

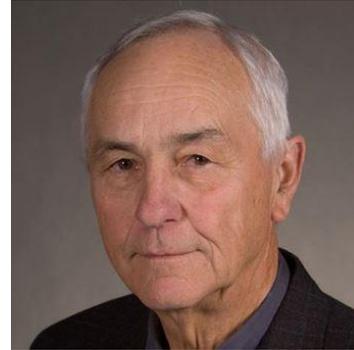
PLAINS FOLK - widely-syndicated column

by Flint Hills author Jim Hoy

CD review:

"Clean Curve of Hill against Sky," col. no. 1425

by Jim Hoy July 26, 2010



The Flint Hills of Kansas are home to half a dozen world champion rodeo cowboys, one world champion heavyweight boxer, and a major pool of oil. Each year the bluestem grass here produces millions of pounds of beef. The Hills have inspired painters, poets, and photographers. But where's the music? That question has been answered, and answered emphatically, in the latest CD from Tallgrass Express, "Clean Curve of Hill Against Sky."

The sixteen songs in this album capture perfectly the beauty and the distinctive folklife of the Flint Hills. The lyrics, complemented by melodies that I find myself unconsciously humming, embody the landscape, the people, the animals, the rocks, the prairie fires, and the grass. As a native of this region I can identify with "Getting a Count" or "Working Flint Hills Cowboy," but what is especially good about these songs is that they can convey the Hills to people who don't live here, people who have never seen them, people who have never had the experience of walking out on the prairie at night or of being horseback in a remote pasture as the sky begins to lighten and the stars fade away. (There is no exaggeration, by the way, in the list of contents inside the cab of the pickup in "Working Flint Hills Cowboy.")

Except for one instrumental ("Home from the Z-Bar") by fiddler Charley Laughridge, all the songs, both words and music, were written by Anne Browning Wilson. (Other band members are Loren Ratzloff and Carl Reed.) Annie, a scion of a Greenwood County ranching family knows the life, and she has a poet's eye for detail and for imagery. This album is obviously a labor of love. Annie's affection for the landscape, for the people, for the way of life they embrace is tangible, not only in the lyrics but in the sweetness of the melodies and the beauty of her voice. Only Emmy Lou Harris has a more resonant vibrato.

The opening cut, "Sail the Summer Sky," features her favorite prairie birds: meadowlark, prairie chicken, great blue heron, plover, red-tailed hawk, and killdeer. Other birds and prairie animals populate a novelty song, "Night Out on the Prairie." The boyhood of her father in "Flint Hills Billy" serves as a vehicle for depicting life in the Flint Hills in the 1920s with its one-room schools, ranch work, and shipping cattle by rail, while the story-song "Runaway Nell" gives a funny (and tense) account from her own childhood.

I have often said that the Flint Hills do not take your breath away; they give you a chance to catch it. The title song fully grasps their subtle beauty. A Flint Hills peak is not rugged and jagged, like a Rocky Mountain. One of these hills does indeed present a clean curve against the sky. Which is not to say that the limestone and flint rocks are not formidable; the softness of the appearance of the Hills belies the hardness of the stone that gives them their character.

Annie got the poetic line, clean curve of hill against sky, by the way, by combining a couple of phrases in the columns of Zula Bennington Greene, who wrote under the pen name "Peggy of the Flint Hills." She also borrowed from Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" for the contemplative "Stopping by the Homestead Ruins," a song that puts our human aspirations in perspective.

"Hot Summer Day" realistically describes the lethargy we all feel when we step outside on a hundred-degree July day, but the last verse shows that these hot days are just what the grass needs. Big Bluestem is the subject of "King of the Prairie," one of the most hummable songs on the album, and it is bluestem grass that is capable of putting over 3 pounds a day on a yearling steer (although the rhizomes and ligules probably provide more detail that most listeners need to know).

If I'm ever stranded on a desert isle, I'd want this CD to get stranded with me. Ask your local dealer to get you a copy, or you can order one yourself at tallgrassexpress.com.