were interrupted right then, as it was time for Ray to leave rapidly for the airport. He said we should pick it up at our next meeting the following year. It was a promise, for sure! But, like the visit to the Vatican, it was a promise fate would not allow us to keep. However he remains to this day a very special part of my memories: with his sense of humour, his open-eyed wisdom, his generosity, his firm beliefs and his acceptance of whatever life had in store for him, as you will discover in the six interviews I describe in the book *Dizzy, Duke, Brother Ray and Friends*, published by the University of Illinois Press. 🙏