

FRINGE BEAT

RAYMANIA

by Josef Woodard

HISTORIC SOUL KITCHEN: More than most of the world's cities, Los Angeles is a matrix of hidden treasures lurking beneath drab exteriors and humdrum localities. Unassuming buildings contain laboratories of culture that have then gone on to shake and shape the world's cultural values. Take, for instance, Burbank. Or, more specifically, take the utilitarian '60s-era hunk of a building on Washington Boulevard just east of Western, a building ignored by millions, who were unaware that this is the house that Ray Charles built.

It was here that Charles based his operations for forty years. Here, in the upstairs studio, Charles did most of his recording since the '60s, up through his 13th hour success story, last year's duet project, *Genius Loves Company*. When health issues kept him off the road, curtailing his tireless world-touring ways (the reason he canceled his *Gainey Vineyard* show two summers back), Charles hunkered down in this home base and invited some of his friends/diehard fans to come up and sing with him. The likes of Norah Jones, Willie Nelson, Van Morrison, Bonnie Raitt, Elton John, Van Morrison, Diana Krall, and others were more than happy to trek to Mecca on Washington Boulevard for the occasion.

That's album's success — three million sold so far — plus the renewed focus sparked by the biopic *Ray* — have generated a justifiable final burst of Ray-mania, if just a little bit too late. Charles, who died on June 10 last year, is the great American legend most likely in both the Grammys and the Oscars.

The posthumous buzz lends an added air of the mythic to Charles studio/muse central. When the call came for a pre-Grammy Awards press op in that hallowed space, the music columnist couldn't make I'm there italicized enough.

The studio remains much the same as it has been for decades, with some soundproofing, monitors, and signs from another time. Charles' organ, Steinway, and the digital keyboards he's been favoring in recent years are all there, in a space Charles is reported to have been as intimately familiar with as any in his life.

For this gathering, the studio also boasts a table full of past Grammy awards (actually, replicas of the originals, reportedly damaged by Charles' kids, who would use them as toys). "Hopefully, we'll be adding more to this collection," said Charles' longtime manager Joe Adams, gesturing at the Grammy trove. Sure enough, eight more would be added at last Sunday's Grammys. Adams invited up longtime friend and collaborator Billy Preston, who had stopped by before a rehearsal for a special Charles tribute on the Grammy show. Adams recalled first hearing Preston on Shindig many years ago and telling Charles to hire him, enthusing "this guy does you better than you do."

Props, kudos, and plaques were passed around, between Adams and record company producers who have helped Charles' recent re-entry into the music world, through the Ray soundtrack, historical compilations on Rhino, and the duet project which allowed Charles to go out in style.

Concord Records producer John Burk, the man behind Genius Loves Company, was introduced warmly by Adams. "A lot of people said 'oh, Ray's past tense.' John didn't believe it. We didn't believe it. And I guess a lot of people didn't believe it."

Adams hopes to turn the site into a museum, to go public with one of Los Angeles' semi-secret soul power generators. Ray Charles is gone, physically, but he's anything but past tense. Charles' importance, as inventor of genre-free "soul," comes alive every time you listen to his unique voice, or when you notice his fingerprint over much of pop and soul music for as long as his Washington Boulevard safe house has existed.

TO-DOINGS: The great jazz singer Tierney Sutton fairly well blew the house down at her recent Lobero Theatre concert. Tierney brings musical sophistication, precision, and freedom to bear, and is clearly among the finest jazz singers anywhere. Hear her, if briefly, Monday at SOhO, as guest vocalist for a few songs with the gleaming good Chris Walden Big Band. (got e? fringebeat@aol.com)