Back to where it all began
Joe Ely and Lloyd Maines release The Lubbock Tapes
By Jan Sikes

WITH A MUSIC CAREER THAT SPANS over four decades, Joe Ely has not only created a specific image but an entire genre of music.

Now, we get to journey back to the beginning, the 70s, with Ely, Lloyd Maines, Jesse “Guitar” Taylor, Greg Wright, Curley Lawler, the late Ponny Bone, and Steve Keeton on

The Lubbock Tapes.

When Lloyd Maines discovered these tapes in a box he’d moved at least five times or more, he knew he’d hit gold. What a cool and amazing find!

“About seven or eight years ago, Lloyd Maines found our very first Flatlanders’ tape in somebody’s car in Lubbock that had been there for over twenty years. That was me, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock. We’d never released it, so that became The Odessa Tapes. And now here with these tapes, we’re off on another adventure.”

An interesting early story emerges around the find. After the demise of the original Flatlanders, Ely left Lubbock and headed to New York to write songs and play folk clubs.

“I was in New York for about six months, came back home, joined the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey circus, got kicked by a horse, came back home again, and started a band.”

Ely recalled.

We all get nudges in life, but Ely says getting kicked by the horse was a pretty big nudge to him that he needed to change directions. He sold his life insurance policy to buy a PA sound system, and the rest is history.

“Now, all these years later, I’m taking a step back and trying to untangle it all,” Ely stated.

Out of all the songs on The Lubbock Tapes, there are only four or five that didn’t get released on other albums through the years.

Ely said, “They came from different time zones. We recorded one of these tapes around 1974 and the other in 1978. They were two separate sessions.”

One thing that struck me, as I listened to this album, was a certain element of musical magic that happens repeatedly between Lloyd Maines and Jesse “Guitar” Taylor.

“That was the thing that struck me too when we first started getting the band together. I had met Jesse in California in the sixties, but I had never played with him in a band and he kinda took off and happened really fast. At that time in Lubbock, there was only one big venue and that was the Cotton Club on the outskirts of town. You could rent it for practically nothing and play your own gig. So, we decided to give it a shot. We saved up enough to do some radio ads and have posters made.

“We plastered the posters all over Lubbock not knowing whether or not anyone would come out. I am going to date myself here, but I remember the ever-popular rainbow posters that bands used in those days. Joe chuckled when I mentioned it and confirmed that the posters were exactly that.”

Evil Honky Tonks

“So, ANYWAY, we put everything we had into this one gig, thinking we might get thirty people, and we’d be thrilled. Then maybe the next night we’d get thirty-five and keep building.”

But, a Lubbock preacher had other ideas.

“I remember one Sunday around noon, a friend of mine came braying on my door and said he had to tell me something and didn’t know how I’d take it. That morning in church, the preacher’s sermon had been all about the evils of honkytonks, and he specifically mentioned my name eight or nine times. I was dumbfounded. I talked to the band. We didn’t really know what to do. I thought I was going to have to move to Fort Worth or Austin or somewhere, but we decided to play the gig. We had already booked around the Lubbock area for the next three weeks.

That very next Saturday night we were playing the Cotton Club, and when I got there, I saw a line of cars about a mile-long waiting to get in. And there were five hundred people that night. So, I wrote the preacher a nice note, thanked him for mentioning my name and included two tickets to see the show the next Saturday night.”

Leaving Lubbock

FROM THEN ON, JOE ELY AND his band packed the Cotton Club and didn’t have to leave Lubbock. I wondered if the preacher ever came to a show, and Ely said he didn’t.

Shortly afterward, Jesse Taylor and Ponny Bone joined the group, and the full sound was born.

“The sixties opened the door, but the seventies were the time when all these different and new approaches to music happened,” Ely recalled. “We went into Don Caldwell’s studio in Lubbock where Lloyd worked, and that’s where we recorded.”

A lot of attention has been given lately to the strong influence Texas music has had on the entire country music genre. The Country Music Hall of Fame has a beautiful, comprehensive display, Outlaws and Armadillos honoring our Texas legends and Joe Ely is an integral part of that history.

Ely said, “Six months ago, I was contacted by the Country Music Hall of Fame asking for some of my memorabilia for a display. I loaned them some items from the early seventies, including my old circus outfit from when I worked for Ringling Barnum and Bailey’s Circus. The Outlaws and Armadillos display is incredible. It takes up a large part of one whole floor in a huge building.”

For someone like Ely who has been on the front lines of the music business for decades, I wondered what kind of prediction he might have for the future of Texas music.

“I don’t know that I’m the right one to ask. There have been so many changes since the sixties and seventies when everything was still straight ahead and traditional, and you had to color inside the lines. What I’ve seen happen is more of a blending of music. For instance, in the early days of this change, you might see Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark came along and opened it all up even more. Texas stole the spotlight from Nashville and now has changed in a big way, and I think the future of Texas music is very secure.”

What’s ahead

WITH A TWENTY-YEAR CAREER with MCA records behind him, what is ahead for the legendary Joe Ely?

For many years, I’ve carried a notebook and wrote notes and lines and pieces of songs. I’m now looking at all of that again and discovering things I’d forgotten about. I also have a few hundred songs already recorded that I will release a few at a time, sometimes in the near future. I’m looking at the age of the internet as the opportunity to put out stuff that’s never seen the light of day.”

Obviously, we have much more to look forward to from Joe Ely. But, if you’d like to take a journey back in time to the early days when Joe Ely’s unique songwriting style took wings, you can check out his Jumbo Records album, The Lubbock Tapes.

You can see Joe Ely live in Eden on September 8. For more about the tour and the artist, visit eely.com.

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