

Charlie Louvin: Dec. 21, 2003

BELL BUCKLE, Tenn. -- The evocative country harmonies of the Louvin Brothers never go out of style, but the stark, postmodern sound of pop acts like Cake, Ween and the late Elliott Smith have led to a reappraisal of Charlie and Ira Louvin.

The Louvin Brothers tribute album "Livin', Lovin', Losin'" (Universal) has been nominated for a 2003 Grammy for best country album and tribute guests James Taylor and Alison Krauss notched a nomination for country collaboration with vocals. The eloquent project also features appearances by Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt, Merle Haggard, Dolly Parton and one of the last recordings by Johnny Cash.

When Cash and the Tennessee Two (bassist Marshall Grant, guitarist Luther Perkins) were beginning their career at Sun Records in Memphis, all they wanted to sing was gospel music. The Louvin Brothers were their guiding light.

The brothers' pure harmonizing and Ira's tortured tenor created a distinct setting for a mysterious spiritual message. Ira played mandolin and Charlie chipped in with guitar. That message was dimmed when Ira died in a horrible car crash east of Williamsburg, Mo., on Father's Day 1965.

At 76, Charlie remains a regular performer at the Grand Ole Opry. He also just got off the road with the Unlimited Sunshine Tour, the annual melting pot road show created by Cake's John McCrea. Besides Louvin and Cake, this year's version of the tour featured Cheap Trick, the Detroit Cobras and the Hackensaw Boys, who served as Louvin's band.

"I was scared to death on the first day of the tour," Louvin said during a long conversation at his Louvin Brothers Museum, about 70 miles south of Nashville. "I pictured myself walking out onstage and singing one of my redneck songs, and people yelling, 'Hey, get that crap off the stage.' But that never happened.

"After three or four days into the tour, I began doing Louvin Brothers duets with John McCrea. He's a big Louvin Brothers fan. And halfway through the tour, I was singing 'California Man' with Cheap Trick. The Detroit Cobras wanted me to sing a Bill Monroe song about soul, but we never got around to rehearsing that. I'm looking forward to a bigger tour next year. We only did 15 dates this year."

Since Louvin was on the road, it was easy to keep the tribute project a secret. "Livin', Lovin', Losin'" was produced by Grammy-winner Carl Jackson, a former bluegrass picker in Jim & Jesse's Virginia Boys.

But Louvin is a bright straight-shooter. "The Grammy nomination is great," he said. "But I think we'll do better next year at the CMAs Country Music Association Awards. The Grammys are more political than the CMAs. I was a personal friend of John Cash and his wife, June. But I want to know when they recorded 'Temptation' which is up against Taylor and Krauss. I never heard it, but they're nominated. Most likely, they'll win out of the sympathy."

Louvin was surprised to learn that Cash recorded the spoken word parts to the Louvins' "Keep Your Eyes on Jesus" three weeks before June Carter died. "Keep Your Eyes on Jesus" closes out the tribute record with Pam Tillis on lead vocals and the Jordanaires reprising their harmony parts from the original 1961 Capitol Records recording.

"It was hard for John to get out of the house," Louvin said. "He didn't look the way he wanted to look. I like John's narration, however, I don't think it is as good as my brother's. John didn't have the breath. The places where he pauses aren't necessary. But under those circumstances, he did a great job. Carl had the soundtrack on his laptop computer. He took that to John's house. He did the same thing with Merle Haggard."

Haggard recorded "Must You Throw Dirt in My Face," one of the more upbeat tracks on the tribute. With immaculate phrasing over a sympathetic mandolin, Haggard wonders, "You've already put big ol' tears in my eyes/Must you throw dirt in my face?"

"Must You Throw Dirt in My Face" was written by Bill Anderson and was the last hit for the Louvin Brothers in November 1962. It is one of four of the project's 15 tracks not written by the Louvins. "Merle wanted to do the song, but he was never in the right place at the right time," Louvin said. "So Carl took his laptop to Merle, who was at a Holiday Inn in Oxford, Miss. Everything is studio, except Merle's voice. I just read George Strait did his entire new album sitting in his house that way, with a laptop computer."

