

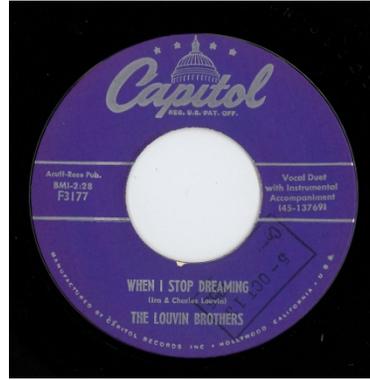
“When I Stop Dreaming”--The Louvin Brothers (1955)

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Essay by Benjamin Whitmer (guest post)*



The Louvin Brothers



Original label

Charlie and Ira Louvin, the brothers who made up the blood-harmony duo the Louvin Brothers, had to fight tooth and nail to get “When I Stop Dreaming” recorded. After working their way off their family cotton farm and away from their abusive father, it had taken them 20 years to make the Grand Ole Opry and sign a major recording contract with Capitol Records. The problem being, now, Charlie and Ira found themselves pigeon-holed as gospel-only artists, which wasn’t doing their career any favors.

As Charlie described it to me, the gospel people really didn’t like them much because they played string instruments. Since in the gospel world the piano was the only acceptable instrument, the strings made the audiences consider the Louvin Brothers as something like carnival people. Likewise, when the brothers played country music venues, their gospel music brought down all the people who were just trying to have fun. People don’t want to hear about God on Saturday night; that’s for Sunday morning. As Charlie put it, “We was pretty close to being a fart in a whirlwind.”

They knew they needed a secular song if they were ever going to get out of the gospel trap. So they approached their A&R man at Capitol Records, Ken Nelson, with the idea. Nelson was not amused. Capitol Records had just tried a similar transition from gospel to secular with a singer named Martha Cross. It had been a disaster. Thanks to her husband and manager, her music had gotten risqué and her neckline had plummeted, enraging her gospel fans. It had destroyed her career, and Capitol had just recently dropped her.

Charlie and Ira promised not to try anything heavy, swearing to Nelson that they’d stick to songs that everybody could like, from religious grandparents down to the smallest child. The song they had in mind was “When I Stop Dreaming.” It was a slow waltz that Ira had written, and which they’d been tinkering with for nearly a year. Charlie had great faith in its universal appeal. “We were dreamers,” he told me, remembering the decades he and Ira had spent working towards the

Opry. “Everybody knows what it’s like to dream. I believe the world is made by the dreamers.” That in itself was enough to make him believe that it could be the secular hit they were looking for. And after hearing the song, and the reasoning, Nelson was convinced enough to let them give it a try.

Charlie’s faith didn’t mean they weren’t nervous when they went into the studio on May 25, 1955, however. So they came with backup material. After recording “When I Stop Dreaming,” they taped another secular song about their home state called “Alabama,” as well as a Jimmy Rule song entitled “Memories and Tears.” But even those weren’t enough for Ken Nelson. He showed up with a song of his own, “Pitfall,” which was published by Central, a company Nelson half owned. He was probably more nervous that Charlie and Ira, scared that they would tank like Martha Carson.

Nelson needn’t have worried. “When I Stop Dreaming” was perfectly suited to the Louvin Brothers, showcasing the brothers’ sublime blood-harmony talents, the soaring and swooping mix of their voices learned at the family reunions steeped in the Sacred Harp tradition. It was a prime example of Ira’s best songwriting, a deceptively simple lyric about heartache, rooted in concrete images. As the first non-gospel song they recorded for Capitol Records, it introduced the classic Louvin Brothers’ country sound to the nation, and the nation was ready for it. “When I Stop Dreaming” hit in 1955, and hit big, making it to the top ten in “Billboard.”

It was the first song the Louvins released after joining the Opry, and it was exactly the debut the Brothers needed. It launched their success, leading to a string of hits including “I Don’t Believe You’ve Met My Baby,” “Cash on the Barrelhead,” and the seminal murder ballad, “The Knoxville Girl.” It also served as the foundation of their career, their harmony influencing everyone from Gram Parsons to the Beatles. Within a year of its release, they were as hot as anybody on the Opry, touring the country with a young Elvis Presley, whose career was just launching. For the first time the brothers had money, too. Which they used to go out and buy Nudie suits, the uniform of a successful Opry star.

Of course, by helping to introduce the world to Elvis, they also managed to precipitate their own decline. A decline in all of country music, in fact. When Elvis took over the nation, the popularity of country music suffered hugely, especially among those acts that we already considered old-timey. To some degree, the Louvin Brothers were carrying on a musical tradition that was almost anachronistic by the time they began to chart. The music of their influences, other brother harmony acts like the Blue Sky Boys and the Delmore Brothers, were already fading from the radio.

In fact, that’s part of what makes the Louvin Brothers so important. They began by singing songs like “Mary of the Wild Moor,” which their mother’s people had brought across the ocean, and had passed down to her, and which she’d given to them. In Charlie’s words, “It’s something you can’t teach and you can’t fake, and I’m afraid it has been all but lost forever.” The Louvin Brothers provided the link between the traditional folk ballads that made their way to Appalachia and the popular country music that began its ascendance during their career.

Unfortunately, their newfound popularity also gave Ira the resources to head down the path of self-destruction he'd been flirting with his entire life. As Charlie put, before "When I Stop Dreaming" hit, Ira was too broke to really screw up. With the Louvin Brothers' newfound success, Ira had enough money to get divorced and hit the bottle hard, leading to the career-sabotage and hell-raising that he became increasingly known for, including the infamous incident where, while trying to strangle his third wife with a telephone cord, she shot him six times.

But there was the song. Charlie once said that it's twice as hard to sell a waltz, but if you can get a waltz to chart, it'll stick around longer than any other kind of song. "When I Stop Dreaming" seemed to prove him right. It was covered over a hundred times by everybody from George Jones to Ray Charles. The version that moved Charlie the most, however, was by Johnny Cash. Cash's friendship meant the world to Charlie. They had been friends ever since the Louvin Brothers played in Dyess, Arkansas, and Charlie let the thirteen-year-old Cash sneak into the concert without paying.

After Johnny Cash's death, his estate released an album called "Personal File." It was a collection of songs that had a special meaning for Cash, which he recorded solo between 1973 and 1982. Cash would tell a little story about why the song meant so much to him, and then he would play it on his guitar. For "When I Stop Dreaming," Cash told the story of how he'd been working carrying water for a dredging crew on the Tyronza river as a teenager. Every day at noon he would sneak into his foreman's truck, turn on the ignition, and listen to the Lonesome Valley Trio Gospel show, which consisted of Smilin' Eddie Hill and the Louvin Brothers. Only one day, he forgot to turn off the ignition, and was fired from the job. Charlie considered that story and song a final gift from Johnny Cash. His way of saying goodbye.

Often when talking about that song, Charlie would get choked up. It was a song that, in some ways, tracked the course of the Louvin Brothers' career. Though their story ended tragically with Ira's death in 1965--he was killed by a drunk driver while he himself was sober, having recently sworn off alcohol--it was one of the few gambles the brothers made that paid off perfectly. To Charlie, "When I Stop Dreaming" represented the best of what the brothers had to offer.

Listening to it, it's awfully hard to argue the point.

Benjamin Whitmer is the author of "Pike," which was nominated for the 2013 Grand Prix de Littérature Policier, and coauthor (with Charlie Louvin) of "Satan is Real," a "New York Times" Critics' Choice book. His new novel is the critically-acclaimed "Cry Father."

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.