

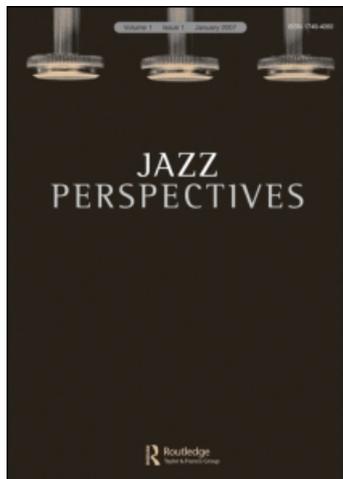
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Media Reviews

At Carnegie Hall. Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane. John Coltrane, tenor saxophone; Thelonious Monk, piano; Ahmed Abdul-Malik, bass; Shadow Wilson, drums. Liner notes by Larry Appelbaum, Amiri Baraka, Stanley Crouch, Ira Gitler, Ashley Kahn, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Lewis Porter. 2005. Blue Note Records B000AV2GCE. \$18.98.

The Complete Riverside Recordings. Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane. John Coltrane, tenor sax; Gigi Gryce, alto sax; Coleman Hawkins, tenor sax; Thelonious Monk, piano, arranger; Wilbur Ware, bass; Art Blakey, drums; Shadow Wilson, drums. Liner notes by Orrin Keepnews. 2006. Riverside RCD2-30027-2. \$19.98.

“Like finding the Dead Sea Scrolls!” “The Holy Grail of Jazz!” “A buried treasure!” “A revelation!” “The ‘find’ of the new millennium!”¹ With praise like this from fans, players, and critics alike—teeming as it is with overtones of religious zeal—it would seem impossible to offer anything but an unconditional recommendation to purchase these wonderful and rare recordings pairing “the high priest of bebop,” Thelonious Monk, with “the budding innovator,” John Coltrane. In the documentary film directed by Kim Fields to herald the release of *At Carnegie Hall*, Bruce Lundvall, the head of Blue Note Records, offers just that: “Anyone that is a serious jazz fan will have to own this record. Anyone that is an emerging jazz fan, a new jazz fan, will want to own this. It’s that important. It’s that musically important. It’s that historically important.” Not to be outdone in the promotional department (or in the not-so-subtle use of religious imagery), Fantasy Records (the parent company that purchased Riverside Records in 1972), along with *DownBeat* magazine and Tower Records, launched a competition coinciding with the release of *The Complete Riverside Recordings* titled “Touch the Tapes!” in which the winner is “given the opportunity to hold and be photographed with the master tapes of Thelonious Monk with John Coltrane.”² The packaging of this newly reissued set of the pair’s studio work includes a sticker that describes it as “The MUST HAVE companion to *At Carnegie Hall!*”

Who am I to disagree? This *is* wonderful music played by wonderful musicians, and it does provide a fascinating perspective on—quoting here again from the promotional materials at [bluenote.com](http://www.bluenote.com)—“one of the most historically important working bands in all of jazz history, a band that was both short-lived and, until now, thought to be

¹ Comments taken from listener reviews and an abridged version of the documentary film directed by Kim Fields found at <http://www.bluenote.com> (accessed July 24, 2006).

² <http://www.towerrecords.com/monkcoltrane> (accessed July 24, 2006).

frustratingly under-recorded.” As a saxophonist and jazz historian, I waited with bated breath to hear these recently unearthed tapes of Monk’s quartet, featuring John Coltrane on tenor saxophone, Ahmed Abdul-Malik on bass, and Shadow Wilson on drums, performing live at Carnegie Hall on November 29, 1957, as a benefit for the Morningside Community Center in Harlem, a concert that incidentally also featured Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, Chet Baker, Zoot Sims, and Sonny Rollins (as one online commentator succinctly put it, “Has Carnegie Hall ever seen a better night?”).

