



<http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/1996-06-21/532054/>

The Spectre of Swing

Don McCalister's Demon

JUNE 21, 1996, MUSIC

I don't know. What do you think it is?" queries Don McCalister with a sharp, inquisitive expression shooting out from behind his unusually thick wire-framed glasses. There's an air of challenge in his subtle squint and gentle drawl. He's answered a question with a question -- a question that has no simple answer. But searching for clues is no arduous task, either. In fact, for fans of fluid songwriting and country hybridisms, it might be the perfect way to spend a hot Texas afternoon. The Question: Just what style of music is *Love Gone Right* (Biscuit Boy) the new Don McCalister, Jr., CD?

A man sitting at the counter inside Texas Chili Parlor, where *Love Gone Right* is playing over the speaker system, turns to McCalister's table some ten feet away and offers his own answer to the question at hand. "I like it," he says with a sincere grin, lifting his beer in salute, "It reminds me of early Lyle Lovett."

"Thank you," responds McCalister in a modest sotto voice that is barely audible over the din of the dinner crowd, "I'm a big fan of Lyle's."

Yes, the man's ears are sharp. There are songs on *LGR* that reek of the country-jazz fusion that rocketed Lovett to the stars. But it's not that simple. In fact, *LGR* is McCalister's most complex album to date. His first release, *Silver Moon* (Biscuit Boy), was basically bluegrass. His second, *Brand New Ways* (DejaDisc), an album that took years to finish, was quite varied in style, but stuck for the most part to basic country dashed with hard rock pepper. It's an evenly textured cloth, with a couple of subliminally stitched designs. In comparison, *Love Gone Right* is an expansive tapestry stretching from Brownsville to the Panhandle.

The title track, "Staying Gone," "Radio Boogie," and "It's My Life," all possess a slick, trailer park-gone-to-Carnegie Hall feel. But that still leaves six songs floating around, and those guys have no single unifying thread. There's the Tejano ambience that permeates what is otherwise a country song on "Mexican Wind." There's a slow ballad written by McCalister with Nashville big pen Roger Brown called "The Stars Spell Dixie." "Red of Rose of the Morning" is an easy tempo, hold 'em close two-stepper. The remaining three cuts can be stamped with a fiery catch phrase with which McCalister is often closely associated here in Austin and all over the world: Western swing.

Yet McCalister would rather leap from a moving Britrail than call himself a Western swinger. He doesn't care if the imprimatur could help him fill the Rose Bowl. He's too eclectic for that. This is a man who has experimented with more musical styles than Castro has smoked cigars.

As a kid who moved around countless times in tow of his sociology professor father, McCalister's first musical endeavors were on alto sax at the tender age of 12. Being the tallest kid in his junior high band, somehow his music

conductor saw fit to shuffle him over to the baritone section where a little more stamina was required. When McCalister got his first acoustic guitar not long thereafter, he wanted to be a flamenco player.

"My dad was teaching at Tulane," McCalister recalls. "Down in New Orleans they would broadcast all of Sid Franklin's bullfights on Friday nights and I always watched. He was the only American bullfighter. This is why I thought flamenco was cool and this is how I got into Spanish and Mexican culture."

In his adult years, McCalister would major in anthropology and Mexican-American Culture at the University of Texas. He is still six hours short of graduation. "Flamenco's hard stuff," he laughs. "I realized when I was 14 that I wasn't going to get any girls playing flamenco music, so I got into lots of rock bands here and there throughout high school. There was nothing significant to speak of. I did play in a folk band in Alabama that got lots of gigs."

In 1982, McCalister moved to Austin after the peso went down the tubes, taking his construction business in Brownsville with it. Looking for something to do with his spare time when not studying for exams at UT, he hooked up with a bluegrass band. According to McCalister, the only thing worthwhile about that group was its name -- the Flakey Biscuit Boys. Still, the band lasted more than five years.

During the reign of FBB, McCalister started to hone his songwriting skills as well as develop working relationships with other songwriters. Emily Kaitz was the first writer with whom he worked. From that point, the list of songwriters and musicians with whom he collaborated grew as much in distinction as in length: Roger Brown, who has written for George Strait, Nanci Griffith, and Randy Travis and who has just signed a deal for a Western swing LP with Decca; Charlie Larkey, bassist for Fuggs and Carol King; Floyd Domino, a pianist of Asleep at the Wheel fame who has also worked with Waylon Jennings and George Strait; Jesse "Guitar" Taylor; Kimmie Rhodes (see p.48); Kirk Roth; Stan Paul Davis; and many more.

McCalister now makes frequent trips to Nashville to lend his talents to country songwriters and publishers, and has become a member of a very elite club. He's one of the few country musicians in Austin or anywhere who makes 100 percent of his living through music. Forty percent is earned through live performance and publishing royalties and the rest is earned by teaching guitar to other musicians. He's covered an impressive distance in a mere 14 years.

But still, the specter of Western swing looms. After all, he does call his band the Texas Rhythm Kings and the folks in Snyder with the Legends of Western Swing Festival saw him as a natural to play their event on June 26th. "I think Texas Rhythm Kings came about as something to put on a T-shirt to sell in Europe," says McCalister, who insists it was never a preconceived notion to start a Western swing band. "I'm not even sure how this all happened," he says, "I just played with lots of people over a long time and somehow it turned into this."

No matter how vague or varied McCalister is about his style, it is Texas or Western swing that sells. This summer, he will do his first U.S. tour outside the South, playing the West Coast where many of the clubs he will play, such as the legendary Ash Grove in Los Angeles, have one night a week specifically set aside for Western swing.

And yes, there's a good reason to put "Texas Rhythm Kings" on a T-shirt for European consumption, especially in the U.K. "Those people were going nuts," says McCalister about his gigs at the Ferry in Glasgow, "The place was

packed on two floors all the way around. People were screaming. During breaks, there would be a kazillion people lined up to buy the CD. I was like: `What? What is this?' In Europe we're a novelty. We embody this whole notion of what they think Texas is. It's something they've never seen. It's like Jose Greco when he comes to Austin."

Italy was also receptive to McCalister and crew. There, he was featured on MTV, played the famous Donato's castle in Pescia, and became a pet favorite of *Jam* magazine in Milan. McCalister was so taken with Italy that he's now studying Italian and will be passing through again when the band returns to Europe this fall.

But back home, people aren't exactly busting down club doors. McCalister sees the situation as a matter of saturation. "I think Austin crowds have seen so many singer-songwriters," he says, "that it's like, what the fuck!?! Another singer-songwriter."

He puts on a long face, mimicking a jaded music fan. But McCalister, the singer-songwriter, the guitar teacher, the Western swinger, the flamenco guitarist/anthropologist or what have you, doesn't measure success by numbers in a crowd or in dollars, pounds or lira. A mansion is not on his itinerary.

"Make good music with good musicians. Have a nice place to stay. Eat good food. Drink good wine, and god help us, make a little money," he chuckles on the last line, "As long as I can pay the insurance on the van...." n

Copyright © 2015 Austin Chronicle Corporation. All rights reserved.