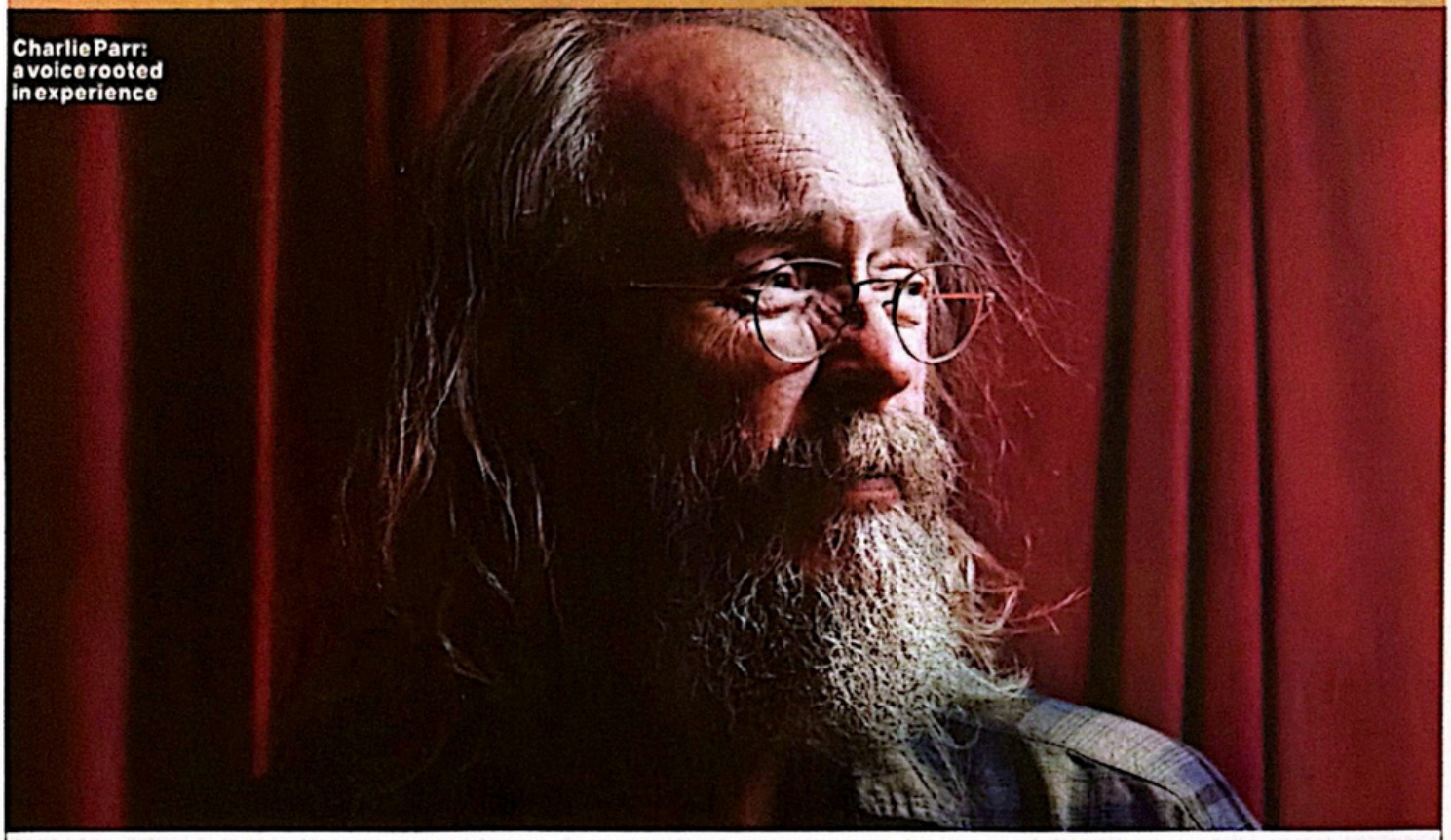
UNCUT

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AMERICANA

Album of the month



Charlie Parr: a voice rooted in experience

CHARLIE PARR

Rooming House SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

9/10

Career best from country-blues Minnesotan



CHARLIE Parr has spent much of his life creating vivid character studies in song, from his 2002 debut *Criminals & Sinners* to 2024's *Little Sun*, a collection of neighbourhood tales whose settings ranged from downtown blues bars to front porches and the shores of a lake. But *Rooming House* is more specific. Here, Parr fashions a conceptual folk opera set under a single roof in the Upper Midwest, tracing the lives of its shifting occupants across decades.

Recorded over two days, the album features just Parr and sympathetic drummer Dave King (save for Jacqueline Ultan's elegiac cello on "Lilliput Park, 2026"), bringing a spare intimacy that allows its songs' subjects to breathe.

A student of Piedmont blues, Parr's guitar-playing – mostly on the 12-string Gretsch that the late 'Spider' John Koerner gifted him – is wonderfully agile and descriptive, supporting a voice rooted in direct experience. Parr himself spent years living in Minneapolis rooming houses, the album's inhabitants all rough composites of people he's known.

On "Duluth 1964", 12-year-old John is orphaned when his mother walks out into a cold January night and never returns. He cleans, fixes and cooks, renting out the garage to a biker gang and taking over when his landlady dies, though forever consumed by emptiness. "*John stays in the room he shared with his mom*", sings Parr. "*He says he's not waitin' for her but I think that he's wrong*".

In her bedroom up the stairs, a single parent ("Mother Sara") battles the odds, nursing her newborn while the radio plays. Another lodger deliberately botches a hold-up down the street ("Bank Robber") in order to secure a bed and regular food in prison, handing the bank teller a note: "*I'm sick and I'm tired and I only want some peace*".

But amid the poverty and desperation there's also dark comedy, compassion and small acts of grace, elevating *Rooming House* into something tender, tragic and universal, an exercise in human portraiture that feels akin to the work of Terry Allen or James McMurtry. ***ROB HUGHES***