

## Ray Charles Live!

by Suzan-Lori Parks, directed by Sheldon Epps **World premiere**

**Pasadena Playhouse** • October 31– December 9, 2007 (Opened, rev'd. 11/9)

**With a title straight off a Vegas marquee, the world premiere of Suzan-Lori Parks' 'Ray Charles Live!,' at the Pasadena Playhouse through December 9, adds theater's take on the seminal performer's life and music to those of non-fiction literature and motion pictures. Where the best book, Charles' own 'Brother Ray,' let him whisper his story in our inner ears and the blockbuster film 'Ray' mixed a cinematographic documentary with a sometimes tabloid vibe, 'Ray Charles Live!' shows the unique power of theater to weave a dramatic narrative through a virtual live concert.**

Charles' life was a rags-to-riches success story. He climbed to the top of a music business he helped redefine, all the while fighting the side-battles of blindness and blackness in America. By breaking the seal on the sacred sounds of gospel, and letting them walk the street with the blues, he alienated chunks of the white and black communities. But he helped forge the soul music that did as much as anything in the 1900s to work the truths within African-American music into the general culture. Appropriately, his two 'Live!' collaborators have established their own records of reaching wider audiences without sacrificing: playwright Parks won a Pulitzer for her unflinching yet artful look at racism in 'Topdog/Underdog' and Epps increasingly offers his Pasadena Playhouse as an institutional launch pad for socially ambitious works.

The play is set after Charles' death at the age of 73 in 2004. Consequently, the title has two meanings: it's a live performance by someone who must return from beyond to make the gig. The deal he struck to get here isn't important. He is back in a recording studio to lay tracks for a final 'Greatest Hits' record while setting his permanent record straight. The famous Atlantic Records' producer Tom Dowd, who died two years before Charles, is back at the board, mixing a pit band under the baton of Eric Butler. The musicians have a place of honor across an upstage platform, and serve as both Charles' live concert accompaniment and session players. The live album will be a "life" album: working Charles' greatest hits into his life story. But the tunes, when appropriate, will be sequenced to fit key characters and key moments to build the record's other component, an oral history.

The tour guide for the show is Charles' mid-career persona, played by Brandon Victor Dixon. Jeremiah Whitfield-Pearson plays him as a child in Georgia and Wilkie Ferguson beautifully handles four songs as 'RC,' the emerging talent in his late teens, early adult years. The person who shaped him most, his mother Retha, is given warmth and backbone by Yvette Cason, who delivers her songs powerfully, especially a heart-breaking version of Henry Glover's "Drown in My Own Tears" after the drowning death of Ray's little brother. We meet Quincy Jones (Phillip Attmore), a life-long friend who met Charles in Seattle, but is little more than name-dropped here, and David "Fathead" Newman (Ricke Vermont), who has a lot more stage time as a bandmember. Other musicians, bandleaders and music industry folks are represented, notably Atlantic founder Ahmet Ertegun (Daniel Tatar, back in Pasadena after 'The Last Five Years').

Of equal importance to the music, however, are the women in his life. Charles' long-suffering wife



**Brandon Victor Fox**

PHOTO CRAIG SCHWARTZ

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**Brandon Victor Fox**  
**Nikki Renee Daniels**

**SCHWARTZ**

Della B is well-rounded and beautifully sung by Nikki Renee Daniels. And, as two of the his 'road wives' from the back-up Raeletts, Angela Teek is a feisty Mary Ann Fisher, while Sabrina Sloan is a sultry, younger Margie Hendricks.

Before Parks gets into the storytelling, however, she lets the man who would be Ray prove himself. The curtain rises on a bandstand filled with players. The show-ready Charles is led to the piano and, after introducing himself, takes his seat, tilts his head, and widens the signature smile-snarl that somehow spoke his ecstasy and anger at once. As soon as he and the band launch into a thumping rendition of 'What'd I Say,' it's clear that Dixon knows Charles, vocally and instrumentally. (If he's not playing the piano, it's the best fake job we've seen.)

With the popularity of the book and movie, it's not necessary to trace the "plot" of 'Ray Charles Live!' The usual subjects are covered, and Parks' narrative conceit permits Charles to indulge in some free-range storytelling, moving things around for dramatic contour and better effect. She doesn't sugar-coat anything, either, portraying Charles' womanizing, his emotional neglect of Della and their sons, and his 17-year addiction to heroin, which he kicked decades before he died but never apologized for using.

Still, there is a polished, restrained quality to the piece that is inevitable with a Broadway-bound show: a prettiness to things, an over-articulation to songs. When we feel the kind of roadhouse heat that could cook this music to the searing point is in the Angela Teek numbers. This is not to slight any of these fine performers out there doing their job. Cason in particular is a treasure. So are Daniels and Sloan, especially when they join Teek for the show-stopping "I Can't Stop Lovin' You." But during those Teek solos, you may hear a husky voice in the inner ear whisper, "That's what I'm talkin' 'bout."

Still, Dixon is so good that if the show settles in for a Broadway run in 2008 he could own New York. If so, his key to the city will likely be his version of 'Georgia.' For one thing, it's testament to the ability of Charles' music and personality to triumph over ignorance, since it was adopted as official song for the same state that once banned him after he protested its policy of segregated theaters. On the other hand, it's Dixon taking the master head on and delivering one of Charles' most identifiable songs in a way that lets us appreciate both the actor and the originator.

The company is deep with talent, but a couple of shout-outs go to Maceo Oliver (back after his parts in 'Cuttin' Up') and to Leslie Stevens, a utility player who not only dances to beat the band, but also serves up a remarkable range of well-toned characters -- from Queen Elizabeth, to a male country singer, to a backwoods schoolmarm. If she weren't the only white woman on stage you'd never believe it was the same person.

Of the stories that make their way into every telling of the Charles' story, a favorite is about how he sized up a woman's physical appeal. While shaking hands, he politely slid his left hand along her right wrist. As acupuncturists check the human body through points on the ear, Charles' gauge was all in the wrist. His long-held inside joke, his personal definition of 'eyes of the beholder,' must have given the signature grimace-grin full flower. But it was the redefinition of music that makes him important. And if 'Live' doesn't redefine theater as a whole, it is turning at least one theater into L.A.'s hottest club through December 9. And that's reason to smile.

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**WITH** Brandon Victor Dixon, Nikki Renee Daniels, and NRaca, Phillip Attmore, Matthew Benjamin, Aaron Brown, Christopher Brown, Yvette Cason, Meloney Collins, Tara Cook, Wilkie Ferguson, Dionne Figgins, Matthew Koehler, Sylvia MacCalla, Yusuf Nasir, Maceo Oliver, Jeremiah Whitfield-Pearson, Sabrina Sloan, Leslie Stevens, Daniel Tatar, Angela Teek, Rocklin Thompson, Ricke Vermont, Harrison White •

**PRODUCTION** Riccardo Hernandez, set; Paul Tazewell, costumes; Donald Holder, lights; Carl Casella and Domonic Sack, sound; Austin Switzer, video; Charles G. LePointe, hair/wigs; Lurie Horns Pfeffer/Conwell Worthington III, stage management