

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #226
The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles
7th Jan, 2022

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by

Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge, and today is the start of another three-part mini-series, this time on troubled but **iconic¹** American musicians of the 1950s and 60s.

[00:00:35] In part one, today's episode, we'll talk about the man they called The Genius, Ray Charles.

¹ very famous, symbolic

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The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:00:43] His is an amazing story of escaping from dire² poverty and tragic circumstances³ as a boy through to becoming one of the most successful musicians of his time, against all the odds⁴.

[00:00:57] Then, in our next episode - which will be one of our member-only ones - we'll talk about Johnny Cash, "The Man in Black", another man who grew up in poverty yet became a defining⁵ voice of his generation.

[00:01:11] And to finish it off we'll learn about the life of the man they called "The King", Elvis Presley, someone who was considered "average" by his teachers as a boy but went on to really create the category⁶ of rock and roll.

[00:01:28] In these three stories to different degrees⁷, we'll meet adversity⁸, we'll learn about America in the 1950s, we'll come up against near death experiences, there will be sex, drugs, rock and roll, and plenty of personal demons⁹ to battle with.

² extreme

³ conditions, situation

⁴ in spite of great difficulties

⁵ very important

⁶ style, genre

⁷ levels, amounts

⁸ a difficult or unpleasant situation

⁹ problems or passions

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The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:01:45] All three of these episodes have been a huge amount of fun to make so I hope you'll enjoy them.

[00:01:52] Ok then, the Amazing Life of Ray Charles.

[00:02:00] It is hard to imagine many people who have had a tougher start to life than the subject of today's episode.

[00:02:09] Ray Charles Robinson was born on September 23rd, 1930, in Georgia, in the deep south of the United States.

[00:02:19] His mother, Aretha, was 15 years old when she fell pregnant with him. His father left before Ray really knew him, and he was brought up¹⁰ by his devoted¹¹ young mother.

[00:02:33] He had a younger brother, George, who was born before Ray's first birthday. Yet nobody seemed to know who his father was, and he certainly wasn't around.

[00:02:44] So, while she was still a teenager herself, Ray Charles' mother was busy looking after two young boys, trying to make ends meet¹².

¹⁰ raised

¹¹ loving and loyal

¹² have enough money to cover the basic needs

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[00:02:55] They lived in abject¹³ poverty. They were dirt poor¹⁴.

[00:03:00] What's more, the country they lived in, and in particular the area of the country, the deep south of the United States, was very racist.

[00:03:10] This was still the era of the Jim Crow laws, where black people were not allowed to sit in the same places as white people.

[00:03:20] So, we have this brave young mother trying to bring up two children in an institutionally¹⁵ racist country. And this family, given their poverty and lack of a father figure, were at an even greater disadvantage than most African Americans at the time.

[00:03:38] In his autobiography, Ray Charles would later write "Even compared to other blacks we were on the bottom of the ladder looking up at everyone else. Nothing below us except the ground".

[00:03:52] Ray Charles was also to experience deep personal tragedy and huge trauma¹⁶ when, as a four year old, he saw his young brother drowning¹⁷ to death in the bath.

¹³ extremely unpleasant

¹⁴ very poor

¹⁵ characteristic or typical of a culture or a society

¹⁶ emotional shock and pain

¹⁷ dying by being under water and not being able to breathe

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The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:04:05] As if the [cards weren't already sufficiently stacked against him](#)¹⁸, as a young black boy who had lost a brother, growing up poor with a teenage mother in an [institutionally](#) racist America, the young Ray Charles was starting to lose his sight, he was going blind.

[00:04:24] He suffered from something called glaucoma, a condition that damages the optic nerve and can cause blindness, and by the time he was 7 years old he was completely blind.

[00:04:39] His mother tried her hardest to find a school that would take a young, blind black boy with [no money to his name](#)¹⁹, and eventually found one in Florida, where Ray Charles went when he was 7 years old.

