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It's a long way from "Jumpin' Jack Flash" to the solo piano music of **Forever Blue**, but that only goes to further validate Chuck Leavell's stylistic versatility. The highly sought-after piano man extraordinaire boasts a massive discography varied enough to include the Rolling Stones, the Allman Brothers Band, Aretha Franklin, and Hank Williams, Jr. **Forever Blue** was released in conjunction with Leavell's book, *Forever Green*, an informative work that addresses his other passion -- forestry -- which he avidly pursues on his 2200-acre tree farm in central Georgia. Seven of the ten songs on **Forever Blue** are originals; some are stripped-down versions of tunes Leavell recorded with his band, Sea Level, in the '70s ("A Lotta Colada" and "Song for Amy," a bouncing, Vince Guaraldi-style tune he wrote while watching his daughter at play when she was a toddler). Leavell's playing is creative and original, yet remains strongly connected to bluesy, Southern roots. A New Orleans feel is often present, particularly on "Walk a Little Closer." He comes down hard on the keys on the gospel standard "Higher Ground," but also gives a valuable lesson in dynamics when he quickly shifts to a gentle, feather-light touch, demonstrating that the distance between forceful emphasis and nimble delicacy can be just a few seconds. Leavell included his take on "Ashokan Farewell," a Jay Ungar song popularized when it was used in the PBS TV documentary *The Civil War*. Although the song has been recorded more than 30 times, Leavell is one of only a handful of artists who took a gamble on it and made it his, following his own musical trail rather than treating the song as a precious entity not to be tampered with. Even listeners intimately familiar with the tune will be taken to some new territory. The same goes for "Georgia," one of the bluesiest versions of the song you're ever likely to hear. Leavell gets totally inside a tune and goes where the music leads him, yet you get the sense he knows where it's going to lead him. In his hands, some old familiar songs sound as fresh as they did the first time they landed on human ears. Chuck Leavell has loads of chops and plays straight from the heart, resulting in music that is magnificently accomplished and sensitively executed. It's also highly accessible and deeply moving in a simple, straightforward manner. For example, "Comin' Home" was written during the last few days of a tour with the Stones. Leavell was looking forward to returning home to the peace and quiet of the Georgia countryside, and you can literally feel the anticipation he built into this song. A vision of him walking down a long, tree-lined driveway comes to mind. It's not easy to get a full sound on piano, but Leavell does it on **Forever Blue**, with fat chords on top and nice rhythmic basslines that are used to cover bass and tenor sounds. Superb, fluid fingering produces beautiful flowing and cascading runs, nice trills, and showy licks, all while covering several octaves of the scale in just a few measures. He utilizes the pedals for some great dramatic stops and employs both a linear and a circular way of playing. He runs through the chord progressions several times, but they aren't obviously recycled since they are often phrased differently. Best of all, every note in Leavell's playing has a purpose. This CD would go perfectly with a pitcher of lemonade on the front porch on a hot summer day. It is as down-home and genuine as the man himself -- and that's saying a whole lot. ~ **Ann Wickstrom, All Music Guide**