

Remembering the Great Ray Charles

Grammy-winning R&B star was a crowd pleaser

(AP)—Ray Charles, the Grammy-winning crooner who blended gospel and blues in such crowd-pleasers as "What'd I Say" and ballads like "Georgia on My Mind," died Thursday, a spokesman said. He was 73.

Charles died at his Beverly Hills home surrounded by family and friends, said spokesman Jerry Digney.

Charles last public appearance was alongside Clint Eastwood on April 30, when the city of Los Angeles designated the singer's studios, built 40 years ago in central Los Angeles, as a historic landmark.

Blind by age 7 and an orphan at 15, Charles spent his life shattering any notion of musical boundaries and defying easy definition. A gifted pianist and saxophonist, he dabbled in country, jazz, big band

regated South.

"His sound was stunning — it was the blues, it was R&B, it was gospel, it was swing — it was all the stuff I was listening to before that but rolled into one amazing, soulful thing," singer Van Morrison told Rolling Stone magazine in April.

Charles won nine of his 12 Grammy Awards between 1960 and 1966, including the best R&B recording three consecutive years ("Hit the Road Jack," "I Can't Stop Loving You" and "Busted").

His versions of other songs are also well known, including "Makin' Whoopee" and a stirring "America the Beautiful." Hoagy Carmichael and Stuart Gorrell wrote "Georgia on My Mind" in 1931 but it didn't become Georgia's official state song until 1979, long after Charles turned it into an American standard.

"I was born with music inside me. That's the only explanation I know of," Charles said in his 1978 autobiography, "Brother Ray." "Music was one of my parts ... Like my blood. It was a force already with me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me, like food



Ray Charles sings "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" at the March 3, 1996 Easter Seal fundraiser in Pasadena, Calif. Despite being blind since age 7, Charles was a gifted pianist and saxophonist and dabbled in country, jazz, big band and blues. (AP photo)

taint how people thought of his work.

"I've known times where I've felt terrible, but once I get to the stage and the band starts with the music, I don't know why but it's like you have pain and take an aspirin, and you don't feel it no more," he once said.

Ray Charles Robinson was born Sept. 23, 1930, in Albany, Ga. His father, Bailey Robinson, was a mechanic and a handyman, and his mother, Aretha, stacked boards in a sawmill. His family moved to Gainesville, Fla., when Charles was an infant.

"Talk about poor," Charles once said. "We were on the bottom of the ladder."

Charles saw his brother drown in the tub his mother used to do laundry when he was about 5 as the family struggled through poverty at the height of the Depression. His

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Grammy-winner Ray Charles early in his musical career.

I was born with music inside me. That's the only explanation I know of.

and blues, and put his stamp on it all with a deep, warm voice roughened by heartbreak from a hardscrabble childhood in the seg-

regated South. Charles considered Martin Luther King Jr. a friend and once refused to play to segregated audi-

ences in South Africa. But politics didn't take.

He was happiest playing music, smiling and swaying behind the piano as his legs waved in rhythmic joy. His appeal spanned generations: He teamed with such disparate musicians as Willie Nelson, Chaka Khan and Eric Clapton, and appeared in movies including "The Blues Brothers."

Charles was no angel. He could be mercurial and his womanizing was legendary. He also struggled with a heroin addiction for nearly 20 years before quitting cold turkey in 1965 after an arrest at the Boston airport. Yet there was a sense of humor about even that — he released both "I Don't Need

No Doctor" and "Let's Go Get Stoned" in 1966.

He later became reluctant to talk about the drug use, fearing it would

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