

CARL RAY BIO – DRAFT #2
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It was Christmas Eve, and Carl Ray was ready to give up.

The Houston native had just returned from a trip to Nashville, where accolades followed him up and down Music Row. Guys in suits compared his silky tenor tone to Vince Gill. Others complimented his heart-filled songwriting. And quite frankly, in the early years of the nineties, many seemed mildly intrigued at the idea of a black man in a cowboy hat making it big in the primarily white country music industry.

But the phone wasn't ringing.

The phone hadn't rung in a while, despite countless days of trying to find a home in the genre that always had a way of speaking directly to his heart. As his wife and family headed out for some last-minute holiday shopping on that fateful night, a dejected Ray sat down on his floor in the dark, with just the streetlight outside illuminating his tear-stained face.

But then, the phone did ring.

And it was Garth Brooks.

As the story goes, the then spanking new country star had found his way to a car dealership in town, the same dealership that was coincidentally owned by Ray's longtime friend. And while Brooks was signing some papers, he heard Ray's music being played on the speaker over his head. And right then and there, not knowing that Ray was at the end of his rope, he picked up the phone.

“Keep writing,” Ray remembers Brooks telling him. “It's a tough business. Sometimes you feel like you want to quit. But don't quit. Always remember the one who gave you the gift.”

God gave him a gift.

And from that day on, he has used that gift.

But never had Ray so clearly heard God's whispers as he did in August of 2020. As political and racial tensions reached a fever pitch and with three complete albums under his belt, Ray found himself struggling once again.

"I remember asking God... 'Why is there so much anger?'" recalls Ray, whose most recent album "Coming Home" featured a duet with legendary bluegrass star Rhonda Vincent. "'Why is there so much viciousness?' I knew I couldn't fix everything, but I knew what I could do. With God's help, I could write a song."

So he did.

The song is called "I Stand with This Country."

"Immediately after writing it, I knew God was playing a huge part in this song of peace and love," says Ray, who co-wrote the song alongside acclaimed songwriter Jacky Jack White. "When the song was finished, I broke down like a baby. I knew if God could heal me through this process of just writing this song, how many other people on the edge could be healed just by listening to it?"

And that answer was hundreds of thousands of people.

Soon after its release, "I Stand with This Country" and the accompanying music video went viral, with countless people explaining how the song had graced them with a peace at a time where they couldn't bear more pain.

"It's a song about the heart of America, a heart that is still there if we can just start loving each other and respecting each other," explains Ray, who has also performed with the Tulsa Philharmonic Orchestra. "When we are at our best, this country cherishes diversity. We tolerate different opinions.

We may argue about the direction we are going, but we should also have a pride that we are all created equal.”

And while Ray says he wrote this song for the people of the world, he also wrote it for himself.

“It’s a song you must live by,” reflects Ray, who continuously has shined the spotlight on the worthwhile contributions of black people within the country music genre. “This isn’t one of those songs you just write. You have to live the song. You have to have passion for this song. I have always wanted to be given a song that would change me and others. I have always wanted to be given a song that would remind me of the person God wants me to be. And this song does that.”

Granted, both God and music have been a forever piece of Ray’s life. His earliest memories of its combined power occurred at his grandparent’s farm in East Texas, when his grandfather would spend many a summer evening singing the blues for anyone willing to listen.

“He was a tap dancer,” Ray remembers with a slight laugh. “My cousins and I would sit outside in the pitch dark with the stars shining and just listen to him sing and play music. His face was as black as the night and his teeth were as white as ivory. His voice would travel through the air and even the crickets would stop to listen.”

Growing up, Ray had joined a band in high school that called themselves “The Super Naturals.” He’d find comfort under the protective wing of “I Can See Clearly Now” songwriter and reggae star Johnny Nash, who Ray says taught him the true art of songwriting. He would hang with the likes of Peabo Bryson and Roberta Flack and open for the likes of The Spinners, BB King, Teddy Pendergrass, and Harold Melvin and The Blue Notes.

And through the seventies, the talented singer/songwriter would add song after song to his expanding resume and yes, he could have easily followed the straight line to a career in another musical genre.

But country music kept calling his name...maybe for a time such as this.

Ray knows he still faces challenges. He's never had a hit record and he has never got a seat at the CMAs. And as a 62-year-old man who is rarely found without his cowboy hat on, Ray knows that the path for a song that has a black man praying for the soul of our nation at such a tumultuous time just might end up being a rocky one.

But he's okay with that.

"I have always believed that your gift will make room for you," Ray says quietly. "Once the doors open, what are you going to say? This song has opened a door, and now I need to do what God wants me to do. And he wants me to share this song to all who have the heart to hear it."

And if you believe in God and destiny and second chances, then you must believe in Carl Ray.