The music does not disappoint. For Coltrane scholars, this document represents the period when “Coltrane truly became Coltrane,” to quote Ashley Kahn from the accompanying liner notes. Challenged by Monk’s impeccably structured compositions, and liberated by his penchant for laying out or “strolling” for considerable stretches of time, Coltrane’s impressive technique and voluminous creativity matured significantly during the five months that he played nightly with Monk’s group at the Five Spot in the East Village. Although three studio takes already existed of the original quartet (with Wilbur Ware on bass instead of Abdul-Malik), and all are included in the two-disc Riverside reissue, they were captured early in the group’s extended club stay when Coltrane was still finding his musical place in the quirky and unconventional world of Thelonious Sphere. Steve Lacy, quoted in the liner notes to the Carnegie Hall set, recalled that Coltrane was “clumsy, very obscure, maladroit, and then each night a little more relaxed.... [By the end] it got into a kind of security, into a freedom and into a wild abandon. To watch that unfold was a revelation.” The two sets recorded live at Carnegie Hall by Voice of America, and only recently discovered languishing in the stacks at the Library of Congress by Larry Appelbaum, offer a remarkable (and a remarkably good sounding) opportunity for contemporary listeners to experience something of the revelation that Lacy describes.

“Monk’s Mood,” a somber yet robust ballad composed by the pianist, served as the vehicle for the first studio meeting of Coltrane and Monk (and it is programmed first in the mostly chronological set by Riverside) and as the opener of the early set at Carnegie Hall. Coltrane came well-prepared to the studio, laying down a performance that even without any extended improvisation provoked Orrin Keepnews (the producer of both the original and reissued Riverside recordings) to remark that it was the first time that he really *heard* Trane. Still, the Carnegie Hall rendition of the tune demonstrates an even greater confidence and rapport that can only be achieved in an extended working situation. In a similar way, when one compares Coltrane’s solos from the studio and live versions of “Nutty,” one hears similar pyrotechnics, yet four months later Coltrane is better able to integrate his “sheets of sound” (to use Ira Gitler’s now-famous description) into Monk’s jagged comping and bristly melody. (One of the particular delights of this short-lived pairing is reconciling Trane’s frenetic-yet-fluid style with Monk’s more halting and staccato delivery.)

“Crepuscle with Nellie,” a graceful ballad composed by Monk for his wife during her then-recent illness, provides the most opportunities to compare between the two recordings, since it appears during the first set of the Carnegie Hall concert and it is presented five times(!) on *The Complete Riverside Recordings*. Monk invariably

performs the tune by playing the melody twice, either solo (Carnegie Hall) or as a trio (studio) the first time through, then with added horn(s) on the repeat (Coltrane at Carnegie Hall, and a full septet featuring Coltrane, Coleman Hawkins, Gigi Gryce, and Ray Copeland on the Riverside recordings). The entire first day of the two-day studio session with Monk's septet was dedicated to this tune, since, according to Orrin Keepnews's wonderfully detailed liner notes, Art Blakey arrived late to the studio, the engineers were busy dealing with technical concerns relating to the then-very-new stereophonic recording process, and Monk—overwhelmed and overcome—suddenly fell asleep at the piano and had to be rolled out on an equipment cart. Although the Carnegie Hall performance of the tune is well-executed, I actually miss Blakey's more boisterous and unconventional approach using sticks and his high-hat to break up the time. Shadow Wilson uses brushes to provide a more subdued and conventional accompaniment (as does Blakey on the takes of the tune from the second day in the studio). Perhaps the only real disappointment with the Carnegie Hall tapes, though, is that the group did not perform "Trinkle Tinkle," a hair-pullingly difficult Monk tune that Coltrane devoured on the Riverside studio sessions. (Acknowledging Trane's tenacity as much as his ability, Tommy Flanagan is quoted in the Carnegie Hall liner notes as saying: "He was more careful about learning things exactly as Monk meant.")

Although perhaps not his most inspired on record, Monk's playing during the Carnegie Hall concert is infused with a palpable joy. He was able to play on a respectable instrument for a receptive audience (only months after getting back his cabaret card, without which he had been unable to perform for the previous six years at clubs in New York City). And his playing is noticeably energized by his ongoing relationship with the young Coltrane, for whom he appears to have had the utmost respect. (The only other live recording of Monk's Quartet with John Coltrane is a poor quality bootleg from a single night recorded at the Five Spot nearly a year later—and previously released by Blue Note Records—when Trane filled in for Johnny Griffin. Monk reportedly would only accept Coltrane or Sonny Rollins as suitable replacements.) Robin D. G. Kelley, author of the forthcoming *Thelonious: A Life* (The Free Press), writes in the liner notes to the Carnegie Hall disc: "Monk is having such a good time at the piano that he hardly gets up from the bench ... what Monk is playing underneath Coltrane is pure brilliance; to call it 'comping' simply does not do justice to the creative dialog Thelonious is having with the entire band."