[00:04:55] It was to be here that the young Ray Charles started to develop a great talent for music, in particular, on the piano.

[00:05:04] He had begun playing music when he was a much younger boy, at even three years old, but it was here at this school that he really started to [excel](#)²⁰.

[00:05:15] Now to [state the obvious](#)²¹ that piano is not an easy instrument to play if you are blind, especially when you are first learning how to play it.

¹⁸ he wasn't faced with enough difficulty already

¹⁹ no money belonging to him

²⁰ be extremely good

²¹ to say what everyone already knows

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[00:05:25] If you watch famous pianists now, their hands move up and down the keyboard and they barely²² need to look. But that is the product of tens of thousands of hours of practice.

[00:05:38] Because he was blind, Ray Charles needed to use braille²³ music, music specifically designed to be read by blind people with their hands.

[00:05:50] He would learn the notes²⁴ that needed to be played by the left hand by using his right hand to touch and read the music, then he would learn the right hand movements by using his left hand to touch and read the music.

[00:06:04] And then, of course, he would have to memorise²⁵ the music to play it together.

[00:06:09] Learning the piano when you are blind is certainly no mean feat²⁶.

²² almost don't

²³ specifically designed to be read by blind people with their hands

²⁴ written signs representing the pitch (the degree of highness or lowness of a tone) and duration of a musical note

²⁵ remember, learn by heart

²⁶ a great achievement

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[00:06:16] Now, although by all accounts²⁷ Ray's time at the school for the blind was a happy one, further tragedy was to befall²⁸ him when in 1945 his devoted mother died before her 30th birthday.

[00:06:32] Aged 14, he was now completely alone in the world.

[00:06:37] No brother, no mother, and he had never known his father.

[00:06:40] This tragedy caused Ray Charles to drop out²⁹ of school, and go and join a friend of his mother's in Jacksonville, the largest city in Florida.

[00:06:52] He managed to get some work playing piano, but it was incredibly low paid, and he barely made enough money to eat.

[00:07:02] Ray Charles had bigger hopes and dreams than playing in someone else's band, though. He wanted to write his own music, to create his own songs, to carve his own path³⁰ in the world.

[00:07:16] The musical expectations at this time in the United States were clearly fixed.

²⁷ according to the information that is available

²⁸ happen to (for something bad)

²⁹ give up, quit

³⁰ make his own way

The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:07:21] There were clearly defined **genres³¹**, and expectations of the kind of music someone would make based on the colour of their skin.

[00:07:31] And if you were black, the expectation was that you'd play jazz music.

[00:07:36] The most successful jazz musician at the time that Ray Charles was growing up was Nat King Cole.

[00:07:43] When Ray Charles started to write his own music, it was really in the style of Nat King Cole. It's slow, **soulful³²** jazz music.

[00:07:55] In 1948, three years after Charles had left school, and when he was not yet 18 years old, he moved to Seattle.

[00:08:05] The story goes that he asked a friend what city in the United States was furthest away from where he was, in Tampa, Florida.

[00:08:15] His friend took out a map and drew a line all the way across, getting to Seattle, on the far north-west of the country. He made the 5-day bus journey across the country, finally arriving in this new city.

³¹ styles

³² expressing deep emotions

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[00:08:32] It was here that he met another **ambitious³³** boy, a 15-year-old called Quincy Jones, a man whose career would go on to include working with Frank Sinatra and Michael Jackson.

[00:08:45] In Seattle he had his own apartment, he lived independently, and he started to **make a name for himself³⁴** as “Ray Charles, the blind singing **sensation³⁵**”.

[00:08:58] His **big break³⁶** was to come four years later, in 1952, when he was signed to a record label called Atlantic Records.

[00:09:08] This finally gave him the distribution that he so badly needed, and success came quickly after with the release of “Mess Around” in 1953, and then the following year, in 1954 with the song that really **catapulted³⁷** him to nationwide fame: “I got a woman”.

