



Ray, Johnnie (1927-1990)

by Linda Rapp

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Johnnie Ray as featured in a still from a trailer for the film *There's no Business Like Show Business* (1954).

Singer and songwriter Johnnie Ray caused a sensation in the 1950s with energetic concert performances of hit songs, including the chart-topping "Cry." Because of his emotional on-stage style he was dubbed the Prince of Wails. Teen-aged girls squealed at the sight of the handsome heartthrob, but Ray's principal romantic attachments were with other men.

John Alvin Ray was born on a farm near Dallas, Oregon on January 10, 1927. Several years later, at the height of the Great Depression, the family lost the property and moved into town, where Ray's father found work at a lumber mill.

Young Johnnie Ray showed musical talent early. At the age of three or four he began playing tunes by ear on a pump organ. His parents arranged for him to take lessons from the church organist, and soon Ray was playing at services.

The boy's musical taste ran to pop, however, and he and his older sister began performing together at schools.

By the time he was five Ray knew that he wanted to be an entertainer. When his father took him to see George Archainbaud's *Murder on the Blackboard* (1934), he immediately decided that he wanted to star on the silver screen.

An accident in the summer of 1940 nearly derailed his plans. During a blanket toss at a Boy Scout Jamboree, Ray fell to the ground, suffering a concussion and severe ear injuries that cost him about fifty percent of his hearing.

Neither Ray nor any of the other boys reported the incident at the time, and so he received no medical treatment. In the months that followed, he became withdrawn and felt like "the loneliest boy in the world." It was not until late 1941, after a teacher suggested that he be sent to a school for the deaf, that he saw a doctor, was fitted with a hearing aid, and "got the world back."

When World War II broke out, Ray's family moved again, this time to Portland, where his father worked in the shipyards.

Ray pursued his interest in acting with appearances in high school plays, but it was his singing that began drawing attention. He played at weekend dances at the YMCA that promoted the sale of war bonds. At one such event he met Sophie Tucker, an idol of his, who advised him, "If you want to make it in show business, kid, get the hell out of Portland."

He did not take her advice immediately. During high school and for several years thereafter he performed in Oregon, but at twenty-two he headed for Hollywood. Although he found some jobs, he did not enjoy much success in California. Within a year he was broke and on his way home.

Ray was delighted when the male-female comedy team of Bob Mitchell and Jay Grayton came to perform in Portland. The couple had helped him get some bookings in Los Angeles and had also made him part of a ménage à trois. Ray's participation in sexual activities with both Mitchell and Grayton is paradigmatic of his bisexual tendencies; although he seems to have been mostly homosexual in orientation, Ray also participated in heterosexual liaisons. Once again the couple took him under their wing and, through their agent, got him a two-week gig in Ashtabula, Ohio.

He played there and at various other clubs in northern Ohio without great success. When Grayton and Mitchell, who were performing at the Flame Showbar in Detroit, persuaded the management to give Ray an audition, he barely had enough money for a bus ticket to Michigan.

The Flame was a "black and tan club," one that had a mixed-race clientele. Most of the singers who appeared there were African-American, but Ray fit right in: his musical style had been strongly influenced by black artists. Before there was Elvis Presley there was Johnnie Ray.

His stage presence was unique: he expended enormous energy, pounding on the piano, singing at the top of his lungs, and often shedding tears. The last would earn him such nicknames as the Prince of Wails and the Nabob of Sob.

While playing at the Flame in 1951, Ray was "discovered" by disk jockey Robin Seymour of WKMH in Dearborn. He brought him to the attention of record producer Danny Kessler, who said of his first view of Ray's performance, "I was probably more overwhelmed with what I heard and saw than by anything else I ever encountered artistically in my life." He signed Ray to a record contract.

Ray recorded two songs of his own composition, "Whiskey and Gin" and "Tell the Lady I Said Goodbye."

Before his record was released, however, he was arrested by a Detroit vice squad officer who was targeting men who entered the restroom of the Stone Theater burlesque house. Ray did not engage a lawyer or request a jury trial. He simply pled guilty. When offered the choice of thirty days in jail or a twenty-five dollar fine, he paid the fine. The arrest of an unknown singer drew little attention at the time, but in later years tabloids occasionally dredged up the story.

Ray's next record was extremely successful. "Cry" topped the pop charts in late 1951, and the song on the flip side, "The Little White Cloud That Cried," reached number two.

An appearance on Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* television program in early 1952 added to Ray's popularity. He put out a string of other top-selling records and began playing at prestigious venues such as the Copacabana in New York City.

In the spring of 1952 Ray married Marilyn Morrison, the daughter of a Los Angeles club owner. Morrison had avidly pursued the handsome young singing star. She was aware of Ray's homosexuality but told a friend of his that she would "straighten it out."

Her resolution was doomed, as was the marriage. The couple separated within a year and were divorced in 1954.

Ray's career, meanwhile, was flourishing. He made his first foreign tour in 1953, going to Britain, where fans went wild whenever they saw him, even ripping off pieces of his clothing for souvenirs. Ray would return to Britain on numerous occasions. His tours in 1955, 1980, and 1987 featured command performances for the royal family. He also had great success with concerts in Australia.

