

# Ray Charles let America be its beautiful self

By Marc H. Morial  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Ask different people which song by Ray Charles first came to mind when they heard of great singer's death last week and you're liable to get virtually the entire Ray Charles canon.

In the 1950s and 1960s the power and popularity of such songs as "What'd I Say," "Hit the Road, Jack!," "Unchain My Heart," "You Don't Know Me," the instrumental "One Mint Julep," "You Are My Sunshine," "Rudy," and "Your Cheating Heart," to name just a few, and not only established Ray Charles as a force in American music, it pushed his name and reach and inspiration across the then mistakenly-asserted hard-and-fast boundaries of popular music, rhythm and blues, jazz, and country and western music.

Ray Charles' artistry took no notice of false boundaries in music, and the seductive pull of that one-in-a-million voice, whether sly on "Busted," or poignant on "Georgia On My Mind," and "Born to Lose," made it easier

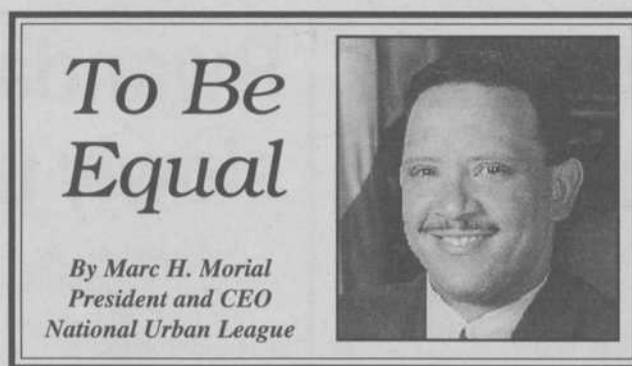
for millions of us to recognize the beauty of good music no matter what its origin or who performed it.

The world began to see that in 1961 when his rollicking "Hit the Road, Jack!" simultaneously secured the number one spots on both the popular music and rhythm and blues charts.

The next year, seemingly to switch gears entirely, his haunting ballad, "I Can't Stop Loving You," drawn from his album "Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music," rested — again, simultaneously — atop the popular music, country and western, and rhythm and blues charts.

"I was born with music inside me," an Associated Press dispatch last week noted Charles had said by way of explanation in his 1978 autobiography, *Brother Ray*. "That's the only explanation I know of. Music was one of my parts ... Like my blood. It was a force already with me when I arrived on the scene. It was a necessity for me, like food or water."

So, Ray Charles made his music a necessity for mil-



## To Be Equal

By Marc H. Morial  
President and CEO  
National Urban League

lions around the world.

The song that first came to my mind when I heard the sad news about "Brother Ray" was not a dance tune, but a hymn: his rendition of "America The Beautiful." It's further proof of his genius that his "lively" version is at least as adoring and moving an assertion of the American Ideal as the more stately ones.

Perhaps that's not only because Ray Charles sang it in that voice and inflection which speaks volumes about the experiences of African-Americans in America. It might be that it's largely because we know it's Ray Charles singing — and the Ray Charles of our experience is someone who's crossed boundaries of possi-

bility in his own life as well as his music, and brought us along for the wonderful ride.

In Ray Charles' "America The Beautiful," we laugh with surprise and delight at the sheer fun he's having expanding the vocabulary, one might say, of the song, even as the words we've long known begin to tug on our hearts.

I also thought of a different African-American artist, Langston Hughes, the poet, novelist, and social commentator, who also spoke of America and its ideals and dreams, though in more complex ways.

Born in 1902, a generation before Ray Charles, Hughes came of age in the 1920s and 1930s, when Jim Crow ruled America, North as well as South, and much of his writing reflected his artistic vision of the search of African-Americans for the America evoked by the soaring words of "America The Beautiful."

In the mid-1930s, when the economic hardships of the Depression Blacks faced intensified and were, in turn, intensified by the hardships of racial discrimination, Hughes wrote two poems, "Let America Be America Again," and "I, Too, Sing America," which keenly express both the bitterness racial bigotry spread throughout Black America and the faith African-Americans retained in the American Dream.

"Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be ... (America never

was America to me), he begins in the former.

But he goes on to say in the latter, "I, too, sing America ... I, too, am America."

Such a notion must have seemed far-fetched even to many Black Americans during the hard years of the 1930s.

Perhaps, however, Langston Hughes, who died in 1967, recognized what he was seeing in his survey of the American scene in the early and mid 1960s.

Perhaps he understood that Ray Charles was one of those African-Americans in many different fields of endeavor who was proving the sublime truth of his Depression-era assertion.

For Ray Charles, the musician, had already forged what became most clear when he sang "America The Beautiful." When that happens, the song proclaims, Ray Charles: American.

## Republicans

(Continued from Page 5)

he added, "but today I think the party has changed significantly, and is changing."

For others, there is a belief the Democratic Party does not speak for Blacks on some issues.

Cain, who opposes abortion, said he believes a majority of Black voters take a similar view on that and other issues of family values.

