

Country

Jack Bernhardt, Correspondent
Shawn Camp, "Fireball" - 4 Stars

If you knew Shawn Camp solely from his failed attempt at a commercial country career in the 1990s, you might regard him as a minor talent who couldn't make it past the first cut on "Nashville Star."

You'd be dead wrong.

Camp has it all: a master's chops on mandolin, guitar and fiddle (which he's played for the Osborne Brothers, Alan Jackson and Trisha Yearwood); a strong, Arkansas-bred vocal style; and a gift for imaginative songwriting (he has penned hits for Garth Brooks, Brooks and Dunn, Ralph Stanley, Randy Travis and others).

From the explosive opening of the title track, "Fireball" (Skeeterbit Records) lives up to its incendiary premise. Moving seamlessly between country, folk, rock and bluegrass, Camp cleverly fuses melody and lyric in ways that set toes tapping and bring smiles to the face.

He is equally charming at full throttle, as on "Tulsa Sounds Like Trouble to Me" and the eccentric "Hotwired," or when teasing or easing into romantic contentment.

Camp is skilled at old-school honky-tonk and the more familiar sounds of today's country. He nails the hard-driving bluegrass of "Would You Go With Me," a song also on the latest Josh Turner CD. Bluegrass fans will get a charge out of hearing the late Jimmy Martin's "dialogue" with his hunting dogs as a lead-in to the forlorn blues "Beagle Hound."

"Fireball" is the kind of smart, well-crafted music that can be heard by those who are willing to search beyond the boardrooms and bottom lines of Music Row.