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Charley Pride still humble after 45 years

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It was a couple of years ago at a Grammy-sponsored VIP reception honoring Mississippi music at Harrah's Horseshoe Casino in Tunica that the "pride of country music," superstar Charley Pride, spotted Mississippi resident and actor Morgan Freeman across the way.

The story goes that the three-time Grammy Award winner and Mississippi native stuck out his shaking hand and said, "I'm Charley Pride, the singer."

To which the film actor, who portrayed chauffeur Hoke Colburn in *Drivin' Miss Daisy* and high school principal Joe Clark in *Lean On Me*, supposedly replied, "Well, I'm Morgan Freeman, the actor."

What the story illustrates is what I've seen repeatedly in the many times I've crossed paths with Pride over the years: In spite of being a legend who has sold more than 70 million albums, Pride always has remained extremely humble about his accomplishments and about his role as one of the few blacks to achieve fame in the mostly white world of country music.

In fact, it is a pretty sad state of affairs that, 45 years after RCA Records released Pride's debut single *The Snakes Crawl at Night* in 1966, there is only one black country music star on the charts today. That is Darius Rucker, who we first met through the South Carolina-originated rock-blues band Hootie & the Blowfish.

Rucker's current CD is titled *Charleston, S.C., 1966*. He was born the same year as Pride's breakthrough single.

Nevertheless, Pride's passion for recording and singing continues unabated after 36 No. 1 singles.

On Tuesday, the legendary vocalist will be releasing *Choices*, his first all-new album in five years, on the Music City Records label. It comes out just a few days before his 73rd birthday on March 18.

Publicity about Pride's new release is a far cry from that of his first single.

Chet Atkins, then head of RCA Records in Nashville, Tenn., and other label officials were so concerned about how white country listeners would feel about Pride that RCA didn't even release a photo of him; hoping the authentic country sound of his strong voice would win them over.

It wasn't just Pride's voice that won over country music fans. It also was his classic style of performing, the quality of the songs he recorded, his obvious deep love for his fans and his just-glad-to-be-in-country-music personality.

In January 1979, Pride called this columnist from Dallas, where his office was based, and, after some 30 minutes of talking, happened to mention that he was calling from his car.

"Where are you heading?" I asked. He replied, "Nowhere. I'm just sitting in my car outside my barbershop."

At that I commented, "Charley, you must have a crowd outside your car by now." He replied in that famous voice, "Well, there is a lady looking in at me through the car window."

Pride earned the Country Music Association's Male Vocalist of the Year award in 1971 and its top Entertainer of the Year award in 1972. He was inducted into the Country Music Association's Hall of Fame in 2000.

There have been some serious discussions and negotiations to make a movie about Pride's life, with actor Terrence Howard said to portray him. Time will tell if that gets made.

The first time I interviewed Pride was in early 1977, at a birthday party in Atlanta for then-Georgia Lt. Gov. Zell Miller. Pride was very happy for his acceptance by country music fans, but he wanted an even broader audience.

"All I want to do is to be heard and seen on all (radio and TV) stations," Pride pleaded.

"Let's stop talking about easy rock, heavy rock, country rock, middle-of-the-road or country music," he added. "The time has come to stop grabbing at straws and putting music into different categories."

Here are some verbal gems gathered in my conversations with Pride over the years:

- "That is one of the most conscientious things I try to do; to stay myself. I try to keep my feet on the ground. Even though I appreciate the fame and adoration, I remember once I used to pick cotton, and I felt like then I was somebody. I have the same feet, hands and heart like everyone else. I'm just also blessed with a good voice.

"My philosophy has been to be Charley Pride, the American, first."

- "I think the record industry and everything else has changed," he said in 1985 backstage at the Grand Ole Opry House.

"You've got so many variations of how radio stations program records. Many have such a limited playlist. It's not a very lucrative time record-wise in today's economy. So you just keep trying to make good records and keep performing out on the road until everything breaks and the record business gets back on an even keel."

- "I let other people look at my place in country music. I just consider myself another American. That's the way I keep my head on straight. I don't dwell on my success."

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