

# Jersey singer recalls working with Ray Charles

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BY JAY LUSTIG **Star-Ledger Staff**

In April 2001, Stefanie R. Minatee found herself face to face with a living legend. Ray Charles was thinking about putting together a show with a gospel choir, and a friend had suggested Minatee's Jersey-based Voices Of Jubilation. Minatee, a Union resident who teaches music at Plainfield High School, flew to Los Angeles to meet with him at his recording studio.

"I was just in awe to actually sit in a room with him," said Minatee yesterday of Charles, who died Thursday at the age of 73. "When he came in, I was just dumbfounded. And he was so personable. We began to talk, and fell in love with each other right away." The meeting led to a December 2002 concert at the Resch Center, an arena in Green Bay, Wis. The show featured Charles and Voices of Jubilation, along with three Wisconsin-based choirs, and was dominated by gospel standards and Christmas songs.

In October, a DVD documenting the show was released under the title "Ray Charles Celebrates a Gospel Christmas With the Voices of Jubilation." Numbers include "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire)," "The Little Drummer Boy," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and "Silent Night."

Charles, a prolific recording artist throughout most of his career, left behind one unreleased CD, the duets collection "Genius Loves Company." It features Elton John, Norah Jones, B.B. King, Willie Nelson and others, and is scheduled to hit stores in August. But the "Gospel Christmas" DVD was the last batch of newly recorded music he released in his lifetime.

There's some poetic justice to this, as the DVD brings him back, full circle, to the kind of gospel music he heard and sang in his youth. "It was very nostalgic, bringing me back to my childhood at church on Sundays," said Charles of the concert, when the DVD was released. Minatee, 46, founded the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's Jubilation Choir and was serving as its leader at the time of the Green Bay concert. Many Jubilation Choir members were also in Voices of Jubilation, but NJPAC had no involvement in the project.

Approximately 5,000 people attended the show. Minatee brought along her 70-member choir, as well as a small band. She helped select the songs and arranged them. There was just one rehearsal, the day before the concert.

"Since Ray didn't really do gospel, he allowed me to pick the songs I wanted him to do with the choir," said Minatee. "So I actually had the opportunity to say, 'Listen, Ray, will you sing this for us?' and 'Will you sing that for us?' And most of the songs I chose, he recorded with us."

Like virtually all the concerts Charles presented, this one was a lively affair. "The first half (of the show) was devoted to spirituals," wrote Warren Gerds, reviewing

the concert for the Green Bay Press-Gazette. "Seated at an electric piano, Charles often got into the music, his legs flying. "At the end of the first half, he proved to be spry for age 72. He squatted, held his hands to his face in joy, then stood and spread his arms as he flashed his big Ray Charles smile."

Minatee said she talked to Charles several times after the concert. "We were hoping to do something else," she said, "but then he got sick, so that was it." Charles, who was so ill over the past year he had to cancel concerts for the first time in more than half a century, died of acute liver disease at his Beverly Hills home. A memorial service is planned for next week at Los Angeles' First AME Church, with burial afterward at Inglewood Cemetery.

"This is a tremendous loss to the music industry and to the world at large," said Minatee. "He transcended all colors, creeds and religions. "Everybody loved Ray, and our hearts are saddened at this time. We just pray that he's resting well, and we thank God for the contributions he made to the world."