

Ray Stevens just thinks funny.

His humor is keenly observant and rich in nuance. His style is unaffected and unpretentious which for the past fifty years has allowed for entertainment that is both witty and guileless. From his multi-million selling comedy hit, "The Streak" to the socially aware "Mr. Businessman" to his Grammy award winning pop standard "Everything Is Beautiful" his talent has touched so many. Not only a singer and composer, Ray has also produced, arranged and played on the recordings of some of Nashville's most legendary performers.

Ray Stevens was born Harold Ray Ragsdale in Clarkdale, Georgia on January 24, 1939. Clarkdale was a small cotton mill town twenty miles north of Atlanta. Ray's early influences came from the radio and the jukebox at the village swimming pool where Ray and most kids spent their summers. In those days radio stations were diverse and played music of all different styles and that, along with the records that the jukebox played exposed Ray to an eclectic selection of music.

As a seven year old taking piano lessons Ray had a realization, and in his own words, "It all made sense." From that time on music was his life. By the time he was a teenager in Albany, Georgia, he had absorbed many of the great Southern musical influences, from country to rhythm and blues. At age fifteen he sang and played piano in a band, the Barons and they played all over the area for the American Legion, the Elks, private parties, anywhere.

At age seventeen he moved to Atlanta where he met radio personality and Georgia Tech football broadcaster, Bill Lowery. "Bill had all types of shows. He was on several different radio stations around town and he had started a music publishing company. He was looking for talent to write songs. I went out to his house and I said, 'My name is Ray Ragsdale and I'm going to learn to write songs for you.' He said, 'Okay lad, go to it.' I borrowed a little tape recorder from a friend. I got the key to the lunch room, which also served as the assembly hall, from the principal. The room had a very high ceiling and a piano on a little stage. I went there one Sunday by myself and made a demo of a song that I and a friend had written called, "Silver Bracelet". I took it to Bill and he liked it. He called Ken Nelson at Capitol

Records, who was coming to Nashville a lot during those days to produce records. Ken liked the song and signed me to a contract with Prep Records.”

In 1957 while Ray was still in high school he made his first trip to Nashville and recorded his first track, “Silver Bracelet”, at the now historic RCA “B” studio. It was on that trip that he met Chet Atkins, who was the head of A&R for RCA and a lasting friendship was formed. “Silver Bracelet” was a hit in Atlanta, but there were bigger things to come. Shortly thereafter Ray left Prep Records and went to Capitol, its parent label. In 1958 Ray recorded some tracks for Capitol and it was during this time that Bill Lowery formed the National Recording Corporation (NRC). NRC had a little studio that wasn’t state of the art, but was somewhere to play and record. Ray, Jerry Reed and Joe South among several others would show up daily bugging the engineer to let them record.

Ray returned to Atlanta, finished high school and started college at Georgia State University where he studied classical piano and music theory. Ray left school during his junior year and in 1961 recorded a song called “Jeremiah Peabody’s Poly Unsaturated Quick Dissolving Fast Acting Pleasant Tasting Green and Purple Pills.” The song went to #35 on the pop charts. At that point Ray’s wide range of talent landed him a job with Mercury Records in Nashville. He arrived in Music City on January 2, 1962, and worked on countless sessions as a pianist, arranger and vocalist in his first year alone. It was in one of those sessions that he recorded, “Ahab the Arab” which climbed to #5 on the pop charts in 1962.

On occasion Ray used to sing with the Jordanaires. He also played on a session for Elvis Presley. That was the only Elvis session Ray ever played on. He played trumpet with Charlie McCoy and in his own words he explains, “I’m a terrible trumpet player. I played keyboards, of course, and they didn’t need me to play on this particular song. It was a sort of Mexican song, so they asked Charlie and me to get our trumpets and play a little Mexican lick on it, and we did. I’ll never forget that! The only Elvis session I ever played on, I played an instrument that I could barely hold.” Several years later Ray would publish “Way Down”. Elvis’ last hit before he died.

At Mercury, Ray also recorded, "Harry the Hairy Ape" and "Santa Claus is Watching You." After that Ray's recordings tapered off. He was spending his time in the studio producing and not focusing on his own music. Soon Ray left Mercury and joined Monument Records as a producer overseeing new artists, one of those being a young Dolly Parton.

1969 would result in a year of phenomenal releases from Ray. As always the music was drawn from all styles of music. The jungle band comedy "Gitarzan" returned him to the pop charts top ten. On the country front he recognized the talent of a young Nashville writer and became the first artist to record Kris Kristofferson's "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down." Later in 1969 he hit the pop charts again with a revival of the old Coaster Pop/R&B hit, "Along Came Jones."

Ray joined Barnaby Records in 1970, a label owned by singer Andy Williams. After he performed on Williams' television variety show, he became Barnaby's first contemporary artist. The summer of 1970 gave Ray the opportunity to host the summer replacement for the Andy Williams' Show on NBC. He needed a hit song for the show and the end result of three days spent in his basement at his piano surrounded by crumpled paper was "Everything is Beautiful." "Everything is Beautiful" became Ray's first #1 hit on the pop charts and won him a Grammy for Male Vocalist of the Year.

