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Cover story



Butch Hancock (from left), Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Joe Ely form the core of "western beatniks," popularizing a grittier alternative to Nashville.

Songs of the wide open species

Taking country on a ride through rock, soul, gospel and blues

By Greg Kot
Rock music critic

One night a few weeks ago, the cosmic cowboy—Jimmie Dale Gilmore—came home. On the road for most of the last year, he came through Austin, Texas, as part of a national tour with a hot up-and-coming country act, Marty Brown, and the town was buzzing. Even family and friends had to hustle to squeeze in some private time.

Before the show, Gilmore's wife, Janet, nestled next to her husband and filled in some of the pieces in his interview with a visitor. Daughter Elise, 27, stopped in while cradling her infant so she could "get some granddaddy in." Their hugs and kisses are more precious than ever these days because Gilmore's rising popularity has turned him into a traveling man.

At least two Austin chad-drivers mentioned the Gilmore show to an out-of-town visitor that day. "He's a legend 'round here," one said.

Dozens of musicians and journalists from around the country, in town for the South by Southwest Music Conference, blew off the showcase events at the rock clubs and caravaned down to the dusty old roadhouse with the dirt parking lot in anticipation of a magical homecoming. They would not be disappointed.

Gilmore's manager, Mike Crowley, couldn't help but remark on the irony of it all. Once Gilmore was so much part of the local scene he'd become "like part of the furniture—everyone looked past him," Crowley says.

Now, at 46, the silver-haired Texan has his first major-label record out, "After Awhile" (Elektra/Nonesuch),

and the accolades are rolling in: It made many year-end top 10 lists, including the Tribune's, and finished No. 13 in the prestigious Village Voice poll of 300 critics from around the country.

But "After Awhile" is just the tip of something bigger. It's in the vanguard of "Western beat," an umbrella label for a varied group of musicians with roots in the hard country music of Hank Williams Sr. and Jimmie Rodgers, but who also branch out into rock, soul, gospel and blues.

Centered in the Southwest and especially Texas, but almost defiantly non-regional in its eclecticism, Western beat is a grittier alternative to the slicker, more readily marketable Nashville sound epitomized by Garth Brooks and Wynonna Judd, though it has a long way to go before it will make a similar dent in the marketplace.

Gilmore, who will perform May 15-16 at Schuba's, and his fellow Western beatniks are used to being ignored. Some are relatively famous, such as Joe Ely, k.d. lang and Lyle Lovett, but most are still known mainly to aficionados: Butch Hancock (who will perform Wednesday at Fitzgerald's in Berwyn), Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Kevin Welch (who plays May 24 at Lounge Ax), Jim Lauderdale, Rosie Flores, Kelly Willis, David Hal-



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ley, Tish Hinojosa, Darden Smith, Nanci Griffith and dozens more.

That night at the Broken Spoke, Gilmore is joined onstage by a Who's Who of the Beat. He does a duet with his buddy Ely, and then Willis and Welch team up to perform "Love Hurts," the old Everly Brothers hit. Later Flores and Hinojosa join the party, and Gilmore and Brown close things off with a jumping version of "Jam-balaya."

The dance floor is packed from start to finish with two-steppers, from experts in blue-rinse beehives to amateurs from the North and beyond. Everyone is smiling, perspiring and out of breath at the end, including Gilmore, who is clearly enjoying his new-found celebrity and the chance to share it with his hometown friends.

"It's given us all something to hang on to," says Welch, who grew up in Oklahoma and now lives in Nashville. He says the Western beat label emerged when he, Gilmore, Hancock, Ely and Lauderdale were asked to perform at the Montreux Jazz Festival last year.

"The promoter knew what we were doing wasn't straight country music, but he didn't know what to call us," Welch recalls. "Sort of collectively we said, 'Call it "Western beat,"' which refers to, among other things, the

music's debt to country & western and the spirit of beat writers such as Jack Kerouac.

Two months later, Welch says, a club in Los Angeles opened with the same name, and he borrowed it for the title of his just-released second album on Reprise Records.

"We had been talking on the plane ride over to Switzerland about categories and how so many artists strive to fit into one, to the point where it warps their initial intent," Welch says. "For a long time a lot of guys and gals like me have been struggling to define exactly what it is we do, but I'd gotten too old and jaded to care about anything else but the music."

"We all felt a connection, like we shared something, but at the same time, clearly Joe Ely's music is different from mine, and we're both different than Jimmie Dale, and so on."

"It's almost easier to describe what it isn't. Western beat isn't a kind of music, or a feel or a tempo. It's more of an attitude, almost an anti-category. If we share anything, it's a strong American heritage in our music. Otherwise, we're just being ourselves."

That individualism is what threw Gilmore, Ely and Hancock together in the first place. The Holy Trinity of the Western Beat grew up in Lubbock, Texas, and their musical tastes were as disparate as their demeanors: the soft-spoken, cerebral Gilmore is "a country music history class," Halley says, who was reared by his guitar-playing father with an admiration for Hank Williams Sr. and Marty Robbins, and who then later discovered Bob Dylan; the intense Ely is a passionate rocker who became a favorite of the British punk group the