The extensive booklet that accompanies the Carnegie Hall disc includes short essays by an impressive cast of jazz scholars and critics. In addition to the already mentioned liner notes of Kelley and Kahn, Amiri Baraka offers a perspective that situates this musical meeting at a time when Emmett Till's murder and Rosa Park's pride "stampeded Black America into enraged conflict with America the Ugly... [This was] a period of intense struggle which was the foundation for a profound art." Ira Gitler, one of the few who can claim to have heard the Monk/Coltrane quartet "three times a week" at the Five Spot, sets the scene for understanding the developments that ultimately led to the Carnegie Hall performance. In addition,

Stanley Crouch—with no shortage of hyperbole—manages to connect Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Wayne Shorter all to the musical vision of Thelonious Monk. Leaving cultural commentary to others, Lewis Porter focuses on situating these releases chronologically in relation to Coltrane’s other recorded work (its proximity to *Blue Trane* is readily apparent in Coltrane’s solo on “Blue Monk”) and on situating certain pronounced patterns in Coltrane’s playing in relation to his growth as an improviser and artist. Lastly, Larry Appelbaum offers a truncated version of the story of how these remarkable tapes were first unearthed, a story that is even more dramatically presented in the documentary at bluenote.com.

To return to my opening gambit, certainly this is not the first occasion that industry executives—or devoted fans for that matter—have engaged in hyperbole when asked to discuss music to which they may have a strong personal or professional connection. And perhaps I should simply be pleased that these performances featuring two jazz masters in full stride are able to reach a broad audience; according to one Amazon.com reviewer, *At Carnegie Hall* reached #1 on the online store’s daily sales chart for *all* music, not just jazz.³ But as a player, educator, and researcher, I continue to be concerned over the extreme canonization of jazz in our schools and the necrophilia that appears to be on the rise in the record industry.⁴ Neither of these points is, strictly speaking, a *symptom* of the extreme hyperbole that surrounds our beloved jazz heroes; rather, they are more likely its *cause*. I do fear, however, that our inclination to lavish uncontrolled praise on these jazz legends may serve to justify these worrisome tendencies through a complex feedback cycle. Orrin Keepnews seems to share some of my concern as well: “The coming together of Monk and Trane, like all events that actually were larger than life-size, may in memory inevitably be in danger of sliding entirely outside the boundaries of reality.”⁵

In the last few years, Columbia, Atlantic, and Verve have all drastically reduced their roster of living artists in favor of re-releasing older material. Even the

³ On the day that I accessed the site, nearly nine months after its initial release, it still placed #105 in all music sales and #8 in the jazz rankings.

⁴ One preliminary reader of this essay commented, with only partial tongue-in-cheek, that “cannibalism” and “negrophilia” could easily replace the terms “canonization” and “necrophilia” in my description of the current state of the jazz academy and industry. For a good place to start on these complex issues, see Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (Autumn 1991): 525–560. A forthcoming book by Gabriel Solis, *Monk’s Music and the Making of a Legacy* (University of California Press), promises to shed light on similar issues through the lens of Monk.

⁵ For his part, Keepnews attempts to set the record straight on a “rather vicious myth” that has Coltrane nodding off during a take of “Well, You Needn’t” until Monk shouts out his name to wake him, at which point Coltrane launches into an intense solo. With less narrative force but perhaps more historical veracity, Keepnews simply recalls that there was a miscommunication regarding the solo order, prompting Monk to alert Trane that he was next in line and this misunderstanding required the rhythm section to vamp for a few extra bars. I’m not certain though that the musical record supports Keepnews’s memory in its entirety. The way I hear it, Monk seems to get rhythmically disoriented coming out of the final bridge section of his solo (or he is attempting a melodic and rhythmic displacement that unnerves Ware and Blakey briefly), ultimately making the last A section of his solo a bit uncertain. Monk wisely cues Coltrane to solo next, at which point Blakey offers a characteristic press roll that saves the day and launches Trane into his first chorus, only two beats late.

