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*I Can't Stop Loving You: Ray Charles and Country Music.* Country Music Hall of Fame.

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"I just wanted to try my hand at hillbilly music. After all, the Grand Ole Opry had been performing inside my head since I was a kid in the country." This quote provides the impetus for the five-thousand-square-foot Ray Charles exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Named after one of Charles's most successful country crossover hits, "I Can't Stop Loving You: Ray Charles and Country Music," interprets the connection between the "Genius of Soul" and the Country and Western Music that played a distinctive part in his career. The curators at the Country Music Hall of Fame have created an important exhibit that I enjoyed immensely, one that is both scholarly and entertaining.[1] <p> The Country Music Hall of Fame is to be commended for bringing diversity to its public offerings. It is no secret that country music in general is predominantly associated with white folks with a couple black artists thrown in here and there, but the Hall of Fame seems to be intent on widening its public base. The Ray Charles Exhibit was chosen to follow "Night Train to Nashville: Music City Rhythm and Blues, 1945-1970," which boldly expanded the interpretive confines of the Hall of Fame well beyond country music in order to educate the public on a forgotten aspect of Music City's past. With the Ray Charles exhibit, curators have continued to blaze an interpretive path, which may veer somewhat from country music's traditional status quo, yet remains a very important piece of country music history. <p> Visitors are led to the Ray Charles exhibit at a halfway point of the tour and enter the gallery space upon entering the second floor. However, at this point patrons are given the option of entering the Charles exhibit or following an outer path that leads to unrelated display cases. I witnessed several visitors completely missing the Ray Charles entrance (or perhaps choosing to miss it) only to wander in at a later point. In the absence of any formal tour guide or mu-

seum representative present to direct patrons, there are several areas where you can enter the exhibit if you happen to miss the initial entry, but only the first entrance properly initiates the patron with a relevant video interview of Charles followed by a chronological narrative of his childhood and musical roots. I may be too regimented, but if one misses the context of the exhibit at the beginning, it will harm the overall understanding of how and why Ray Charles ventured into making country music records. <p> Speaking of Ray Charles's country recordings, his most acclaimed country music album was 1962's "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music," which was a watershed moment in popular music history. The title of the album alone was a bold statement for a black rhythm and blues artist to be making in a genre of predominantly southern whites at a time when the nation was in the midst of a civil rights struggle. But Ray Charles's unique brand of R & B transferred well to country music and as the exhibit states, "Charles audaciously validated the music of the southern white working class during a time of turmoil and racial divide in America." It is apparent from the numerous quotes by country artists in the exhibit such as Willie Nelson and Loretta Lynn, that "Modern Sounds," with its seminal recording of "I Can't Stop Loving You," was appreciated by Charles's contemporaries for bringing many new fans to country music. <p> For good reason, the interpretation of this album has been given a dedicated room in the exhibit. "The Modern Sounds" room features relevant artifacts such as original handwritten manuscripts of several songs from the album including Don Gibson's "I Can't Stop Loving You," and original LP album covers. All of the artifact descriptions are written in both standard typed English and Braille, which to me signifies a heartfelt tribute to the man being honored. The optional audio tour includes narration of this

portion of the exhibit by Charles's close friend and blind country superstar Ronnie Milsap. Six cuts from the album play on a continuous loop in the "Modern Sounds" room, but I was never given the complete list of the songs on the album nor who recorded them originally. However, before leaving this room, I learned that the album was such a hit with the public, that before 1962 had ended, Charles released "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music, Volume Two." <p> The outside wall of the circular Modern Sounds room is devoted to showcasing another noteworthy Ray Charles's contribution to country music, the 1984 album "Friendship." This album featured Charles singing country-flavored duets with Johnny Cash, George Jones, Hank Williams Jr., and Merle Haggard, among others. This album also spawned the number one hit "Seven Spanish Angels" with Willie Nelson. Patrons can make use of cutting-edge multimedia when experiencing "Friendship" by using one of the many touch-screen kiosks which feature Ray Charles' own introduction to several of the duets, followed by playback of the entire song. <p> A section of the exhibit showcases RPM International (Recording, Production, and Management), which was Charles' business headquarters and recording studio in Los Angeles. Several panels explain the importance and longevity of this company and several artifacts from RPM are on display. One of the more interesting items is a Boston University mug that his daughter gave to him and which Charles always kept full of equal parts coffee and gin topped off with sixteen packets of sugar. <p> Impressive are the artifacts on display, mostly on loan from Ray Charles Enterprises. There are two electric pianos, which were used extensively by Charles to get the signature "down and dirty" sound as heard on "What'd I Say." Charles was also proficient on the saxophone, and his alto saxophone is also on display. There are also several of Charles's flamboyant tuxedos as well as a fine selection of his trademark sunglasses. Perhaps one of the most eye-catching and humorous artifacts in the exhibit is a Braille copy of <cite>Playboy</cite> magazine. Several of his awards are on display including the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts medal he received in 1986 and the plaque he received in conjunction with his star on Hollywood's "Walk of Fame." <p> The exhibit is certainly not lacking in multimedia presentation and has many different outlets for audio/video experiences. The most prominent video highlight is the fifteen-minute loop that

shows Charles performing on various country music-themed variety programs with artists including Johnny Cash, Glen Campbell, and Ronnie Milsap. As entertaining as the aforementioned video loop is, the most striking video is the grainy black-and-white concert footage of Ray performing hits such as "What'd I Say," "Hit the Road Jack," and "Georgia." The visitor experiences these early clips on a TV monitor, which has been custom-built into a wooden cabinet, much like those of the 1950s and 1960s. As co-curator Mick Buck explains, "The black and white footage displayed in the TV cabinet is representative of Charles' early R & B period when he was being hailed as the 'Genius of Soul.'" His last televised performance, recorded for CMT's 100 Greatest Songs of Country Music televised concert in 2003, also plays continuously. Several viewing stations provide patrons with a place to sit and relax while enjoying portions of the exhibit. However, this leads to the principal negative aspect of the exhibit. In the attempt to keep patrons visually and audibly stimulated, there is an overload of sounds and music, which becomes a bit overwhelming as they blend together in a cacophony of sound. After walking through the exhibit several times, I felt like I needed a break from the noise. <p> With that said, I must comment on the art design of the exhibit. There is a universal color scheme and presentation design, which fluidly incorporates yellows, browns, deep reds, and blues in a visually appealing manner. This use of color, exhibit casing, text and graphic panels, and placement of multimedia within a semi-cordoned area on the second floor is done very tastefully and is a nice change from the more conventional approach taken with the rest of the exhibits. <p> There have been many recent public reminders of Ray Charles's brilliance and originality including his posthumous Grammys for Genius Loves Company and the success of the 2004 film biopic "Ray." In light of these recent accolades, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum has created a fantastic tribute that educates the public on his important role in country music while providing a great primer of his career as a whole. I thought the exhibit was an exceptional example of painstaking research combined with enjoyable audio and visual technology. I would highly urge any lover of good music to experience "I Can't Stop Loving You: Ray Charles and Country Music" before it ends its run on December 31, 2007. <p> Note <p> [1]. Exhibition page: <http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com>.

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