

Dust-blown Tractor Tunes: Representations of Environment in Butch Hancock's Songs About Farming in West Texas¹

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Land and environment are important themes in country music, as many musicians reflect on their surrounding rural spaces to tell stories about country life or work on the family farm. Weather conditions are often prominent elements in the narratives of these songs, emerging as unpredictable forces that contribute to the hardships or successes farming. A native of Leesburg, Georgia, former peanut-farmer Luke Bryan had his first number one hit on Billboard's Country Songs list in July 2010 with a song about the importance of rain in facilitating the growth of high-quality corn crops, in "Rain is a Good Thing".² On his sixth studio album, Canadian country artist Corb Lund lamented how west winds on the prairies blow the good dirt east in "Chinook Wind" (2009). These songs serve as source material to understand the effects of climate on life and farming in a particular region, while also describing "the character and identity of place" (Kong 1995). Like Lund's experience on the Canadian prairies, farmers on the West Texas plains of Lubbock County have also had to contend with harsh west winds, but their situation is magnified by the region's extreme dryness. Country-folk singer-songwriter, and former farmer, Butch Hancock's concept album, *West Texas Waltzes and Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes* (1978), is perhaps the strongest evocation of Lubbock's rural landscape – not just through the album's lyrics, but in the recorded vocal and instrumental gestures as well. In addition to capturing the sounds and character of place, these songs also illuminate socio-political tensions that exist between rural and urban values, highlighting the frustrations and lack of confidence the farmer might have in his or her government. This study examines two songs from *West Texas Waltzes*, focusing on how Hancock captures Lubbock County's environment in his music and conveys complex feelings about his hometown.

Cultural geographers such as Susan Smith (1994), Lily Kong (1995), George Carney (1994), and Blake Gumprecht (1998) have emphasized "the extent to which sound and music structures spaces and characterizes place" (Smith 1994, 232). In her pioneering study *The Sounds of Place* (2003), Denise von Glahn considers how instrumental works of the "high-art

tradition" evoke soundscapes of both natural and urban landscapes. Von Glahn does not simply track correspondences between topographical details of places to musical gestures, but rather considers what each composition reveals about the character and identity of place. Important in her study are questions concerning the composer's relation to place: What was the reason or inspiration for each composition? How did the composer relate to place? And what compositional techniques were used to capture or connote place or environment (2003: 12-13)? Whether one is studying music of the "high-art tradition," as Von Glahn, or popular music, as I am here, instrumentation and musical gestures can be used as a method of evoking landscape, or providing environmental context captured in the song lyrics. Extending from Adam Krims' groundbreaking work *Music and Urban Geography* (2007), I am interested in the idea that musical codes or stylistic conventions can be drawn on to mark out place, not simply representing or characterizing geographic space, but also highlighting, embracing and critiquing aspects of environment. Drawing on the scholarship of von Glahn and Krims, this paper will consider the ways in which Hancock anchors his identity to West Texas through songs from the *West Texas Waltzes* album. Through an examination of music and lyrics in "Dry Land Farm" and "Texas Air", I will consider the ways in which Hancock's songs evoke Lubbock County's environment and weather, and consider how each song elaborates the relationship between the dry land farmer and his land.

The Geography and Music of West Texas

Located in the Texas panhandle, Lubbock County sits in the middle of the Southern High Plains of West Texas, an area of land that is 200 miles wide (Finely & Gustavson 1981) and elevated 3241 feet above sea level (LEDA 2009). Lubbock County is flat and treeless, so treeless that it was once called the "staked plains" because early settlers had to drive stakes into the ground to tie up their horses (Maner & Sledge 2003). The region's climate is extremely hot and dry, with summer temperatures reaching highs of

105°F, and an average of only 18 inches of rain per year (LEDA 2009).³ Despite this lack of adequate precipitation, Lubbock’s climate is characterized by extreme weather conditions due in large part to its geographic placement. Situated between large rock formations called the Caprock Escarpments (see Figure 1), the Southern High Plains are susceptible to unpredictable weather patterns. As Blake Gumprecht has observed:

When moist, unstable air from the Gulf of Mexico does reach the area, it tends to collect along the Caprock Escarpment, where it meets drier air transported from the Rocky Mountains. The interaction between these contrasting air masses triggers the formation of storms of such ferocity that West Texas has one of the highest incidences of severe thunderstorms, hail, and tornadoes in the world (1998: 66).



