

Audio verite

Butch Hancock's 'No 2 Alike' puts a 6-night stand on 14 cassettes

By Chris Heim

Coming from almost anyone else, it would have been an exercise in ego. Instead, this "Forsythe Saga" with fiddles, this "War and Peace" as a West Texas waltz is a surprisingly modest affair, no mean feat for a 14-tape project that proudly boasts "No 2 Alike" among its 140 songs.

The "No 2 Alike" project is the brainchild of singer-songwriter Butch Hancock. This native of Lubbock, Texas, is largely a cult item, but anyone following new country music, particularly its progressive Texas wing, has probably come across his work.

Most discover him through covers done by Emmylou Harris, the Texas Tornados and Jerry Jeff Walker, but some listeners encountered Hancock as far back as the early '70s with the Flatlanders. It was a band he put together with boyhood friends Joe Ely, whose vibrant country-rock not only won Western fans but made converts of the Clash, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore, who recently acquired a higher national profile with his album on the new American Explorer Series of innovative contemporary roots music. (Ely and Gilmore also have done nearly two dozen Hancock songs on their own albums.)

The Flatlanders anticipated neo-traditional country by more than a decade, and the band's wind-blown, bleached-bones style even now seems to belong to no time and every time.

The Flatlanders did only one album, and that nearly two decades ago, but a mystique built up around the group that has assumed almost mythical proportions.

"It was pretty mythic and pretty proportional all at once, even when it was happening," Hancock said with a laugh. "It was a spawning ground for a lot of the stuff we're doing now, certainly for the many, many directions we're all headed in."

"That time was like the eye of an hourglass—a lot of swirling sand that came together and all went through that little eye. It was pretty intense energy for a while, and then it had to spread back out into a new dimension. It's a singular sound. Townes Van Zandt calls it 'that high lonesome plains sound.'"

"It's got a lot of air in it, a lot of sand and grit and," he pauses and laughs, "a lot of wind."

Since the days of the Flatlanders, Hancock has done one import-only album with Jimmie Dale Gilmore and six solo al-



Butch Hancock: Despite the immense scope of the project, his "No 2 Alike" retains a homey, modest and charming air.

bums and two cassette-only releases on his own Rainlight label.

In late October, Sugar Hill Records released "Own & Own," a set of 17 choice tracks from those recordings. It is Hancock's first U.S. release on a label other than his own since the Flatlanders.

"Own & Own" is a fine introduction to Hancock, but a more intimate acquaintance comes with the epic "No 2 Alike." Hancock settled in to sing nothing but his own songs during a six-night stand at the Cactus Cafe in Austin, Texas, last year. Each evening began with Hancock accompanied only by his own harmonica and guitar, but eventually some two-dozen guests shared the stage with him. Ely and Gilmore paid visits; the Flatlanders reunited one evening; Townes Van Zandt mysteriously appeared to sing one couplet, then vanished again; Jesse Taylor, David Halley and the Texana Dames pitched in; fiddles, mandolins and dueling musical saws filled out the sound.

"Occasionally you need to dig up old ground," Hancock explains. "It's not necessarily going back and wallowing in it—although it might have that feeling sometimes."

In its final form, "No 2 Alike" appears as 14 one-hour tapes. Each is autographed and comes with song and artist lis-

tings and short comments from Hancock. The cover photos, by Hancock, that appear on each tape combine to make one big picture.

Hancock has been offering the set through what he only half-jokingly calls his Tape of the Month Club (Butch Hancock—No 2 Alike, 406 Brazos, Austin, Texas 78701, 1-512-478-1536). Each tape comes with an order form for the next. In early 1992, those who managed to hang in for the entire 14 tapes will get a "Foto/Songbook" with lyrics to all 140 songs and 70 to 100 Hancock photos.

Despite the intensely personal focus and immense scope of the project, "No 2 Alike" retains a homey, modest and charming air. That's in part because, where most "concert" recordings tweek and trim and air-brush all the mistakes, delays and ultimately life out of a project, "No 2 Alike" is pure audio verité. Credit, too, Hancock's sensibility and style. In sound and substance, his music suggests the homespun charm and populist stance of Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and early Bob Dylan.

"Where the songs come from is still up for anybody's guessing," he says. "It's not that I'm trying to write a song; a song is part of the media I use to live life."

Chris Heim is a Chicago freelance writer.