

Eleven Hundred Springs

On their last album, 2004's *Bandwagon*, Eleven Hundred Springs posed the musical question, "Why You Been Gone So Long?" Well, here we are in 2008, and their fans could be asking them the same question. Four years, after all, is a long time to take between albums. But the guys didn't plan the delay; life just happened. Truth is, it's not about how long it takes, it's about how well it's done, and this time out, the Dallas-based band has created one heckuva collection – a rich blend of perfectly ripened musical fruit they're calling *Country Jam*.

For their effort, Eleven Hundred Springs also decided to hire a jam-master of sorts. They'd never worked with an outside producer, so they went after the one guy who's quite possibly the busiest music-maker in Texas: Grammy winner Lloyd Maines, whose production and pedal-steel playing skills are so in demand, allmusic.com has 21 album credits listed under his name – for 2007 alone. Needless to say, they had to stand in line for a while.

The band also scheduled some notable guests, including singer Heather Myles, who duets on "I'll Be Here For You"; guitarist/vocalist Nick Curran, who contributes to the Ronnie Dawson cover, "V-8 Ford Boogie"; and lead guitarist/vocalist Matt Hillyer's uncle, Robert Lockart, who adds sax to "Rocket 88" (yeah, it's that "Rocket 88" – the song most often cited as the genesis of rock 'n' roll). Tim Alexander delivers piano, organ and accordion, and Maines does some acoustic guitar and banjo work as well.

The notion of added ingredients more or less led to the album's title, though the initial inspiration came from a friend of the band's, an acrobatic, "always animated" NBA mascot. "Nobody does the country jam like y'all!" he often tells them. The line seemed funny at first, but it gave Hillyer the idea for some yummy-looking album art, from the actual jar of jam on the front cover to a full country breakfast – eagerly gobbled by the band on the back cover.

"With the sit-in performances that we had lined up, the whole concept of a country jam started to make more sense as a title, because it was kind of like a jam session," he explains. And those sessions certainly could be called, uh, fruitful.

"There was kind of an open feeling to it," he says of recording at the Zone in Dripping Springs, outside of Austin. "That's what we were going for, just to be able to have fun in the studio."

Having an outsider at the helm also helped minimize any potential decision-by-committee issues. Though Hillyer and bassist Steve Berg co-founded the band 10 years ago (after playing together, in various incarnations, since 1992), drummer Mark Reznicek, pedal steel player Dan Crelin and fiddler Jordan Hendrix could just as easily step behind the control-room glass, according to Hillyer.

And having Maines around was a blast, he says. "One reason we loved working with him so much is he's very good at letting you do what you're gonna do anyway. He knows how to get a great performance out of you without trying to steer you in a direction that you don't necessarily want to go. He's also really good at doing what producers do, which is taking you to the next level."

It was Maines, in fact, who suggested the addition of another rockabilly song; they wound up choosing "Rocket 88," the iconic Jackie Brenston/Ike Turner tune.

"It was a last-minute add-in," Hillyer says. "We had gotten done with all our rhythm tracks and it just felt like we were a little bit short. Lloyd said, 'You guys do a great job with the rockabilly stuff, and not a lot of people can really pull it off, so why don't you think about if there's something along those lines that you might want to cut?'"

Hillyer had always been looking for a chance to collaborate with his uncle, a session player in L.A. and the guy whose colorful stories first turned Hillyer on to "the romance of being a musician."

"I thought, man, we could get him to play a really cool sax lead on it and that would be something really special for my whole family," Hillyer relates. The result is a song that definitely rocks it – heated up by Lockart's sax and Alexander's high-octane piano.

Octane drives the album's other rockabilly raver, Dawson's "V-8 Ford Boogie." It also has significance for Hillyer, not only because he considers guest player Curran a kindred rockabilly spirit, but because both had backed Dawson on several occasions and because Dawson was a major influence on both Hillyer and Berg. They dedicated *Bandwagon* to Dawson and their cover of the Mickey Newbury-penned "Why You Been Gone So Long" included a snippet of the late singer's vocals. This time, Hillyer plays Dawson's actual guitar. With his widow's permission, Hillyer borrowed the rare Schecter from the Ellis County Museum in Waxahachie.

"There's so much history to the actual guitar," he rhapsodizes. "That gold mirror pick guard is worn down from sweat and the way Ronnie would just tear it up. Not everybody can do that. It takes years and a whole lot of energy ... it's a magical thing."

Hillyer, whose appealing tenor graces this collection with an easy affability, experienced a different kind of magic with the birth of his daughter, the subject of "Nobody Told You About the Love." The uptempo ballad addresses the fact that, while expectant parents get all kinds of advice, nobody adequately describes how parenthood "opens up your whole world and your eyes to what love is really about, what life is really about."

"I'll Be Here For You" was written as a lullaby, but works just fine as a classic country duet. In fact, *Country Jam* is brimming with classic country elements – and classic Texas country (there is, of course, a difference). A great example of the latter is the album opener "Texas Afternoon," a terrific melody that almost sounds as if Doug Sahm's playing on it. ("Mention Doug Sahm and you're covering a whole lot of territory," Hillyer says of the band's influences. And Johnny Cash would certainly approve of the cheatin' song, "10 to Life.") "Whose Heart Are you Breakin' Tonight?" is a perfect dance-hall number, and the George Jones cut, "Don't Stop the Music," shows up because, according to Hillyer, not enough people are doing waltzes these days. "Every Time I Get Close to You" is another quintessentially Texas tune, one he describes as "drivin', rockin' country – full of energy."

It's a fun song to play, Hillyer says. But then again, these guys sound like they're having fun on every song they play – because they know how to squeeze just the right amount of flavor out of each one.

You know, putting together an album is sort of like creating the perfect jam recipe. Sometimes it takes years – and a whole lot of energy and some magic – to make it taste just right. So that's why they've been gone so long. They were busy in their kitchen, cooking up an incredible batch of musical delights.

So go ahead and share that breakfast with the band – and get ready to fall in love with their fine country jam.