

Shawn Camp

Some careers can be described with a couple of words, but Shawn Camp's isn't one of them. A bold and distinctive singer, a songwriter who's provided material for artists ranging from Garth Brooks and Brooks & Dunn to Ralph Stanley, Del McCoury and Ricky Skaggs, and a multi-instrumentalist who's played with everyone from Alan Jackson to the Osborne Brothers, his music sprawls across the lines that divide mainstream country, Americana and bluegrass—and if his songs have been recorded by more popular artists, his energetic new CD, *Fireball*, makes a compelling case that no one can do them better. From the hard-charging, country-rockin' energy of the opening title track to the cheerfully mordant humor of the closing "Drank," it's a collection that showcases the thoroughly modern yet deeply rooted creations of one of Nashville's most unique talents.

"I dragged around a guitar from the time I was five," Camp says with a chuckle, but it was with the fiddle that he first walked through the door to a career in music. Born and raised in Arkansas, he grew up surrounded by music—everything from his mother's Elvis and his father's Merle Haggard records to picking parties at his home to the sounds of living legends and local heroes at the bluegrass festivals his family regularly visited. "That's kind of where I learned to play, under the shade trees," he notes, and before he had finished high school he was playing for country dances around his home and hitting festival stages around the midwest as a member of bands with names like the Grand Prairie Boys and Freddie Sanders & Signal Mountain.

Spotted by the Grand Ole Opry's Osborne Brothers at an Iowa festival when he was 20, Shawn moved to Nashville in 1987 to play fiddle with the legendary bluegrass act, and over the next few years, he lived the life of a sideman, touring for short runs and long stretches alike with country stars and newcomers ranging from the Burch Sisters to Jerry Reed, Alan Jackson, Suzy Bogguss and Trisha Yearwood. Before long, he became a prolific songwriter, too—thanks to a fortuitous encounter at Nashville's songwriting mecca, the Bluebird Café. "I'd always written little sketches of what I thought would be songs, but I'd never really thought enough of them to finish anything," he recalls. "And then one night I was sitting at the bar at the Bluebird, and I got to talking with this guy, and kind of just said, 'yeah, I'm a songwriter.' It turned out to be Dean Miller, and before the night was through, we had written a song together—and after that, we just kept going, non-stop, and wound up with about 40 of them."

Shawn got his first cut in 1991 with "Fallin' Never Felt So Good," and though he claims that he began singing simply in order to pitch his songs—"I think it just evolved from having to perform them in order for somebody to hear them," he says with a grin—he was signed to Reprise Records the following year, and released his self-titled major label debut in 1993. But mainstream success proved elusive, especially when work on his second album ground to a halt over creative differences the following year. "Emory Gordy produced that album," he says proudly. "And I had Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Quartet; Patty Loveless was singing a couple of songs; we had players like James

Burton, Jerry Douglas and Bobby Hicks on it. Looking back on it today, every song on it might not play exactly the way I'd like it to, but mostly I was proud of and felt strongly about it. But the head of the label wanted me to take it all off and put electric guitars on it; he said it didn't sound like the current John Michael Montgomery album. I told him I'd think about it, but I wound up calling him back and telling him that I couldn't change anything—that he needed to give me a release date or a release from the record label.”

Undismayed, Camp remained in Nashville and plunged into a songwriting career supplemented by occasional forays as a sideman. His catalog grew steadily, and so did the list of his songs recorded by major country artists, including his first #1—Garth Brooks' 1997 recording of “Two Piña Coladas.” Yet even as he was scoring hits with the mainstream, Shawn kept close to his roots, too, co-writing with friends like Guy Clark and another writer with a bluegrass background, Jim Lauderdale, and the commercial success of songs like “How Long Gone,” a #1 for Brooks & Dunn in 1998 was matched by critical acclaim for the likes of “Forever Ain't No Trouble Now,” which appeared on the 2002 Grammy-winning Lauderdale-Ralph Stanley collaboration, *Lost In The Lonesome Pines*.

Still, by the end of the 90s, Camp was growing intent on recording his songs in his own voice, and in 2001 he released *Lucky Silver Dollar* on his own Skeeterbit Records label. Combining his own versions of songs like “How Long Gone” and “Can't Have One Without The Other” (previously recorded by Tracy Byrd) with new material like “Tune Of The Twenty Dollar Bill,” the Mark Miller-Allen Reynolds produced album earned rave reviews from publications like *Country Standard Time*, which called it “an album that should appeal to almost every country music fan.” Yet despite the enthusiastic reception it got from those who found it, *Lucky Silver Dollar* was stymied by a lack of exposure—“I had no airplay, and I had no booking agent to book me, so I had no shows,” Shawn recalls with a grin—and so he continued to focus on songwriting until early 2003, when a spur-of-the-moment decision to record a couple of bluegrass shows he'd booked at a favorite hang-out resulted in *Live At The Station Inn*, released the following year on John Prine's Oh Boy Records.

Backing Shawn with an all-star bluegrass cast and showcasing a trio of fiddle-driven numbers he'd written with Guy Clark, favorites from the *Lost In The Lonesome Pines* album, originals that had already found their way into the Del McCoury Band's repertoire along and others already or soon to be recorded by some of bluegrass's biggest names, *Live At The Station Inn*, as Shawn puts it, jump-started his performing career by re-introducing him to the tightly-knit, supportive bluegrass community. Appearances followed at high-profile venues like Colorado's famed Rockygrass festival, the Northwest String Summit and the International Bluegrass Music Association's annual World of Bluegrass convention, while Prine invited Camp to open for him on an extended tour of the northwest. “I was so nervous, because he's got such a great audience, and such an intelligent one—I was thinking, man, am I smart enough to sing for these people,” he laughs, but like the bluegrass audience, Prine's fans embraced his music.

Now, with the release of *Fireball*, Shawn Camp stands on the brink of still another phase of his career. Loaded with a fresh batch of songs written with friends like John Scott Sherrill, Mark D. Sanders and co-producer Billy Burnette, the album reveals his strengths as a rootsy yet modern country stylist—and, as always, a songwriter who memorably connects contemporary sensibilities to forms that evoke memories of classics that traverse the range of country music history. Witty, sardonic stories like “Hotwired” and “Just As Dead Today” are interspersed with rockabilly-flavored blues like “Waitin’ For The Day To Break” and “Beagle Hound,” the smooth-flowing, grassy “Would You Go With Me,” the glistening ballad “Love Ain’t Leavin’,” the easy groove of “Nothin’ To Do With You” and even more. Adding to the “listening amusement” Camp dedicates to his listeners, virtually all of his co-writers participate, too; “I love having them on there,” he says, “because to me, they have as much right to say how the song should sound as I do—we wrote it together, so we have to let it grow together, or it’s not ours any more.”

The result of an organic process that found him “recording every song I wrote in the last year or so as if it were a master session,” *Fireball* has, despite its variety, a kind of seamless elegance that makes it a fitting capstone to a year that Camp counts among the best he’s had. “All my life I’d wanted to record a bluegrass record, so to get any kind of approval at all out of doing that has been a real honor. This last year has felt a lot different to me—getting to play some of those places again, and seeing some of the same people. Those bluegrass festival folks are strong, you know? So it’s been an amazing year--it’s been a treat. And now it’s on to the next thing.”