Among those at Ray's first appearances in England was Sir Noël Coward, who also attended one of his 1955

shows, of which he wrote in his diary, "Squealing teenagers and mass hysteria, quite nauseating, but [Ray] gave a remarkable performance both on stage and later at the Embassy, where he fondled [actress] Terry Moore for the cameras. Poor boy."

Ray and Coward developed a friendship. They socialized when their schedules brought them to the same city, and Ray was an occasional guest at Firefly, Coward's home in Jamaica.

Ray's long-held dream of being in a film was realized when he appeared in Walter Lang's *There's No Business Like Show Business* (1954). Ray hoped that more movies would follow, but when producer Darryl Zanuck, who had praised Ray's performance, left Twentieth Century Fox to form his own company, neither studio offered him any further projects.

When Ray appeared as the "mystery guest" on the *What's My Line?* television show in 1956 he met journalist Dorothy Kilgallen, who was a regular panelist on the program, and the two began an affair.

The romance was an unlikely one. Married and fifteen years Ray's senior, Kilgallen embodied cosmopolitan sophistication, while Ray had the image of a country boy turned pop singer. Kilgallen remained with her husband, and Ray took one man after another as lovers. Nevertheless, the affection between the pair was genuine, and the affair lasted for years. Ray was devastated by Kilgallen's mysterious death in 1964.

Ray had a gold record (i.e., one that sold a million copies) with "Just Walking in the Rain" in 1956, his first big hit in several years, but a series of less than successful disks followed. Ray, who had by that time stopped writing his own material, relied on Mitch Miller for song selections even though he did not always like them. Record-buyers were evidently not too impressed with some of Miller's choices either.

Ray underwent two ear operations in early 1958 with disastrous results. He lost all the hearing in his left ear and sixty percent in his right.

Despite the setback, Ray quickly returned to the concert stage and briefly hosted his own CBS radio program, *The Johnnie Ray Show*.

Although Ray's 1951 arrest had been alluded to in various scandal sheets over the years, the general public was unaware of it. That changed in 1959, when he was once again arrested by the Detroit vice squad on a charge of soliciting an undercover police officer in one of the city's gay bars, the Brass Rail.

This time Ray hired an attorney and fought the charges. Kilgallen stood by him, even calling the judge in the case to insist that that he receive a fair trial.

After hearing the testimony, the jury took less than an hour to find Ray not guilty, apparently concluding that he had been entrapped. Ray promptly left Detroit and never set foot in the city again.

The hard drinking in which Ray had indulged since his teens caught up with him in 1960. Weakened and exhausted, he contracted tuberculosis. He recovered after several months of treatment and resumed his career. He did not give up alcohol, however, and landed back in the hospital in 1963, suffering from cirrhosis.

Once again Kilgallen was at his side, but this time so was Bill Franklin, who had worked in public relations in the entertainment industry before becoming Ray's manager and also his lover.

The relationship with Franklin gave Ray's personal life a stability that it had lacked for many years. With Franklin's encouragement, he started paying attention to proper nutrition and swore off drinking.

In the mid-1960s Ray faced a serious financial problem: due to previous mismanagement he owed a

substantial sum to the Internal Revenue Service. Paying the back taxes took him years.

The 1959 arrest and widely disseminated gossip about Ray's homosexuality took a toll on his popularity, and contributed to the decline of his career, especially in the United States. Ray continued to play club dates in the U.S., though at increasingly less prestigious venues, and did regular concert tours in Britain, where he remained a headliner. In the spring of 1969 he undertook a Scandinavian tour with Judy Garland, but she was by then so debilitated that she could barely perform, and the project was soon abandoned.

Eventually Ray started drinking again. Despite Franklin's efforts to limit his intake of alcohol, he reverted to his old ways. His career, already in decline, suffered further, although he could still draw adoring crowds in England and Australia.

Franklin, frustrated by Ray's self-destructive behavior, left him in 1977.

Even as his health deteriorated, Ray kept up a busy schedule of performances, including frequent tours in Australia and Britain.

The concert that would be Ray's last took him home to Portland, where he did a benefit for the Center for the Performing Arts in October 1989. Afterward he went back to Los Angeles, where he became reclusive and withdrawn. He was malnourished and seriously ill with liver disease. To cope with his pain, he was using, in addition to alcohol, the tranquilizer Halcion.

Ray was soon hospitalized. He lapsed into a coma for a few days; although he came out of the coma, he had no chance of recovery from the liver disease. He died on February 24, 1990.

Despite his great popularity in the 1950s, Ray was largely overshadowed by the pop and rock stars who followed him, but he was not entirely forgotten. Dexy's Midnight Runners began their 1983 hit song "Come On, Eileen" with the lines "Poor old Johnnie Ray / Sounded sad on the radio / Broke a billion hearts in mono." Ray's name is also included in the eclectic list in Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989).

In 1998 Columbia Records released a CD, *The Real Johnnie Ray*, featuring many of his classic songs, including some recorded live in concert while fans screamed with delight.

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