

# BLURT

BY STEVEN ROSEN

In the decades since the 1972 release of their first recording - one which few people outside the band's Texas home even knew existed at the time - the Flatlanders have gone from a band to a legend to a band again and on to their current state: A state of grace.

As alt-country/Americana, especially the rootsy, twangy, plaintive Texas variety, has essentially become the new folk-rock, only more enduring, the Flatlanders - Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock - can take a fair portion of credit for pioneering it. And they no longer have to explain to everyone outside Texas what their music should be called and why they should have an audience.

They've got that audience now - and the response to their new album, *Hills and Valleys* (New West), shows that. It's the third since the Flatlanders, who broke up in favor of solo careers shortly after the first album, reunited in the late 1990s. At the funky ballroom known as the Southgate House in Newport, Ky., just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, the large, older crowd knew the music well and the comfort level was high. (It helps that a local radio station, WNKU, plays Americana.)

And the three fit and vibrant sixtysomething Flatlanders, backed by three other musicians, including wonderfully empathetic guitarist Rob Gjersoe, performed with a relaxed feeling of nothing to prove. They were completely in synch with each other - sharing verses on individual songs - and their audience. Even when Gilmore flubbed the start of a line, as he did twice, the recovery was so graceful that it was a tribute to their synergy.

Hancock and Gilmore played acoustic guitars; Ely switched from one to an electric. After opening with several older songs, highlighted by exquisite harmony singing on Hancock's "Julia," Ely introduced the new group-written "Homeland Refugee" as a tale of "reverse Dust Bowl migration." With a vividly detailed populist narrative, and with Ely's voice filled with a ruggedly bittersweet, tough loneliness that conjured the image of sparks from a campfire rising into cold-night air, this is probably *Hills and Valleys'* best song. Ely sang with authority. When he got to the lines, "there's some refugees from Mexico/Behind an abandoned Texico/We nod and smile/It's clear we're all the same," you couldn't help thinking, "Woody Guthrie lives!"

But a close second best song would be the



plainspoken yet poetic "Thank God For the Road," rooted in country-rock tunefulness and sung well by Hancock in his deep and homespun voice. Hancock's gift for lyrical beauty and kindness, cut with a trace of sorrow, was also evident in the group's trading-verses performance of his "If You Were a Bluebird."

Gilmore, whose high voice has an almost-otherworldly warble, took lead on the romantic "No Way I'll Never Need You." He dedicated it to his "spiritual adviser" - his wife. That was a nice touch, since Gilmore once put his career on hold to live near an actual spiritual adviser - a religious guru - in Denver.

Toward the set's end, the three did a revved-up, honky-tonk version of one of their earliest classics, Gilmore's "Dallas." Continuing their tribute to Texas, they also covered Townes Van Zandt's "White Freight Liner Blues" and - during one of the two encores - the hilariously raucous, religion-spoofing "Gimme a Ride to Heaven Boy" by Terry Allen, their fellow West Texas native Terry Allen.

It's great to have the Flatlanders out there and active. They're a living and still-vital showcase for what's great about Texas - not just musically, but also politically, as evident in their humane lyrics. Considering that the Lone Star State has recently given us the worst president ever and an extremist current governor who implies that succession might be good, Texas (and America) needs the Flatlanders more than ever as an antidote.

Contact:

Lance Cowan • LCMedia • (615) 331-1710 • [lcmedia@bellsouth.net](mailto:lcmedia@bellsouth.net)