

Cover Story



Sawyer Brown

Shakin' Up Country

By Bill Fisher

After achieving national recognition as the winners of the 1984 *Star Search* television talent competition, and after signing with Capitol/Curb Records, Sawyer Brown's career has been marked by an unusual degree of success — on the charts and in the building of a large, enthusiastic audience. The future for the band has never been brighter: Capitol/Curb has just released its second album, "Shakin'," and this week the group is jetting to Japan with Kenny Rogers for a series of shows that the quintet hopes will be the beginning of strong international acceptance.

The band is comprised of: Mark Miller, lead vocals and rhythm guitar; Bobby Randall, lead guitar, fiddle, steel guitar, harmonica and vocals; Gregg Hubbard, keyboards and vocals; Jim Scholten, bass; and Joe Smyth, drums and percussion. For its upcoming dates, the group has added a synth player and a reedman to help match the sound of its new album, which has a slightly bigger sound overall.

Sawyer Brown's first Capitol/Curb single, "Leona," peaked at 28 on the country chart in the final week of last year. That was a highly respectable debut, to be sure, but the second single, "Step That Step," went all the way to number one last May, and the group's self-titled first album hit number two on the country LP chart. That album remains in the top 10 still, with sales around 300,000. A third single, "Used To Blue," reached number two just this month.

The new album, like the first, presents a group that is obviously oriented toward pure entertainment and that means live entertainment. The recorded Sawyer Brown is important, but the heart of this group is found in the spotlight. Said lead singer Mark Miller, "We're not gonna let anything technically imperfect go down on the record, but the music's got to absolutely feel good. Sometimes I think that if you get too technical with your music you might — well, 'we' would lose something if everything was just 'polished,' you know." Guitarist Bobby Randall added, "I think that some producers and some people work so hard at making it so perfect, so polished, that they lose a little bit of the personality, a little bit of the feel. Our music is more personality

and more feel than perfection . . . all of our records are fun . . . We work real hard on our vocals, I think, and they are probably the most polished of anything, but you know, the drums are a little more rock 'n' roll, the guitars are a little more ragged than a perfect country record . . . 'cause we're just madmen in there having fun." Sawyer Brown's reputation for manic excitement on stage remains its proudest boast, and the group has been extending that reputation tremendously over the last year while touring with Kenny Rogers. Opening for Rogers has been more than a strictly musical experience, however. Miller observed, "Most of what we've learned is from watching how the tour's been set up — the actual business going on . . . in taking that kind of an entourage from city to city every day and not losing anybody. That's been, I think, an education in itself."

The band will be making half a dozen concert appearances in four Japanese cities on its upcoming trip, and Miller says that the group is eager to tap foreign markets. "We'd like to tour Europe," he said. "We'd like to be an international act . . . to be able to go to other countries and draw a crowd and them be familiar with our music. So this is just kind of the beginning, we're hoping."

Sawyer Brown is managed by C.K. Spurlock and Mickey Baker's Starbound Management, and the game plan for making the band look and sound good includes an array of product endorsements from Pearl drums, Schecter guitars and D'Addario strings to the group's trademark Converse tennis shoes and, possibly in the near future, a clothing company endorsement.

The first single from "Shakin'" is "Betty's Bein' Bad," a song that is the perfect vehicle for Sawyer Brown's party time persona. A video of the tune has been completed; shot in Manhattan, it was directed by Martin Kahan (who did Ricky Skaggs' equally upbeat and very popular *Country Boy* clip).

The Country Music Association has recognized Sawyer Brown's outstanding freshman success with a nomination for the Horizon Award, and the group has a good shot at winning. For Sawyer Brown, the award would mark the end of an incredibly rewarding first year as a recording group.

EAST COASTINGS

A MAN NEEDS A FARMAID — Woody Allen once remarked that casual sex is a pretty empty experience, though as empty experiences go it rates pretty high. Well, watching **Nell Young** plough through 30 minute versions of 10 year old songs that were never that good to begin with was likewise a first rate second rate experience. But Young, performing at Pier 84 on September 10, proved he had



SOME GUYS — Steve Lillywhite (l), producer and Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones, putting the finishing touches on the forthcoming Stones LP at RPM, NYC.

a heart of gold when he talked movingly about the plight of farmers and repeatedly plugged FARMAID and the Harkin Farm Reform Bill. The next morning he even appeared on ABC's *Good Morning America* where he said the farm crisis was on his mind "all the time." Another side of farm unemployment — that is, what farmers do with all their enforced leisure — was jocularly addressed by **Ned Sublette** at a CBGBs show September 13. Sounding like an AM-radio swamp preacher in an SRO hotel, Sublette ripped through songs like "Cow Mutation" and "The Devil Took the F Train." His five man band will perform September 27 at a New Music Seminar showcase where he'll likely infect more people with his bubonic humor.