³³ having a strong wish to be successful

³⁴ become well-known

³⁵ someone of public interest and attention

³⁶ an opportunity or chance that leads to professional success

³⁷ put or sent in a sudden and quick way

The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:09:29] When it comes to the evolution of the musical style of Ray Charles, you can clearly hear that he has moved away³⁸ from the slow jazz, the Nat King Cole style what's called “crooning³⁹”.

[00:09:43] And by now he has mixed, he has fused⁴⁰ together a variety of different styles of music - there is jazz in there, but he has combined it with blues and even gospel, the style of music popular in churches in the American south.

[00:10:02] This was something that people simply didn't do.

[00:10:06] Gospel music was holy, it was music that was sung in church. Blues, on the other hand, was sexual, it was smooth⁴¹, it was the opposite of gospel.

[00:10:18] By blending⁴² the two styles Ray Charles was putting a type of music associated with sin⁴³ and debauchery⁴⁴ together with music sung in church.

³⁸ changed his direction

³⁹ a style of relaxed and emotional singing

⁴⁰ combined, mixed

⁴¹ easy-going and pleasing to the ear

⁴² combining, mixing

⁴³ an action that breaks a religious law

⁴⁴ activities involving sex, drugs and alcohol, vice

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[00:10:31] He would also use gospel [lyrics⁴⁵](#) and switch parts of them. For example, in “I've got a woman” he takes a gospel song called “This little light of mine” but switches “light” for “girl”, and he really, he is [sexualising⁴⁶](#) a hymn.

[00:10:51] And there were large parts of black America that reacted badly to it - they didn't like what Ray Charles was doing. He was even accused of [sacrilege⁴⁷](#) by gospel pastors, who accused him of [bastardizing⁴⁸](#) the hymns.

[00:11:08] There was little that could stop Ray Charles though, and he continued to have hit after hit.

[00:11:15] He was becoming such a star that he was even offered a new, incredibly generous contract by another record label. In 1959 he switched from Atlantic Records to ABC records when he was offered a \$50,000 annual [advance⁴⁹](#), which was about half a million dollars per year at the time, plus ownership of all of his records - this would have been an incredible deal for the period.

⁴⁵ the words of a song

⁴⁶ giving sexual meaning to, making it sexual

⁴⁷ an act of disrespect for something considered holy, blasphemy

⁴⁸ changing it by adding new elements and lowering its quality

⁴⁹ an amount of money paid for some work before it's done

The Amazing Life Of Ray Charles

[00:11:45] Ray Charles, alongside being a **bold**⁵⁰ and incredibly talented musician, was also a **shrewd**⁵¹ negotiator and an excellent businessman.

[00:11:56] He would negotiate his own contracts, he owned his own music, he had his own music studio, he later on even started his own record label.

[00:12:07] He was blind, but he saw more clearly than most the commercial advantages of having control over your own music and your own destiny - at the time most other musicians would have had their record labels manage all of this for them.

[00:12:23] And although he was completely blind, and his eyes had literally been removed from his body, he was incredibly independent.

[00:12:32] He never used a stick and he never had a dog to guide him. He walked on his own, confidently, feeling his way over to where he needed to go. **So much so**⁵² that people would often doubt that he was really blind at all.

[00:12:49] This **bravery**⁵³ is believed to have partly come from his mother, who would tell him “you’re blind, you ain’t stupid”.

⁵⁰ not afraid to try new things, willing to take risks

⁵¹ very capable and clever

⁵² to such a great degree

⁵³ the state of showing no fear in the face of danger

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[00:12:59] From a young age, Ray Charles was taught that there was no point⁵⁴ feeling sorry for yourself.

[00:13:04] Yes, he had had a very tough start to life - he had grown up poor, blind, and black in a racist country.

[00:13:13] But this shouldn't stop him from doing anything he wanted in life.