Boone, the political science professor, is not ready to go that far, but said the experts are mistaken when they categorize all Blacks as liberal. "The Black folk we've chatted with indicate they are against abortion. They are prepared to talk about choice, but whether they would condone abortion, the answer is no," Boone said.

Will White Republicans vote for a Black candidate? And will Black voters support a

Republican? Georgia's July 20 primaries and the Nov. 2 general election will help provide answers. Emory University political science professor Merle Black said he believes most Blacks will continue to support Democrats.

"This activity is concentrated among a relatively small number of conservative Blacks," he said.

"The vast majority of African-American voters are Democrat. I haven't seen much evidence of substantial growth of Black Republicanism in the state."

Bobby Kahn, Georgia's Democratic Party chairman, agreed.

Every election cycle, the Republicans "try to prove they're an inclusive party, notwithstanding the domination by White guys. But then their policies and tactics seem to contradict any effort at inclusion," he said. "This is symbolic and nothing more."

## Fletcher

(Continued from Page 11)

in Darfur, and to pretend to be something akin to a misunderstood honest broker. The activities of the Khartoum government and its approach to the war in the Southern Sudan, should at least lead outside observers to question what is actually transpiring in Darfur. It should also lead people of conscience to object to the atrocities taking place before us.

When the Rwanda genocide occurred in 1994, it was not only the then-Clinton administration that was silent. So, too, was most of Black America. It was almost as if we were ashamed or embarrassed. Certainly had the Rwandan genocide been carried out by a White minority regime, there would not only have been outrage, but probably thousands of African-Americans would have volunteered to go to Rwanda and either fight or provide humanitarian

assistance. Yet, while close to 1 million people were murdered over a three-month period in Rwanda, most of us remained silent.

The situation in Darfur feels almost as if history is repeating itself. Will we fool ourselves into silence? Will we pretend that it does not matter?

Please contact the Sudanese embassy in Washington, D.C. and let them know that the cover has been ripped away from the events transpiring in Darfur and that the activities of their government are nothing short of criminal. The Embassy of the Sudan can be reached at: 202-338-8565 (phone); 202-667-2406 (fax); or info@sudanembassy.org.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum, a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit educational and organizing center.

## Overstreet

(Continued from Page 10)  
the "Colored Combatants."

On a recent sports talk show Larry Bird was sitting around with Magic Johnson, Carmello Anthony and LeBron James talking about past and present-day rivalries in the NBA. Bird, very innocently and truthfully, stated that given that the support base of the NBA was largely White, the league could benefit by having more American-born White stars.

The White media tried its best to grow

this molehill into a mountain of controversy.

Nothing was mentioned of the fact that the Black panelists both agreed with him and had a good honest laugh about Bird's statement.

If I had my way, I would decree that truth have no negative connotations. As such the truth should not be dogged by controversy, but should be viewed in the context of being the highest form of enlightenment.

## Curry

(Continued from Page 11)

vice by providing decidedly unbalanced coverage.

An effusive New York Times story on June 7 claimed Reagan "was almost always popular and, many now say, usually right." It added, "Reagan lived long enough to enable many of his old lieutenants, and some more dispassionate chroniclers as well, to argue that he had also been right on some of the bigger questions of his time."

How did the venerable New York Times reach that conclusion? Six of the eight sources quoted were either Republicans or former Reagan staffers. FAIR asked, "Should readers be surprised that Reagan's friends and former colleagues still think he was right?"

The media study observed, "Television news displayed an even more pronounced reliance on Reagan's Republican admirers. The Sunday morning shows (6/6/04) almost exclusively featured Republicans; former Reagan chief of staff James Baker appeared on all three networks as well as FOX and CNN. FOX New Sunday featured, in addition to Baker, current national security advisor Condoleezza Rice, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and Sheila Tate, former press secretary for Nancy Reagan. MSNBC's June 6 Hardball program featured Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole, Republican representatives David Dreier and Chris Cox, and Reagan strategist Richard Wirthlin."

Reporters spoke endlessly of Reagan's

influence over world politics but mentioned his failures in passing, if at all.

"Reagan's fervent support for right-wing governments in Central America was one of the defining foreign policies of his administration, and the fact that death squads associated with those governments murdered tens of thousands of civilians surely must be included in any reckoning of Reagan's successes and failures," FAIR stated. "But a search of major U.S. newspapers in the Nexis news database turns up the phrase 'death squad' only five times in connection with Reagan..."

FAIR stated, "The Reagan administration's friendly policy toward Saddam Hussein was also a neglected media topic. During the Reagan years, the U.S. offered significant support to Iraq, including weapons components, military intelligence, and even some of the ingredients for manufacturing biological weapons like anthrax."

Time magazine (6/14/04) deflected criticism of Reagan by observing, "Even when his views were most intransigent — when he wondered out loud whether Martin Luther King Jr. was a communist or failed for nearly all of his presidency to speak the word AIDS even once — Reagan gave Reaganism a human face."

And the news media gave Ronald Reagan a pass.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.