

Joe Ely: The New Pride of Lubbock

BY PAUL CULLUM

"We like this kind of music. Jazz is strictly for the stay-at-homes."

—Buddy Holly

"Hot dog I like it a lot!"

—Joe Ely

It's a smoky yellow evening outside, still warm, and the Joe Ely band is onstage at some Lone Star dancehall, tuning up. John Lennon's just been shot a couple of nights ago, and the crowd's milling around, not much spirit for the night ahead. Ely, a high school dropout from Lubbock with a passel of 5-star albums to his credit, hasn't looked at the crowd yet.

So the band seems ready, and Joe faces the mike now, serious. "Y'all heard the news?" And the crowd—as one man—thinks, "Great. Whole world's falling apart. What next?" ... when Joe slams rhetorically into a Roy Brown standard: "Ya heard the news?/There's good rockin' to-night." Which sets off not just the catharsis, but elation bordering on gratitude.

Or the time at Gruene Hall ("Texas' Oldest Dance Hall") when the sheriff came out after 2 a.m. to shut them down and Jesse Taylor, the bear-like guitarist, poured a beer in his hat (forcing them to dive into the crowd to have an escape). Or London at the Venue, when Ely and Butch Hancock were out after the show howling at the moon, and the bouncers tried to chase them down and kill them (forcing them to hide in a Dempsey Dumpster until a safe car could come around).

Joe Ely in concert is like no other—him charging and careening, flailing about, falling into the drums or climb-

ing up on the peana. He has more fun onstage than a white person has a right to.

There's lots of places we could meet, I'm thinking. The Alamo Hotel, the sparkling and virulent Thirties brownstone where LBJ's brother decayed from cancer. The base of the Texas Tower—count the sniper's bullet holes out on the concrete mall. Some chili parlor or domino hall with a sense of history. Any old icon.

"Tell ya what,"—Ely speaking with that same goofy deadpan in his drawl—"you bring your tape recorder and meet me at the Austin Bowl-O-Rama."

"Next up in mixed league competition, we got Hall's Package Stores vs. the Lane Tamers on Lane 2, and Edgebrook Texaco vs. the Hair Flair on Lane 22. Parents, please keep those youngsters off the end lanes, we have a tournament going on down there."

"Y'know," he's studying the orange headpin now on the lane just in front of us, "there's some real good sauce you can get at Tom Thumb grocery stores. It's called Cox's Texas Hot Sauce, and it comes in a mayonnaise jar, from Dangerfield, Texas. You try it sometime—it's de-licious."

Master of non sequitur. Joe is dressed in a vintage British tweed jacket, black corduroy shirt and pants, wing-tipped ostrich or something boots, silk scarf, and a blood-red bolo tie with tiny toy gun clasp. That and the neo-rockabilly chopped pompadour clump-swirl coiffure (compliments Yardley English Lavender). For a Lubbock boy who used to play for nothing but Rebel Tractor drivers, he looks to be out of place in any culture he could claim.

Joe Ely was born in 1947 in Amarillo, Texas. His father worked for the railroad, as had his grandfather, so they shifted: from Amarillo to Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio and then Lubbock. He played hooky from high school, tried out amps and guitars in the downtown stores, eventually starting to work in local clubs. Over the past ten years or so he's gone from being just another Texas secret to opening for the

Rolling Stones and touring with the diverse likes of Merle Haggard, Carl Perkins, Tom Petty and the Kinks, acting as Clash clown and Linda Ronstadt's next trend to ride ("Honky Tonk Masquerade" on her next LP), at long last putting two albums on the *Billboard* charts (*Musta Notta Gotta Lotta* and *Live Shots*), and bringing country music into the Twentieth Century.

Peter Guralnick called Ely's work "some of the hardest-hitting music of the decade" in *Country Music* magazine, adding, "It has all the intensity, the singleminded drive, conviction and explosive originality of first generation rock 'n roll." *Rolling Stone* found Ely's albums "Full of poignancy, insight and affection for the Southwest and its people." The *LA Times* tagged him "... the most impressive male singer to enter country music in the '70s." Twentieth Century-Fox approached Ely to star in *Not Fade Away*, a planned film biography of Buddy Holly that never got made. (Ironically, Gary Busey—later the star of *The Buddy Holly Story*—was to have played the part of Holly's drummer.) Chuck Berry caught a 1978 Ely set in St. Louis and, after midnight, jumped onstage to join the band on "Jambalaya" and "Mountain Dew."

The corners in-between were packed up with a lot of his term, "colorful misery." He slept on the beach in Venice, California with a Fender Super Reverb amplifier for a pillow, rode a lot of rails ("The Rock Island Express out of Amarillo, up east to watch the leaves turn"), played the subway circuit in NYC, and slept on the Staten Island Ferry. He zigzagged around in the entrails of the continent, working as a fruitpicker, dishwasher, feeding the llamas and the world's smallest horse for Ringling Bros., sopping up the scenery in places like Louisiana, Arkansas, New Mexico, Old Mexico, Colorado—all those Texas outlands he's been made responsible for.

"I helped build Angel Fire Ski Run up in Eagle's Nest. Drove a concrete truck up and down that mountain, like to scare me to death. I was unloading hunderd-pound sacks of concrete and they asked could anybody drive a truck, so I said 'sure,' anything to get out of loading concrete." And could he drive a truck? "No, course not. But, y'know—you learn real fast, a-hurling down the side of a mountain with about two tons of concrete right behind you."

