

# A legend finally at ease in the recording studio, Charley Pride reflects on *Choices*

## Country's Last Stand

by RON WYNN

During the sessions that led to his landmark 1969 hit "All I Have to Offer You Is Me," Country Music Hall of Famer Charley Pride admits he was anything but an expert in recording and production techniques. "I really didn't any idea of what was happening in a studio then," Pride says. "So I would constantly ask Cowboy [producer Cowboy Jack Clement], 'What are you listening for? How do you decide if that's a good take?' Over the years I've taken a lot from what he and other producers have told me, and now that I'm doing it myself I think I've learned what it takes to make good records."

After a five-year absence, Pride returns to the country music marketplace March 8 with *Choices*. It is a resolutely traditional country record, with steel and fiddles prominent on several cuts, Pride's still-formidable baritone in solid shape, and the lyrical and story settings a blend of topical ("Hickory Hollow Times and Country News," "Guntersville Gazette") realistic relationship tunes ("This Bed's Not Big Enough," "Maybe Love Will Save The Day") and reflective/biographical material ("Resting Place," "You Touched My Life," "The Bottom Line"). Then there's "America the Great," co-written by Larry Mercey and Edward Allen Gowens, for which Pride says he prefers the term "patriotic," rather than "political" or "conservative."

Throughout, Pride's authoritative tone, smooth delivery and confident presentation all signal that he remains capable of making fine music, even if health problems and age have robbed him of some depth on the lower registers. Soon to be 73, Pride is under no illusions about getting airplay in an era where country radio is as obsessed with youth as its rock, pop and urban compatriots.

"I'm a country traditionalist — that's always been my strength," Pride says. "For me, George Strait really represents kind of the last stand for those of us who aren't interested in any kind of crossover or rock influence in our music. I don't have anything against the new singers or the current things that are popular on country radio. I just don't have any interest in doing it."

He's won every country music award over his long career, and earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. But Charley Pride will always be most remembered as the first black country singer with a No. 1 hit. (He's had 36 chart-topping singles overall.) Still quite active and set for an 11-city Canadian tour in April, Pride remains outspoken on the thorny question of race in country music. For instance, does he feel the success of Darius Rucker has rendered moot issues of color and success in country?

"Well, Darius is a fine singer, and I'm happy he's having success, but he comes from a soft-rock background. So I'm not sure his success shows that the industry is now open to black vocalists doing traditional country music. I feel about him like I did about Ray Charles: He's a great singer who's now become successful doing country music. ... I still wonder why there haven't been any more like myself come along and enjoy the same degree of success. I know of at least two, my brother and my son, who are great country vocalists, and they haven't been able to break through. ... Today I can honestly say it would be just as tough, if not tougher, for a traditional black country act to make it as it was for me when I started.

"It's a funny thing," he adds. "When writers first started talking to me after I began having hits, they would tell me I was the first colored country singer to have great success. Then later it changed to me being the first Negro country singer. Then I became the first black country star. Now I'm the first African-American country star. But over all that time, I'm still the same: Charley Pride, American."

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*Choices*

By Charley Pride (Music City)