

Joe Adams

Shepherding the Philanthropic Legacy Of Ray Charles

BY ROBIN HEFFLER

Most who drive by the modest building with the white iron fence on Washington Boulevard in the West Adams district of Los Angeles have no idea they are passing a historic landmark. Yet for more than 40 years, the building's second story housed the personal recording studio of legendary singer Ray Charles. The man who helped introduce the world to soul singing and shattered musical and racial barriers to shape modern popular American music recorded many hits there, including "America the Beautiful" and "In the Heat of the Night."

Down the hall from the studio is the office of Joe Adams, longtime personal manager and friend of Charles until the singer's death in 2004. For over four decades, Joe Adams was "the man behind the man." On a warm summer day, the multi-talented Adams looks coolly dapper in a black-and-white striped jacket that he designed, accompanied by a black pocket handkerchief and black-and-white shoes. He sits behind the desk in his sleek, leather-furnished office, a glass etching of a characteristically exuberant Ray Charles perched on a nearby table.

Before working with Charles, Joe Adams was an accomplished radio-show host and a film and stage actor. Now, he works to keep the legacy of Charles alive in both the worlds of entertainment and philanthropy. He serves as vice-president/CEO of RPM International, the parent company of Ray Charles Enterprises, as well as the executor of Charles' estate. He also chairs the Ray Charles Foundation, which recently gave an unrestricted donation to Cedars-Sinai in recognition of the care that Charles received at the Medical Center. The Foundation chose to commemorate that gift by naming one of the most visited areas of the Medical Center as the Ray Charles Cafeteria and Conference Center.

"The gift was brought on by the way Ray was treated at the hospital: not as a personality or celebrity, but as a real person," says Adams, a tall, soft-spoken man who grew up in the Watts area of Los Angeles. He sees the naming as a testament to the way Charles led his life, even after gaining fame. "The cafeteria is where everyone—patients, families, doctors, staff—goes to get nourishment," he says. "It's the type of place Ray would go to. He never gave up his common-man roots."

For the leadership of Cedars-Sinai, having the cafeteria and conference center bear Ray Charles' name is an appropriate honor. "It seems fitting and a privilege that a man who lifted up the spirits of so many with his music should have his name affiliated with the central meeting place for a Medical Center that provides the highest level of care and compassion," says Art Ochoa, senior vice president for Community Relations.

The first meeting between Charles and Adams was in the late 1940s when Adams, who was the first African-American in Los Angeles to have his own daily radio show, interviewed the singer. Adams' five-and-a-half-hour radio program was the No. 1-rated deejay show in Los Angeles, and it was the catalyst for a dazzling career in radio, television, stage, and film. Among his triumphs: appearing on Broadway with Lena Horne and in more than 26 motion pictures, including *Carmen Jones* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. He also was the first man of color to receive a Golden Globe® Award as the Outstanding New Actor.

