



May 05, 2006, 7:15 a.m.

## Dispatches from the Lost Highway

Good country.

By Aaron Keith Harris

**T**here is plenty of legitimate complaining to do about the state of country music today (see here, for instance). But there is still plenty of good stuff to be found—if you're willing to look hard for it, that is. I've been looking, and so far this year I've run across a number of fine country and bluegrass releases, as well as two remarkable, hard-to-classify efforts that qualify as good country music based on their artistry and attitude.

**BR549** reestablishes their credentials as one of Nashville's most versatile, original, and entertaining acts with *Dog Days* (Dualtone), a compulsively listenable effort, with the quartet's characteristic mix of Western swing, honky-tonk, and pop-flavored alternative country. Another Music City name that, in a just world, you'd be hearing on the radio is **Shawn Camp**, an ace songwriter and session musician who's stepping into the spotlight where he belongs. *Fireball* (Skeeterbit) is the kind of album Ricky Skaggs would be making today if he hadn't returned to doing bluegrass full-time (not that there's anything wrong with that!).

Speaking of bluegrass, **Mountain Heart**'s *Wide Open*—their fifth album, and their third for Ricky's Skaggs Family Records—is their most ambitious effort yet. With help from producer Mark Bright, the sextet has added range and polish to their sound without abandoning their bluegrass muscle, and Steve Gulley's incredibly soulful vocals are better than ever.

For fans of acoustic picking, there's *Stomp* (Acoustic Disc), an intimate

and engrossing stroll through pre-World War II string band music from mandolin masters **Mike Compton** and **David Long**. (It was Compton's mandolin you heard kicking off "Man of Constant Sorrow" from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) Also, guitar ace Bryan Sutton is joined by friends like Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, and, yup, Ricky Skaggs on Not Too Far From the Tree (Sugar Hill), a collection of fourteen jaw-dropping guitar duets.

Which brings us to **Hank Williams III**'s aptly named *Straight to Hell* (Bruc), an album that carries the outlaw country concept to its illogical, hyper-aggressive extreme. The only thing surprising about the fact that Hank III, who also fronts a death metal band, has released the first major-label country album with a parental advisory sticker is that it took him so long to do it. Backed by a crack country band with a hard rock edge, Hank III belts out lyrics (which could have been co-written by David Allan Coe and Hunter S. Thompson) in a hillbilly whine that's sharper and wilder than his granddaddy's. Of course, Hank III isn't half the singer or songwriter that Hank Sr. was, but *Straight to Hell* is a hair-raising burlesque of the musical style that Ol' Hank created.

Another, perhaps less obvious, disciple of Hank Sr. is **Van Morrison**, the son of a Belfast shipyard worker whose enormous collection of American records set young George Ivan on the path to becoming the world's foremost performing musicologist.

Though Morrison has explored country before ("I Can't Stop Loving You" from *Hymns to the Silence* [Polydor, 1991] is a prime example, a few tracks on *You Win Again* [Virgin, 2000] less so) *Pay the Devil* (Lost Highway) is Morrison's first album completely dedicated to old-school country.

The result is nearly as pleasing as the classic *Irish Heartbeat* (Mercury, 1998), Morrison's exploration of traditional Irish music with the Chieftains, and for the same reason. Rather than merely paying tribute to other great stylists like Hank Sr. ("Half as Much," "Your Cheatin' Heart," and "My Bucket's Got a Hole In It"), Webb Pierce ("There Stands the Glass," "Back Street Affair" and "More and More"), and George Jones ("Things Have Gone to Pieces" and "Once a Day"), Morrison grabs hold of each song and, with his own inimitable delivery, wrings out its essence, bringing new musical insight to well-worn material.

Morrison also makes the little-recorded “Big Blue Diamonds” sparkle as brilliantly as the former chart-toppers, and he tips his black fedora to the tragically unsung R&B shouter Big Joe Turner with a countrified take on “Don’t You Make Me High.”

Three originals — “Playhouse,” “This Has Got to Stop,” and “Pay the Devil,” an homage to Hank’s “Lost Highway” — fit seamlessly into the mix, making this Van’s most consistent effort since 1997’s *The Healing Game* (Polydor).

But as with every Morrison album, there’s one transcendent track, one truly magical moment. Here it’s the album’s closer, Rodney Crowell’s “Till I Gain Control Again.” Introduced by a languid gut-string guitar, Morrison gently rides the melody for a while, then teases it to one exquisite climax after another before bringing the song, which he’s now made his own, to a whispered, satisfied close.

—*Aaron Keith Harris writes for Country Music Today and Bluegrass Unlimited and is the author of the blog Listen to the Lion.*