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Swingin'

New album by sidebar/should-be-star Shawn Camp gets rhythm

By Geoffrey Himes

Shawn Camp

Fireball (Skeeterbit Records)

Shawn Camp is one of those characters you often find in the shadows of Nashville. You know the type: the gifted songwriter or picker who's on the telephone short list of many a producer and artist, but who's more or less invisible to the general public. Camp excels in both roles—he's written with Guy Clark and Jim Lauderdale and he's picked with the Osborne Brothers and Cowboy Jack Clement—but he's thus far been unable to finesse the tricky transition from background whiz to self-supporting front man.

Camp's new album, *Fireball*, gives him his best opportunity ever for crossing that boundary. Released on his own indie label and firmly rooted in tradition, the album doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell with country radio. But the record is so catchy, so lively and so believable that it could catapult Camp toward a Mary Gauthier-like or Buddy Miller-like career—one where critical adulation leads to a loyal audience that assures gigs at the best listening room in every big city and a new album every two years. There are no guarantees—just being good is never enough—but the opening is there.

What makes *Fireball* better than Camp's three previous albums—and better than 90 percent of the country records released in this decade—is rhythm. To strengthen the pulse in a country song, Camp knows, it's not enough merely to make the drums louder, as so many Nashville producers believe. It's not enough merely to imitate '80s arena-rock. It requires tapping into the forgotten past of country dance music. It takes swing, and *Fireball* swings "like a pendulum do."

This is most obvious on the fiddle-driven Western swing number, "Tulsa Sounds Like Trouble to Me," which even includes a Bob Wills-like shout of "A-ha!" But a similar syncopation distinguishes Camp's country rock tracks from the uptempo radio hits they superficially resemble. Camp does more

than merely bring the snare drum and lead guitar up in the mix; he creates a bait-and-switch tension between where we expect the beat to fall and where it actually does fall.

This tension fits Camp's lyrics perfectly. Most of the songs here are variations on the same theme: the singer knows he shouldn't keep loving the woman who has left him, who has taken over his whole life or who was never interested in the first place, but he can't help himself. Sometimes this is played for laughs ("Beagle Dog" begins with a field recording of Jimmy Martin arguing with his hunting dogs and ends with the singer discussing his love life with his own dog); sometimes for tragedy ("Love Crazy" describes a singer so rattled he can't tell good weather from bad); and sometimes for both ("Waitin' for the Day to Break" describes a suicide attempt so unlikely that it becomes ridiculous).

In all these songs, the singer's hormones are pushing on the gas pedal while his conscience keeps slamming on the brakes. The lyrics suggest this conflict, but it's the push-and-pull of Camp's syncopation that makes the conflict matter. The title song about a dangerously alluring woman, for example, twitches with the nervous energy of those '50s rockabilly tracks by Dorsey and Johnny Burnette (father and uncle of Billy, who contributes songwriting and guitar to the song). Billy Burnette also contributes to the lurching, should-stop-can't-stop drinking song, "Drank." Even the album's one true ballad, "Lovin' Ain't Leavin'," has a bluesy swing to it.

Camp has an odd track record of becoming a major presence on other people's records. He had three co-writes, for example, on Mark Chesnutt's 1991 album, *Looking for a Feeling*, three more on Brooks & Dunn's 2001 *Steers & Stripes* album, and two more on Ricky Skaggs' 2004 *Brand New Strings* album.

This year, Camp co-wrote four of the first five songs on Josh Turner's new album for MCA, *Your Man*. One of them, "Would You Go With Me," boasts the best lyrics on "Fireball," though Turner's bottomless baritone brings out the poetry in the song's series of romantic proposals better than Camp ever could. "Baby's Gone Home to Mama" crackles with J.J. Cale-like swamp funk and "Loretta Lynn's Lincoln" is a deliciously comic fantasy by a "would-be country-singing sensation [with] no visible means of transportation." Unfortunately, Turner's album suffers a precipitous decline after those first five songs.

Camp deserves Turner's level of success. He had a shot at it when Reprise released *Shawn Camp* in 1993 and two singles poked their noses into the

country Top 40. But the label refused to release the 1994 follow-up because Camp refused to replace the fiddles with loud guitars.

It was a rare attack of conscience on Music Row, and it relegated Camp to the shadows, where he has worked ever since. There was a 2001 small-label studio album and a 2004 live bluegrass record on John Prine's Oh Boy Records, but *Fireball* represents Camp's best chance to climb back into the public's consciousness. These songs are as accessible, hook-laden and well played as anything on the radio, but they also boast an inner rhythmic drama that should appeal to the NPR/*No Depression* audience that might give Camp the solo career he deserves.