

Ballad in Blue

(US: "Blues For Lovers")

UK : 1964 : dir. Paul Henreid : Alsa / Warner

: 89 min

prod: Alexander and Miguel Salkind; Herman Blaser : scr: Burton Wohl : dir.ph.: Ron Taylor

Piers Bishop; Lucy Appleby.....

Ray Charles; Tom Bell; Mary Peach; Dawn Addams; Betty McDowell

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	≠	Z	⊗	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"This story of Charles (playing himself) and a blind child is maudlin, but fans will like the generous footage devoted to Ray's song hits, including "I Got a Woman" and "What'd I Say?". ** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A famous pianist becomes friendly with a blind boy and helps reconcile his parents. Curious sentimental drama with the star playing himself; competent but hardly rousing."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Dull melodrama about a blind boy's friendship with a blind American jazz musician. Jazz-pianist Ray Charles performs well enough in his screen debut, but the music is best - an attractive mixture of American jazz and English-ballad blues. ** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Not content with a blind star, Ray Charles, Paul Henreid has a blind boy (Piers Bishop, only acting), to make it difficult for you to turn

a blind eye.¹ Mary Peach and Tom Bell play parents who are brought together again by Ray Charles' friendship with their son. It's all a bit tearful, but the songs are good. 7 "

The Time Out Film Guide review:

" "You're always trying to get me discovered - as if I were some new Italian restaurant" Tom Bell's composer/nightclub pianist gets the one good line in this combination of concert movie and sentimental B picture. Charles doesn't play himself off-stage too convincingly, and a cloying story of how he helps a little blind boy into the arms of a Paris specialist ("Is there a chance, doctor?" etc) doesn't help. Admirers of the man's music - about thirty percent of the movie is concert footage - will find the in-between tedium tolerable, although director Henreid could hardly get a gig with "Top of the Pops" on the evidence here."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Sixties British Cinema", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993", "The Virgin Film Guide" or "The Warner Bros Story"]

¹ Arf arf....

Radio Times review:

"Drama, starring jazz legend Ray Charles as himself. While on the London leg of a European concert tour, Charles has a profound effect on the lives of a blind boy, his mother and her musician boyfriend. ** "

"A starring vehicle for singer Ray Charles, playing himself, in a mawkish London-filmed

melodrama about – surprise surprise – a blind entertainer who befriends a blind child. Suffice to say that the singer, styled "The Genius", performs such greats as "What'd I Say" and "I Got a Woman" and benefits from terrific support by Dawn Addams and Mary Peach. ** "

The Salkinds! Alexander and Ilya – exceeded in mediocrity only by Cannon's Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus - were the creative force behind such turkeys as Mark Lester's **"THE PRINCE AND THE PUPA"** (77), **"SUPERGIRL"** (84), and **"SANTA CLAUS"** ('85). Compared with those ghastlies, **"BALLAD IN BLUE"** doesn't seem so bad at all. It falls into a neat but obscure little category of films where a celebrity of some description plays himself (rather poorly) in a tenuous and contrived plot threaded between star turns.

Charles arrives in London and gives an impromptu performance at the "City Institute for Sightless Children", where he makes the acquaintance of young David Harrison (Piers Bishop) who lost his sight six months before from keratitis. David is about eight, the same age that Charles lost his eyesight. Being London, it's raining outside, and Charles offers the boy and his mother a lift in his limousine. He makes David a present of the expensive "tactile" watch he's wearing. Later his manager, Fred Parker, observes "I wish she'd lay off that kid. She crowds him."

David's father has died some years before, and mother Peggy (Peach) is now seeing out-of-work composer Steve Collins (Bell), but they're constantly falling out over her smothering of the boy, which she describes as "just trying to ease him through the adjustment period". Learning from Steve how expensive the gift watch is, she confiscates it and tries to return it to Charles (advising David "We mustn't take gifts from strangers") but the singer dissuades her, explaining that the boy's blindness will involve a steep learning curve for herself too. She arranges for him to attend a nightclub where Steve is playing, in the hopes her boyfriend will be "discovered" at last. Impressed, Charles hires him on the spot as a music arranger.

Steve's new job takes him on tour to Paris, where of course there is a world-renowned eye specialist who can offer David a five percent chance of complete recovery. David and his mother come over to France and hit the town in the company of Charles (avoiding the phrase "see the sights"). David attends one of Charles' evening performances but, when the star is mobbed by fans on leaving the stage door, the boy and his mother are trampled underfoot and in an overwrought state she resolves to rush him back to London, abandoning the appointment with the specialist. Charles sternly talks her out of this, questioning whether, on an emotional level, she really wants her child's sight restored. She is using his blindness to make the boy totally dependent on her, he says, rather than encouraging him to find his own feet. The film ends with the eye operation completed, but the bandages not yet removed, leaving it indeterminate whether the operation was successful or not.

Not only is it unusual of heart-tugging B movies to bale out before the happy ending, the film is equally unusual for its time in that race is a non-issue. Charles' manager, his orchestra and singers, are all black, while there's not a single black face to be seen in the capacity London concert hall audience, yet skin colour is simply never mentioned. Or rather it is mentioned just once: by a hack reporter who fires the immediate question at Steve: "Tell me what it's like for a white man touring with an all-negro company". Steve does not dignify the question with an answer. Today this matter-of-factness might be unremarkable, but in the British cinema of the sixties race was definitely an "issue".

One wonders what Ray Charles made of the whole business. Picture Stevie Wonder doing a concert film, the venues strung together by his struggle to save an old folks' home in Manchester. If Charles wanted to send home some message about how to handle blind children, then the little this film has to say on the matter is certainly to the point, but it makes such a flimsy vehicle, both for that message and his music, that one has to wonder why he bothered.

It is still at heart a traditional slice of English whimsy-whamsy, with some impossibly pukka accents and one ludicrous scene where David and the neighbour's daughter Margaret (Lucy Appleby) steal out after dark to find the star at a nightclub so that Margaret can be introduced to him (and thus believe David's tale about the watch). Charles and his manager then have to chaperone the kids back home – past David's mother's bedroom door – without waking the household. Not bad going for a blind guy who's a stranger in town.

Of young Piers Bishop, The Sunday Times critic writes he is "only acting" his blind role. I watched his eyes and head movements closely to try and judge whether he was blind or not, and concluded that he must be. Since he was in fact acting, he does it very well for a child with little performing background. He had appeared two years previously in "**TOMORROW AT TEN**", as a kidnap victim locked in with a time bomb, but made no subsequent films. He resembled a pouchy-cheeked younger version of William Dix from "**THE NANNY**" (65). Nothing else is known of Lucy Appleby.

Sophia Loren introduced her (and Carlo Ponti's) very photogenic son Edoardo in a similarly icky tale, "**AURORA**" ('84), about an Italian woman marching her blind son of about 10 round her various former lovers and insisting to each that he's their son in order to finance an eye operation for him. More intriguing, at least on paper, was "**AFRAID OF THE DARK**" (91), in which Ben Keyworth plays a boy with failing eyesight (and a blind mother) who begins to suspect a serial killer is attacking blind women in the district, the intriguing element being that this may only be an expression in the boy's mind of his fears of encroaching sightlessness.

See subject index under **DISABLED / HANDICAPPED, MUSIC / YOUNG MUSICIANS** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**. There is also a brief fairground sequence in Paris. See under **CIRCUS / CLOWNS / FAIRGROUNDS** for more, and under **BLACK PERSPECTIVES / BLACK CULTURE** to see how other titles of the period treated that matter.