

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Flatlanders live their music

By Bill Thompson

A common reverie: Wouldn't it be great to work with friends that you've known for most of your life? Wouldn't it be great if you could earn a living by writing songs, singing those songs and traveling the world with guys who know you better than anyone? Well, yeah.

Such is life for Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Joe Ely, who have been making music on and off together as the Flatlanders since the 1960s turned into the '70s.

The lore surrounding one of the original alt-country bands is so well known in some circles that when they re-released their first album from 1972, it was titled "More a Legend Than a Band." That's what happens when three independent-minded singer-songwriters take time off from successful solo careers to band together to play each other's songs, and write new ones together.

"It's absolutely amazing," Hancock says, retelling the story of growing up in Lubbock, Texas, for the umpteenth time.

"Jimmie and I have known each other since sixth grade. It took a few years before we found out we each played guitar because we were just friends at school." The grade school pals hooked up with Ely when they all were in high school.

Hancock credits Lubbock, best known as the home of Buddy Holly, for helping to form his worldview.

"It was a great place to grow up, wide open spaces, a tree or two on the horizon," he says, alluding to how the band was named. (Quick aside: For James McMurry fans, there really is a Levelland, which sits west of



Lubbock in west Texas).

"I spent a lot of time on a tractor on a my dad's farm. It's good for you to spend time on a tractor."

Hancock's career reflects the title of the new album. Some of his best-known tunes have been recorded by others (including "West Texas Waltz" and "If I Were a Bluebird" by Emmylou Harris). He was anointed one of the many "next Bob Dylans" for his literate songwriting and sometimes scratchy voice. And in one regard, he was a pioneer of the DIY path that many musicians – both established and hopeful – are trying these days.

"It was back in 1978," he says, "I just woke up one morning and realized I can record my own album.

"So I made 'West Texas Waltzes,' and I wound up with about 40 boxes of LPs. I came to the first stop sign, and I turned around and looked at them in the back of my Volkswagen van and said to myself 'What do I do now?'"

"I went to Dallas and drove past a head shop. I walked in with an armful of those LPs and realized they didn't know who I was or how to sell records. But I think they took three albums on consignment, and I kind of learned how to do it over the years."

This description pales compared to listening to a master storyteller embellish a tale that is filled with laughter and wonder at a long-ago time. It's fascinating that Hancock has lost neither his sense of wonder nor humor during his 40-plus years in the music business.

The time has helped sharpen the songwriting on the new album. That might be a product of the times (tough) or time (precious, as Hancock describes it).

Hancock lived in Austin for a long time, but 11 years ago he packed up and moved to Terlingua, "an old mining ghost town in the middle of the desert" near the Mexican border in west Texas. Again, he seemed to be ahead of the curve, this time by returning to a simpler (if not simple) way of life.

"There's no fire ants, no chiggers, no parking meters," he says. "These days, we don't seem to have time to hang with an idea. There's always interruptions, but there's time to think, too."

"I don't see the other guys all that often, but when we get together to do our writing, we realize that time is precious. We say here is what I've been doing and we work on some of those songs."

Those songs include "Homeland Refugee," a condemnation of where aspirational lifestyles have left us in America, and "Borderless Love," which describes the folly of building walls to keep people out of America.

"We hope that some of these songs have the feel to help people get out of the swamp of living in the mud," Hancock says. "Everything is so compressed. We're so busy, we hardly have time to die."