Ely came into American radio through the backdoor of the English

Gilmore & Hancock: The Minds Behind the Songs

A lot of the bands who come through Austin, from U-2 to the Stray Cats, believe all those stories Joe Ely tells over in England—chicken wire across the stages to protect the bands, people shooting off guns inside of bars. So invariably, they get depressed by all the redevelopment—fern bars, gentrification, ossification, cartilage to bone, the spread of mellow capitalism up Sixth Street like a pastel disease.

After that, they generally like what they find: The Fabulous T-Birds/Cobras/Stevie Ray Vaughan blues confluence. The Huns/Records/Norvells new wave exes nexus. And the Emmajoe's aggregation.

Emmajoe's is the socialist roadhouse (named after Joe Hill and Emma Goldman) which is local home to the modern country crowd—people like Townes Van Zandt, Lucinda, Rank and File (formerly the Dils, premier West Coast punk outfit), Butch Hancock and Jimmie Gilmore.

Hancock and Gilmore are always mentioned in tandem, probably a disservice, since both go back to the Flatlanders, the Lubbock band circa 1970 that they formed with running buddy Joe Ely. The Flatlanders' one album is finally on Charley Records as a British import. Together they have written over a third of the songs on Ely's albums.

Jimmie Gilmore is responsible for "Treat Me Like a Saturday Night," "Tonight I think I'm Gonna Go Downtown," and "Dallas," three ballads of subtle clarity. They speak of loneliness and grey light, and the high gentle whistle of the Lubbock winds. Technically, it was Jimmie Dale and the Flatlanders.

Butch Hancock, on another hand, is the best songwriter in America. This is not hyperbole. In the folk poet tradition, singer-songwriter, one man/one guitar, Hancock is the best there is.



DENNIS CARLYLE DARLING

"Boxcars," "Fools Fall in Love," "Wishin' for You," "She Never Spoke Spanish to Me" ("All her favorite poets said/Spanish is the loving tongue...")—over and over again. Perhaps his most accessible songs show up on the Ely albums, those on his own being more private, more mystical. But there are gems like "Dominos" or "Own and Own," about Texas' rural to urban shift and things lost to progress, or the ballad "Mario y Maria" (subtitled "Cryin' Statues and Spittin' Images") which are shared between an audience of maybe 5000 people.

Hancock has five albums—*West Texas Waltzes and Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes*, *The Wind's Dominion* (double), *Diamond Hill*, and two new live collections, *1981: A Spare Odyssey*, and *Firewater (Seeks Its Own Level)*, with Jimmie Gilmore. If he lived in Los Angeles and hustled the clubs on the Strip for five years, he would be famous in more places than just Texas and Italy (where they love him). But that would probably kill whatever it is that makes him Butch Hancock. Hancock is also a practicing architect, makes video documentaries, once won an argument with the Soviet ambassador over Afghanistan, and built the bar at Emmajoe's. But those are other stories.

Hancock's albums are available for \$7.00 from Drawer 810, Clarendon TX 79226.

press. Much has been made of his adoption by the Clash, their English tour, the oxymoron of that alliance. But if the new wave was ever about anything, it was about structural integrity—purity of essence, reconnecting to roots of form.

"The first couple of Clash shows we did in England were really hilarious, the first time we were confronted with what would be a normal Clash crowd, y'know? Especially places they'd grown up, like Camden Town, were really rowdy crowds. They'd be throwing stuff, and we'd throw back buckets full of ice. To me it felt about like a Saturday night in Austin."

That was the *London Calling* tour, and Joe's *Live Shots* LP was almost named *Lubbock Calling*. Stateside, the Clash wanted Joe to open their Texas dates, and he ended up signing on for the rest of the American tour. (It's probably instructive to remember that the Sex Pistols said their San Antonio audience was the only one to respond with violence in kind. Two thousand people in a concrete skate palace, guys with shaved heads and safety pins in their scalp, and this big cowboy saying, "If y'all'd just move about a c-t hair closer, we could get some more people in here.")

"The Clash were playing Houston, Austin and Dallas on their swing through Texas, and they had a couple of days before they had to go out west, so I talked 'em into playing Lubbock. They scared everybody there, it was great. Then they wanted to see the

sights of Lubbock. Y'know, there just aren't too many sights in Lubbock. So I showed 'em Prairie Dog Town, the high school where Buddy Holly played, that's just about it. We ended up getting some six-packs and spending the night out at Buddy Holly's grave."

Lubbock was where Ely came of age, where he took guitar lessons from Buddy Holly's old guitar teacher, where at age 11 he saw Jerry Lee Lewis outside of Pontiac House. ("There was Jerry Lee on a flatbed truck, wind blowing, dust everywhere...") It's where he says he learned to shoot pool. (He played a friend's wedding last year and took some Aspen developer types for about five hundred dollars.) It's where he lived through his first three LPs (*Joe Ely*, *Honky Tonk Masquerade* and *Down on the Drag*). The 6th LP, the one he's fast at work on at his lakehouse outside Austin, could well be the one to finally force him out of this cult ghetto he's been reposing in the last four years. Another Linda Ronstadt LA-country album is a small enough price to pay.

"Bowlers, I'd like to remind you of the *Diamond Jubilee* next week, we'll be having one shift and one shift only, and that will be the 8:00 shift. Also, there will be a deaf tournament here. It's gonna be real quiet."

"He say 'Death Tournament?'"
"I think he said 'deaf tournament.'"
"Oh, good... Least we won't have to hear all this racket."



Joe Ely: Hard-biting, fun-loving Texas rocker. Above, Butch Hancock and Jimmie Gilmore: Head of the Balladeer Class.

HOWARD ROSENBERG