



## The Flatlanders **"Wheels Of Fortune"** New West Records

It's good to see this trio of elder statesmen of the Texas folk/country music scene [Junior Division – since Willie, Jerry Jeff, Kinky and Billy Joe & Co. are still *chompin' at the bit*] finally enjoying significant commercial success at the onset of their twilight years. Hell, as solo acts in-their-own-right, they are three of the greatest musical heroes of my adult decades. Great brouhaha was made when The Flatlanders issued their *comeback* album **"Now Again"** [2002], relating to a startling *new departure* - they had co-written most of the songs. On **"Wheels Of Fortune"** there's nary a three-way credit, so in the best traditions of the James Brown Soul Review, here's the question *"What's that say? I'll say that again, what's that say?"* My Folkwax review of **"Now Again"** rated the disc as an *over generous 7*, and in conversation at the time of its release and since, I can attest that the album has its *true believers* as well as its *great detractors*.

So here we have **"Wheels Of Fortune,"** the third offering from those dwellers on America's Third Coast. As much as the acoustic **"One More Road"** was a unique and classic acoustic creation, **"Now Again,"** *for me*, amounted to the main course at thanksgiving dinner [garnished by *too many cooks*], while **"Wheels Of Fortune"** appears, according to the liner at least, to be a coat of many colours. Between them, as solo acts, live and studio, these guys can muster well over thirty albums [#], and from those recordings more than half the fourteen songs are already familiar to long time supporters.

Considering the commercial success of **"Now Again"** The Flatlanders possibly figure they've discovered a new audience, unaware of their past artistic glories in word and melody. Ely has certainly stated that the decision to reprise their respective back catalogues in tandem with cutting new material for **"Wheels Of Fortune"** was deliberate strategy. That being the case, for *long-standing fans*, taken at *face value* the contents of **"Wheels"** could be assessed as, *"Heard much of it before, and I've got the t-shirt to prove it."* Enough said, let the **"Wheels Of Fortune"** spin. Maybe we can figure out the bottom line.

The album opens with Hancock taking the lead vocal on his own "Baby Do You Still Love Me," the only previous version being a *live* rendition on **"No Two Alike, Tape 8"** [1991]. A gently paced ballad, it's chock full of typical Hancock phraseology including the surreal, *"Is it androids or elephants that never forget?"* the nod to his hometown Lubbock and the Llano Estacado with *"I was born under blue skies in the land of the wind"* and a knowing wink aimed at the audience in *"There was water in the well and fire from the first, Were ya burnin' me out or were ya quenchin' my thirst?"* There's only one individual on this spinning sphere of matter whose singing voice sounds like Jimmie Dale Gilmore. Supported by his lifelong buddies Joseph n' George [~], J.D. steps up to the microphone for the album title cut, a Hancock penned love song. It first appeared on Hancock's **"Diamond Hill"** [1980], and resurfaced a decade later on the Gilmore/Hancock *live* Antipodean adventure **"Two Roads."** Further pursuing the *"let me sing your song"* tack, Ely delivers a down n' dirty bluesy rendition of "Midnight Train," a ten-plus year old Gilmore song about a railroad trip on which the narrator is accompanied by *Fear* and *Trust*. Pursuing the numeric as well as the *"who is gonna be the vocalist"* pattern that has emerged so far, the fourth cut, Hancock's "Wishin' For You," dictates that 1981 is the year you need. During 1981 Butch included this song of yearning on his *live* at Austin's Alamo Lounge artefact **"Firewater Seeks Its Own Level,"** as did Ely on his rockabilly influenced **"Musta Notta Gotta Lotta."** On **"Wheels,"** you've guessed it - Jimmie Dale delivers the goods.

The first farm fresh product on **"Wheels"** is Hancock's "Eggs Of Your Chickens" a suitably *off the wall* title sung by the master of lyric tongue twisters. This *"urge to be going"* tale features a repeating pair of lines at the end of each verse, and vocally, Jimmie and Joe join in, in true folk singin', *almost* sea shanty style. Subjectively, the song also focuses upon *missed opportunity* and across five verses Hancock's words confirm that his sense of humour remains intact. Next up is a pair of new tunes from Ely, the *kinda* road song "I'm Gonna Strangle You Shorty" sung by Joe, and "Back To My Old Molehill" which finds Gilmore taking the lead. Shorty is *"runnin' down the highway"* when he's picked up by the narrator, and in this just under three minute long cut, he's successfully pursued by a skillet wielding waitress. Set to a snappy back beat, and some bluesy guitar riffs, "Back To My Old Molehill" features a gypsy fortune-teller, a doctor, a lawyer, and a heartbroken, lovelorn narrator, who in search of peace of mind spends some time fishin' and swimmin'. In the past Hancock has talked of their teen years in Lubbock [%] when they'd ride their bicycles in the vapour trail of crop dusting airplanes. Nothing in the universe of any Flatlander is normal, or what it seems !

Butch's song catalogue includes the title "Deep Blue Eddy," while Gilmore's 1989 self-titled sophomore album featured his own "Deep Eddy Blues," and on **"Wheels"** Hancock takes the lead vocal on the latter title. Ely's trio of new songs is completed by "Neon Of Nashville" in which an innocent woman – *"Her eyes they shone of turquoise, And her hair was a waterfall,"* eventually falls from grace after succumbing to the deceptive bright lights and the *"glitter of the Silver Stage."* "Once Followed By The Wind" appeared Hancock's classic 1979 double album **"The Wind's Dominion"** and here Jimmie Dale takes the lead, while Gilmore's "Go To Sleep Alone" the second cut on **"Wheels"** taken from **"After Awhile"** [1991] is sung by Ely. Pattern ? Who said there should be a pattern ?

In Ely's song catalogue "Indian Cowboy" possesses legendary, if not mythical status. Inspired by the time during his *road scufflin' years* when Joe tended animals for the Ringling Brothers Circus, in the early seventies he sang it, once, to Guy Clark. Fifteen years on, Clark included it on his **"Old Friends"** [1988], and during the nineteen-nineties Townes Van Zandt, Tom Russell and Katy Moffatt followed suit by cutting it. Previously, the only recording by Joe was a *live in the studio* radio station version on **"Broadcasts Vol. 2"** [1994] issued by KGSR 107.1 Austin, Texas. Here, Hancock takes the lead vocal. By way of casting a backward glance at The Flatlanders debut album, which included three compositions by fellow Lubbockite, Al Strehli, the penultimate track on **"Wheels,"** performed by Jimmie, is Al's wailing train song "Whistle Blues." The fifth and final new *band* song, "See The Way," is a six-verse Gilmore/Hancock co-write. By way of bringing this collection to a climax, and displaying fully-fledged Texas diplomacy, vocally each of the protagonists take the lead on two consecutive verses. As for the thrust of the lyric, it's an optimistic paean to the glory to be found in love and in livin' life to the full, so *"throw back the curtain"* and forget her.....

I think they've done it, darn, I think they've cut a *fourteen-carat keeper*.

#### **Note.**

[#] – And if you count Hancock's 14 \* 60-minute long *live concert* tape extravaganza **"No Two Alike"** from 1991, then the *body count* of recordings approaches fifty. Across six consecutive nights of performance, and only featuring Hancock penned material *no song was repeated*.

[~] – Hancock's given Christian name is George.

[%] – This trio became friends during their teen years in Lubbock, Texas. That was a few years ago.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood

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