

Country singer Charlie Louvin dead at 83

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Country singer Charlie Louvin died January 26 at the age of 83. Louvin was, along with his brother Ira (1924-1965), one half of the influential duo The Louvin Brothers, a group that epitomized the “close harmony” singing style of country music. Beginning in the early 1940s, Charlie Louvin’s career spanned an incredible seven decades. His final album, *The Battles Rage On*, was released in November 2010.

Charlie Louvin was born Charles Loudermilk on July 7, 1927, and grew up in Henagar, Alabama. He and his brother Ira worked in the fields on their father’s farm, located in a relatively isolated mountain area, and would often be sent into a nearby town to sell vegetables from carts on the street.

The Louvin Brothers, as the two boys would come to be known, grew up in a very rich musical environment. Many of the day’s more popular country and “hillbilly” acts would pass through their area, and their father regularly bought all the major country records released during the 1930s. Louvin has said that in the late 1930s, he and Ira once walked five miles to see the remarkable country singer Roy Acuff perform.

Charlie and Ira soon began singing themselves. Charlie would also learn guitar, while his brother took up the mandolin. They would be heavily influenced by the music of several “brother acts” popular at the time that featured distinctive two-part “close harmony” singing. Among them were the remarkable Delmore Brothers, The Monroe Brothers and The Blue Sky Boys. Initially devoting themselves to gospel music, the devoutly religious Louvin Brothers would begin recording “secular music” as well, going back and forth between the two throughout their career.

By the early 1940s, Charlie and Ira, first appearing under the name The Radio Twins, had begun performing music professionally. They moved to Tennessee and began working in radio, also taking jobs at a local post office to support themselves. They would

eventually get their first record deal in 1947 and would record for various labels until signing with Capitol Records in the 1950s, the label for which they recorded some of their best-known music.

There’s something very striking about the brothers’ voices and the way they blended together. The high tenor of Ira straining to reach the necessary notes somewhere in his upper register mixing with Charlie’s lower, more resonate voice made for a combination very rich in its possibilities for emotional expression, and their singing contained a *texture* that remains very appealing decades later.

The Louvin Brothers’ songs often contained very clever and surprising vocal arrangements that set them apart from many groups of their day. The sincerity of their music and the kind of emotional honesty one often finds there continues to be moving.

All of these features are perhaps best demonstrated in the song “I Don’t Believe You’ve Met My Baby,” in which a man describes a sudden anxiety and insecurity over the girl he wants to marry. Charlie and Ira trade lines, alternating lead vocal duties throughout, while singing together in harmony on every third line. The song, a big hit for the group, is also notable in that it is made up entirely of verses, with no chorus.

“Cash on the Barrelhead,” with its up-tempo honky-tonk beat, is another of the Louvin’s best recordings. The song concerns a man who has been arrested and can’t afford to come up with the money to win his release. After 30 days in jail, he tries to leave town but finds he can’t afford that either. Whenever he tries to get ahead, he’s met with the same voice pushing him back again, singing, “That’ll be cash on the barrelhead, son. Not part, not half, but the entire sum!”

The Louvins would record many memorable songs throughout the 1950s and early 1960s on which their harmony singing was rarely less than superb. Among their best songs were “When I Stop Dreaming,” the

murder ballad “Knoxville Girl,” “Pitfall” and their version of the traditional folk song “In The Pines.”

With regards to their gospel music, which they recorded in great quantities, suffice it say that the listener does not have to share the Louvins’ beliefs in a higher power to appreciate the better recordings the duo performed in this genre. The brothers were rarely in better form as singers than on the 1959 recording “The Christian Life,” a song famously covered by The Byrds on their 1968 album *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*.

After two decades together, the Louvin Brothers would choose to end their musical partnership in 1963. By this time the brothers reportedly were clashing often, and Ira’s struggle with alcoholism had taken its toll. He would die in a tragic car accident two years later.

Charlie Louvin continued recording and performing as a solo artist but never achieved the same level of success as he had with his brother. Ultimately, with Ira lost, there was something essential missing from his music. But there are moments in his solo work as well, including “See the Big Man Cry “ from 1965 and “Will You Visit Me on Sundays” from 1968.

At the time of his death, Louvin’s career had experienced something of a resurgence. He had returned to recording after a long hiatus and was performing regularly. His loss at 83 will be deeply felt by the many musicians he influenced and by lovers of classic country music, to which today’s country music bears so little resemblance.



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