THEY'RE AN AMERICAN BAND — New York's **Del Lords** ground up the history of rock 'n roll and chewed it with its mouth open September 15 at Maxwell's in Hoboken, N.J. Not only does their unpretentious approach to rock sound ready-made for arenas, but they look like rock heavyweights too, somewhere between the **Clash** and **Creedence Clearwater Revival**. At Maxwell's they performed new rave-ups ("Only Love Can Set You Free") and old crowd pleasers ("I Believe There's a Heaven Before I Die") while spicing the set with a dangerously quiet version of **Springsteen's** "Johnny 99." Their show was well-paced and well played and the crowd — they attract the best-looking audiences — was still calling for more after they closed with an encore of Neil Young's "Union Pacific."

YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST — Tour dates are set for A&M recording artist **Marti Jones**, whose A&M debut album "Unsophisticated Time" has already spawned a single in "(If I Could) Walk Away." Maxwell's in Hoboken will be the site of her first New York area concert on September 26, followed the next night by a New Music Seminar spotlight show at Irving Plaza. Her touring band will include producer/songwriter **Don Dixon** on guitar, **db Chris Stamey** on bass, **Ted Lyons** on drums and **Mary Mack** on keyboards. This temporary Marti Jones band will then tour major cities from Miami to Boston later this fall, with west coast dates tentatively scheduled for the winter. In between, Dixon will produce the new **Bongos** album. In related news, an engineer at Reflections, the Charlotte studio where Marti's album was cut, revealed that he recorded five live **R.E.M.** shows last fall and has assembled a master tape for potential release as a live album. The as yet unsigned master is ready for mixing and could be released by early next year. Explains recording engineer Mark Williams, "R.E.M. was getting ready to drop a lot of their early material from live shows and figured recording it would free them from actually playing it."

WORLD FAMOUS IN THE EAST VILLAGE — With no apologies to **George C. Scott**, the two-man band **They Might Be Giants** performed with ferocious tape loop backing at the East Village club Neither/Nor. **John Flansburgh** and **John Linnell** are the prolific singing/songwriting duo who play highly entertaining original tunes like "She Was a Hotel Detective" and "32 Footsteps." They will also be playing a New Music Seminar showcase at 8 B.C. on September 27. For a sample of this appealing, eccentric mix, call their Dial-a-Song service at 718-387-6962.



COASTING OUT — The **Washington Squares**, those gone hepcats from Greenwich Village, are shopping around for a producer for their new album . . . **Princess DI** reports that her all-time favorite song is **Spandau Ballet's** "True" and her favorite bands are **Spandau** and **Dire Straits**. She didn't mention the **Sex Pistols** . . . **Lou Reed** is in the studio recording his next RCA album due for release in early '86. Reed's "don't settle for walking" print and TV promo spots for Honda scooters have been credited by **Wieden & Kennedy** (Honda's ad agency) as having had a "significant impact on increased sales" of the motorbike . . . **Shannon** has just released her version of **Foreigner's** "Urgent" as a single . . . **Sheena Easton's** new **Nile Rodgers** produced album (tentatively titled "Do You") will be released by EMI in October. Included on the album are two songs by Rodgers and a reportedly blistering cover of **Martha and the Vandella's** "Jimmy Mack." Little Steven Van Zandt has announced, that **Ringo Starr**, **Peter Townshend**, **Daryl Hall** and **Bob Geldof** are participating in the recording of "Sun City," the anti-apartheid song . . . **Robert Gordon** will bring his brand of rockabilly to the Lone Star on September 27 . . . **Buster Poindexter** and the **Banshees of Blue** will perform October 18 at the Bottom Line.

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE QUINN — Capitol Recording artists **Ashford** and **Simpson** took some time backstage during a recent NY appearance to chat with MTV VJ **Martha Quinn**. After enjoying the success of their single, "Solid" from their recent LP of the same title, they have written their first Broadway play and are in the recording studios for their upcoming 1986 Capitol LP release.

Paul Iorio