Marsalises, perhaps the most visible jazz performers today, no longer have a major record deal. David Hajdu perceptively writes in a 2003 *Atlantic Monthly* spread on Wynton: “Where the young lions saw role models and their critics saw idolatry, the record companies saw brand names—the ultimate prize of American marketing. For long established record companies with a vast archive of historic recordings, the economies were irresistible: it is far more profitable to wrap new covers around albums paid for generations ago than it is to find, record, and promote new artists.”⁶

Clearly this example of a significant historical find does not fit conveniently into the state of affairs that I am outlining; according to a *Billboard* article, Blue Note’s David beat out the Goliaths of Sony BMG and Verve to obtain the rights to this historic recording.⁷ Yet George Wein, the noted jazz impresario, states with considerable conviction in the documentary about the Carnegie Hall disc: “Whether it was that important then is *not* important. What *is* important is what it means now.” Beyond the musical discovery, then, what *does* it mean now?

For an artistic tradition to remain dynamic and healthy, the network dynamics that take note of history and provide hubs for a common language and style should not become too powerful. The canonization of jazz education ensures that the music is not in jeopardy of disappearing. Pops, Duke, Bird, Miles, Monk, and Trane will all continue to be remembered, esteemed, and emulated—as they should be. But if the disparity between the hubs and the remainder (those still alive and fighting to explore their own creativity, to earn respect, and to make a decent living) becomes too great, there may be a “tipping point” beyond which communication and innovation can suffer dramatically.⁸ In the same *Atlantic Monthly* article by Hajdu, Jeff Levinson, the former Columbia Jazz executive, is quoted as saying: “The Frankenstein monster has turned on its creators. In paying homage to the greats, Wynton and his peers have gotten supplanted by them in the minds of the populace. They’ve gotten supplanted by dead people.”

In the final sentences of his contribution to the liner notes of *At Carnegie Hall*, Stanley Crouch both touches on, and seems to conceal, an ongoing tension between honoring jazz’s past and supporting its future, a tension that has played out in rather complex ways in Mr. Crouch’s own career as well. He writes: “We hear that the present moment of improvisational creativity can be as timeless and refined as any polished creations from the great past. As this recording proves, Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane, above all else, are as central to that fact as every other titan of the jazz idiom.” Although Crouch’s specific target appears to be Western concert music (he is a bit vague on this), his first sentence, when read from the alternate perspective

⁶ David Hajdu, “Wynton’s Blues,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 2003), 54.

⁷ Margo Whitmire and Chris M. Walsh, “Blue Note Snags Monk/Coltrane Rarity,” www.Billboard.com (accessed July 1, 2005).

⁸ Malcolm Gladwell’s best-selling *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay Press, 2002) offers a popular treatment of certain aspects of network theory. Albert-László Barabási’s *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Jackson, TN: Perseus Books, 2002) and Duncan Watts’s *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003) offer more detailed explanations of the science.

of my points above, seems to betray an anxiety about current practices in jazz and improvised music as well.

Without belaboring the point here, in what is meant as a strong recommendation for this music, I found it interesting that the one Amazon.com review of the *At Carnegie Hall* performance that jumped out in a sea of praise for the release (and made me laugh out loud as well) was one that seemed hell-bent (to return to our religious subtext) on destroying the disc's near-unanimous five-star rating. Titled "How Do I Get to Carnegie Hall? Apparently Suck, Suck, Suck," this reviewer gave Monk's debut at New York City's most prestigious hall the lowest rating possible and insisted that once you know Kenny G, all other saxophonists, including Mr. Coltrane, simply can't compare. I won't advocate Mr. G as a way out of our collective woes, but a little irreverence for our esteemed tradition—arguably always an integral part of said tradition—may in fact go a long way.

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Genius Works: The Collected Ray Charles on Atlantic

Pure Genius: The Complete Atlantic Recordings, 1952–1959. Ray Charles, Boxed set of 6 CDs and 1 DVD. Liner notes by Ahmet Ertegun, Leonard Feather, Ren Grevatt, Nat Hentoff, Gary Kramer, Bill Randle, Guy Remark, David Ritz, Billy Taylor, and Jerry Wexler. 2005. Rhino/WEA 74731. \$149.98.

