

★ Starline Rhythm Boys

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Starline Rhythm Boys: Honky-tonk style

"These boys remind me of the good old days with a sound that's between Memphis and Nashville. It's good, clean and from the heart — and nowadays that's fresher."

— Vassar Clements

If famed fiddler Vassar Clements wrote something like that in the liner notes

about local band

"The Starline Rhythm Boys, then that should be enough praise for anyone. So, just humor me and read on.

If anyone has ever loved a Hank Williams tune or longs for the early days of rock 'n' roll (or wishes for a place that has both), he or she probably has sought out this swingin' trio to get their fix.

The Starline Rhythm Boys has tapped into a musical artery that flows to all sorts. From the blue collars of Charlie-O's to the collegiate/twenty-something hipness of Red Square, the band brings its vintage country-twanged rock-a-boogie and swing, lonesome blues, prairie laments, and the occasional nod toward grandpa bluegrass in a varied mixture that never ceases to entertain.

The band bridges the gap locally between The Chrome Cowboys and Buck & The Black Cats. While Chrome Cowboys makes you swoon over a Hank Williams tune (or a Rolling Stones cover) and Buck snarls and rebels like Elvis, The Starline Rhythm Boys plays on both sides of Tennessee; at times both rowdy enough for Memphis and respectable enough

for Nashville.

The Starline Rhythm Boys plays music for the honky-tonk, the great Everybar of white America, where respectability and rowdiness always seem to collide in colorful ways. The place where honest, sometimes bitter truths are simply distilled like the bottles found behind the bar.

"Better Luck Is a Barroom Away" is a classy, well-produced mixture of originals and covers in a 50/50 ratio that blurs the line between what was written in '47 by Roy Acuff and in '97 by upright

bassist and sometime Black Cat Billy Bratcher. From the bluegrass of "Piece of Alabam" to the early rock 'n' roll of "Do a Little Wrong Tonight," Bratcher's songs follow the original blueprints to the letter and prove himself a neo-traditionalist of the first order.

Other original songs, such as "3 a.m. on the Kansas Plain" with its smooth honky-tonk blues sound, are almost indistinguishable compared with the oldies but goodies found on the album. That's not a bad thing. Quite the contrary. It shows a lack of arrogance and a reverence toward the musical forms that gave birth to our more modern notion of rock music.

Bratcher catalogs some of the musical themes that eventually would have combined to create the genius of Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly or Carl Perkins. While some songs would have fit nicely in the post-Phil Halley era, SRB



■ The Starline Rhythm Boys: "BETTER LUCK IS A BARROOM AWAY"

seems to exist more comfortably in that proto-rock era of Sun Records before Elvis signed.

Too old maybe to bother with fuzzing things up with alternative-rock-inspired country, but young enough not to seem like a visit to the geriatric ward at the Grand Ole Opry Old Age Home, SRB lays snug in the pocket between; re-energizing its traditional sound and making it zing in the barrooms of today.

The 16 tracks move along at a good clip as any Sun Record should (only one song reaches just shy of four minutes), but the production is big and clean like Nashville demands. Bratcher's slap-bass technique with a few minor touches of cymbal here and there is enough to create a whole rhythm section of sound throughout. It's remarkable this band doesn't have a drummer the way the music chugs along and snaps when it needs to without that percussive backbone leading you in the two steps.

Guitarist Al Lemery plays that Telecaster sound to the hilt, and vocalist Danny Coane croons with the spirits of the past; never imitating but giving the music that extra vintage feel. With friends filling out the trio's sound

with mandolin, steel guitars, and the fiddling of Breakaway's Gene White, the songs ring true with authenticity and competency.

If you're a fan of smooth honky-tonk swing with touches of rockabilly pace, then any of these songs are gonna make the guys grease back your hair and roll up the denim cuffs. It might even make the ladies respond to a naughty little wink. If your baby likes to dance, then you'll have no trouble movin' her around the floor.

Nicely understated artwork and killer liner notes from Asleep at the Wheel's Leroy Preston (who also contributes an original, previously unrecorded song called "Buckets of Love") create a vintage-looking package. But the music within stays as vital as if it been recorded in '56. Like Hank Williams III and/or Wayne Hancock, the band takes the honky-tonk sound out of the historical vault and reintroduces it back into its natural environment.

But in a town like Burlington, you probably don't have to worry about chicken wire covering the stage or sawdust on the floors. In some ways, that's kind of unfortunate for this particular musical animal.

■ **Friday night performance:** The Starline Rhythm Boys celebrates the release of "Better Luck Is a Barroom Away" on Friday at Club Metronome in Burlington. Chrome Cowboys opens. SRB performs with many special guests; an all-star jamboree is scheduled for the later hours. This is a show fans won't want to miss.

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