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FLATLANDERS
"Hills and Valleys"
New West

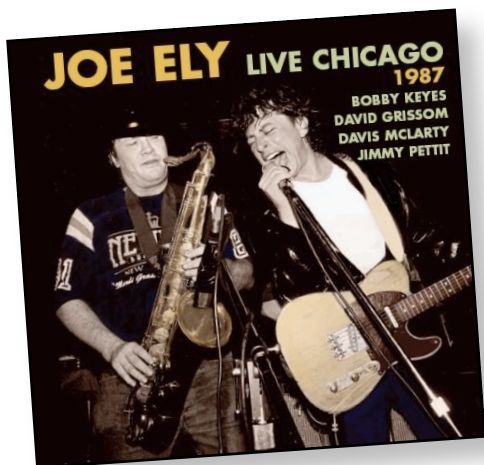
JOE ELY
"Live Chicago 1987"
Rack 'Em

THE FLATLANDERS are an unusual trio. They really don't rely that much on harmonies, most of the singing is one man at a time, and the crucial collaboration takes place at the songwriting stage. Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock have been friends since they were teenagers in Lubbock, Tex., and they share a common sensibility whether they're writing songs together (as they do on eight of the 13 tracks on "Hills and Valleys") or separately. The same blend of passionate idealism, irreverent humor, philosophical questioning and West Texas rowdiness flavors everything they do.

The trio's fourth studio album includes an adaptation of a Woody Guthrie song, "Sowing on the Mountain," and Guthrie's spirit informs the original songs as well. Ely sings the chiming folk-rock song "Homeland Refugee," an evocative portrait of the new American migrants forced onto the road by foreclosures and layoffs. Hancock sings the bouncy Tex-Mex tune "Borderless Love," a witty satire on walls, both the literal one on the U.S. border and the metaphoric one in xenophobes' minds. Gilmore sings the lovely ballad "After the Storm" about a man searching for a lost lover in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Spicing up everything are the fluttering accordion of Joel Jose Guzman, the weeping pedal steel of producer Lloyd Maines and the eerie musical saw of Steve Wesson.

In 2007, *Ely* launched his own label to release out-of-the-mainstream projects. His latest release, "Live Chicago 1987," available mostly online at iTunes and Amazon.com, or in a hard copy via his Web site and select stores, comes from a much-bootlegged concert that featured the same quintet that recorded his terrific "Lord of the Highway" album that year. What separates this live disc from that studio album are the faster tempos, longer solos and unleashed abandon of the playing.

What separates it from Ely's other live albums is the presence of Bobby Keyes, the saxophonist so prominent on Rolling Stones records and shows since 1969. In fact, "Live Chicago 1987" resembles one of those legendary Stones shows from the early '70s, with Ely's rhythm guitar sounding like Keith Richards, David Grissom's lead guitar sounding like Mick Taylor and Keyes sounding like, well, himself. It's as if the Stones had devoted a set to Texas country-rock at its best.



-- Geoffrey Himes