The Caprock Escarpment flanks both the east and west sides of the Llano Estacado (the Southern High Plains). The Mescalero Escarpment in New Mexico is an extension of the Caprock.

Figure 1. Caprock Escarpments (Raisz 1957)

This unpredictable weather has created an unstable environment for cotton crop management, Lubbock’s main industry.

Weather has remained a virulent force for dry land farmers throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Because of its hard, flat terrain, the first Anglo-Saxon settlers to this High South Plains region 150 years ago “believed the region to be uninhabitable”, and learned quickly to expect drastic change in weather; if they did not, they failed (Mason 1986: 1-2). Historian Richard Mason has best described the land’s transition from staked planes to prosperous farming land in his essay “The Cotton Kingdom and the City of Lubbock” (1986). As he reveals, settlers to this region from eastern parts of the United States brought with them knowledge of cotton farming, but were unsure of how to farm the region’s semi-arid plains. While the crop was initially successful, cotton farmers suffered significant crop failures during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s as a result of cycles of drought. A contributing factor to this drought was the inability of farmers to tap deep enough into the Ogallala Aquifer (the Southern High Plains’s underground water supply) to withdraw enough water to save their crops (Kerr Center 2000: 5). Lubbock County’s farmers compensated for this loss by branching out to dairy farming to supplement their income (Mason 1986: 2-3). As researchers at The Kerr Center in Poteau, Oklahoma, have shown (2000: 6), withdrawal from this groundwater increased steadily after World War II with the introduction of new irrigation technologies, a change that was accompanied by the return of cotton as the region’s most important crop.³ “The miracle of the new irrigation technologies did much to protect farmers from the harshness of drought during the 1950’s, early 1970’s, and in the late 1980’s” (Kerr Center 2000: 6). Despite the reliance on this underground water table to provide irrigation solutions to farmers on the Southern High Plains, the lack of rain often renders the soil hard and impenetrable, or the West Texas wind blows loose soil from its place. Furthermore, the hot, arid climate also makes physical labour in the fields challenging, with winds whipping at the faces of farmers in the fields, suffering in the heat of the sun.

Lubbock’s country artists have a long tradition of reflecting on and responding to their hometown through their music. This tradition dates back to the turn of the twentieth century and the singing cowboy, who, as Lubbock historian Rob Weiner has revealed, entertained himself while herding cattle by singing

songs about the places he traveled and worked (Maner & Sledge 2003). Since then, Lubbock musicians have written a variety of place-conscious songs about the town and surrounding county, touching on a range of topics including its people, industry, religion, politics, culture and land. Lubbock's environment has emerged in many of these narratives, as artists muse on the effect of wind, lack of precipitation and tornados on life on the Southern High Plains. In addition to lyrical reflections on the elements, Lubbock artists have been known to evoke the sound of Lubbock's landscape through instrumentation that is both traditional and non-traditional for country music. For example, in "Lubbock Tornado (I Don't Know)" (1980), Terry Allen uses a wind machine, tornado siren, and violin to simulate a ferocious windstorm in a song about two F5 tornados that devastated Lubbock, Texas on May 11, 1970. The Flatlanders have been known to use a musical saw, mandolin tremolo, and pedal steel to evoke different characteristics of wind in their music (see especially "South Winds of Summer" (2002)). Flatlander Butch Hancock's debut solo album captures a more intimate relationship with land and environment, one rooted in narratives of defining territory and place.