[00:13:18] And by the mid 1960s, Ray Charles was certainly a huge success by anyone's standards⁵⁵.

[00:13:26] However, there was a darker element to his life that was of his own making⁵⁶.

[00:13:32] He had been addicted to heroin since he was 18 years old.

[00:13:37] Obviously, being addicted to hard drugs is not a sensible⁵⁷ life choice for anyone, but in the late 1940s and 50s, especially in the circles he was in, of jazz and blues musicians, it was nothing completely unordinary⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ it served no purpose to, it was useless to

⁵⁵ according to everyone

⁵⁶ caused by his own actions

⁵⁷ reasonable, wise

⁵⁸ not common or normal

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[00:13:55] Other jazz musicians took heroin very happily, including lots of people that Ray Charles looked up to.

[00:14:02] He thought it was a way of relaxing and it helped creativity, and he had been a full-on⁵⁹ addict since he was 18.

[00:14:11] Although he was deeply addicted to the drug, he managed to function⁶⁰ semi-normally. It was still an illegal drug though, and after being arrested several times in the 1950s for possession, and then finally again in 1964, he decided to go to rehab and he managed to kick his addiction once and for all⁶¹.

[00:14:35] There was one more addiction, another vice⁶², or perhaps we should just say another part of Ray Charles' character, that he never really managed to overcome⁶³.

[00:14:46] His love of women.

[00:14:49] He was married twice, for a total of 23 years, but had numerous other relationships and is known to have fathered⁶⁴ 12 different children, only three of whom came from his marriages.

⁵⁹ complete

⁶⁰ work or operate

⁶¹ completely

⁶² bad habit

⁶³ succeed in dealing with it, get over it

⁶⁴ been the father of

[00:15:01] He would sleep with his band members, with fans, with women he met on his tours. And there was no shortage⁶⁵ of women who were attracted to Ray Charles.

[00:15:13] Despite not being able to see, Ray Charles was reportedly a keen⁶⁶ admirer of female physical beauty. When he met a woman he would take her hand and arms, run⁶⁷ his hand over them, to get a feel of whether this was a woman that he was attracted to.

[00:15:32] You can perhaps tell this from Ray Charles' music, but he was an incredibly sensual person. Of course, if you do not have the luxury of being able to see, your other senses become heightened⁶⁸, and it seems that for Ray Charles it was his sense of touch and of hearing that compensated⁶⁹ for the lack of vision.

[00:15:55] Musically, he went on to become a national and global sensation. He made more than 60 albums, won countless awards, and has had a profound⁷⁰ influence on the generation of musicians who followed him.

⁶⁵ a large number

⁶⁶ highly developed and enthusiastic

⁶⁷ feel them with his hand by moving it over them

⁶⁸ increased, strengthened

⁶⁹ were strengthened in exchange for his inability to hear

⁷⁰ very great

[00:16:12] He died at his home in Beverly Hills in 2004, aged 73, after complications from liver surgery, leaving behind an incredible [back catalogue⁷¹](#) and a completely new and unique sound.

[00:16:28] Despite all of the odds, despite [the deck being stacked against him⁷²](#), he went on to be one of the defining voices of his generation. He never felt that people should be [sympathetic⁷³](#) towards him, or that he was [unlucky⁷⁴](#) in life.

[00:16:44] He never let his blindness stop him from doing anything, he was a truly [determined⁷⁵](#) and evidently a very [brave⁷⁶](#) man.

[00:16:53] And perhaps there is no greater [compliment⁷⁷](#) of Ray Charles than how another musical [icon⁷⁸](#), Frank Sinatra was to describe him - he called him “The only true genius in our business”.

[00:17:08] OK then, that is it for today’s episode, The Amazing Life of Ray Charles.

