

Nov. 17, 1996----

The Louvin Brothers are the most influential harmony group in country music history. Sometimes scary, other times soothing, the voices of Charlie and Ira Louvin ring true even today in the records of Emmylou Harris, Gram Parsons and Bruce Springsteen.

Now, in some of the most important reissues of 1996, Capitol/Nashville has resurrected three Louvin Brothers albums: "Tragic Songs of Life" (1956), "Satan Is Real" (1959) and "A Tribute to the Delmore Brothers" (1960). Listen to the way the Louvin Brothers' vocals are shaped by down-home spirits. They worked as a relay team, with Charlie passing a vocal torch off to Ira, who took it somewhere into the dark beyond.

Ira Louvin died in a fiery car crash on I-70, east of Williamsburg, Mo., on Father's Day, 1965. He was 41. Charlie turns 70 in 1997 and is planning his first tour in years to promote "The Longest Train," his new album for Watermelon Records, based out of Austin, Texas.

In a time of Eisenhower-era optimism, the Louvins' gospel-influenced material was ominous. The Louvin Brothers sang songs like the Carter Family's "The Kneeling Drunkard's Plea" and stark originals such as "Are You Afraid to Die?" and "Satan Is Real." The brothers' clear harmonizing and Ira's painful tenor were a perfect conduit for a mysterious message.

"It was scary," Charlie Louvin said in a recent conversation from Austin. "We knew as children that when a song was approaching where I couldn't reach it, he'd have to take over. It was obvious. So he'd take the high lead (alto, sometimes tenor), and I'd drop under for the low harmony. That's the way we arrived at our style. We did that without cues, without stepping on toes (in the studio). We didn't even rehearse.

"I've found out since then how hard it is to try and teach somebody to sing half a line and lead and then jump to the tenor on the last half of that line," he continued. "A lot of people can't do it. I never thought of it being hard, because that's the way I was raised."

The Louvin Brothers grew up on a 23-acre cotton farm in Henegar, Ala. Their mother, Georgiane Elizabeth, was the daughter of a Baptist preacher. She was also a gospel singer who taught her seven children how to sing on shape notes. Charlie and Ira were the only boys in the family.

"(For) shape notes, we never used instruments, not even a pitch pipe," Louvin said. "In church, one man would run up and down the scale and arrive at what key the song was written in. They'd all sing the notes one time through and then do the words. Most of the time they carried five-part harmonies."

Despite their beautiful harmonies, the brothers were like opposites. Ira usually played mandolin; Charlie filled in the gaps with guitar. Charlie has been married for 47 years; Ira was married four times. He divorced his third wife, Faye, after she shot him six times in the arm, chest and shoulder.

And Ira liked to drink. A lot. He often got the brothers fired from gigs by smashing his mandolin onstage in fits of frustration.

In 1955, the Louvin Brothers headlined a tour with Hank "The Yodeling Ranger" Snow. The "also appearing" act was a young rock 'n' roll singer named Elvis Presley.

"I'd say Ira cost the Louvin Brothers catalog \$1 million with that tour," Louvin said. "We were in Benson, N.C., and Elvis sat down at the piano and started singing some old hymn and said, 'This is the kind of music I like.' And Ira said, 'Why you white - - - - -, why do you sing that - - - out on the stage?' Presley said he gave the people what they wanted to hear. So while Elvis told several publications the Louvin Brothers was his all-time favorite country act, Ira's comment fixed it that he never recorded one of our songs."

Ira's constant moaning, groaning and drinking finally caused the brothers to split on Aug. 18, 1963, after a show in Watseka, Ill. Their wages had dropped from \$1,750 a day to the \$250 they were paid in Watseka - and they had a third musician with them.

"It was an outside show, and it was raining," Louvin said. "Ray Price was on the bill. He couldn't outdrink my brother, but he could stay right with him. All the way to Illinois (from a show in Kansas City, Mo.), I caught hell from my brother. He'd been (complaining) for three or four years, saying, 'I ain't doing this crap anymore.' That day, he said it in front of so many people, I said, 'Ira, I ain't never said this to you, but today you're right. This will be the last show we'll do together. It wasn't meant to be.' "

By the 1960s, brother harmony teams were no longer the rage. While the Louvins grew up listening to the lower harmonies of Alton and Rabon Delmore and, to a lesser degree, Bill and Charlie Monroe, such rudimentary singing had become passe. Country music had its hands full competing with the rapid evolution of rock 'n' roll.

So Charlie enjoyed greater success as a solo artist. But even in 1967, after making the smash recording "I'll Remember Always" for Capitol Records, he missed his brother's voice. "It was purely hell," he said. "And today, 33 years later, when I come to a part that should have a harmony, I'll move off to the left unconsciously to allow the tenor singer to get on the mike. My brother and I always worked one microphone. That way you didn't have to depend on the engineer to make you sound like you ought to sound. I've never missed one thing as much as I've missed my brother's voice."

But the brothers' music has lived on through other artists. In 1968, the Byrds and new member Gram Parsons covered the Louvin Brothers' "The Christian Life" on their landmark "Sweethearts of the Rodeo" album. The Louvin Brothers' harmonies washed over the late Parsons to the degree that he used to pay people to search Los Angeles record stores for used copies of their out-of-print albums. And in 1993, Springsteen featured the Louvin Brothers' "Satan's Jeweled Crown" in his encores during a series of benefit concerts in New Jersey.

These days Louvin lives in Wartrace, Tenn., about an hour outside of Nashville. He is a member of the Grand Ole Opry and appears with the Opry when he is in town. Louvin and his wife, Betty, run a Louvin Brothers museum in the quaint antique town of Bell Buckle, about 10 minutes from Wartrace. Filled with pictures, scrapbooks, awards, clothing and vintage instruments, the museum is open from noon to 5 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

"My wife saved almost everything that was printed on the Louvin Brothers," he said. "When we couldn't keep any more of it in the house, I figured we ought to build a place to display it. We get kids who come in there and just read all day. They know more about the Louvin Brothers than I do, and I was there."

Louvin also plans to assemble a band for 70 to 80 road dates next year to celebrate his 70th birthday. "I'm at an awkward age right now," he said. "Every time I go out and make a buck, they deduct three of it for Social Security. It truly got to the point where it wasn't worth it to work. But next year, when I hit 70, I'll be like a Kentucky colonel and I'll be able to make all I want to make."

Although "The Longest Train" reveals that Louvin has lost some of his range, he's still passionate on a remake of "The Christian Life" and delivers a chilling, pensive version of Sandy Denny's "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?" Producer Julian Dawson, a British folk-rock songwriter, rearranged the tempo of the ballad that was popularized by Judy Collins.

"That was put to me as a challenge," Louvin said. "Julian put a little bit of a rock backbeat on it. He never gave me the lyrics until the day before we cut the track. I love what the song says. I hope I did it justice." Charlie Louvin succeeded. The truth of a Louvin Brother vocal twist never gets old.