Butch Hancock's *West Texas Waltzes and Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes*

Butch Hancock's 1978 concept album *West Texas Waltzes and Dust Blown Tractor Tunes* explores the hardships of dry land farming through musical portraits of Lubbock's environment and landscape. With nothing but his guitar, harmonica, and foot stomp accompanying him, Hancock admits that he sought to create "a real West Texas/early Dylan/Woody Guthrie sounding album" (Cohen 1992: 45). The album's songs were written during a period when he was "driving a terracing machine on farms in [Lubbock County]," admitting that he got "really tuned into the earth and the weather" (Buchholz 1994: 14) while sitting on his tractor all day. In an interview with Christopher Oglesby (2002), Hancock revealed that with this early songwriting, he drew inspiration from the land and the open sky ahead of him, and he sought to describe exactly what he was seeing from the seat of his tractor. The album's narrative reflects this preoccupation with Lubbock's land in songs, drawing on iconographic imagery and climate of West Texas as a dry, hot, desert land with farmers, crops, and Texas purple sage dotting the landscape. Perhaps the most iconic image portrayed in these

songs is that of Hancock as a modern cowboy, who traded in his horse in for a tractor, writing songs about life and work on the Plains. Songs from this perspective include the transformation of the region from hard desert land into fertile cotton fields ("They Say It's a Good Land"), storms ("Dry Land Farm" and "Just One Thunderstorm"), the smell of rain ("Texas Air") and even the farmer's enemy: the coyote ("Little Coyote Waltz"). While place is evoked throughout the album's narrative, Hancock also describes the effects of urban encroachment on this rural landscape, and the ignorance of outsiders to the needs of dry land farmers.

With the land and open sky ahead of him as inspiration for his homage to Lubbock's landscape, his tractor became his accompaniment in the composition phase. He states: "I took a harmonica out there one time and figured [sic] out that the key of G was second gear [at two-thirds throttle] on this ol' [sic] tractor" (Oglesby 2006: 74). Hancock found that the fluctuation in the tone and rhythm on the tractor's speed-up and slow-down while moving through hard and loose soil became the perfect accompaniment. Hancock wrote songs from the seat of his tractor by day, and finished them on his guitar in the evenings. The harmonica tends to emerge in these narratives as an environmental force, representing the many shades in character of the West Texas environment in general, and the wind in particular. With the exception of "West Texas Waltz", the harmonica is featured only in songs about Lubbock's landscape and environment, all of which refer to the effects of wind on dry land farming (highlighted in blue in Table 1).

"Dry Land Farm"

The album opens from the seat of his tractor, where Hancock reflects on the extreme weather patterns affecting the land he is working on in "Dry Land Farm". The song's lyrics (Example 1) draw on images of the frontier, the wide-open flat land, desolate landscape, dry climate and, most importantly, the lonesome cowboy working the fields. Hancock describes the reality of life and work on West Texas land, outlining the effect of the summer breeze and the sand-filled west winds, revealing that he's "swallowed a gallon of sand for every acre", which is "more than he can chew".⁵ In the opening lyrics, Hancock establishes a source of tension by comparing his farming situation to those living "over on the county line" who are fortunate enough to "get rain". In so doing, these lyrics establish an immediate boundary

Table 1: Instrumentation, Time and Key Signature of album

Song	Instrumentation	Time Signature	Key
Dry Land Farm	Harmonica, Guitar, Foot	4/4	A ♭ +
Where the West Winds Have Blow'd	Harmonica, Guitar	3/4	D+
You've Never Seen Me Cry	Guitar	4/4	G+
I Wish I Was Only Workin'	Guitar	3/4	D+
Dirt Road Song	Harmonica, Guitar	3/4	D+
West Texas Waltz*	Harmonica, Guitar	3/4	C#+
They Say It's a Good Land	Harmonica, Guitar	3/4	D+
I Grew to Be a Stranger	Guitar	4/4	D+
Texas Air	Harmonica, Guitar	4/4	G+
Little Coyote Waltz	Harmonica, Guitar	3/4	E+
Just One Thunderstorm**	Guitar	4/4	D+

*Lyrical narrative not about landscape or environment

**Narrative about the effect of one thunderstorm on the region

between the dry land farmer in Lubbock and the more fortunate “other” over on the county line. The government, and specifically the “two-faced” president, is another “outsider” in this song narrative. In the third and fourth verses, Hancock vents about political ignorance toward the realities of farming in Lubbock County.⁶ Although Hancock modernizes this narrative through the mention of automobiles and air conditioning, these luxuries remain unavailable to the man on the dry land farm, pitting the rural values of the West Texas cowboy against urban ones.

