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Remarks at PBS's "A Tribute to Ray Charles: In Performance at the White House"

February 24, 2016

The President. Thank you, everybody. Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, good evening, everybody

Audience members. Good evening!

The President. And welcome to the White House.

Over the past 7 years, Michelle and I have set aside nights like this to honor the music that shaped America: classical and country, blues and Broadway, gospel and Motown, the women of soul and the sounds of the civil rights movement. This has become one of our most cherished traditions, and I want to thank PBS for helping us to put on these wonderful events.

Tonight is a little bittersweet because this marks our final "In Performance at the White House."

Audience members. Aww!

The President. I will not be singing. [*Laughter*] But for our last one, it is fitting that we pay tribute to one of our favorites, and one of the most brilliant and influential musicians of our times: the late, great genius himself, Mr. Ray Charles.

I want to thank the Smithsonian for their support. And I want to thank the members of Ray Charles's family who are here with us tonight. It is a great honor to have you here.

Ray Charles Robinson's childhood in the segregated South was marked by poverty and tragedy. Early in his life, he watched his younger brother drown, lost his eyesight, and lost his father. But Ray had two things going for him. One was a strong mother, Aretha, who insisted that her son not wallow in self-pity, but master self-sufficiency. And two, he had music.

As Ray once put it, "I was born with music inside of me." A local café owner introduced him to the piano, and at the St. Augustine School of the Blind and Deaf, he studied the saxophone, the clarinet, and trumpet as well. He learned how to read, write, and arrange music in Braille. And he was exposed to a wide range of styles, all of which he loved, from gospel to the blues, from Chopin to Art Tatum. At night, like so many others, he would turn his radio dial to the Grand Ole Opry.

When his mother passed, Ray left school. He took whatever gigs came along. But when he met another young man named Quincy Jones, everything changed. "Ray came to town, lit it up like a rocket," Quincy said. "He had it. Whatever it is, Ray had it." And everyone knew it.

Throughout the fifties, Ray fused jazz, gospel, and blues into a new soul sound. As he put it: "Gospel and the blues are almost the same thing. It's just a question of whether you're talkin' about a woman or God." [*Laughter*] And with his touring band, including his iconic backup singers, Raelettes, he recorded some of the biggest hits ever, including "What'd I Say" and "Hit the Road Jack."

Now, in those days, Black musicians were expected to play in the Jim Crow South. But in 1961—the year I was born—Ray refused to play for a segregated audience in Augusta,

Georgia. He was sued for breach of contract, but he continued boycotting segregated venues and became an active supporter of the civil rights movement.

On stage and in the studio, Ray did it all: jazz, R&B, rock and roll, pop. He even helped to bring the country music he loved to a broader audience. But whatever genre of music he was playing, there was no mistaking his singular sound: that virtuoso piano playing that matched that one-of-a-kind voice. Even as a young man, he had the rich, raw honey tone of an old soul. No matter the feeling—whether it was love, longing, or loss—Ray Charles had the rare ability to collapse our weightiest emotions into a single note. And from the tiny clubs in which he started out to the arenas that he eventually filled, Ray was an electrifying performer. He couldn't see us, but we couldn't take our eyes off of him.

Chart-topping hits, 17 Grammy Awards, a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, beating Willie Nelson at chess—[*laughter*]—his accolades are too many to name. But perhaps his greatest achievement was in showing all of us that it is our incredible diversity of music, a chorus of cultures and of styles, that truly makes "America the Beautiful."

To see Ray's legacy, you don't have to look far. It lives on in the countless musicians he influenced, including the ones here with us tonight. Yolanda Adams. Leon Bridges. Andra Day. Anthony Hamilton. Brittany Howard. Demi Lovato. Sam Moore. Jussie Smollett. The Band Perry. Usher. And we've got Rickey Minor conducting the Christian McBride Big Band, using some of Ray's actual arrangements. And let me tell you, these guys can play anything, and they play it well.

So I'm going to stop talking, because with 17 pieces—the same number of instruments as Ray's band—this might be the biggest band to ever to play the White House other than the Marine Band. [*Laughter*] Are you ready? Me too. Hold onto your seats and enjoy the show.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:05 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musicians Quincy D. Jones, Jr., Willie Nelson, and Usher T. Raymond IV.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : PBS, "A Tribute to Ray Charles: In Performance at the White House".

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