

## 40 years later, Charley Pride's still got it

blade staff and news services

### **CHOICES** Charley Pride (Music City Records)

It should be a great comfort for fans of traditional country music to learn that one of the legends of the genre still is working and has recorded his first all-new album in five years. Adding to that comfort is the knowledge that the silken, buttery baritone of Charley Pride is mostly intact as it handles these 13 tunes.

While some deterioration in vocal quality is usually the case over a 40-year career, it is nearly imperceptible here, partly due to Pride's choice of interesting melodies, strong instrumental backing and the power of his voice. Careful listening, however, might turn up a note or two that quivers slightly, but that's easy to overlook in an otherwise good album.

The tracks are a well-ordered mix of ballads, with a few up-tempo numbers thrown in for good measure. Album highlights include a Cajun-flavored song, an homage to our country, and a Gospel-tinged piece.

Is the voice as good as 40 years ago? No, but few voices are, and Pride's is still plenty good enough. "Choices" will be in music stores Tuesday.

-- *KEN ROSENBAUM*

### **LIVE IN MARCIAC** Brad Mehldau (Nonesuch Records)

Brad Mehldau is an incredibly gifted jazz-classical pianist who can fascinate and frustrate listeners.

His stripped-down, lay-it-all-on-the-line solo improvisation work on this two-CD/one DVD package has plenty of highlights, even though part of it is choppy, unstructured without purpose, and emotionally blank.

But there also are portions of "Live in Marciac" in which Mehldau is as utterly captivating as one would hope. Unfortunately, it's a mixed bag, mostly during the moments he's improvising or playing one of his own arrangements. Some of his most memorable performances are his amazing jazz interpretations and free-style renditions of songs from Radiohead ("Exit Music (for a Film)"), Nirvana ("Lithium"), the Beatles ("Martha, My Dear") and, believe it or not, Rodgers and Hammerstein ("My Favorite Things").

He is part of an elite class, to be sure, whether it's his playful experiments with rhythm and his fascinating melodic loops on this album, the jazz-rock-classical hybrid he pulled off on "Highway Rider," his last Nonesuch album, or his dreamy, critically acclaimed duets with jazz guitarist Pat Metheny from a few years ago.

But there's still a bit of emptiness, a sense that he's reaching (and his listeners are waiting) for something out there

that he's just not quite getting.

-- *TOM HENRY*

### **BLESSED** Lucinda Williams (Lost Highway)

Lucinda Williams built her reputation in the 1990s with a series of stunning albums that detailed, with tender insight, a turbulent life filled with reckless men and a rambling search for meaning in the heart of modern America.

Now happily married and in her 50s, Williams has sometimes struggled to bring the same passion and clarity to a life more settled. With 2008's uneven "Little Honey," she sang of personal fulfillment in terms both spiritual and sexual, while ramping up the blues-rock component of her ragged, roots-based sound.

The title of her new album, "Blessed," might suggest more songs of bliss. However, Williams now looks outside her own heart and experiences -- and proves she can be just as moving when singing about others instead of herself.

She keeps the music rough yet tightly arranged, juxtaposing raw guitar rockers with gentle acoustic tidings, similar to Neil Young's eclectic Americana style. Williams still focuses on characters living outside of society, as in the heartbreaking "I Don't Know How You're Livin'," but now it's with a maternal concern rather than as a fellow traveler.

What "Blessed" brings back is the charitable grace with which Williams sees the world -- an openhearted yet unflinching honesty that continues to make her music a sweet blessing in a tough world.

-- *MICHAEL McCALL, Associated Press*

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The Toledo Blade Company, 541 N. Superior St., Toledo, OH 43660, (419) 724-6000

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