'Every Note A Pearl' on Starlight Drifters release

STEPHANIE A. CASOLA

By far the best part of swing dancing — and I suppose I speak on behalf of women when I say this — is being spun around in dizzy circles and lifted high into the air.

The music of Ann Arbor-based quartet, The Starlight Drifters, has much the same appeal. In a whirlwind conversation outside the Magic Bag Friday, I spoke to the local rock-a-billy boys — Bill Alton, Chris Casello, Rudy Varner and Marc Gray — as they celebrated the release of their new album, "Every Note a Pearl."

Between their fast-talking, light-hearted comments, amazing ability to finish each other's sentences, and friendly interruptions from fans on their way into the club, the band shared some insight into another world, one of cowboy boots and Western crooning, steel guitars and heart-felt lyrics.

Together since 1997, the band has added drums to its line-up, which rounds out its signature sound, and allows them to play more styles of music, said singer Bill Alton, a Livonia resident. Hesitant to categorize the band's sound, Alton said he doesn't "want anybody to know what we are."

So I won't tell you that "what they are" is a talented group of guys who refuse to tie themselves — and their music — into one style or popular trend.

In just the few years that The Starlight Drifters have been together, guitarist and song-writer Chris Casello noted that the music scene has changed considerably.

"When we started there was a really strong rock-a-billy scene," he said. "The rock-a-billy scene and the swing scene have kind of meshed."

Mirroring that change, "Every Note a Pearl" shows off more of the Western swing side of a band that started out sounding much more rock-a-billy on its first album "Introducing ... The Starlight Drifters."

Whatever you call it, the band members are proud of the new album, christening it "a labor of love."

"It was very tedious at times, but the work we put into it was well worth it," said Alton. "Chris did the engineering and producing. (We) wrote all the songs together. I'm extremely proud of it."

Casello admitted "Every Note" is "his baby." Working several nights a week, the album took about five months to complete.

"We were very meticulous about what we wanted on it and what we didn't," said Casello.

Revealing influences as diverse as the Brian Setzer Orchestra and Elvis Presley, the songs appeal to a wide variety of listeners. Dale Alton, the group's manager, politely interrupted to pass a photograph around to be autographed. A 5-year-old fan couldn't wait a second longer. It was just another example of the universal dimension inherent in The Starlight Drifters music.

Check them out: *The Starlight Drifters swing into action 9 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 28 at the Cavern Club, 210 S. First Street, Ann Arbor, $5 cover, 21 and over. Call (734) 332-9900 for information.*

"I think we do reach a wider spectrum," said Alton.

Casello completes his thought by adding that the audience includes anyone "from little kids to senior citizens."

Dale Alton, who also happens to be Bill's father, shared his own opinion on the subject.

"Older people can remember this music and younger kids can relate to it," he said.

Above all The Starlight Drifters offer a sound that's unmistakably American.

"If you don't like it, you're a communist," said Casello, laughing.

Politics aside, The Starlight Drifters established a strong following, most of which came dressed in hoop skirts, slick suits, and fedora hats. While fancy attire is not required, it suits the mood and era the band evokes in their style and sound.

"They're very professional people," said Dale Alton. "I call them entertainers, not a band."

Where will The Starlight Drifters go from here?

Alton said he hopes the band stays true to the roots of their music.

I'm sure they will.

Check out The Starlight Drifters when they swing into action 9 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 28 at the Cavern Club in Ann Arbor.

Sophie B. Hawkins' 'timbre' falls flat

CD REVIEW

Sophie B. Hawkins — "timbre"
Columbia Records

With a title like "timbre," Sophie B. Hawkins third and latest release seems to scream "look out below, listeners."

Sophie B. Hawkins

All it's missing is a capital "T."

Heavily weighted down in emotional texture, the album offers 12 tracks that are not suited to the average listener. The parental advisory — likely added due to the strong sexual references in songs like "32 *Lines" and "The Darkest* Childe" — isn't the only deterrent. Some songs are highly insightful and reflective. But others borderline on the deeply depressing, like "No Connection," in which Hawkins sings "I'm feeling the strings of your rejection/Kneeling in the wrong direction/Sealing my heart to your neglection/ Revealing no connection."

While listeners might easily relate to the weighty subject matter, little reprieve is derived from a brighter song, such as "Mmm My Best Friend." The first single off of the album, "Lose Your Way" is featured on the Dawson's Creek soundtrack.

Though "timbre" might be best reserve for a rainy afternoon of introspection, it does offer a couple musical gems.

"Strange Thing" showcases Hawkins' melodic voice in her own gentle songbird manner. In "Bare the Weight of Me" Hawkins sounds as if she's stretched across a piano in a smoky lounge pleading for attention, for love. Spiced with soft hints of percussion and a violin for added romance, this track is a worthy example of Hawkins' work and diversified abilities. It's unfortunate there isn't another like it in the dozen.

All songs were written, produced and performed by Hawkins, and the album is now available in record stores.

— Stephanie Casola
Staff writer

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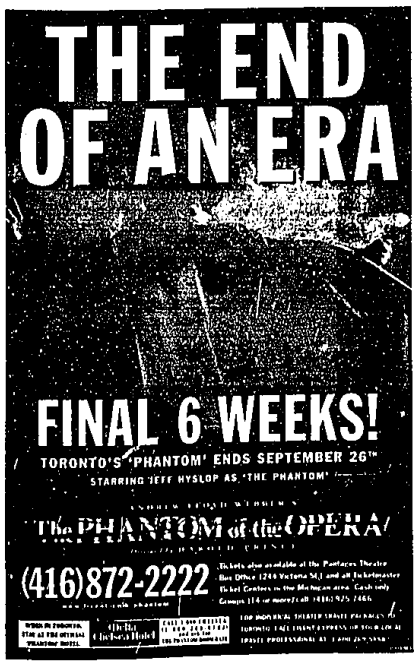

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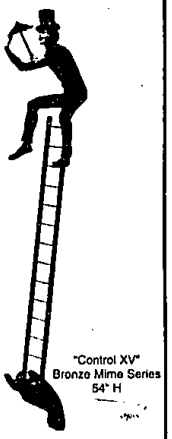

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