



JR DELIA

Gone Country

AMERICANA GUITARIST JIM CAMPILONGO RETURNS TO HIS SWINGING ROOTS

BY MICHAEL ROSS

IN THE MID '90S, SAN FRANCISCO GUITARIST

Jim Campilongo forsook a burgeoning career as a funk-rock guitarist for the joys of twang, recording a series of Jimmy Bryant meets Speedy West-style records with pedal-steel maestro Joe Goldmark (Dallas Wayne, Jim Lauderdale) under the sobriquet Jim Campilongo and the Ten Gallon Cats. Despite the classic instrumentation, Campilongo's compositions and unique playing style pushed against any strict "country" appellation.

After moving to New York, Campilongo refined his distinctive "Roy Buchanan meets Thelonious Monk" approach in a trio format, moving even further from the hard country he loves. His new sound endeared him to attendees of his residencies in Manhattan, and his masterful manipulation of a top-loading, maple-fretboard 1959 Fender Telecaster brought him work with Norah Jones, Teddy Thompson, and Martha Wainwright, and appearances on programs like *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Conan*, and *Later...with Jools Holland*.

A few years ago, Campilongo discovered the New York band Honeyfingers playing a version of

the modern Western swing style he had pioneered with the Ten Gallon Cats. The guitarist soon began sitting in with steel player Jonny Lamm, Tele-master Luca Benedetti, Gypsy jazzier Roy Williams, and a series of rotating rhythm sections. This sizzling string seminar ultimately resulted in *Last Night, This Morning* [Blue Hen] by Jim Campilongo & Honeyfingers. The release revives some Cats tunes, reimagines some trio tunes, covers a couple of classics, and throws in some new tunes for a hoedown throwdown that looks to be one of the top guitar records of the year.

Why do this record instead of another one with the trio?

I had missed playing country music since I moved to New York. My trio thing has definitely developed, and I am really into it, but it got less and less country.

I had an erroneous notion that all country music in New York was a Johnny Cash kind of country, while the country I loved was based more on the principles of Bach than Cash. My favorite music is

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Features

JIM CAMPILONGO

the pre-beard Merle Haggard, Lefty Frizzell, Johnny Paycheck, the ballads the Buckaroos did, and the instrumental stuff of the Troubadours, Buddy Emmons, and Lloyd Green. It is deadly serious and romantic country. I hadn't heard that in New York—I would see weird combinations of country and Motörhead. Then I saw Luca and Jonny play country really well, but with a New York mentality, and I really wanted to play with them. We ended up playing and just hit it off. We got together every Tuesday for 14 weeks. That is unheard of in New York—I think my trio has rehearsed twice. We ended up developing these arrangements that were so good I wanted to record them, and I'm really glad I did. It is fun to hear how big the tunes sound, and in some ways they are more realized than the originals.

How did the third guitar player get involved?

Roy Williams was integral. His rhythm playing really made this stuff. The main concern for Luca and me is trying to fill in the void when Roy is soloing. He does this thing we cannot do. He understands groove in a way that is genius.

Who arranged the tunes?

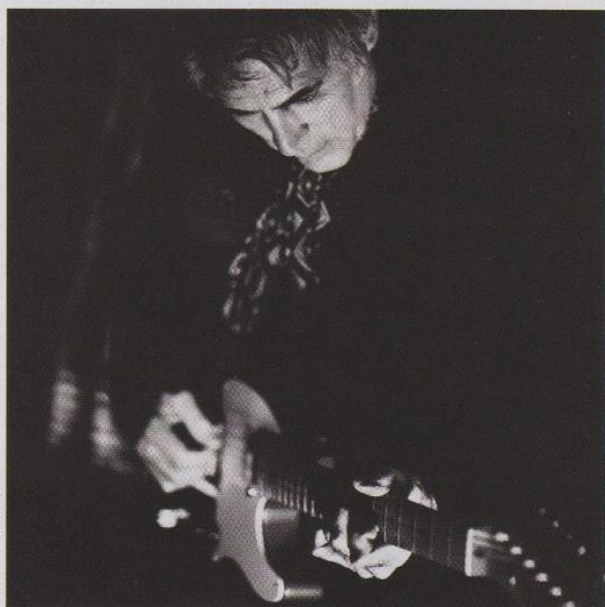
It was a group effort, but I would say Luca always has a bunch of ideas. Usually that's my role, but Luca would have 20 ideas, and they would always be good. He really contributed a lot and that's why he has a production credit.

