



## The Flatlanders: Now It's Now Again

By John T. Davis (University of Texas Press, 2014)

The go-to formulation explaining the existence of the Flatlanders' music originates from the pithy title to the 1990 release of recordings the band originally made in 1972: more a legend than a band. The problem that has always existed with this theorem is the variables of how and to whom this legendry applies. For those who followed the Texas singer-songwriter scene closely in the 1970s, the legend of the Flatlanders is a result of songs from the band's repertoire appearing in the performances and records made by the three primary members (Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock) in the years before the release of *More a Legend Than a Band*. For everyone else, the appearance of that record itself actually inaugurated their mythos—a previously unknown relic to play alongside the collected works of Gram Parsons, among others, at the dawn of “alt country.”

John T. Davis is well aware of both of these angles of approach to the Flatlanders, and it is to his credit that he disassembles them both in *Now It's Now Again* in order to provide a far more interesting narrative: a band as transitory moment in the lives and careers of a handful of friends brought together in a specific place and time, and emanating onward and outward to the present. Strictly speaking, the place was Lubbock, Texas, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, every band is a product of its place and time. But Davis's novel approach to band biography is in placing the music of the Flatlanders within a much longer history of the landscape from which they emerged. In the introduction, he acknowledges as much when he writes that “most books about contemporary musicians do not start off with depictions of Plains Indians and tales of Spanish conquistadores journeying over a vast sea of grass.” But if you know anything of the sparseness of West Texas, how could it be any other way with a band that called itself the Flatlanders?

The vast emptiness of a prairie plowed under to cotton field calls for a big sound to stave off the loneliness, and the lonesomeness that a place like Lubbock induces in those with a certain state of mind draws them together against the desolation. Although Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock each experienced this differently and had seen something of the world beyond Lubbock's downtown lights, they all shared common points of musical reference: the Western Swing of Bob Wills, the honky-tonk of Ernest Tubbs, and the rock and roll of local boy Buddy Holly, alongside deeper folk tradition stretching back to cowboy days. Butch Hancock especially tapped into the spirit of those frontier ballads as a young man when he learned to play a harmonica in tune with the transmission's whine on his International tractor, as Davis astutely notes. When they finally came together, it was, again, as much about geography as it was

musical sensibility. “There was this house,” Davis writes, and that house was on the edge of the Texas Tech campus. And in that house, Jimmie, Joe, and Butch would play songs long into the night, drawing from each other's vast repertoire and writing a few new ones along the way.

They played together enough as friends that they accidentally became a band. A man who occasionally played bass with them, Syl Rice—the most professional and concurrently most outside the core group—helped facilitate their recording of some demos in Odessa, Texas. The studio there was better than the one in Lubbock and cheaper than Norman Petty's across the line in Clovis, New Mexico, where Buddy Holly had recorded before them. Those demos got them a session in Nashville in 1972 with Shelby Singleton, a man who, at the time, owned what was left of Sun Studios, as well as Plantation Records. A single of perhaps their finest song, “Dallas,” was released on that label, though not widely. Supposedly, a few 8-tracks were produced. They played the Kerrville Folk Festival to much acclaim, at least among the few who attended. But rather quickly, they forgot about the whole event.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore then headed off to an ashram, and Joe Ely put together a group to rival Doug Sahm's for its synthesis of all the strains of Texas music and wound up touring with the Clash. Butch Hancock began releasing records on his own label like *West Texas Ballads and Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes* that were much admired by fellow songwriters, but little heard at the time.

More than anything, they kept in contact with each other. They played each other's songs, produced each other's records, and all played tunes from their brief time as the Flatlanders. When *More a Legend Than a Band* was issued in 1990, Jimmie, Joe, and Butch were middle-aged men. Davis's book is unimaginable without the public response to that record, though the nearly forgotten demos that Syl Rice kept all those years, released as *The Odessa Tapes* in 2012, are probably the superior performances. Together, they sang in harmony like brothers. In the past twenty-five years, which Davis chronicles in great detail, they have “reunited” for albums and performances many times under the Flatlanders moniker, *Now It's Now Again* is a fitting title for their story, whose beginning and end are as hard to grasp as the West Texas wind.

