

STARLINE RHYTHM BOYS:

Keep those sweet sounds rolling

Vermont's latest export blends the best of honky-tonk and rockabilly

By Tom Huntington
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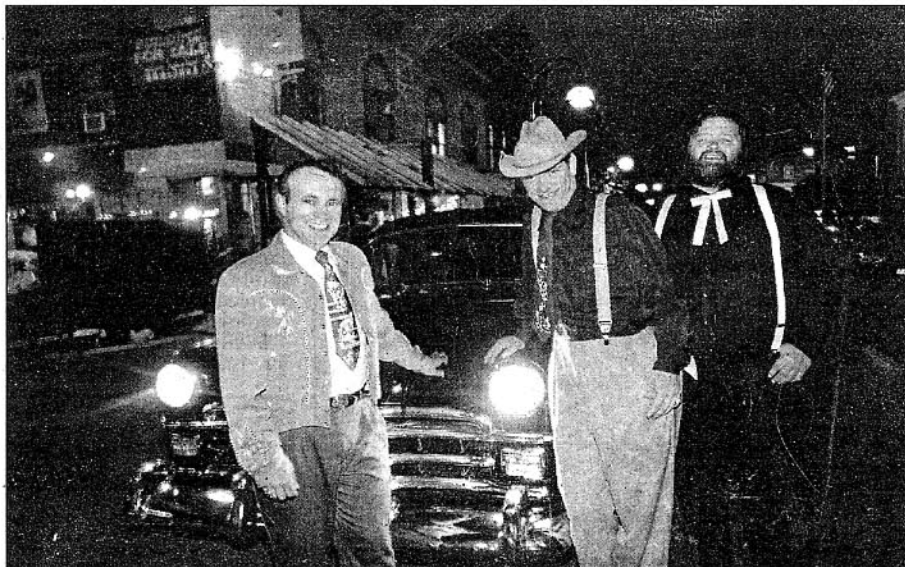
When the three members of the Starline Rhythm Boys came together four years ago, it didn't take long for musical magic to happen.

Guitarist "Big Al" Lemery and slap-bass master Billy Bratcher were hanging out at Bratcher's Burlington home, singin' and pickin' away on Merle Haggard's "Swingin' Doors." When singer and guitarist Danny Coane — a.k.a. "Little Rollin' Danny C" — showed up, he started crooning the lead vocals. Lemery jumped right in on the high harmony, and the sparks started to fly. "I knew right then that we had something special," said Lemery, who was kicking back at Bratcher's on Sunday afternoon.

The group's goose bump-inducing, two-part vocal harmonies — which are occasionally augmented by Bratcher's own punctuating pipes — are just one of the reasons the Vermont trio has not only been a popular presence on the Green Mountain scene, but are also causing ears to perk up nationwide and beyond.

Monday, the Boys learned their latest CD, "Honky Tonk Livin'," is the most popular album being played by alternative country and Americana DJs at independent radio stations in the United States and as far away as Europe and Australia. The Freeform American Roots (FAR) radio chart, based in Texas, is compiled from reports by more than 100 "freeform" (i.e. no playlists) DJs in all 50 states as well as in Canada, Ireland, Germany, France and Australia. This month, the Starline Rhythm Boys are No. 1, beating out the likes of Merle Haggard, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Patti Griffin.

"It ran away with this month's No. 1 position," said



While still playing on the local front, The Starline Rhythm Boys finds itself making a name on the global stage as well.

Upcoming shows

■ **Friday:** Lake Champlain music cruise with opener Rick & the Ramblers, King Street ferry dock, Burlington, 7-10 p.m., \$35. 864-9669.

■ **Aug. 16:** Charlie-O's, 70 Main St., Montpelier, 10 p.m., no cover. 223-6820.

■ **Aug. 30:** Breakwaters, King Street ferry dock, Burlington, 6-10 p.m., no cover. 658-6276.

Tom Ayers, a FAR reporter and American roots music director at the University of Vermont's WRUV-FM 90.1 in Burlington. Ayers, who has hosted his own show for more than three years, said the recognition will most likely generate increased interest in the band throughout the world.

"I think these guys are one of the best bands working in the country right now in

honky-tonk and rockabilly," he said. "They're as good as it gets, and I hear a lot of these kinds of bands. They're in the top tier in the world right now in terms of bands that are playing in this genre."

Ayers isn't the only one singing the band's praises. Country Standard Time, a national magazine covering mainstream and alternative country, calls "Honky Tonk Livin'" "quite probably the most infectious indie country album you'll hear this year." The magazine also dubbed the Boys' 2000 debut album, "Better Luck is a Barroom Away," "one of the best-kept secrets of that year."

Ayers, who has been following the band for more than three years, credits much of the acclaim to Bratcher's impressive songwriting skills and the band's no-nonsense approach. "Some of Billy's best tunes are just so well-crafted in that honky-tonk tradition that they sound like instant classics," he said. "It's

just really straightforward, honest music, and it's not gussied up with a lot of production gimmicks."

Bratcher, 39, who hails from Bennington, moved to Burlington in 1987 and helped form the countrified rockabilly band Buck & the Black Cats in 1993. Guitarist Lemery, 50, who moved to Vermont from the Glens Falls, N.Y., area in 1989 and lives in Essex, signed on shortly afterward. In 1997, Bratcher left the band to tour the country with Texas neo-traditionalist Wayne Hancock. Upon his return a year later, Bratcher found that Lemery had also strayed from the Cats.

Bratcher had always wanted to play with Coane, whom he met when Coane was playing with The Throbulators, a popular rockabilly group, in the late 1980s. Coane, 54, who lives in the Montpelier house he grew up in, started playing surf-and-pop tunes with a band called The Jesters in the early 1960s before delving into bluegrass

with a variety of groups and starting The Throbulators in the 1970s.

Though the Starline Rhythm Boys still throw some rave-up rockabilly into their repertoire — especially during their energetic live performances — the band's music owes more to the classic honky-tonk style known in country music circles as the Bakersfield sound, popularized by artists such as Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. The first genre of country music to incorporate a rock influence and electric instrumentation, the style is marked by the use of twangy telecaster guitars and clean, ringing vocals. Early Elvis, Buddy Holly and the close, two-part harmonies of Owens and Don Rich as well as The Everly Brothers have also had a big influence on the group's blue-collar, country boogie.

"We grew up on that stuff and were weaned on it, so all these elements are coming together," Bratcher said, "but the songs are relevant to today. We're not trying to recreate the past."

Still, with a cache of vintage instruments and some sharp duds to go along with them, it's clear that the retro element is a big part of the band's appeal. The Starline Rhythm Boys are certainly keeping busy, playing regularly in bars, town greens, parades, fairs and rockabilly festivals throughout the Northeast — all while holding down day jobs.

Despite increased interest from around the globe, the Boys still "keep the home fires burning," as they sing on a classic cut from "Honky Tonk Livin'." "We're a down-home band," said Bratcher, who added that they've been "carrying on a musical tradition of real hillbilly music in Vermont that was started in the 1940s."

"We pound the pavement, big time, and that's why people are noticing us," he said.