

★ Starline Rhythm Boys

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STARLINE RHYTHM BOYS, *BETTER LUCK IS A BARROOM AWAY* (Tin Town Records, CD) — The rising star that is Burlington's Starline Rhythm Boys, and the appearance of their debut CD, *Better Luck Is a Barroom Away*, speaks to a lengthy and venerable musical history that deserves at least a cursory explanation. Maybe it's the lack of a new "big thing" in the music biz; maybe it's that musical genres never really go away, they just have waxing and waning audiences. Either way, you can't keep good music down for long, apparently. Witness the swing — and, to a lesser extent, lounge — resurgence in recent years that opened the retro door to an enthusiastic new generation. Witness the burgeoning, if still cultish, popularity of "Americana" — an amorphous term for the rubric that siphons indigenous American musical forms (country, folk, bluegrass, "cowboy," early rock) into a palatable hybrid for contemporary listeners. Rockabilly, which spans both trends, has been periodically reinterpreted since Elvis' pelvis-swiveling version made girls swoon. All of which suggests that even young listeners sometimes instinctively reach back to reclaim a past they never knew — and which they usually interpret as less cynical, more innocent, maybe even more fun. Somehow, this seems most easily done through music. The happy result is that some of those listeners will discover the works of pioneering artists, who, if still alive and in pos-

session of publishing rights, reap an unexpected windfall in their old age. More often, the originals are deceased, but those contemporary artists who remain truest to the spirit and style — and usually attire — benefit from their efforts.

Enter Starline Rhythm Boys, who describe their music as "hillbilly boogie." For a couple years the trio has plied its well-dressed and infectiously exuberant craft at local watering holes — following stand-up bassist/songwriter Billy Bratcher's tour with Austin's Wayne Hancock. In his late thirties, Bratcher is the youngest member but has long been an aficionado of rockabilly and its kissin' cousin, vintage country, and his taste for authenticity is boundless. Case in point: He had old-style posters for the CD release party printed at the legendary Hatch company in Nashville. Danny Coane and Al Lemery, both guitarists and vocalists, are old enough to have seen Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis on television in their early years. The point is that all three share an appreciation — no, a love bordering on fanaticism — for the homespun genre with catchy melodies, great harmonies and a real passion to entertain. Starline don't "interpret" the music; they simply play it.

And one would be hard-pressed to distinguish the vintage of their originals from the elder covers on *Better Luck*. The title track, in fact, is Bratcher-penned, as are five others on this generous 16-song disc; Coane contributed one rocker. "Better Luck Is a Barroom Away" kicks off with a nice, easy lope, a toe-tapper warm-up about love lost. The song benefits from the easy-going guitar trade-offs between Lemery and guest Cartwright "Carty" Thompson of Maine. Thompson also adds pedal steel on some songs, while 68-year-old Maine mandolinist Allerton Hawkes dolls up the bluegrass-inspired numbers, such as Bratcher's "Piece of Alabam."

Despite the occasional tear-jerker (Johnny Paycheck's sorrowful "Apartment #9," Don Gibson's "I Couldn't Care Less"), Starline provide a whoop-and-a-holler good time here. Most of the tunes are mid-tempo twangers, such as Cy Coben's "I Need a Good Girl Bad." The remainder is more caffeinated roadhouse

fare — Bratcher's "Do a Little Wrong Tonight," Coane's "Better Buick Boogie," the classic "Juke Joint Johnny." There isn't a clunker on the whole album, but some are particularly memorable. One is Leroy Preston's "Buckets of Love" — a song the Vermont tunesmith never recorded with his old band, Asleep at the Wheel. Breakaway fiddler Gene White is a welcome presence on this one as well as on Bratcher's "Life's Heart is Unfair." The latter is sung with an appealing combination of sass and sweetness by Starline girl Rose Lucas.

Coane sings most lead vocals with an experienced countrified tone — he was front man for the now-defunct local rockabilly band The Throbulators — but his delivery of the chestnut "Where the Rio De Rosa Flows" is a knock-out. Bratcher croons on his own paean to the road, "Texacos and Roadmaps," a two-stepper worthy of Bob Wills, complete with vintage guitar tone, lively fiddle and snappy rhythm — led, as always, by Bratcher's crisp, string-popping bass lines. Lemery is stellar on both guitar and vocals — his high wail pierces the heart on "Piece of Alabam" and adds just the right plaintive tone to the uptempo closer, "Goodbye Train."

The excellence of musicianship throughout is one reason to admire *Better Luck*, the obvious enjoyment the band conveys is another. Producer Sean Mencher captured the band's old-time sound — and most of its live energy — with a warm, analog recording. Mencher has considerable rockabilly cred himself, as guitarist and co-songwriter for the Austin-based High Noon in the 1980s-'90s. Now living in Maine, he produced *Better Luck* at his Track Farm Studios. The disc is a well-deserved notch in the gun.

Mencher is just one of the all-star cast joining Starline this Friday for the CD release party at Club Metronome. Burlington's other vintage swingers, The Chrome Cowboys, heat up the stage first.

— Pamela Polsto