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the existence of the Flatlanders’ music originates from the pithy title to the 1990 release of recordings the band originally made in 1972: more a legend than a band.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 title is the myriad of how and in whom this legendary 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 record itself actually inaugurated their mythos—a previously unknown relic used 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 disseminates 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 outward 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 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 detail, they have “reenacted” 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.

The Flatlanders: Now It’s Now Again
By John T. Davis (University of Texas Press, 2014)

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