

Ray Charles

The concept at the Versailles Room of the Bethesda Holiday Inn is commendable—a one-price dinner/open bar/concert with special guest stars, preferably those who can bring back precious memories to several generations. It's like celebrating New Year's Eve on a bimonthly basis; last night, Ray Charles was Santa Claus, but he brought little beyond his presence.

Charles, who has earned the high-priest-of-soul moniker over three decades of often magnificent singing that not only transcends but bridges diverse genres, has one of the classic, most instantly recognizable voices in popular music. Like Willie Nelson, he can absorb the essence of songs as different as Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Some Enchanted Evening" or Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and integrate them seamlessly with a hurting blues like "I Can't Stop Loving You" or a sassy strutter like "What'd I Say."

The long evening was saved by Jane Powell, a barrel-voiced singer from Roanoke who handled sweet ballads and punchy dance tunes with equal flair and abandon. Though she did mostly covers, she invested them with an internalized passion that was lacking in Ray Charles. She stole the night from a legend.

—*Richard Harrington*