In addition to rehearsing, did you guys play the songs out live before recording?

We played a lot. I have residencies with my trio, and when my bass player and drummer couldn't make it, I would just plug in Honeyfingers. In addition to the 55 Bar, Barbes, and Rockwood, we played a little place called the Shanty. It was a gig where no one paid attention and we could literally play songs two or three times in a row. It is so important to have gigs where no one pays attention. You want to be in the corner and playing and working on your craft. It was basically a rehearsal where we would leave with a little money. We played a lot, so 99 percent of what is in on that record is live. I thought I was going to overdub, but I listened to it, and thought, "This is good!"

This band has at least 30 strings going on. How did you deal with tuning issues?

That is a fair question. For me, the can of worms is bass and steel. David Franz is



What is the Gibson guitar you play live with them?

That is a Gibson 225. I was playing that at first and was starting to get into using feedback and some interesting stuff that transcended the typical jazz box. I was doing my thing, but it was a different thing. But then I did one gig on the '59 and that was it.

What amps did you use?

I used a silverface Fender Princeton with a Celestion G10.

I thought I was going to overdub a lot of solos, so I just brought a basic setup and it ended up all the same amp and guitar. We re-amped through a big amp when we mixed. On every record, I re-amp and send it in through another amp I would never carry, like a Fender Pro Reverb or Twin Reverb with JBLs. We mic the back and the front—you get a lot out of that back mic.

I am assuming there were your usual “no pedals” used in this record?

I endorse a few pedals, but for some reason I did not use them.

You switched to a Fender Princeton from a larger Fender Vibrolux when you came to New York. Was that just a concession to the size of the clubs?

I do not think there is that much of a difference between a Vibrolux on ten and a Princeton on ten, especially if my Princeton's bias is hot with new tubes. You're miked anyway, and the soundman isn't mad at you for playing on ten. In a way, it became louder using a Princeton versus a Vibrolux. Instead of having the soundman say, “Look, I can't put you through the P.A.,” he would put me through the P.A., and nine times out of ten, it's loud enough. I played through a Princeton at Shepard's Bush with Pete Townshend, and it was plenty loud on that stage. In 2000 seaters, Princeton's are almost too much sometimes. Those venues are not designed for loud guitar amps. They are designed for an acoustic cello to be heard in the back row.

What's next for Jim Campilongo?

I would like to record a trio record next. The trio with Chris Morrissey on bass and Josh Dion on drums is on a new level. I would like to incorporate Josh as a vocalist because he is a great singer. I have this fantasy about doing a Cream thing—but our version of it. 🍷

a great upright bass player. His intonation is really good and Jonny's intonation is also good, but I wanted the steel to intonate to us, rather than us gravitating towards the steel. I made that mistake in the Cats. In that band, we played to the steel guitar. I would play an open G, third string, which sounded good and 30 seconds later I would play my open G and it sounded flat. That was because there was microtonal shifting of the upright bass to adjust to the steel. The pedal steel guitar is the “Lord and Master” of intonation. It dictates what is 440, 440.3, or 440.5. Those shifts occur. So, when we recorded the basics, I said, “I do not want that to happen. It's going to be about guitar tuners and the guitars, and then the steel will come in and adjust to the guitars.

Also, at the advent of this band, I got a fret job on my '59 Telecaster. The frets were like painted on silver at that point and the thing had not been intonating for years. I also got these saddles that Luca recommended. They are threaded, but, for the first time in my life, they are compensated.

Did the steel play on any of the basics?

He played on all the basics and we kept some, but I kept Jonny really low in the headphones, and so did David. Then he would overdub and concentrate on tuning to us. It is just the nature of the instrument.

Did you separate everything to help with overdubbing?

Absolutely, I anticipated way more overdubs than actually happened. We had Roy and the bass very close because they are part of the rhythm section, so there was some leakage there, but that was okay. Nothing haunted us.

What guitars did you use on the recording?

It was just the '59 Telecaster. I would like to be more interesting.

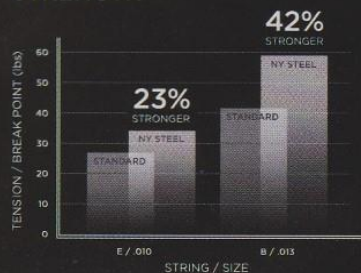


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