

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Genius of Ray Charles

Created and produced by David King  
Theatre Royal Haymarket  
(2005)

"Genius" was Ray Charles' nickname - an accolade conferred on him by fellow icon Frank Sinatra.

This show, opening in London just a year after his death, is the brainchild of David King. Would he capture the spirit of Charles' genius?

It wasn't immediately clear from the programme whether a single actor was going to perform as Ray, Jamie Foxx style. But when the curtain opened it was unequivocal - an image of Charles himself was represented on the transparent curtain that shielded the live orchestra. A large portrait with that familiar open smile that commanded his audience to have a good time. None of the performers would have presumed to represent the singer himself. The production is simply a celebration of his life and work.

Seven singers grace the stage at the outset; representing different ages, shapes and colours. This underpins Charles' appeal. He crossed lots of boundaries - race, age, musical genres - blues, jazz, soul, country, rock and roll. He became a legend at them all.

Charles was born in Georgia in 1930 to a poor family and had a turbulent private life from the outset. When he was five, he saw his younger brother drown. By the time he was seven, he was completely blind and an orphan by the age of fifteen. At the time of his death, he had won twelve Grammy Awards and his rendition of Hoagy Carmichael's "Georgia on my Mind" had been adopted as Georgia's state song.

Though relatively few of the songs were written by Charles, this scarcely mattered as the programme was very well chosen, giving the audience a flavour of each section of his fifty year career. The show started with "A Song for You" which would have been a suitable prelude to a session in the smoky jazz clubs that Charles played in his early career. The performances built to noisy crescendo culminating in the rip-roaring "What'd I say" (one of his three Number One hits) and "Shake a Tail Feather" which finally brought the audience to its collective feet.

There was just the right amount of biographical information about Charles so that those who weren't familiar with his life story could feel included without it boring his lifelong fans. The pace was never allowed to flag with upbeat songs like "Hit the Road Jack" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" interspersing the moodier numbers such as the Beatles' "The Long and Winding Road" and Harold Arlen's and Johnny Mercer's "Come Rain or Shine".

Segues from song to song were seamless. For example, a humorous rendition of the country song "Busted" which hinted at Charles' own troubles with the law gave way to "You are my sunshine" which began with a temptress in a white feather boa - more than a passing nod to Charles' own complicated love-life.

It was very much an ensemble piece, with none of the company taking centre stage for too long. This was in keeping with the spirit of the music - unselfish and inclusive. The cast certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves and by the end of the show, were happy to come into the audience to get us to join in. Ty Stephens sang many of the big numbers ("Georgia on my Mind" and "I Can't Stop Loving You"). He had a good connection with the audience and didn't disappoint with the penultimate song, Georgia's anthem, which the audience had been anticipating since the show started.

Ken Prymus was the authoritative Daddy of the piece and gave us the biographical details about Ray. Johnnie Fiori's rendition of "Imagine" went on a little too long and her interpretation was more joyous than Lennon had intended while N'Kenge Simpson-Hoffman gave a sexy version of Peggy Lee's "Fever" assisted by Director Gary Lloyd's pulsating choreography.

The set, designed by Solly Matofsky, gave due prominence to Ray himself while staying sparse enough to allow the ensemble enough space to dance. The lighting by Peter Kramer added to the magic of the evening. Pink and blue fairy lights dotted around the curtains which changed to red for the more seamy moments.

Producer David King and Musical Director Barry Robinson have pulled together a great show that Ray Charles would have approved of.

**Reviewer:** [Bronagh Taggart](#)