Hancock accompanies himself in “Dry Land Farm” with acoustic guitar and a heel stomp, with harmonica solos featured in the introduction, transition, bridge and ending. “Dry Land Farm” (and the entire *West Texas Waltzes* album) draws on straightforward and simplified production values that make minimal use of technological parameters, a style of recording synonymous with 1960s-70s country-folk music. This production style is reminiscent of early recordings of country and folk artists like Johnny Cash, Woody Guthrie and especially Bob Dylan, which focused on presenting the song in a relatively simple form. Drawing on this scaled-down technique, “Dry Land Farm” emphasizes the place of voice and harmonica in the mix: the voice and harmonica are brought to the front of the mix, while the acoustic guitar and heel stomp recede to the background, playing a supporting role for the voice and harmonica.⁷

“Dry Land Farm” is in the key of A ♭ major. This tonal center is only one semitone away from the G major key area that Hancock associates with the second gear of his tractor. Interestingly, the song-

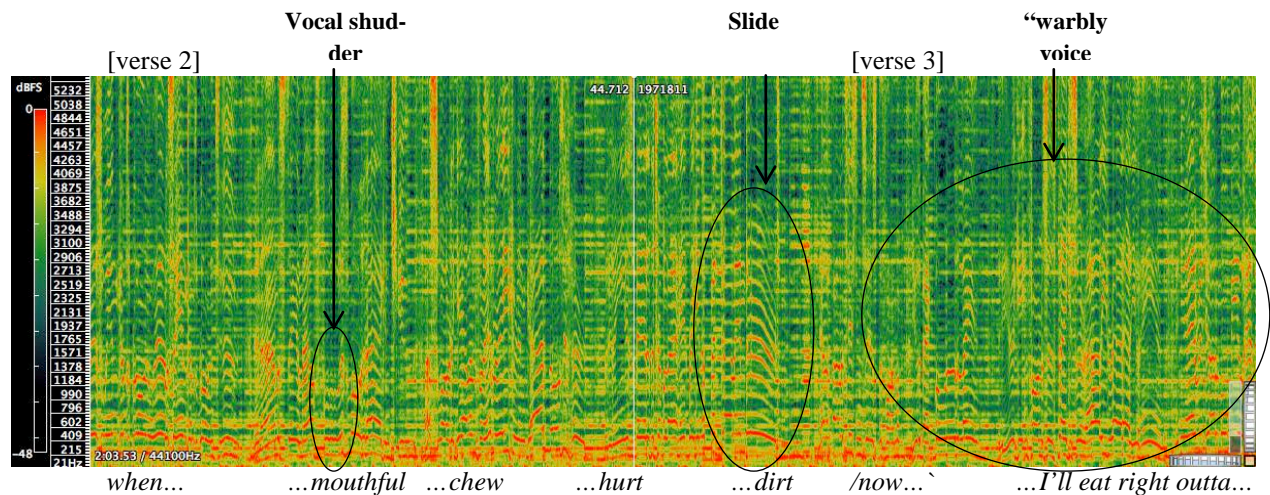
writer actually revealed in an interview that he found that “somewhat exaggerating the speed-up and slow-down” altered the pitch of the tractor (Oglesby 2006: 74). Thus, increasing the speed of the tractor while driving in second gear, even minutely, would raise the vehicle’s drone-hum by the semitone from G to A ♭. As such, it is possible that Hancock wrote “Dry Land Farm” from the seat of his tractor, and simply increased the speed to find his A ♭ drone tone for accompaniment while writing this song. Both the guitar accompaniment and foot stomp provide the 4/4 chugging rhythm for the song. The guitar’s strumming patterns alternate between I and V of A ♭ major in the verses, and Hancock also finger-picks an ostinato-like gesture on the guitar that outlines the harmonic movement and further enhances the sense of movement. The heel stomp, combined with the A ♭ hum and plucked motive on the acoustic guitar, capture the forward motion of a tractor plowing through the fields, as though it is plucking at the hard soil to loosen and mix it for spring planting. Both the song’s key and rhythm seem to be pulled from the tractor, an aspect that resonates through the recording.