⁷¹ all of the works or recordings by an artist

⁷² the fact that he was faced with a lot of difficulty

⁷³ showing sympathy, sorrow or pity

⁷⁴ without good luck

⁷⁵ decided, set in purpose or opinion

⁷⁶ showing no fear of difficult things

⁷⁷ an expression of admiration or praise

⁷⁸ very important person, symbol

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[00:17:14] As a reminder, this was part one of a three-part mini-series. Next up will be Johnny Cash, The Man in Black, then part three is going to be on Elvis Presley.

[00:17:27] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:17:31] For the Ray Charles fans out there, what is your favourite of his songs, and why?

[00:17:37] Where else can you see the influences of Ray Charles?

[00:17:41] And what other examples can you think of people who did not let obstacles⁷⁹ get in their way?

[00:17:47] I would love to know.

[00:17:49] So, you can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:17:58] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:18:03] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

⁷⁹ difficulties

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Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Iconic	very famous, symbolic
Dire	extreme
Circumstances	conditions, situation
Against all the odds	in spite of great difficulties
Defining	very important
Category	style, genre
Degrees	levels, amounts
Adversity	a difficult or unpleasant situation
Demons	problems or passions
Brought up	raised
Devoted	loving and loyal
Make ends meet	have enough money to cover the basic needs

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Abject	extremely unpleasant
Dirt poor	very poor
Institutionally	characteristic or typical of a culture or a society
Trauma	emotional shock and pain
Drowning	dying by being under water and not being able to breathe
Cards weren't already sufficiently stacked against him	he wasn't faced with enough difficulty already against him
No money to his name	no money belonging to him
Excel	be extremely good
State the obvious	to say what everyone already knows
Barely	almost don't
Braille	specifically designed to be read by blind people with their hands
Notes	written signs representing the pitch (the degree of highness or lowness of a tone) and

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	duration of a musical note
Memorise	remember, learn by heart
No mean feat	a great achievement
By all accounts	according to the information that is available
Befall	happen to (for something bad)
Drop out	give up, quit
Carve his own path	make his own way
Genres	styles
Soulful	expressing deep emotions
Ambitious	having a strong wish to be successful
Make a name for himself	become well-known
Sensation	someone of public interest and attention
Big break	an opportunity or chance that leads to professional success
Catapulted	put or sent in a sudden and quick way
Moved away	changed his direction

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Crooning	a style of relaxed and emotional singing
Fused	combined, mixed
Smooth	easy-going and pleasing to the ear
Blending	combining, mixing
Sin	an action that breaks a religious law
Debauchery	activities involving sex, drugs and alcohol, vice
Lyrics	the words of a song
Sexualising	giving sexual meaning to, making it sexual
Sacrilege	an act of disrespect for something considered holy, blasphemy
Bastardizing	changing it by adding new elements and lowering its quality
Advance	an amount of money paid for some work before it's done
Bold	not afraid to try new things, willing to take risks
Shrewd	very capable and clever

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So much so

to such a great degree

Bravery

the state of showing no fear in the face of danger

There was no point

it served no purpose to, it was useless to

By anyone's standards

according to everyone

Of his own making

caused by his own actions

Sensible

reasonable, wise

Unordinary

not common or normal

Full-on

complete

Function

work or operate

Once and for all

completely

Vice

bad habit

Overcome

succeed in dealing with it, get over it

Fathered

been the father of

No shortage

a large number

Keen

highly developed and enthusiastic

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Run	feel them with his hand by moving it over them
Heightened	increased, strengthened
Compensated	were strengthened in exchange for his inability to hear
Profound	very great
Back catalogue	all of the works or recordings by an artist
The deck being stacked against him	the fact that he was faced with a lot of difficulty
Sympathetic	showing sympathy, sorrow or pity
Unlucky	without good luck
Determined	decided, set in purpose or opinion
Brave	showing no fear of difficult things
Compliment	an expression of admiration or praise
Icon	very important person, symbol
Obstacles	difficulties

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com