

GOOD AIM

THE SHOOTOUTS PERFECT 'RUST BELT' COUNTRY ON NEW ALBUM 'SWITCHBACK'

The Akron, Ohio, trio lean on Midwestern hustle and connections with Rodney Crowell and Vince Gill to make the sleeper Americana LP of the summer

By **GARRET K. WOODWARD**

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The Shootouts worked with Rodney Crowell on their new album 'Switchback.'

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It was just about 10 years ago when singer-songwriter Ryan Humbert had an epiphany, one where he realized what he was doing musically wasn't exactly where his heart and soul wanted to be.

"When we started this band it was literally like a bolt of lightning shot through my body," Humbert tells *Rolling Stone*. "I felt like this is what I should have been doing all along."

Humbert is describing the creation of his group the Shootouts, a rising country act based out of Akron, Ohio. Self-proclaimed “Rust Belt Americana” (an ode to the group’s Midwestern roots), the trio, including guitarist Brian Poston and vocalist Emily Bates, have been making waves around Nashville and beyond, even though all still call Akron home.

“We’ve been asked a few times if we would consider moving [to Nashville],” Humbert says. “If we’re lucky enough to continue to build our dream, I don’t really see any reason why we’d have to abandon a hometown that has been very good to us.”

The group’s latest album, *Switchback*, offers up a wide range of sonic flavors — Americana to bluegrass, Western swing to honky-tonk. It also features a slew of special guests, including Vince Gill, Sam Bush, Rodney Crowell, Mickey Raphael, Logan Ledger, and bluegrass breakout Lindsay Lou.

“We mix a little bit of [everything] into what we do,” Humbert says. “The new record feels like the first record we’ve made that, I think, speaks more to who we are, as opposed to who we love.”



A decade ago, Humbert was trying to make it as a singer-songwriter in Northeastern Ohio, all while finding work in various bands. But it wasn't until he crossed paths with Poston that things began to come into focus. The duo teamed up and the Shootouts were born. At first, they played mostly covers — by Hank Thompson, Gram Parsons, Marty Stuart — but quickly were inspired to write their own original music.

Switchback is the Shootouts' fourth record since their inception (as well as their debut with Transoceanic Records). For the last decade, the outfit, which eventually added Bates, has been hitting the ground hard, hustling to find creative and financial stability. But there was never any doubt in their intent: put a creative, Midwest spin on country music.

Coming out of the gate, the group played around Akron and its surrounding cities, from Cleveland to Canton, building an audience in the region.

"We've managed to curate a great fan base there," Humbert says. "There's definitely a lot of that area that has seeped into our music. It's a work ethic as much as it's a sound. The 'Rust Belt' work ethic. You get up every morning and you work hard."

Soon, the band was gigging outside of the region, playing venues within an eight-hour-drive radius. Nashville was in their sights, and they bolted back and forth countless times from Akron via I-71 and I-65. The "Rust Belt" work ethic paid off grandly too: In February 2023, the Shootouts made their debut on the Grand Ole Opry.

Through the Opry and other Nashville channels, the Shootouts met Texas troubadour Rodney Crowell and producer Dan Knobler (Crowell's son-in-law.) Crowell cameos in the *Switchback* track "Half a World Away."

"Rodney was kind of unintentionally the godfather of this project," Humbert says. "The first time I heard him sing those lyrics, I got choked up. This is a guy who I have been listening to since I was a kid, and here he is singing on our song — it was incredibly moving."

Through Knobler, they were introduced to Vince Gill, and as fans of Pure Prairie League — a group Gill was once a member of — the Shootouts asked Gill to accompany them on a rendition of the 1981 PPL tune “I’ll Be Damned.” Gill obliged and they played the song on the Opry in April.



“It’s a dream that keeps coming true,” Humbert says.

With *Switchback* out now and another appearance at the Opry set for June 27, the Shootouts are the epitomizing what it means to be a working country band in the modern era: One foot in the traditions of musicianship and touring, the other in finding new ways to reach a wider audience — and a portion of their heart and soul forever in Akron.

“Right now, everything feels like we’re hitting our mark. We found our stride,” Humbert says. “We’re a hardworking band, and that’s what it takes — perseverance and every bit of hustle.” 🎸