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the existence of the Flatlanders’ music originates from the pithy title to the 1990 release of recordings the band originally made in 1972: more a legend than a band.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 is that it is the result of how and in whom this legacy 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 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 assembles them both in New It’s Now Again in order to provide a far more interesting narrative: a band as transitory in the 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 field calls for a big sound to stave off the loneliness, and the loneliness 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 something seen of the world beyond Lubbock’s downtown lights, they all shared common points of musical reference: the lights, they all shared common points of musical reference: the saw something of the world beyond Lubbock’s downtown lights, they all shared common points of musical reference: the Plains Indian and tales of Spanish conquistadores journeying 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 Times 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 “reuniﬁed” for albums and performances many times under the Flatlanders moniker, New 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 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, setting attendance records and establishing the festival’s annual events. Laird rounds out the book by looking into ACL’s more recent move from Studio 6B 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 Knights, 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. One can almost argue that the book is more interested in the history of Austin City Limits Live and its impact on Austin as a musical destination.

Kent Hemphill
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 formulation is the bias of how and in whom this legend originated. 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 decade before the release of More a Legend Than a Band. For every other, the 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 composes them both in his New 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 sparseness of West Texas, how could it be any other way with a Plains Indians and tales of Spanish conquistadores journeying 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 Kervinie Folk Festival to much acclaim, at least among the few who attended. But rather quickly, they forget about the whole event.

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

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

Laid 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. It eventually became the Austin area’s premiere annual events. Laird rounds out the book by looking into ACL’s more recent move from Studio 608 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 Hugs, 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. One of the most compelling reasons interested in the history of Austin City Limits Live and its impact on Austin as a musical destination.

Kent Hemphill

John Cline

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 show’s production, and what makes each performer unique. This approach gives the program a particular ambiance. Laird explains how technology has changed since the 1970s and how ACL has kept at the forefront of equipment advances and production techniques.