

RAY

Even though he became blind at an early age, his mother instilled in him the idea that he was not a cripple. Or a victim.

He was born Ray Charles Robinson. And this is his remarkable story as told by director Taylor Hackford.

Told with some flashback, the film highlights Ray's life from about 1940 to 1966. It covers his genius as a brilliant musician, but also shows a man addicted to heroin and women. He finally conquered the former, but could never resist the latter even though he had a faithful wife.

Ray was bold. He was audacious. He was a man of his word. Though many thought they could swindle and use him, he was intelligent and a shrewd businessman and an innovator in the musical field.

Director Hackford has done a nice job of recreating moments in Ray's life that stand out. The set pieces with automobiles, clothing and furniture naturally evoke the period.

But the most remarkable achievement is Jamie Foxx's performance as Ray. He seems to mimic on film Ray's every swagger, his magical personality, his determination to move forward with his life without any limitations.

In fact, one of the most remarkable things about Ray, was his ability to walk away if something wasn't right. He just walked away. And, Foxx has it all down pat. He's fabulous.

The young actor who played Ray as a child is also quite good. We see in flashback the demons that helped mold Ray and the one source of his independence and why he was driven. His mother practiced "tough love" with him. She would not let him pity himself, but told him he must learn to take care of himself.

Aretha Robinson is played with much gusto by Sharon Warren. She gives a devastating performance as a poor young mother of two boys. She resonates and one sees how Ray became the man he did.

The film starts out with Ray traveling from Florida to the unlikeliest of places-Seattle. There he meets Quincy Jones (Larenz Tate). And even though they go their separate ways, they remain friends.

The rest of the film demonstrates Ray's rise to stardom from Atlantic Records to his move to Paramount. At Paramount, he reaches the pinnacle of power in the music field. In between, many of his hit tunes are played.

He was at home on the road, but married life was not so easy. His wife Della Bea (Kerry Washington) knew about his addictions, but she stood by him and became the one person he could confide in always.

What I found interesting is the way Ray often got his inspiration. In probably the most memorable sequence, Ray is having an affair with one of his background singers-the Raelettes. Margie Hendricks, played by Regina King, wants Ray to leave his wife for her.

As their stormy relationship sours, Ray is inspired to write the song "Hit the Road Jack." When the two are performing the song in a nightclub, you can see their passions rise as both yell out the lyrics to each other.

It is a mesmerizing sequence. Only they knew what was brewing inside their hearts.

Ray's genius is that he had his unique style. He didn't want to be another Nat King Cole. In fact, his producers at Atlantic early on, encouraged him to be himself. His combination of gospel and soul music was a daring venture. His music was passionate. Not all approved.

I must say, for one who never really appreciated the music of Ray Charles, this film gives an interesting perspective on the man. It shows the demons that haunted him; it ponders his genius. Most of all, it is uplifting in depicting a man who grew up with the handicap of blindness, but was courageous enough to find a way to "see" his life fulfilled on his terms.

152 Minutes

MPAA Rating: PG-13 (for depiction of drug addiction, sexuality and some thematic elements)

RATING: B+

Copyright © 2005 Ezio Manzin