

MUSIC OF THE DARE

By Michael Ventura

July 26, 2002

Near the Troubadour in West Hollywood -- a stone's easy throw (if you could find a stone) from a sign announcing the boundary of Beverly Hills -- Butch Hancock peered into a vending machine to take a closer look at a headline in the *San Fernando Valley Daily News*. Something about more suffering in Afghanistan. Then he noticed, above the newspaper's logo, a little photo of Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch himself. "Hey," he called to the other two, "that's us!"

What juxtaposition could be more apt? In this catastrophic time, where disasters ricochet off each other from country to country, there are the Flatlanders floating above the frantic headlines, singing irrepressibly joyful and generous songs that convince precisely because they incorporate an almost cosmic vision of pain: "The more you fear the kiss of death the more she licks her lips ..." "Will the sun forsake the sky?" "Yesterday was judgment day -- how'd you do? ... Did you lay down in heaven, did you wake up in hell? I bet you never guessed it would be so hard to tell."

The Flatlanders are showing up everywhere all of a sudden. On Letterman. On the Don Imus show. On Larry King -- where Imus issued his challenge to top-market radio stations to play their album. On the cover of *No Depression*, and even the cover of an entertainment supplement in the *San Fernando Valley Daily News*. Some would say this hoopla is long overdue, but I can guess what the Flatlanders would say: "You can tell me this is dreamin' or it's all in my head/You can tell me that I'm dyin' or I'm already dead/But it feels so good I might be right where I belong."

I remember listening to the first Flatlanders recording on a reel-to-reel in the living room of that house we all shared on 14th Street in Lubbock. That was January of '73. Fresh out of New York City, I'd never heard such music: earthy yet ethereal, sweet but savvy, fatalistic yet hopeful ... and without a prayer in the world of being played on any radio station in our Broken Promise Land. After we listened to the tape, Butch took out his guitar and played his newest song ... he said he didn't write it, not exactly ... he'd heard it in a dream ... and, in Butch's dream, Jimmie was singing it: "If you were a bluebird ... if I was a highway ..." I learned something crucial that evening on 14th Street: Culture has no center. Not New York, not Los Angeles, not anywhere. The shifting center of a culture, on any day or night, is where its art is most alive -- whether the audience is a few friends in a living room or thousands of strangers in a stadium; whether it's a poem written on a napkin in a diner or a movie that millions see. That night there wasn't any better place in America to hear music than a house in a low-rent district of Lubbock.

We were as silly as any wild bunch in their mid-twenties, but credit us with this: Our tribe of friends had no doubt of the worth of what we experienced when we heard it expressed in the music of these songsters. I don't know if any of us has ever thanked them, so I'll do that now: Butch, Jimmie, Joe -- and Jo Carol Pierce, Terry Allen, David Halley -- you've made music of the lives we lived together, our loves and adventures and disasters, and we discovered many of our meanings and purposes in your songs. Others have experienced the same since, listening to your music, and that's wonderful ... but it's a more personal wonder for your friends. What we lived is what you made music of. That

you could create such music out of our shared lives made our lives themselves musical. "Thank you" ain't enough, it never is, but: Thank you.

Within just a few years we'll all turn 60, but what you Flatlanders sing in this new recording is something most of "the 14th Street tribe" could say still: "My wildest dreams grow wilder every day." From this perch on the far side of middle age, that seems to me our best and most difficult achievement. "Remember when we used to be here now/Livin' in the moment," the Flatlanders sing in the title song of their album. ("Be here now" was a Zen phrase we overused on 14th Street until it became a joke -- but a sincere joke.) "The wind knows how we used to be here now/It circles to remind us all ... Now it's now again."

It always is. And, come to think of it, that's been the message at the heart of every Flatlander song.

Well ... as Butch, Jimmie, and Joe told me their recent adventures in the band bus parked across from the Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard, all sorts of associations awoke in the night. Did they realize that this stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard is also the final length of old Route 66 ... yep, Santa Monica Boulevard in L.A. is Route 66! And 1,200 miles east, just off old 66, 28 years ago, we were in Clarendon, Texas, building a theatre and two bars, and we put on a play about Jesus, of all people. (I wrote and co-directed it, Butch shot the backdrop slides, Joe ran the lights.) And just across the street from the band bus, at the Beverly Hills Motel on the corner of Santa Monica and Doheny, I interviewed Carolyn Cassady, wife of Neal Cassady and sometime-lover of Jack Kerouac. Neal was the model for Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road* -- a book that influenced our 14th Street tribe mightily. Carolyn said, "Do you know what their letters to me were full of? Dreams of finding a nice little house and a nice little job and settling down. That's not their legend, but I've got the letters to prove it." So *that's* what those adventurers were looking for on their famous journeys. I wasn't surprised. To borrow a baseball phrase: Haven't most of our relentless long-distance drives been our way of trying to steal home? And if home eventually becomes a place you must leave yet again, only to search for another ... well, that's part of what "the road" is all about. And it's about a kind of endlessness that frightens and excites by turns. As the Flatlanders sing it: "Did you hear the riddle of a road without a middle or an end?"

Put on the old and the new Flatlanders albums and hit "Random." Listen to the time, and the timelessness, that spans the 30 years between them. The younger sound is astonishingly pure and a little distant; the older, gruff and companionable. The younger sound feels effortless; well, nothing people in their fifties do is effortless -- the trick is to make the effort spice the music, and the Flatlanders pull that off beautifully. The younger songs are a music of discovery. The older songs are about the price of discovery, and about how discovery isn't enough -- you've got to *do* something with what you discover, and that's an entirely different order of difficulty.

The music of youth is a music of longing. This older (though newer) Flatlanders album is a music of experience. Experience is the one thing in this world that you can't fake.

Not for long, at any rate.

Perhaps the Flatlanders are finding wider public acceptance than at any time in their collective or individual careers because a youth-obsessed pop culture is hungry for voices of experience. Voices not jaded, not discouraged. Voices battered but enriched by all they've seen and done. Generous artists sharing their vitality at a time of life when vitality can be hard to come by. Troubadours who know the score and are still willing to

dare the odds. Such a dare can be a valuable and catchy thing. America is a circus of false flamboyance where many are desperate for a daring that counts. A daring not backed up by money, military, or law; a daring that stands on its own. The Flatlanders make a music of the dare.

And speaking of the dare ... that magazine defiantly titled *No Depression* ... I opened it to a piece about Lisa Mednick. Lately I'd been listening again to her 1994 *Artifacts of Love*, wondering what's become of that profound, fierce, haunted artist, and if she'd ever record again. So here she is in this magazine with a new album, *Semaphore*. As different as it can be from the Flatlanders' *Now Again*, but just as valuable. In this time of catastrophe I've found nothing more encouraging than the Flatlanders and Lisa making themselves heard again. We need them. Lisa sings "I'll be your storm today." That's the kind of storm that clears the air.

It's an evil, hard time. "Hope" is a word I use with caution if not trepidation. I don't look for hope but sometimes hope finds me. And it finds me deepest in people who've faced the odds and are still willing to sing the dare.

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