



CMT News

NASHVILLE SKYLINE: Songs for the New Depression

Music to Acknowledge an Enduring Spirit

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The last time I was in L.A., the devil was in my door all day. Or, more accurately, in my e-mail and voice-mail. I was looking for a way past him, and I found it in truth, which the devil detests. The truth is in a song. It's called "Homeland Refugee" and it's on the upcoming Flatlanders album, Hills and Valleys. Which, by the way, is their first recorded venture together in five years and only their fourth studio album in three-plus decades. It's due March 31. This song was written by all three Flatlanders -- Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock -- and is sung by Ely.

The Flatlanders themselves are virtual musical refugees. These three veteran singer-songwriters started out together in Lubbock, Texas, in the early 1970s and have carved out distinctive solo careers. They come together every few years and write and make music together and then go their separate ways. Together, their styles and talents blend for something special -- a mix of Ely's rock 'n' roll spirit, Gilmore's rooted country sensibility and Hancock's coffeehouse folk aesthetic. This year, providentially, there's an album and there will be a tour.

"Homeland Refugee" is not a song of uplift, but of the will to survive. It's a song rooted in gritty reality, in the way Woody Guthrie wrote them. But there's a good argument to be made that acknowledging and facing reality is a better way to deal with adversity than ignoring it in favor of, say, spending a few more millions on a spree in Vegas.

"Homeland Refugee" is a tale about the new economic Dust Bowl. The narrator is leaving California with a "backpack full of yesterdays" after losing his home "when the deal got busted by the so-called security and trust." He's walking in the "desert sands, filling up with empty cans, container trains, casinos and canals." He recalls his grandpa telling him about the original Dust Bowl and "the way the bankers drove 'em out in the wind and the dust in the crash of '29." Passing a clutch of Mexican refugees, "We nod and smile/It's clear we're all the same/For everything this world is worth/We're all just migrants on this earth/Returning to the dust from where we came."

The refrain spells out the Flatlanders' vision of the new Dust Bowl: "I'm leaving California for the Dust Bowl/They took it all/There's nowhere else to go/The pastures of plenty are burning by the sea/I'm just a homeland refugee."

Today's mainstream country songwriters are finally shifting away from the we're-all-having-fun songs and concentrating more on feel-and-be-better-America songs, but sometimes they're just as depressing. Somehow, I'm not uplifted by song sentiments which go along the lines of, say, perhaps after having "had a moment" in church last Sunday, now I'm gonna be a better man. I do think it's wonderful that mainstream country radio is carrying an optimistic tone.

Sometimes, though, the shock of reality is more bracing and restorative than is make-believe.