

The Flatlanders bring legendary sounds to Albany

By MICHAEL ECK, Special to the Times Union

Out in West Texas you can see for miles, with nary shrub nor rock to upset the wide horizon beneath the big blue sky.

Lubbock in the early '70s was still a scratch in the dirt, a town with not much to do and nowhere to go. It was a perfect place for songwriters, a literal tabula rasa waiting for words, chords and Lone Star wisdom.

"When I got there, there were kids playing Stratocasters in every garage," says songwriter Joe Ely, nodding to the legacy of Buddy Holly, which was still thicker than dust in those days.

Ely, an Amarillo native who had already done some bouncing around by the time he landed in Lubbock, liked the look of the place. He soon stumbled into two other locals with similar dreams — Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock.

They became The Flatlanders.

The group — dubbed "more a legend than a band" due to their shadowy status over almost forty years — only convenes when the stars over Lubbock align just right.

Luckily, those stars came together again last fall, and the gentlemen recorded a new album, "Hills and Valleys," which is populated with collaborative numbers like "Borderless Love," "Cry for Freedom" and "After the Storm."

The album was released on Tuesday and a Saturday performance at The Egg marks the second date on the band's first tour in five years.

Before hitting the road, Ely answered a few questions from his home in Austin, Texas.

Q: How important is Lubbock to The Flatlanders?

A: There's a strange kind of energy there because it's so flat. It's as flat as anything could be. It's like being on the ocean. There's absolutely nothing to do. But then there's a whole lot to do because you have to fill up that space. Lubbock is all about space, and I've always thought that that had something to do with its magic. You couldn't fill it up with dirt or buildings or anything, but music could fill it like nothing else could.

Q: Lloyd Maines was your steel guitarist long before he became known for being Dixie Chick Natalie Maines' dad. He produced the new album. What was it like working with him again?

A: We've known Lloyd forever, and knowing all of that West Texas music was a big part of Lloyd's touch when we put this group of songs together. It made them cohesive, it and made them work. He always liked that first record we did in Nashville as The Flatlanders, so it was a real natural thing for him to work with us be



The Flatlanders: Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Joe Ely.

cause he knows where those songs come from and he really knows the studio. It was a pure pleasure to work with him again.

Q: Between the references of the opening track, "Homeland Refugee," and your take on his version of "Sowing On the Mountain," Woody Guthrie seems to be hanging over this record. Is that fair to say?

A: I would definitely say that. Woody was a big part of our beginning. Woody Guthrie and Townes Van Zandt are sort of the patron saints of the Flatlanders.

Q: Despite having known each other so long, you guys didn't start writing as a team until about a decade ago, right?

A: We never did write together during the first go-round of The Flatlanders. In fact, we never wrote a song together until 1998 when Robert Redford's people asked us if we could do a song for the soundtrack of "The Horse Whisperer." We wrote about three songs in four or five days and we thought, wow, that was an interesting experience. So at that point we just kept getting together and we had written and recorded the entire "Now Again" album before we even thought of the possibility of putting it out. It was like it was just to see if we could do it. This new record kind of evolved over the last five years. That's the way we do it. We have no rational approach to anything.

Q: Is being on tour different now that you're all a little older?

A: The bumps are a little deeper and the swerves are a little more severe, but we've all pretty much lived on the road all our lives, so we don't complain about it.