

Script for Me and Brother Ray – Part 2: The Genius Hits the Road

— by Richard R. Guzman (© 2014) —

[Slide 1: Blank] “Georgia on My Mind” comes from the 1960 album *The Genius Hits the Road*. I suppose any album that produces one iconic American song has done pretty well,

[Slide 2: Album cover 1] but “Georgia” was surrounded by its share of strange, unsatisfying moments. In the song “Deep in the Heart of Texas” Ray sings, “The stars at night are big and bright,” and a voice yells something like, “Is this in Detroit, Ray?” to which Charles answers back, “No, no, it’s deep in the heart of Texas.” The joke is annoying the first time, but it’s repeated over and over and over. By the end the voice seems to be ordering Charles around.

*** [Deep in the heart of Texas:]**

I feel sometimes like someone ordered Ray Charles to make this album against his will. In 1959 he left his first major label, Atlantic Records, where his revolutionary early work—some say his most enduring work—was done. More about that later. This was his first album for his new label, the much more mainstream ABC Paramount. The revolutionary part of this move was the business deal: Ray Charles became the first major recording artist to own his own masters. And as much as I’d like to think someone ordered him to do the songs he did, **[Slide 3: Song list 1]** I know it’s probably not true. He was in control. Several writers have commented that making musical compromises to reach a wider audience is what Ray Charles’ career was all about. It wasn’t just compromise, either. *The Genius Hits the Road* was the first step in a direction that wouldn’t become completely crystal clear until about a dozen years later. Ray Charles was going to be more than a Black blues / gospel / rock and roll singer. That was the shape of his career at Atlantic Records. No. He was going to embrace America—all of it—and in this strange record he hit the road to begin doing just that. It’s just that in a song like “Moonlight in Vermont” he sounds so sentimental—even a little smarmy—

***[Moonlight in Vermont:]**

—and...I don't know—when he sings about hitting the ski trails I can't picture it; and not just because he's blind—he drove cars blind after all—I...I just can't believe he could ever be sentimental about it. It sounds dishonest. And in the opening to "Blue Hawaii" his voice...well, could anyone seem less excited to be there?

***[Blue Hawaii:]**

In some of upbeat songs he conveys more enthusiasm, but even in "Mississippi Mud" half the time you get the feeling he's singing deliberately *behind* the beat.

***[Mississippi Mud:]**

Now he often did sing behind the beat, but add up the sentimentality, the behind the beat business, the sometimes weird lack of enthusiasm and you can't help but think something else is going on. When I first listened to the record, besides "Georgia" the only song I could really relate to was "Carry Me Back to Ol' Virginny." It reminded me of the Atlantic Records days, done in a straight out gospel style with the Raelettes in full voice. But even there he seems to be holding back, like he's asking to be carried back to somewhere he wasn't sure about. Most of all, what pervades *The Genius Hits the Road* is that profound sadness—that becomes musically brilliant only in "Georgia on My Mind." And then I think: Georgia, Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas.... **[Slide 4: Song list 2]** Eight of the twelve songs on the album are in the south. Emmett Till and thousands of others have already been murdered. I flash back on my early association of "Georgia on My Mind" and lynching. **[Slide 5: Lynching pic/Charles inset]** Even on the cover, Ray Charles looks tentative. **[Slide 6: Album cover 1]** The record comes out in 1960. The most dangerous days of the Civil Rights Movement will begin in just months. I think, Why would any Black man want to hitting southern roads so much?

[Slide 7: Blank] When I was a kid, of course I wasn't thinking hardly any of this in the days after I first heard "Georgia on My Mind." I was thinking, Where can I get a Ray Charles

record? I couldn't afford to buy a whole album, so I saved up and bought a couple of 45 rpm records. A year or so later I got enough to buy this: **[Slide 8: Album cover 2]** a collection of his "Greatest Hits," which included "Georgia." But just a few weeks after hearing "Georgia" I got this. **[Slide 9: Album cover 3]** The first album I ever bought. It was in a cheapy album bin at Sears and costed just 69 cents. As Ray Charles' popularity grew, saavy record dealers rushed to get anything Ray Charles on the market. But when I put this record on I didn't hear anything familiar. It was all old stuff. Music from his pre-Atlantic Records days. It was hard blues—

***[Misery in My Heart:]**

—or it was rough early R&B, or something on the other end of the spectrum: softer, bouncier jazz stuff. Later I'd come to recognize the jazzy stuff as Ray Charles trying to make music like one of his early idols, Nat King Cole.

***[Ain't That Fine:]**

I soon learned to love all this music, too, and that's how I got into blues and jazz. I was a kid possessed. I drew pictures of Ray. **[Slide 10: Drawing 1. Slide 11: Drawing 2]** I did school reports on jazz and blues. Here's a project I did for high school Freshman English. **[Slide 12: Report]** I got an "A," but all the teacher wrote was—can you see that?—"Evidence of time spent." She later became one of my favorite teachers of all time, but what a stupid comment! "Evidence of time spent."

I suppose it *was* a prophetic remark, a foreshadowing of what I'd spend so much of my career doing. This was the first book I wrote, **[Slide 13: Voices book]** a book not only about jazz and blues, but about what the music took you into: Black culture, race, Civil Rights, diversity.... I went on to lead in writing a Diversity Plan for one of Illinois' premiere school districts. **[Slide 14: Diversity plan. Slide 15: Brochure 1. Slide 16: Brochure 2]** I was asked to speak about diversity and to write articles about it. **[Slide 17: Newspaper]** When I composed music myself, **[Slide 18: Sheet music]** it infused jazz and gospel into regular, white choral forms. And here's one of my more recent books. **[Slide 19: Black Writing]** I got to know more

about Black music and culture than I did my own—but knowing this grew my pride in Filipino culture. It set me on a path of recovering what I could of it, and studying other cultures of color. It all started with Ray Charles. He kept sustaining my journey, too. Without a doubt he's the most important influence on my professional life.