The legendary performer Ray Charles died 11 June 2004 at the height of a surge of popularity that reintroduced him to a new generation of fans. The critically acclaimed blockbuster movie *Ray* (Universal) appeared that year and launched its star, the singer/comic Jamie Foxx, into superstardom. His eerily accurate portrayal of Mr. Charles's demeanor and performance rhetoric earned him an Academy Award and critical acclaim for his acting abilities. Riding the crest of Ray-mania in the American populist consciousness, hip-hop star Kanye West capitalized on the frenzy by recording the smash "Gold Digger," which featured a "Charlesian" vocal intro by Jamie Foxx and a sample from a Charles recording, punctuating the song's bottom-heavy and insistent rhythm track.⁹

This recent attention was not Charles's first reintroduction to the public. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, he surfaced in the mass media as a Pepsi-Cola pitchman, singing at a grand piano surrounded by beautiful and classy background singers modeled after the Raylettes, his female singing group and the responders to

⁹ Kanye West, "Gold Digger," *Late Registration*, Roc-A-Fella Records B0004813-02, 2005, compact disc.

his vocal calls. (These commercials made Charles something of a cult hero among scores of admiring young men back in the day.) Numerous musical tributes by other artists followed his death—Maceo Parker's rendition of "Georgia" during Prince's 2004 *Musicology* tour stands out in my mind. But with the release of this handsome boxed set, Rhino has, perhaps, contributed the greatest homage to this most distinguished artist of our time.

Titled *Pure Genius*, the collection documents Charles's complete Atlantic recordings between 1952 and 1959, commemorating Charles's 75th birthday. The package of 164 tracks, which includes a DVD of a 1960 Newport Jazz Festival appearance, provides a valuable look at the foundational recording career of this American musical icon. A mixture of studio, live, and rehearsal sessions, the set allows one to experience a "range of Rays," each of them displaying the polish and passion upon which he built a peerless reputation. The occasion of this release provides an opportunity to contemplate Charles's immense contributions and to consider some of the larger implications of his "genius" reputation. Hearing these recordings on the heels of Charles's final reintroduction to an adoring public certainly gives us a sense of just how much the music world lost with his passing. He embodied numerous American musical styles that cut across the social boundaries of race, class, region, and the recording industry's generic labeling practices. Indeed, Charles's singularity seemed to be, in part, encapsulated in his ability to traverse, exploit, and at the same time, challenge, the existence of these perceived stylistic borders.

But he achieved much more. His "genius" title stands as a testament to black musical over-achievement in the American music industry. While this boxed set is a musical delight and important as an artistic document in its own right, it also participates in some larger ideas about musical genius—its myths, conceits, and power.

Over the last few years the "genius industry" has involved both demythologizing genius as well as venerating it. Museums, archives, and tourist attractions vigilantly collect ephemera associated with our cultural heroes in order to allow the lesser among us to touch and, perhaps, momentarily possess their greatness. The acts of collecting and codifying the complete works of musicians (as Rhino knows well) can show the development of an artist over time. Such practices are another tried and true way of reinforcing what counts as monumental achievement in the industry. At the same time, scholars have sought to turn over the very myths that have helped to establish the idea of genius in the first place. And some of these scholarly activities have begun to spill out of the ivory tower and into the public mainstream.

A recent *New York Times* article detailing Mozart-mania, for example, examines the mixture of fact and fiction that have constructed our modern-day view of the musician. Writing in July 2005, Nicholas Kenyon observes that following his death, Mozart's biography had been transformed and romanticized. He writes that: "The workmanlike composer became the inspired artist; the servant-artisan became the

free-spirited creator.”¹⁰ Under the scrutiny of ever unfolding research, many of the ideals that we have traditionally associated with the term genius have begun to unravel around this composer’s legacy. This work has revealed, for example, the nature of Mozart’s prodigious talent but also that this gift must be understood in relation to the local cultures with which he interacted, to the financial dealings of a freelance composer and teacher, and to the interests of a musician who desired to be appreciated in his own time. In other words, Mozart has become a contextualized genius who helps us not to transcend his historical moment but to understand that moment better. Yet it is striking that Kenyon concludes his article by reestablishing key aspects of the myth—such as the music’s timeless universalism and autonomy—by writing that Mozart’s “music continues to speak with unrivaled force across more than two centuries, and that, we might guess, would satisfy a man who knew the supreme worth of what he was creating.”

Allow me to muse a bit on this unlikely juxtaposition of Mozart and Charles. Like Mozart, Ray Charles understood his worth during an era in which black performers were routinely signed to record labels and then summarily cheated out of both their creative autonomy and rightful earnings. According to the informative booklet accompanying this collection, after he joined the Atlantic label in 1952, Charles was assigned an arranger, Jesse Stone, a man with years of experience in jazz. Although he appreciated Stone’s talents, Charles bristled at giving up complete musical control of his final products: “I respected Jesse Stone ... but I also respected myself.”¹¹ He went on to say that he didn’t consider himself “a great songwriter. I only wrote songs when I didn’t like the material I was given. But because I am a writer, I know how the shit should sound. I hear all the instruments in my head, I hear all the harmonies, I hear the rhythms, and I know the story. I’m telling the story. So it’s never been easy for me—even in the very beginning before I had any hits—to act like I didn’t know what I was doing.”

