

## The Flatlanders keep rolling through 'Hills and Valleys'

by Walter Tunis

You might not be able to see the world from the Lone Star metropolis of Lubbock. But according to Butch Hancock, you can stand on its streets and view a pretty sizable chunk of it.

"It was so isolated and flat out there," the veteran Texas songsmith said. "It's sort of like a generic cartoon land — just flatlands. Anything that is on the horizon just kind of looms there. You can see it from miles and miles away. If you're driving down the highway, you can see something for 30 minutes before you ever get to it."

Is it any wonder that the Lubbock native and his longtime Amarillo-born (but Lubbock-raised) pals Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore call themselves The Flatlanders?

"When we play back in the East, we're always having to drive around trees and mountains," Hancock said. "We tell everybody on that side of the coast, 'You guys got a tree problem out here.'"

Among the legions of Americana-based artists to stream out of Lone Star country during the past four decades, The Flatlanders enjoy a quiet but near-mythic status. The band formed in 1972, performed through the following year and then split. There would be no new Flatlanders music for 26 years.

During that considerable down time, the three members forged solid careers of their own. Ely built an international following with a solid roots-rock and vintage honky-tonk sound that had him sharing stages with The Clash and Bruce Springsteen. Gilmore, a plaintive and spiritually savvy tenor, followed calmer paths of remarkably emotive — and decidedly non-commercial — country music. Hancock was the master everyman songwriter whose tunes have been recorded by a multitude of artists including, not surprisingly, Ely and Gilmore.

But as The Flatlanders, the three are on a level — dare we say flat — playing field. Now the band has released what might well be its strongest collaborative album to date, the regally rustic "Hills and Valleys."

"What we do ... it's kind of like when you tear up pieces of paper, put them in a hat and start drawing them out one at a time," Hancock said. "Each one of us brings in bits and pieces of ideas. It's like the concept of static electricity. Once you start putting some of these things together, some of the sparks will start flying."

"Hills and Valleys" might well be starkest of The Flatlanders' four studio albums. It evokes eerily topical Dust Bowl imagery during the opening "Homeland Refugee" (sung by Ely), high-spirited country reclamation on "The Way We Are" (sung by Gilmore) and pure Tex-Mex fancy on "Borderless Love" (sung by Hancock). And on a cover of Woody Guthrie's "Sowing on the Mountain," all three trade verses depicting imminent biblical fire.

Although the latter sounds more Appalachian than Texan in nature, the song is still in step with inspirations that take The Flatlanders — not to mention the audience — back to the streets and skies of Lubbock.

"I don't know how to express it, exactly," Hancock said. "It's like if you see a chair in a room, it makes sense. But stick a chair out in the middle of a highway and it's like, 'What the heck is that doing out there?' It just seemed like everything in Lubbock was a little out of context.

"Then there were things like the border radios that we all listened to as kids, with this mysterious, wonderful music that came blasting in at night. And then, of course, there are things like the wind, the water — what water there was in Lubbock — and the UFOs. Hey, we can't rule out the UFOs.

Hancock gave up Lubbock in the '90s and moved to the desert border town of Terlingua. But his friendship with Ely and Gilmore in and out of The Flatlanders remains vital and strong.

"It's been one of the greatest blessings of my life to have known these characters for this long and to have been playing music together," he said.

"I remember, years back, we would sit around the living room playing guitars and songs, sometimes for 10 hours a night. I think when you do that with some friends, you realize that you're all equally crazy. It's kind of a lifelong bond that happens."



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