

“What'd I Say” (Parts 1 and 2)--Ray Charles (1959)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Michael Lydon (guest post)*



Original label

Here's a seldom noted but significant fact about the long and distinguished career of Ray Charles: unlike his contemporaries--Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Bo Diddley--who all became rock 'n' roll stars by making their first records smash hits, he, Brother Ray, the Genius, the High Priest, the biggest star of them all, took the whole decade of the 1950s to emerge, step by steady step, out from the shadows of obscurity into the bright lights of international fame.

In early 1950, Ray touched the black “race records” charts with “Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand”; five years later, he crossed over into the white charts with “I Got a Woman” (also a hit for Elvis Presley!) and “Hallelujah I Love Her So.” Next came “Movin’ On,” Ray’s first foray into country music, then “Soul Brothers,” some jazz with vibraphonist Milt Jackson. Having systematically covered the major branches of contemporary popular music, Ray must have thought from time to time, “What more can I do, what do I have left to conquer?”

Thoughts like that may well have been crossing Ray’s mind in January 1959 as his touring caravan rolled east from Pittsburgh. At a dance in Brownsville, an industrial town, Ray realized he had run out of things to play that fit the excited mood of the dancers leaping and spinning before the stage.

“So I said to the guys,” Ray recalled years later, “‘Look, I don’t know where I’m going, so y’all follow me.’ Then I turned to the Raelettes and said, ‘Whatever I say, just repeat after me.’” Ray started a low, bouncy riff on electric piano, the drummer clicked in on his big cymbal, the band fell into an up-tempo groove, and Ray started singing nonsense choruses: “See that gal with a diamond ring, she knows how to shake that thing.” The crowd loved it and, without knowing that a song was being made up on the spot, fell into the improvisatory feeling.

Soon Ray ran out of words and started to moan. The Raelettes moaned back. The call-and-response began to crescendo of its own accord until it sounded like a man and woman losing themselves in lovemaking. Somehow the improvised groove worked, the people went nuts, and everybody then collapsed exhausted. Offstage, people ran up to Ray and asked where they could buy the record.

“What record?” Ray replied. “The last thing you played, it was wild, we loved it.” The next, night Ray tried it again, again to a huge and happy response, and night after night as the tour rolled east, the response grew. People loved the “Unnnh, Unnnnh’s” and began to moan along too. Ray called the song, “What’d I Say.”

In a few weeks, Ray and company got to New York for a recording session. “What’d I Say” had become a popular slot in the band’s repertoire, and by now they had it down to a sexy science. After a long electric piano intro and the nonsense choruses, Ray waved the song to a close. Immediately, a gaggle of men and women’s voices rise in protest. They want the music to keep going, and though pretending he doesn’t understand, Ray starts again, this time singing a long “Unnnnh” to which the ladies respond, “Unnnnh.” Then a long “Ohhhhh” from Ray, and a long “Ohhhhh” response from the ladies, then faster and faster:

“Unnh!”
“Oh!”
“Unnh!”
“Oh!”
“Unnnh”
“Oh!”
“Don't it make you feel all right!”

...the grunts each time becoming more edged with sexual pleasure until Ray is screaming, the ladies moaning, and the band is rocking. Out of the ecstatic tumult come exhortations to “Shake that thing,” and the general agreement, “Don't it make you feel all right!”

When Atlantic Records executives heard a tape of the tune (if such prosaic words fit the sensual experience of listening to and enjoying this impassioned music), they weren’t sure what to do it. Its driving beat gave the track dance-craze possibilities but, remembers Tom Dowd, Atlantic’s brilliant recording engineer, “It was too damn long, too many piano instrumentals before the vocal. And all the girls with yellow dresses, blue dresses, red dresses, and green dresses, not the best lyrics!” Ray’s tempo, however, was so metronomically exact that Dowd was able to cut and splice out unwanted choruses, and soon he had telescoped the track down to two three-minute sides of a 45 rpm disc, “What’d I Say, Parts I & II.”

Released in July of 1959, “What'd I Say” became a monster hit even though many radio stations, black and white, banned it because all the “Unnhs” and “Ahhh’s” sounded like a couple making love and coming to a highly satisfactory orgasmic conclusion. For many

teenagers, including the writer of this mini-memory, then 17 years old, listening and hip-shaking to “What’d I Say” acted as a sexual initiation nearly as powerful as the real thing.

We found “What’d I Say” the perfect song for dancing “The Twist,” and within weeks “What’d I Say” topped out at number one on “Billboard’s” R&B singles chart, went to number six on the “Billboard” Hot 100, and became Atlantic Records’ best-selling song for the next dozen years.

“What’d I Say,” now 60 years old, lives as one of the miraculously contagious rock-soul-pop tunes that speak with direct, forceful, and humorous energy across all barriers of age, taste, and style. I predict its “Unnnh”s and “Oooh”s will still be sung happily by millions of people another 60 years from now. Why? Who knows! Why does everybody love to sing the triplets that open Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony? Ah, we will never solve the mystery of music! Yet here’s one clue from “What’d I Say” itself:

“Don’t it make you feel all right!”

Michael Lydon is a writer and musician and the author of “Ray Charles: Man and Music, A Biography of the Genius,” as well as many books of essays, among them “Writing and Life” and “Now What?” He lives and performs in New York City with his wife, composer Ellen Mandel.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.