

Concert to feature music of Ray Charles

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ST. LOUIS — The Music of Ray Charles will bring the music of the legendary soul singer to Powell Hall, merging piano, vocals and the St. Louis Symphony.

Performer Ellis Hall actually worked with Ray Charles closely for two years, which led to Hall performing Charles' music with orchestras. Hall met Charles when Hall was performing with his own band in West Los Angeles.

"I was playing 'I Can See Clearly Now'; in the middle of my solo, a friend doing production engineering said Ray Charles was in the audience and wanted to meet me," Hall recalled during a telephone interview with The Telegraph. "He gave me a big hug; I gave him a record. It was an auspicious beginning."

Although Charles covered "I Can See Clearly Now," written and recorded by Johnny Nash, who made the song a No. 1 hit, Charles made it his own with a funky soul treatment.

"The next morning he called and said, 'Who the heck are you; why didn't I know about you?'" Hall said.

Hall ended up signing with Charles in 2002.

Hall performs The Music of Ray Charles concert starting at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 21, at Powell Hall in St. Louis. Grammy-award winning saxophone player Kenny G will play the following night at 7:30 p.m. performing his smooth jazz sounds with the St. Louis Symphony.

"This is a danceable, laughable, loveable soul celebration and I'm the vessel," an exuberant Hall said about The Music of Ray Charles. "I've been in the business beyond 40 years, and it never gets old for me."

Other than Charles, Hall is the only artist to be signed to Charles' label Crossover Records.

Hall has the honor of being introduced as Charles' protege at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where Charles received the National Visionary Leadership Project Award.

Hall described his upcoming St. Louis concert as containing not only Charles' music but also Motown and beyond.

Before Charles opened the doors for Hall to perform with world-class orchestras, Hall made a name for himself in the music and entertainment industry. Hall formerly did vocals for the 1980s animated "California Raisins" in television commercials. In movies, Hall played organ and sang gospel in "Big Momma's House" and was the voice of a singing rooster in "Chicken Run." Hall also is the former lead singer of Tower of Power.

Ironically, though, Hall shares even more than musical talent with the late Charles, who died in 2004. Like Charles, Hall is blind but neither were born blind and both were born in Georgia.

Hall's parents realized a year into his life that he had congenital glaucoma.

"My right eye was always bad, but with my left eye I could see sunsets and pretty ladies. You never forget those; even the colors are more sparkly today," Hall said.

At 5 years old, his parents realized that their son could lose what sight he had and sent him to the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Mass. At age 8, Hall stood on street corners where he lived in the Boston suburbs singing doo wop with a high-pitched voice, while passers-by threw money at him, Hall recalled.

"My mom was like, 'Where did you get that money?'" he recalled. "I just thought if they were throwing money, I could get chips and soda."

Hall became truly interested in music at age 14 at Perkins School.

"Thank God my parents sent me there; still to this day I'm a proponent for keeping music in the schools," Hall said.

He learned piano at the school from his teacher Henry Santos, now in his 80s, who came to Hall's Boston Pops performance in 2011.

"I dedicated my show to him," Hall said. "I love Mr. Henry Santos; to this day, I have to call him Mr. Santos. His coming to that show was just 'it' for me, just outstanding."

Hall discovered his calling at the school.

"I saw the looks on the faces of band members, and said, 'I think I'm supposed to do that,' and when I went home that night, I stayed up late putting a drum set together of some bongos someone gave me, a bass, and a guitar and dived into singing."

Then at age 18, Hall finally lost what vision he had left because of a wrestling accident.

"Ray and I talked for hours about having had sight and things we have seen," Hall said.

Hall grew up on gospel at church, but like the rest of his peers he listened to radio, too. He still listens to gospel but also to all kinds of other music, particularly from The Hi-Lo's, Frank Sinatra, Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin.

"I listened to how I could turn, twist and make it my own box of Crayons," Hall said. "It's funny to hear a blind man talking about colors. It's not that I don't think when one sense goes another sense is heightened, but you pay more attention."