The effect of environmental conditions, such as the sand-filled west winds, can be heard in Hancock’s warbly Dylan-esque voice. Hancock “gravely warble” (as Gumprecht has called the singer’s voice (1998: 75)), is a voice type that has a rough, dry, and hoarse quality that is also very nasal. Fernando Poyatos (1993: 216) states that a hoarse voice implies “a quality acquired through some negative activities”. Hancock’s hoarse vocals give the impression that the

abuse is the result of the environmental conditions experienced by the song's character, as revealed in the lyrics. In the second verse in particular (00:30-00:48), Hancock has an emphasized vocal shudder (tremulous voice) on the end of the word "mouthful", sounding like a physical reaction to a mouthful of dirt. In the next line, Hancock has an intensified, strained voice on the word "God", and a breathy voice on "hurt" (there is an aspiration of air on the "h" at the beginning of the word). On the last word of this verse, "dirt", Hancock has a hoarse, warbly slide. In emphasizing these words in the second verse, the strain of the dry weather on Hancock's voice becomes even more apparent. And finally, Hancock ends each verse with a hoarse, warbly slide on the final word. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson (2006:

249) has connected such vocal slides (portamentos) with depths of feeling and sincerity, but they could also be a method of showing sadness or frustration over one's plot in life. The spectrogram in Example 2 maps out these gestures, providing a visual representation of how Hancock's voice articulates certain gestures. Overall, the paralinguistic qualifiers in Hancock's performance seem to further enhance the image of the singer sitting up on his tractor, with the quality of his voice reflecting his frustration and the harsh effect of the weather on his body. The abuse we hear in his voice gives the impression that it has been damaged by the hot, dry, sandy weather that he endures while plowing the fields, often sounding as though he is singing through a mouthful of sand.

Example 1. "Dry Land Farm", Spectrogram of Second Verse



The harmonica functions in this arrangement as a response to the vocal line, mimicking the singer's warbling vocal line, but also producing clusters of pitches and chords as Hancock articulates the instrument's solo. This technique creates a harsh sound that evokes the environmental context set in the lyrics. The solos build in intensity throughout the song, a result of the change in register between the first three harmonica solos (on A \flat^4) and song's coda (on E \flat^5 , the highest pitch of the song) and of the force in Hancock's articulation. Because of the harmonica's close proximity to the microphone, the range of sympathetic frequencies (overtones) is more audibly present in the recorded track, enhancing the piercing qualities of the instrument's timbre. The harmonica

pitches begin to crack or produce these sympathetic frequencies as Hancock forces more air into producing a sound. This is especially true of the song's coda, where the combination of Hancock's forceful breath and the high range of the instrument produce a piercing "doubled" pitch that sounds like whistle tones. By "double" pitched, I mean that in addition to the melodic pitches that the instrument is actually playing, we also hear the harmonica's sympathetic frequencies in a higher range. Such "doubling" in the harmonica's solo seems to mimic the sound of the harsh wind, and imitates the whistling tones that are often produced by a forceful gust of wind. The intensification of the harmonica's solos from the introduction to the ending also emphasizes the frustration

Example 2. “Dry Land Farm”, Harmonica solos
Harmonica Introduction (0:00-0:09)



Harmonica Bridge, first 6 bars only (1:05-1:16)



Harmonica Outro, first 4 bars only (1:40-01:49)



Note: The asterisk (*) indicates the location of the doubled or fractured pitches.

present in the lyrics and Hancock’s vocal performance.

