

Starline Rhythm Boys prove to be timeless

By Steve Lemcke

Free Press Correspondent

Along with The Billionaires and The Chrome Cowboys, Burlington's Starline Rhythm Boys have led the way in town in creating some cachet for honky-tonk flavored country. But it's The Starline Rhythm Boys who are the ultra neo-traditionalists of this small clique. They have always showcased a vintage sound, speaking to a time when country, swing and elements of R&B and rockabilly were about to spawn rock 'n' roll.

Let me put it this way. Their hillbilly bop/country swing sound is so vintage that none of the band's three members (Billy Bratcher, Dan Coane, Al Lemery) has an instrument younger than 33 years.

The strange thing is, they make those old school honky-tonk tones sound vital on their latest release, the 19-song CD "Honky Tonk Livin'." Their love for the music born many years ago is so readily apparent, it's like you have been transported to the '40s and '50s.

You can thank upright bass player and principal songwriter Billy Bratcher for that. Man, has this cat made a study of all the old masters, or what? It's like he's channeling Carl Perkins, Sam Phillips and Hank Williams all at once. You can tell he's not some dilettante playing at hick chic. He's a true believer and has made this music his life's work.

While he re-tells the same stories of love found, love lost, barrooms and the characters you'll find there, the old standard themes of country music seem to get a shiny new gloss through lyrics that are comfortably appropriate and identifiable to the music. They are never awkwardly updated to fit modern times. In this band's hands, this music and its simple truths still speak to timeless situations and feelings.

You also can thank the way they recorded "Honky Tonk Livin'" for giving the record its classic feel. Made last



The Starline Rhythm Boys — (from left) Al Lemery, Danny Coane and Billy Bratcher — are vintage all the way.

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March at Track Farm Studio in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, all tracks were recorded live in the studio with minimal overdubs. Coane on lead vocals and guitars, Lemery on guitars and backing vocals, and Bratcher (all with spot-on harmonies) combine to form the basic trio. Six extra musicians add all the right touches — dobro, various steel guitars, piano, fiddle and mandolin — to flesh out the songs. The live recording keeps things loose enough to keep things jumpin' and jivin'.

"Give Me A Double" with its pre-natal Buddy Holly sound, "Smart Thinkin'" with its infectious swing, "The Tavern Parking Lot" for its vision of place — these and all the songs would've found a happy home at Sun Records back in the day. If there was a category at the Grammy Awards for best traditional honky-tonk album, I'd nominate this one.

The 14 originals by the Starline boys in the main body of work are supplemented with three bonus tracks. These are songs that have never been previously recorded: original material from the likes of Leroy Preston of Asleep at the Wheel and fellow traditionalist Wayne Hancock. The Starline Rhythm Boys are obviously making fans of those in the know and are creating quite a



■ The Starline Rhythm Boys: "HONKY TONK LIVIN'" ***¾

reputation for themselves.

This new album will only further that reputation for quality and talent. The album has a fantastic vintage sound, and the band plays with amazing care and reverence for the music. It's a nearly perfect recreation of an older sound while maintaining a level of freshness and avoiding bland or moribund nostalgia. "Honky Tonk Livin'" proves in whatever era, as far as honky-tonk music goes, these guys are the real deal.

■ Check out *The Starline Rhythm Boys* on Saturday at Red Square in Burlington, where the band will celebrate the release of "Honky Tonk Livin'" with a free show. Call 859-8909. The group also plays June 1 at the Capitol Plaza Hotel in Montpelier; admission is \$5. Call 223-2935.

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