

The Flatlanders convene for more magic-making

Steve Knopper/ Chicago Tribune

One regular visitor to the \$85-a-month, three-bedroom house Joe Ely shared 45 years ago with four other musicians in Lubbock, Texas, was a carpenter named Steve Wesson. He would show up after work for informal jams in the living room, or on the porch, and haul out a saw from his pickup truck. He tapped it with a mallet so it made an inviting ghostly sound, perfect for the rickety country and folk songs the collective of students, songwriters, poets, guitarists and (in Ely's case) rock 'n' rollers were playing around him.

Wesson's musical saw became a key ingredient of an important and mysterious album by Ely's band, the Flatlanders, with fellow singer-songwriters Butch Hancock and Jimmie Dale Gilmore. They recorded one album together, in Nashville in 1972, and almost nobody heard it until 18 years later, when it came out as "More a Legend Than a Band," with gently swinging country-rock songs like "Jole Blon" and "Rose on the Mountain."

"We always kidded him — if he used the same instrument with the carpenters, what union would he join? Would it be the carpenters or the musicians?" Ely recalls by phone from his Austin home. "When we went to Nashville, we always joked about that."

Ely, 69, retells the Flatlanders' story publicly a few times a year, every time he reunites with Gilmore and Hancock for a



The Flatlanders are Butch Hancock, from left, Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore. (Steve Gullick)

live show. After forming at the Lubbock house, the makeshift band recorded a demo tape at a studio in Odessa, 140 miles south of Lubbock, and sent those 14 songs to a Nashville producer. (The demos would come out for the first time three years ago as "The Odessa Tapes.") Two months later, in Nashville, the band recorded the album that became "More a Legend Than a Band."

"The (Odessa) tape was leaning on Jimmie singing the songs, because he wanted a Nashville kind of a record for his label," Ely recalls in a half-hour interview. "The Odessa Tapes' were just the raw music before we did any focus on it. ... Just the fact we were going to go to Nashville — I remember working out harmony parts and lead parts and we kind of took it seriously, which was unusual for us to do."

He pauses with a laugh: "We didn't take many things seriously."

When the Flatlanders didn't go anywhere, the band took off in different directions,

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all eventually returning to Texas. Gilmore gravitated to Denver, where he played music casually for several years before becoming a successful singer-songwriter out of his home state; Hancock lived briefly in San Francisco before starting his own record label and a prolific recording career based in Austin; and Ely resumed his habit of rambling around the country, then formed his Joe Ely Band in Texas and made superb rock records for years, at one point opening for the Clash. Ely recently discovered 1974 tapes, made by his friend Lloyd Maines, a top country producer and former member of his band, which are "a lot more innocent" than the original albums. He hopes to put them out in February.

Ely's latest release, last year's "Panhandle Rambler," is a soft and intense album that has the ambience of an old Western, complete with dust and tumbleweed. It's about oil wells ("Coal Black Hammer"), moving to Mexico with a woman (a cover of his late friend Guy Clark's "Magdalene") and classic Texas radio towers ("Wonderin' Where"). He started the album like he always does, driving aimlessly around the Panhandle portion of Texas.

"I had gathered together a few songs I thought would fit, and then as I was working on them, different things happened," Ely says. "One time I got stuck in a snowstorm in Snyder, Texas, and it was this blizzard that just knocked

out all the highways and there was a big accident on the interstate, and I ended up in a motel room with nothing but a Burger King next door for about three days. I ended up writing five or six songs during those three days, because there was nowhere to go. That was my three meals a day.

"And that actually changed the course of the record, in a certain way," he continues. "There's about four songs that came from that one snowstorm."

Ely, who is best known for solo rockers over the years like "The Road Goes On Forever," "Honky Tonk Masquerade" and "Settle for Love," spent much of his youth viewing great books and songs as a travelogue. He once read Henry Miller's description of Brooklyn's Freedom Square in "Tropic of Capricorn," then hopped a freight there, only to find an ugly, trash-filled place. But those days are mostly over. "I don't do as much driving for pleasure, because the highways have just completely filled up. I've watched the traffic just go through the ceiling," he says. "I used to go out to western Texas and drive till I ran out of gas just to see what would happen and who I would meet, and sometimes get songs out of that. I don't do that anymore, either." Is it more dangerous? "I guess so."

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