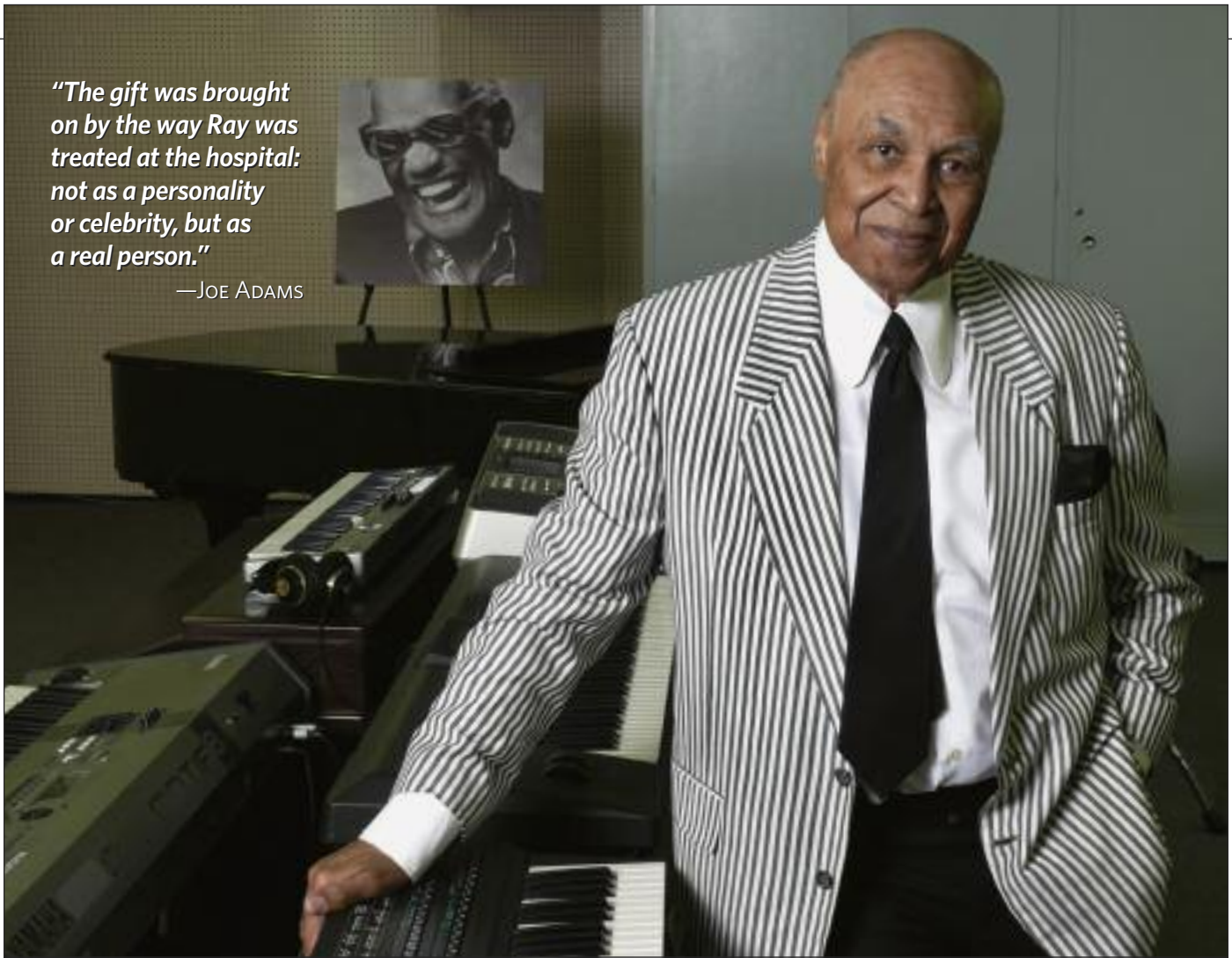
In 1959, when Charles contacted Adams again and asked his good friend to introduce him onstage during his first national tour with a big band, Adams agreed, albeit reluctantly. At the time, he was content to be retired from two successful careers. But after a year on tour, he stayed and never left the Ray Charles organization. He says that

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PHOTO BY JULIANE BACKMANN



during what he calls his unplanned "third career," Charles gave him carte blanche to manage lighting, costumes, transportation, administration, and whatever else needed professional attention. Eventually, he also expertly managed the singer's business deals, as well as his philanthropy.

Adams recalls that Charles never let his blindness impede his work or his positive view of life, which also resonated in the way he chose to give back to society. "Ray never thought of himself as handicapped," he says. "For example, when it came to sound mixing for an album, I would work the equipment by sight, while Ray would put tape between the knobs to know which ones to adjust. He would say to me, 'Anything you can do, I can do. I just have to figure out a different way to do it.'"

That attitude spurred the creation of the singer's foundation in 1987. Initially the foundation primarily funded cochlear implant research and treatment for the

hearing-impaired, particularly children. Under Adams' guidance, it has branched out to support minority colleges, research on eye conditions, and more. Joe Adams and his wife, Emma, have also been generous through their own foundation. Among their gifts was the establishment of the Emma and Joe Adams Public Service Institute at Morehouse College in Atlanta, which supports students who balance academic excellence with a commitment to community service.

For Joe Adams and Ray Charles alike, the motivation for philanthropy always has been "to encourage people, especially kids, to stand up tall and make their own way," he says. "With that in mind, over the last 15 years our foundation has focused on supporting medical and other organizations that help people help themselves."

As Adams speaks, the etched likeness of a beaming Ray Charles a few feet away appears to enjoy seeing his wishes so lovingly fulfilled. ■