

Flatlanders just 'a bunch of friends'

By TOM WILK • Courier-Post Staff

Singers/songwriters Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock have carved out successful careers on their own. Still, there's a special chemistry when then they perform together as the Flatlanders.

"It's a bunch of friends up there on stage who love to play music," Hancock sums it up in a phone interview from the band's tour bus. The band performs Saturday at World Cafe Live in Philadelphia.

Friendship has preceded musicianship for the Texas trio. Hancock, 63, has known Gilmore, also 63, for more than half a century and Ely, 62, for nearly as long.

The Flatlanders have regrouped for "Hills and Valleys" (New West Records), the band's first album in five years. It's a true collaboration as the threesome co-wrote eight of the 13 songs together and share vocals and harmonies on many of the songs.

The somber "Homeland Refugee," the CD's opening track, is as current as today's headlines, as a displaced California leaves his foreclosed home to return to the Dust Bowl.

"Joe had seen something in the news about people leaving California and heading back to the Midwest," Hancock said, in describing the song's evolution.

It sounds like an updated version of a Woody Guthrie classic for the 21st century and the Flatlanders make the connection more explicit with their version of Guthrie's "Sowing on the Mountain."

"Woody has been a great influence on us for years," Hancock said, noting Guthrie's

songs on America and the human condition retain a timeless appeal.

Produced by Lloyd Maines, "Hills and Valleys" mixes folks, country and rock and even a touch of reggae on "No Way I'll Never Need You." The album features plenty of humor and word play ("Sooner or later, it's now or never," they sing on "Just About Time.")



The Flatlanders have an unusual history. Their first album, recorded in 1972, was initially released only as an eight-track tape. It was finally released on CD in 1990 under the tongue-in-cheek title "More a Legend Than a Band." Ely, Hancock and Gilmore re-

united in the late 1990s to write and perform "The South Wind of Summer" for "The Horse Whisperer" film directed by Robert Redford. That led to a pair of albums -- "Now Again" in 2002 and "Wheels of Fortune" in 2004.

With the release of "Hills and Valleys," Hancock is eager to get on the concert stage again. "It's the sheer fun of springing songs on people who have never heard them before."

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