Emmylou Harris is a key figure on "Livin', Lovin', Losin'." In 1975, she had her first country hit with the Louvins' "If I Could Only Win Your Love" (covered on the tribute record by an unplugged Ronnie Dunn and Rebecca Lynn Howard). Harris' late compatriot Gram Parsons was a major Louvin Brothers fan. In 1968, the Byrds and Parsons covered the Louvins' "The Christian Life" on their breakthrough album, "Sweethearts of the Rodeo." On "Livin', Lovin', Losin'," Harris and Rodney Crowell duet on the honky-tonker "My Baby's Gone," written by Hazel Houser.

Louvin was permitted to watch the recording of one track; Taylor and Krauss dueting on "How's the World Treating You," written in 1961 by Chet Atkins

and Boudleaux Bryant. Taylor takes Charlie's part and Krauss tackles Ira's plaintive lead.

Last year, Louvin returned by favor by recording Taylor's "Fire and Rain" on his solo CD "The Sound of Days to Come."

"I admire James Taylor's work," Louvin said. "Especially the sensible part of his career. Carl invited me to come by the session. Alison Krauss is such a fragile singer. It makes you want to walk on your tiptoes when she sings. You don't want to make no noise, because you might miss something. I love all the tracks on the record, but James Taylor and Alison Krauss did the only perfect record I have ever heard. There is not a blemish in the song."

Such a minimalist setting sits well with Louvin.

The brothers grew up as Charlie and Ira Loudermilk on a 23-acre cotton farm in Henegar, Ala. Their mother, Georgianne Elizabeth, was the daughter of a Baptist preacher. She was also a gospel singer who taught her seven children how to shape notes. Charlie and Ira were the only boys in the family. "When we were growing up, we listened to two radio stations," Louvin said. "It was WJJD out of Chicago and XERN out of Mexico. Chicago had 'The Suppertime Frolic' created in the late 1930s by music director Ken Nelson, who went on to record Haggard, Buck Owens, the Louvin Brothers and others at Capitol Records. The Mexican station had the Carter Family and everyone else that was country."

Some of music's deepest charms come from singing with family, whether it's the Louvin Brothers, Everly Brothers, Carter Family or the Staple Singers. "The biggest plus is that you have the same mother and father," Louvin said. "And if there is any lingo in the family, you are familiar with it. You cannot rehearse with an outsider enough to ever become as close as you could with a family member. With family, you think alike. I knew exactly what my brother was going to do before he did it -- in a song.

"Two lines farther in the song, I knew it was going to be too high for me to sing that part. So we didn't have to step on each other's toes, wink or nothing. He just took the high lead. and I would drop to low harmony. That really spooked a lot of people. We could change in the middle of a word. The guy that was doing the sheet music didn't know who was actually doing the lead. Actually, the first song we had on Capitol "The Family Who Prayed," 1956, I did the verses and we sang the chorus harmony. It also depended on how much Ira liked the song. If he really liked it, he wanted to lead. We never argued about that. "

Yet Charlie and Ira were extremely different in personality. Ira was a hellraiser. He often got the brothers fired from gigs by smashing his

mandolin onstage in fits of frustration. Ira divorced his third wife, Faye, after she shot him six times in the arm, chest and shoulder. After he left the hospital, Ira formed a road band with Florence, his fourth wife. She was killed with Ira when an apparently drunk driver hit their 1963 Chevy head-on.

"Yes, my brother was extremely tormented," Louvin said. "He tried to preach in every song. In a lot of the older songs, instead of singing the verses, he would talk through them. He almost sounded like a preacher. He was a miserable man. There wasn't any of his wives that I couldn't have lived with."

And Charlie Louvin has been married for 54 years.

"My mother's maiden name was Haines," Louvin said. "To this day they have a Haines Family Reunion around Henegar, Ala.. It's over 100 years old. They start at 8 in the morning, and they sing until noon. They break up, eat and talk about who has passed away since last year and who might not be here next year. Then they go back in and sing for three more hours. I take my little ghetto blaster and record it. It's a dying breed, because there's not enough young people who want to learn how to read those shape notes. They sing without any music whatsoever. They joke that it is all-day singing, dinner on the ground, whiskey in the bushes, and the devil all around." That's serious living.

That's the Louvin Brothers.