



The Shootouts - *Switchback*

Like all great bands, the Shootouts aren't fond of resting on their laurels or making the same album twice. The Akron, Ohio, band—whose core is lead vocalist/guitarist Ryan Humbert, lead guitarist Brian Poston, and backing vocalist/guitarist Emily Bates—were influenced by honky-tonk and Western swing on their debut album, 2019's *Quick Draw*.

Their second record, 2021's *Bullseye*, was produced by BR5-49 founding member Chuck Mead and took influence from the Bakersfield sound, roots rock, and Roy Orbison-style classics. The group's third album, 2023's *Stampede*, was co-produced by Asleep at The Wheel's Ray Benson and spent over 15 weeks on the AMA/CDX Americana Radio Chart's Top 10.

With their fourth album, *Switchback* (Transoceanic Records), the Shootouts are expanding their vision of rust belt Americana. "Country music can come from anywhere," says Humbert. "We just so happen to come from northeast Ohio. We're rooted deep in the Rust Belt. I think that influence informed many of our choices on this record, more so than in the past."

But *Switchback* also reflects the band's growing confidence, boasting taut arrangements with well-defined hooks and irresistible melodies; Humbert's vocals possess emotional depth, weathered by experience and rich with empathy. The Poston-written title track is a brisk, evocative instrumental featuring nimble mandolin from Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame inductee Sam Bush; the up-tempo "Your Love (I'm Afraid Of)" is '90s country honky-tonk with twang; and "A Few Old Memories" and "Only Good At Goodbye" (the latter featuring Logan Ledger) lean into the band's signature classic country approach.

"I wanted to make sure that we kept our mission statement in place," Humbert says. "We are a band that very much focuses on country music and the roots of that genre. But with every record we've done, we've shown more of what we can do. And *Switchback* feels like the beginning of a new chapter. In fact, it might sound more like *us* than any of our other records."

At the same time, *Switchback* is also a natural progression from previous Shootouts albums, one that expands the band's sound in organic ways. Tenacious rocker "The Other Side Of My Life" is driven by scorching electric guitars and propulsive drums, while the easygoing, rootsy opening track "Trampoline" features vocals from

progressive bluegrass artist Lindsay Lou as well as vintage-soul organ and a fuzzy guitar solo.

In one of the record's most heartfelt moments, the Shootouts also do a bluegrass-leaning cover of "Only You," the 1982 hit single from the synthpop duo Yazoo (aka Yaz in North America), with contributions from Lou and Bush, as well as harmonica from the legendary Mickey Raphael (Willie Nelson).

"There are many influences we can lean into—like bluegrass, blues, folk, and rock 'n' roll. And as we figure out what fits best for the songs, we're letting the songs lead us," Bates says. "We didn't want to get into a space where people would say, 'Oh, the Shootouts are a Western swing band, and that's all that they do,' and not be true to all the other things we enjoy."

The Shootouts recorded *Switchback* right on the heels of finishing a 24-state tour, harnessing the momentum (and creative energy) from the road in the studio. Eager to switch up their collaborators, the group worked with producer Dan Knobler (Bahamas, Allison Russell, Lake Street Dive). "Dan thinks about country music differently than other people we've worked with," Humbert says. "And that was a big part of our shift, talking to Dan and saying, 'We want to make a different record.'"

The Shootouts first cut basic tracks live at the legendary Sound Emporium Studios and then spent a week at Knobler's studio, Goosehead Palace, doing overdubs. "Dan was helping shape these songs alongside us," Humbert says. "It wasn't like we were on the battlefield, and he was still on the ship. He was right there in the trenches with us."

Elsewhere, Rodney Crowell, who introduced the Shootouts to Knobler and happens to be the producer's father-in-law, brings heart-on-sleeve vocal flourishes on the touching highlight "Half A World Away," a meditation on the ways life sometimes doesn't work out how we'd hope.

Country icon Vince Gill also lends his sweet tenor to a revved-up, pedal steel-heavy cover of "I'll Be Damned," a 1981 Pure Prairie League song he wrote while a member of that band. Gill had connected with the Shootouts via Knobler and was deeply appreciative they were covering his song, but initially couldn't appear due to his Eagles touring commitments.

However, in a stroke of good luck, Gill happened to be on the Grand Ole Opry the same night as the Shootouts. Bates asked Gill if the collaboration could still happen. This time, the answer was yes. "Having musicians that we look up to give their stamp of approval is an incredible honor," Humbert says. "It makes us feel like we're on the right path."

A decade and four albums later, the Shootouts have shared the stage with artists such as Marty Stuart, Steve Earle, Sheryl Crow, Chris Isaak, Jim Lauderdale, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. They've also played the Grand Ole Opry seven times since 2023,

recently debuted at the Ryman Auditorium, and have artifacts in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, as part of the Cleveland Rocks exhibition.

Thanks to their steady touring schedule, the band's musical chemistry has only become stronger with time. And heading into the release of *Switchback*, the Shootouts are rested, recharged, and ready for wherever the music takes them next. "We've also always lived in the Americana world, which is open to experimentation and trying new things and sounds," Humbert says. "We're going to continue building on where we've been and where we come from."

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