

Love and Wealth: The Lost Recordings

The Louvin Brothers

Modern Harmonic

28 September 2018

Love and Wealth: The Lost Recordings is hardly the most notable album of unreleased demos by a legendary artist this past month. But unlike Prince's *Piano & a Microphone 1983*, which only made the mind of pop's most private genius more impenetrable, *Love and Wealth* goes a long way towards shedding a human light on the Louvin Brothers—whom I can't be alone in finding a little bit inexplicable.

Here were two brothers who made some of the most terrifying Christian music ever made—epitomized by their 1959 masterpiece *Satan Is Real*, whose title served as its thesis—but happily talked on the next album about killing their girlfriends. Somehow, the murder ballads fed off the fire-and-brimstone sermons and vice-versa to make each one a little more frightening. The myth is complicated by the character of Ira Louvin, the violent drunk with a voice like a virgin choirboy, who sang about salvation while smashing mandolins. Where did their allegiances lie? The forced smiles on their album covers don't shed much light on the mystery.



Love and Wealth, culled from the first half of the 1950s, opens with a voicemail sent by Ira to his label or producer. It's a maudlin way to open a demos album, but it's revealing: Ira apologizes for his brother Charlie sliding a dirty joke into one of their songs. We learn that the hedonist Louvins aren't necessarily irreconcilable with the church-going Louvins; in the 1950s it was normal to go out drinking on a Saturday and stagger into church on a Sunday. A bunch of songs about sex could be canceled out with a disc about Satan and his kingdom, and a "blue balls" gag could be undone with a sheepish apology.

The first disc of the record is given up largely to novelty songs: "Red Hen Boogie" (which would appear officially as "Red Hen Hop" on *Country Love Ballads*) looks in awe at a sexy chicken; "Unpucker" is all backseat scrabbings in drive-through theaters; how many virginities were lost in that decade under the watchful gaze of the Beast with a Million Eyes? The hero of "Discontented Cowboy" pulls cactus spines out of his pants as he longs to be back home in Tennessee. "It's All Off" chronicles the travails of a bald man just trying to get a damn wig already (fear of going bald is an oddly specific theme on this record, perhaps standing in for fear of impotence).

The brothers take genuine joy in this music. As they sing "curly on the HEAD!" on "It's All Off," it's obvious they've been waiting for the whole song to sing that line together. There are a lot of flubs on these recordings, as expected given that they weren't meant to be released, but nowhere could these be mistaken for amateur bedroom demos. The virtuosic skill of Ira's mandolin playing is more apparent than ever without the backing of Nashville's best.

Disc two is gospel territory, and it's far more staid than the first disc. The songs are fine, a lot friendlier and less existential than the dire warnings on *Satan Is Real*, and it's worth it for the interplay between the two; on songs like "Born Again" and "You'll Meet Him in the Clouds," it's astonishing how well these two totally different voices—Charlie's low, Ira's eerily high—blend into something symbiotic. But they don't seem to be having quite so much fun as on the first disc. Besides, it doesn't tell us much we didn't already know about the Louvins.

"The Louvin Brothers" meant a lot of different things during their time together. Mad gospel prophets. Down-home Opry stars. Lovelorn balladeers, epitomized by the excellent *My Baby's Gone*. *Love and Wealth* shows us yet another side: two fun-loving guys who made music with such joy and ease they sounded professional even while they were messing about.

Rating:

Related Articles Around the Web