For the next few years he continued to release music from gospel to comedy. In 1974 while flying to Los Angeles, Ray read an article about a new fad among college students called streaking. Inspired, he jotted down a few notes and decided to work on a song about it later. The result was "The Streak." The album was released five days after Robert Opel a thirty-three-year-old advertising executive snuck into the 1974 Academy Awards broadcast and streaked across the stage past David Niven. The incident made front page news and the release of "The Streak" was perfect timing. "The Streak" was Ray's second #1 hit on the pop charts.

In 1975 Ray received his second Grammy Award. It was in the Best Arrangement category for the remake of the Erroll Gardner/Johnny Burke classic, "Misty." One day in the studio while rehearsing his band for an upcoming television appearance they started clowning around with "Misty"

using a banjo, fiddle and steel guitar. It sounded good. So good that Ray called his engineer to come down to the studio and the arrangement was recorded.

“Misty” was one of his last hits for Barnaby Records. The label was being shut down so Ray signed with Warner Brothers. It was during this time that Ray’s publishing company was enjoying the success of Elvis’ last hit “Way Down.” During his time at Warner Brothers, Ray also recorded “In the Mood” and “I Need Your Help, Barry Manilow.”

From 1979 to 1984 Ray was with RCA Records. His major hit during that time was “Shriner’s Convention”, inspired from a real experience in hotel booked full of Shriners. In 1984 Ray signed with MCA Records and had hits with “The Mississippi Squirrel Revival” and “It’s Me Again Margaret.” Ray continued to record for MCA until 1990 when he signed with Curb Records.

1991 brought the opening of his two thousand seat Ray Stevens Theatre in Branson, Missouri. From 1991 to 1993 during the tourist season Ray performed twice a day, six days a week for 1,600,000 fans. Several years later in 2004 Ray reopened the show for another season and in 2006 the show closed permanently when Ray sold the theater.

During his time in Branson, Ray made music videos of several of his greatest hits to liven up the stage show. The videos went over so well that they were released through Ray’s own Clyde Records, Inc. in 1992 and made available for purchase through a mail order/television ad campaign. The release of “Comedy Video Classics” proved very successful selling over two million copies. He then released “Ray Stevens Live!” in 1995, a video from the Branson show which sold over a million copies. In 1995 Ray made “Get Serious” a full length movie. It earned platinum status from TV advertising and was released to retail outlets by MCA Records in late 1996.

In 2007 Ray decided to record exclusively for his own label, Clyde Records, Inc. Changing it from direct market only to a full-service label that would make releases available to retail and for download. Ray felt that the time was right, being that independents are enjoying the same success as large corporate labels. It also allows him control of the timeline in which new recordings are released. And the first release on Clyde Records is “New

Orleans Moon”, which shares a title with the first single. The CD includes many great standards such as, “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans”, to “Saint James Infirmary” and Randy Newman’s “Louisiana”. It is Ray’s tribute to the music, the culture and the people of New Orleans.

Ray Stevens released “We The People” a CD/DVD package in April 2010 that contained music tracks and videos on subjects that were Political and Patriotic. Due to the popularity of “We the People” Ray recorded and released “Spirit of 76” a CD of more songs on Patriotic and Politically satirical themes in early 2011 along with a DVD titled “Internet Video Hits” that contains a DVD with 10 videos made especially for the internet that drew over 20,000,000 unique internet views. He also published a Book titled “Let’s Get Political” that uses the titles of the songs from the two CDs above to allow him to expand his thoughts on those subjects in 34 essays, some of which have been published in major newspapers and on major websites like Fox News Channel.

Ray Stevens’ most ambitious effort was released in 2012, his “Labor of Love” the “Encyclopedia of Recorded Comedy Music”. The package contains 8 CDs with 96 of what Ray Stevens considers to be the greatest comedy songs of all-time and who should know better than the greatest and most prolific producer of comedy records of all-time. The effort took him over two years in the studio recording what he says are the songs that made him who he is today. He also researched and wrote extensive liner notes on all of the songs and included those along with a “History of Comedy Music” piece written by Don Cusic as well the writer/publisher credits in what he calls the “owner’s manual” of the project, a very entertaining and informative Encyclopedia-like book, along with a Bonus CD containing 12 more songs that Ray says would have certainly been radio hits during the Golden Era of Recorded Comedy Music. It could well be the crowning achievement of a long and varied career but then Ray Stevens said that he still had more projects in mind.

So, in 2015 “Ray Stevens’ Nashville” his memoir of his life in the music business was released and Ray attended several book signings in Barnes & Noble Stores and later that year his 30 minute TV Show of the same name debuted on RFD-TV. “Ray Stevens’ Nashville” the TV Show has

since departed RFD-TV and is now available on Public Television stations nationwide.

In January of 2018, Ray opened his Nashville showroom, Ray Stevens CabaRay. The 35,000 square foot facility is now open to the public where Ray performs weekly concerts for tourists and local natives alike.

Ray brought us the pop classic “Everything is Beautiful” the insightful “Mr. Businessman” and the Grammy Award-winning arrangement of “Misty”. He has memorably spoofed everything from Tarzan movies to trendy crazes and he created his very own genre of comedy classics. Ray’s genre of music is truly unique. It spans from pop, country, rock, bluegrass and comedy. He has delivered entertainment via audio recordings, music videos, television shows, concert stages and the written word. So what does he have in mind for us next? Stay tuned.