

FLATLANDER MEANDER TEXAS TRIO TAKES ITS TIME

By MARY HUHN

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Jimmie Dale Gilmore is on a tour bus with the Flatlanders -- the country band he formed with Joe Ely and Butch Hancock in Lubbock, Texas, almost 40 years ago.

And even though he's nearly 64, Gilmore is a big fan of the bus.

"The bus we're traveling in is my favorite way to travel," he says.

Make no mistake, this is no casino coach to Atlantic City -- this particular bus once belonged to country singer Ray Price. And so did the driver: A musician himself, Fred Snowden bought the bus and started a company.

"The driver is the boss," says Gilmore, as the bus crosses the Mississippi en route from Austin to Memphis.

"We got to be such close friends. He became part of the band."

With impromptu jams and a lobster fest in Snowden's home state of Maine, no wonder it's a good time. The bus rolls into Times Square at B.B. King's Blues Club on Thursday.

"Thank God for the Road," one track from the Flatlanders' just-released fourth album, "Hills and Valleys," isn't about the bus rides or tours -- but the journey on which life takes us.

And it's been a doozy for the three Texas singer-songwriters since forming in 1972. They recorded a monumental album



that was barely released -- only about 200 copies on vinyl and 8-track tape. Ely recently gave Gilmore one of the original 8-tracks for his birthday.

Although it was deemed a commercial failure, Gilmore says the album was not rejected by the country music circuit -- it just wasn't given enough promotional support.

"It never got heard," he says. But you can't keep a good record down. Copies

were passed around on homemade cassette tapes, while the three artists honed their own solo careers. Rounder Records released it 30 years later, aptly calling the originally self-titled album "More a Legend Than a Band."

One fan of the legend who was working on Robert Redford's 1998 feature "The Horse Whisperer" asked the Flatlanders to write a song for the film.

The three had never actually written a song together and recorded it. On that first album, it was a mostly a collection of songs written separately.

It was so much fun, they decided to record again and released a second album in 1999.

The collaborative songwriting effort can be trying, however.

"We're different personalities and our minds work in different ways," says Gilmore. "It's entertaining and sometimes exasperating."

The so-called commercial failure of that legendary first album may have been a blessing in disguise.

"It's quite possibly the reason we are able to still be together," he says. "We maintain a friendship that most bands don't keep."

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