Charles’s confidence was honed early by his mother’s encouragement and guidance; she willed that he become independent despite his blindness, which was complete by the age of seven. Having starting to learn the piano at three, Charles went on to study formally at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind (in St. Augustine), all the while soaking up the heterogeneous musical milieu of the Deep South—the sounds of country, blues, jazz, gospel, and pop filtered through the harsh yet porous realities of social segregation. By the time he became a professional musician at age fifteen, he was taking musical jobs wherever he could find them, gaining experience on the road in varied settings. Over the next three years, Charles became a seasoned musician who could make an audience as well as other musicians take notice. Upon moving to Seattle in 1948, he met a young Quincy Jones and formed a lasting friendship that was mutually beneficial. (Jones recalled, for example,

¹⁰ Nicholas Kenyon, “The Careful Construction of a Child Prodigy,” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, July 24, 2005, 24.

¹¹ David Ritz, “Ray’s Rhythms: The Great Atlantic Sides,” *Pure Genius: The Complete Atlantic Recordings (1952–1959)*, liner notes, 20.

that Charles taught him the basics of orchestration.) In the Northwest, Charles also perfected his imitation of his two of his early musical influences: Nat King Cole and Charles Brown. It would be wishful thinking to say that the Atlantic recordings show “the development of genius.” They don’t. What they demonstrate for me is how fully formed a talent Charles was when he signed to Atlantic. His musicianship astounds.

Vocally, Charles displays a veritable arsenal of techniques: tightly wound, signature melismas, a feast of timbres, and excellent, dead on, intonation. While his vocal approach expanded during the 1950s and settled into the quintessential, husky sound that made him famous, the range of styles under his easy command in these recordings is impressive. As a pianist, his work ranks with that of the most sought after studio musicians of the jump blues and rhythm-and-blues (R&B) eras. Ray Charles the composer knows how to craft memorable songs, ones with catchy hooks, infectious rhythms, ironic twists, syrupy sentimentality, or mature humor for adult audiences. The period covered in these recordings demonstrates Charles’s singular, meticulous, and calculating musical mind.

The 1950s were heady musical times. America would gradually begin to accept the reality of its interracial culture, and stars like Dinah Washington, Louis Jordan, and Ray Charles courted fans outside of the black community on a large scale. The advent of rock and roll energized the industry, but not without controversy. The floodgates opened, and white and black rockers broke down barriers that were previously maintained to keep the fallacy of racial boundaries intact. Gospel became a secularized commodity. R&B, a recently coined term for jazz’s dancing, rollicking, blues-jumping cousin, proved to be a moneymaker for the fledgling Atlantic label. This was the environment that inspired the executives at Atlantic to bank on its mega-talented, yet still relatively unknown, newcomer. What they could not predict, however, is the measure of Charles’s impact on the scene. And, as these recordings demonstrate, Charles’s contribution can be measured by how his distinct yet pliable musical personality overdetermines the effectiveness of this varied material. Whether Charles is crooning, taking a jazz solo at the piano, singing a standard, rocking and rolling, or musing some blues, he sets the highest standards.

These discs are packed with musical riches. Discs one through six are more or less chronologically organized and, taken together, they give a sense, not of artistic development, but rather, of the range of settings in which Charles excelled. What, one might ask, could he not do musically? He collaborates with other arrangers and composers, but he also contributes his own compositions to a session. Many of the pieces are in the 12-bar blues format, and Charles proves that the form doesn’t have to be confining. He belts, croons, or flat-out shouts the blues, giving each piece something a little different, something special. Charles was obviously enjoying the small-group setting that highlights both his vocal and instrumental skills. When he judiciously adds female background singers in the mid-1950s, the resulting call and response inflects the gospel sound in soul music that would be imitated by artists in subsequent generations. Some of the most stunning examples of his versatility in this collection, however, are the Milt Jackson collaborations that showcase the degree to

which Charles was certainly “one of the cats.” A rich harmonic sense, fluid technique, and a crafty, sassy melodic intuition mark his style. Bud Powell and Art Tatum were among his piano influences, and he doesn’t shuck and jive on the changes.

