

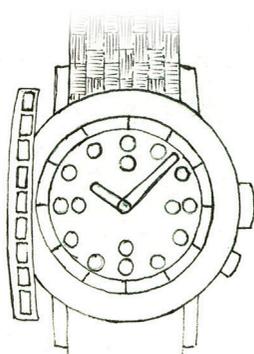
Fascinating memories of a legendary musician take the lead in this touching father and son tale, finds John Reardon, as he investigates the history of a unique Braille wristwatch that was made for Ray Charles in the 1960s

I recently had lunch with Werner Sonn, the retired chairman of Patek Philippe U.S.A., and he told me that he helped design a platinum Braille watch for Ray Charles in the 1960s. I confess that I took this with a pinch of salt, but I have a friend who is connected to the musician's family, and when I spoke with Ray Charles Jr., I found that it was true.

Ray Charles Robinson was a pioneer, blending jazz, blues, R&B, and gospel into a "sweet new style": soul. "His voice," wrote *Time* magazine, "rasped like a man whose heart is in his throat and has just been broken." Born in Albany, Georgia, Charles learned to play the piano at three years old. At four or five, he began to lose his sight, apparently as a result of glaucoma. When, at seven, he was completely blind, his mother sent him to boarding school, where he learned Braille. He left at 15, and later traveled to Seattle, set up his own band, and worked the clubs. Gradually his fame spread. By the '60s, with releases such as *Georgia on My Mind* and *Hit the Road Jack*, he was basking in acclaim and Grammys.

In 1963, and at the height of his powers, he was given a unique watch, probably by his producer Norman Granz, the founder of the jazz label Verve and a watch aficionado. Says Ray Junior, "They were very close, so it was a great way of dad having a one-of-a-kind memento of their partnership."

Patek Philippe hadn't made a Braille watch before. A pocket watch movement with a powerful mainspring was used to power the purpose-built REF. 3482, since with Braille the hands needed to be able to withstand the pressure of being touched. At 37 millimeters in diameter, the face was larger than average to accommodate the



The design of Ray Charles's Patek Philippe wristwatch was stunning: a slim platinum case, a round dial with diamonds to allow the wearer to "feel" the time, and a hinged cover studded with 40 brilliants. Although the watch has since disappeared, these drawings from the Patek Philippe archives give a sense of what it looked like

Braille with clarity. Charles wore the watch constantly; the original leather strap was replaced with a platinum bracelet, because, like most musicians, he sweated when he played.

"The piece was striking because of its silver color, when everybody then was wearing gold," says Ray Junior. "And on my dad's brown skin it looked beautiful. He had diamond cuff links but no other jewelry – I never saw him wear any but that watch." Charles was ineffably cool. "I remember vividly how he looked at that time. He was very young, just thirty-three. His suits were awesome, custom-made silvery sharkskin with thin lapels. Everything extremely stylish. I recall his cologne, his face, and the Patek Philippe on his wrist. Of course, he couldn't see the watch, and, as an eight-year-old child, I couldn't explain its beauty to him. Its design was impeccable."

Before he lost his sight, Charles was fascinated by mechanical objects. As a man, that interest grew. Ray Junior says, "Time was vital to my father, because, being blind, he had no idea where he was in the day. At least once an hour he would tap the watch very lightly, so that it would open. He would gently run his fingers over the dial, then put the watch to his ear, smiling as he listened to the workings of it and the rhythmic tick. Just the sound of it made him happy."

That watch has vanished, though Ray Junior hasn't given up hope that he'll find it. Then what would he do? He grins. "Ah, I would tap the lid. When it opened, I'd run my fingers over the dial, then I'd put it up to my ear and listen to the ticking." He's quiet for a moment. "I mean, it's just like yesterday. Just like yesterday." ♦