*John Cline*

## Laird, Tracey E.W. *Austin City Limits: A History*

By Kent Hemphill (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Tracey Laird's aptly titled *Austin City Limits: A History* offers a compelling look into the television program *Austin City Limits Live*. Laird, the first author to write a comprehensive history of the show, covers the time from its inception in the early 1970s to the present. Music students, scholars, and fans will enjoy the behind-the-scenes approach that Laird uses to present her subject.

The majority of the work, excluding the introduction and one chapter on the ACL Music Festival, is dedicated entirely to *Austin City Limits Live*. The idea for the show came about during the early 1970s, at progressive country music's height in Austin. Based on the booming live music scene that developed around venues such as the Broken Spoke, the Split Rail, and the Armadillo World Headquarters, a group of individuals led by Bill Arhos set out to bring the scene to television, hoping to expand Austin's ambit as a musical entity. Laird does well in explaining problems that the show faced during its inception. She also delves into the program's expansion to multiple PBS affiliates nationwide. Laird points to Willie Nelson's appearance on the pilot episode in 1975 as the defining moment of *ACL*. This memorable performance established a precedent that helped the show start on a firm foundation. Nelson, being both a member of the local Austin scene and a national recording star, was the perfect representative for a Texas-based show trying to break into the national marketplace.

One of the major themes throughout the book is *ACL*'s musical diversity. Although the show projected a uniquely Texan feel during its formative years, as Laird points out, acts were far from uniform. At several points in the text she analyzes the performers of a given season to justify this point. As the progressive country scene waned in the late 1970s, programming featured artists who were not classified as country at all, thus commencing a trend that runs to the present. For example, by 1979 Tom Waits was featured in the same season as Lightnin' Hopkins.

Laird dedicates several chapters to the process, crew, and technology that have kept the program popular through the years. The walkthrough of how a show is filmed is fascinating. Laird goes through the process step by step as if she were the floor manager directing the crew. The *ACL* staff has perfected the process of filming live music with the intimate feel of a music venue. The show seems "real" because there is no set production table. The crew and producers use an outline for each performance but cater to what makes each performer unique. This approach gives the program a particular ambience. Laird explains how technology has changed since the 1970s and how *ACL* has kept at the forefront of equipment advances and production techniques.

Laird also explains the economics behind the show. Under the umbrella of PBS, the program came into its own. However, as public funding for PBS decreased during the 1990s, *ACL* became increasingly dependent on donor support. Fortunately, donors stepped forward and provided the necessary funding to keep the program afloat. It was from this rocky period that the ACL Music Festival came into being. Looking for a way to bring more live music to the Austin area, as well as a chance to entertain sponsors and increase revenue, *ACL*'s directors agreed to partner on a music festival based loosely on the television program. The first year was an overwhelming success, and the festival has grown into one of the area's premiere annual events. Laird rounds out the book by looking into *ACL*'s more recent move from Studio 6A on the University of Texas campus to the Moody Theater in downtown Austin.

Adding another layer to the rich musical history of the city, *ACL* helped define Austin as a unique musical destination. Laird references the One Knite, Barton Springs, the Huns, and Doug Sahm, as well as other names and destinations that fans of Austin music will appreciate. She writes for a popular audience yet produces a scholarly work. Laird interviews producers and managers who were key to the program's success and examines a number of press releases and set lists.

An impressive amount of research went into what may well become the show's definitive history. The book is a quick and enjoyable read that gives someone interested in *ACL Live* and Austin music culture a thorough look into a broadcast that has been crucial in Austin's rise as a major American musical mecca. There are forty black and white photographs interspersed throughout the book that help the reader visualize the subject matter. The book does not, however, offer a history of the ACL Music Festival. Laird examines the festival only to highlight the impact that the television show has had, with a minimal history of the festival itself. Even an expert on Austin music who is familiar with the many musical facets of the city will find new information here. Overall, the book is helpful to anyone interested in the history of *Austin City Limits Live* and its impact on Austin as a musical destination.

*Kent Hemphill*