We learn more by viewing the bonus DVD included in the set. Filmed at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1960, the black and white footage provides a bird’s eye view of Charles’s riveting stage manner. The combination of Charles’s self-assured bearing, superb musicianship, along with the disciplined (if somewhat visually unexpressive) jazz combo, cut a tightly honed unit. When the carefully groomed Raylettes strut and glide from the wings and join the ensemble, good times, indeed, roll. Their carefully choreographed movements predate that of the Supremes, and their solid harmonies please the crowd and probably worried the churchgoers. Also included is an interview with Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records that confirms the mutual respect between the record label and its resident sensation.

Ray Charles’s genius (as it is with others considered so) represents the product of a complex bundle of historically specific, culturally determined, and socially agreed upon discourses that are passed off as “natural.” The public—and those who market the media to them—recognizes genius as a dynamic and compelling concept that performs important cultural work. Genius is a powerful word, marshaling its strength, privileges, and curses—especially in the jazz and popular music fields—from a number of cultural antecedents and ever shifting ideologies.

One aspect of this power emanates from the Western art music tradition. If I may be allowed one more reference to that tradition, Beethoven scholar Tia DiNora has argued that ideas about musical talent and genius are deeply embedded in the relationship among four factors: identity, social structure, culture, and action.”¹² She writes that the images of Beethoven, for example, have dominated the iconography of musical genius in the West. His well-known portraits and busts have become canonized in the popular imagination as the quintessential image of the extraordinary musician whose creative powers tower over all others. For many, Beethoven’s music has come to symbolize the crowning achievement of the common practice period of classical music, providing a bridge to the mid- to late-nineteenth-century repertoire that now forms the core of Western concert literature. Yet, as DiNora argues, far from being a universal, timeless phenomenon, Beethoven’s genius was established in a specific social and cultural context, and only through the years was he established as such a supreme musical genius. Against a “Beethovenian” notion of Western musical genius stand several powerful stereotypes embedded in the historical African American experience and cultural production. Such depictions, without doubt, inform the mainstream’s notion of what musical genius means within African American culture. Agricultural work, musical performance as labor and entertainment, and athletic prowess all figure into contemporary notions of black musical genius. Just as nineteenth-century discourses of Western musical genius inform current discourses, the history, practice, and representation of slave culture

¹²Tia DiNora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xi.

informs mainstream culture's ideas about genius in African American vernacular culture forms. Historically, musical practice was not seen as an intellectual endeavor but as free labor for a white ruling class. Indeed, music and not to mention sports participation, remain very racialized activities in American popular culture.

Underpinning the black musical genius notion are historical patterns that situate musical talent on a continuum between literacy and athletic ability. Of course, literary pursuits are the most prestigious of the three; it is the skill, after all, that reflects the kind of intelligence most closely linked to "the mind" and Western cultural dominance. The physical labor associated with the legacies of slavery and sharecropping, and the institutionalization of a black "service class," continue to shape how black achievement in the other spheres are interpreted. Toiling black bodies became distanced from strong associations with the intellectual pursuits of the mind. Musical ability occupies a middle ground in this perception, as it requires a combination of physical and intellectual activity.

Ray Charles's business acumen (he left Atlantic in 1959 to pursue more lucrative contracts and ownership of his masters) put him in a unique position among other R&B stars of this age. But it was his virtuoso status that distanced him from the crowd. "Like all musical techniques," Robert Walser has argued, "virtuosity functions socially." While some find virtuosos' technical acrobatics "distancing," for others, the powers embedded in their performances "are the most effective articulators of a variety of social fantasies and musical pleasures."¹³ As a blind child prodigy who ultimately conquered a twenty-year heroin addiction, Charles also fit the bill of the prototypical, tortured artist. His ultimate triumph, however, appears to be the way in which he—more so than any others of his generation—opened up new avenues for black creativity and financial equity in American pop.

When the music here is placed in its larger context, we learn that musical pleasures are shot through with the residue of the past, creating powerful meanings for audiences. We experience all of this as part of the life of music. We also learn that the genius of Ray Charles, far from being "natural," was a complicated matter involving work and sacrifice on his part, battles to overcome his physical challenge and addiction, and struggles with historical patterns that shape music's interpretation in society. Genius is and does work.

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¹³ Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 76.