

RAY CHARLES LOVE COUNTRY STYLE

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What is *Love Country Style*? It's not a rigid genre signifier. It's about reveling in the tangible emotions captured in great country music compositions, a template Ray Charles perfected on his now-canonized album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music Volume One* (1962), and its follow-up, *Modern Sounds, Volume Two* (1962).

But those albums were only the beginning of his work utilizing country compositions. 1965 saw the release of *Country And Western Meets Rhythm And Blues*, and 1966 saw *Crying Time*. While the latter pulled from a variety of genres, Charles' recording of the Buck Owens-penned title cut hit Number 5 on the Billboard R&B chart and won two Grammys in 1967 (Best R&B recording and best R&B Solo Performance).

In a profile published in *Playboy* in March of 1970, when asked whether he had any "artistic validity" in his approach to country material, he replied:

"What I did was take country-and-western songs and sing them my way. In other words, I didn't try to imitate Hank Snow or Grandpa Jones." He added, "I've been listening to Grand Ole Opry since I was eight or nine years old, and I happen to dig it. It's not prettied up or glossed over, and it's about poor people and dirt farmers and all the little folks who are having a tough time of it just staying alive--exactly like the blues."

Love Country Style, released in June 1970, drinks deeply from the country music well of genius, but is as rhythm-and-blues-rooted as it is in the countrypolitan idiom. The album was released on Ray Charles' own Tangerine Records imprint, and distribution was handled by ABC Records.

By this time, Jay Lasker, formerly head of ABC's successful Dunhill subsidiary (home of red-hot rock acts like The Mamas & The Papas, Steppenwolf, and The Grass Roots), was the newly minted president of ABC. Lasker once proposed that Charles enlist an outside producer and release a concept album drawing from the songbook of The Beatles. Charles was not explicitly against recording compositions by The Beatles (in 1968, he'd already released a groovy interpretation of the Lennon/McCartney song "Eleanor Rigby" that peaked at #35 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in the United States

and at #36 in the UK). But by the late 1960s, he'd established his own imprint, Tangerine Records, built his own R.P.M. Recording Studios, and in short, did everything in his power to ensure his creative autonomy before such freedom for an artist was commonplace. So, after catching wind of Lasker's suggestion, Ray exclaimed, "Nobody's ever going to tell me what to record."

Love Country Style draws from top-shelf country material from "Ring Of Fire" (written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore and popularized by Johnny Cash) to "I Keep It Hid" (penned by Jimmy Webb, known for his classics "Wichita Lineman" and "By The Time I Get To Phoenix"). Both tracks are nothing short of revelations. In his hands, "Ring Of Fire" is cast as a chorus of half-breathless seduction well-suited for an isolated mid-century modern motel somewhere in the high desert of the American Southwest. "I Keep It Hid" feels akin to Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey" – both dreamy countrypolitan ballads seemingly destined for AM Radio gold.

"Your Love Is So Doggone Good" is one of the few on the set sourced from original material. Penned by Dee Irwin and Rudy Love, who were primarily rhythm & blues composers, the lovely recording served as a precursor of later soulful versions by artists such as The Whispers (1971), and Isaac Hayes (1971). "Show Me The Sunshine" and "If You Were Mine", also penned by rhythm & blues writers, this time the team of Jimmy Radcliffe and Buddy Scott, and by Jimmy Lewis, respectively, showcase a distinctly country feel. And "You've Still Got A Place In My Heart," originally written and recorded by Leon Payne, gets a woozy, jazz-inflected treatment, and leans closer to Dean Martin's interpretation than to Glen Campbell's.

In September of 1970, in the wake of *Love Country Style*'s release, Ray Charles guested on the stalwart country television program *Hee Haw*. He performed "Don't Change On Me" from the album, and later in the broadcast, a duet of "Crying Time" with the original songwriter, and *Hee Haw* star, Buck Owens. Seated together on a piano bench, Owens patted Charles' shoulder in brotherhood. And although the performance doesn't include a conversation between the two, Charles can be heard off-mic at the conclusion of the song, amidst the audience's applause, saying a heartfelt "Amen."

Charles went on to release four more well-received country albums during his career. 1984's *Friendship* hit #1 on the Billboard Country charts. And although *Modern Sounds Vol. I* was nominated for Album of the Year, and Charles went on to ultimately win 17

Grammys in his lifetime (in rhythm & blues, gospel, and pop), a Country Music-specific Grammy win eluded him.

Decades later, after Ray Charles' country records reshaped the genre, Beyoncé released her 2024 country album *Cowboy Carter*. While countless internet hours have been consumed by discussing the relevance (or dare I say “artistic validity?”) of the native Texan artist's record, her ode to the country idiom won the Grammy for Best Country Album.

Love Country Style remains as a testament. The album embodies Charles' ability to cross genres with ease, weaving country traditions into his R&B and gospel sensibility. In doing so, he left a lasting imprint on the soundscape of American popular music.