“Texas Air”

A song that is near the conclusion of the album’s cycle, Hancock’s “Texas Air” presents a different side of West Texas wind. While “Dry Land Farm” vents about the farmer’s frustrations with the weather and circumstances, “Texas Air” is an ode to the land and environment in which he works (see Example 4). Through this song narrative Hancock proclaims his love for the landscape, elements, and nature surrounding him, including the rivers, windstorms, blackbirds, blooming cotton, the smell of the rain and sage, and, most importantly, his love of Texas air. This descriptive-narrative paints a picture of a much more promising and serene environment than the

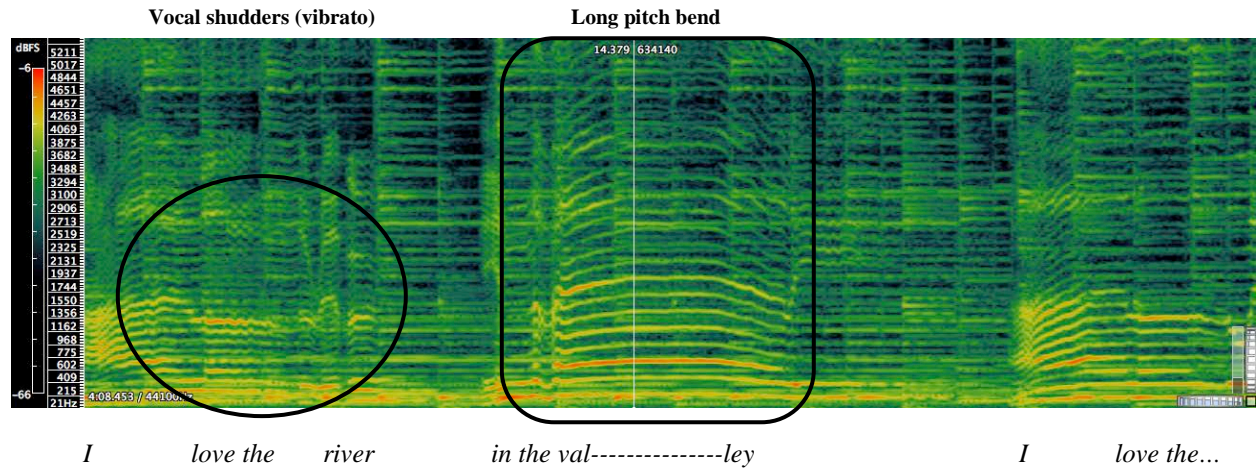
previous song, one in which the “weather treat[s] you fair”. “Texas Air” reveals a real love for land and territory – a love so deep that Hancock requests that his spirit and bones be buried in this land in the song’s chorus.

A more relaxed, rambling pace than the previous song, “Texas Air” is in his tractor’s second-gear key of G major. On his guitar, Hancock plays a simple strumming pattern while also picking a walking bass line that leads from one chord to another. The character of this strumming and walking bass line pattern paints a picture of Hancock ambling through the fields, whether by tractor or by foot. Hancock’s vocal and harmonica performance evokes the tranquility of the lyrics; while his voice is still nasal and hoarse, it is not *as* rough as it was in “Dry Land Farm”, and it certainly cannot be characterized as warbly. In fact, in observing the spectrogram in Example 5, we see

that at the beginnings of phrases (“I love the river”) Hancock’s voice has small vocal shudders (vibrato), but his vocal gestures are much more smooth than they are in “Dry Land Farm”. On the word “valley” his voice is slightly strained as he sings one long arching pitch bend. It is also interesting just to compare Hancock’s articulation from one song to the next on the spectrograms: in “Dry Land Farm” his voice

shifts around and looks as though it moves in a fluttery manner, while in “Texas Air” his voice moves much more smoothly between the melody’s pitches. In articulating the melody of “Texas Air” in this manner, Hancock’s voice suggests calmness, and even conveys the sense of his reflecting on the landscape as he plows the fields on his tractor.

Example 3. “Texas Air”, Spectrogram of Verse 1



The piercing melisma of the harmonica performance in “Dry Land Farm” also subsides in “Texas Air”. Again, the harmonica echoes the vocal line, holding longer melodic pitches, and instead of articulating individual pitches in the melody, the harmonica elongates the line by holding repeated pitches (Ex-

ample 6). The harmonica also produces more focused, clean single pitches, instead of the clustered pitches heard in “Dry Land Farm”. Through long, drawn out pitches, the harmonica slides smoothly through the melody, evoking the sense of a lighter air around the singer.

Example 4. “Texas Air”, Harmonica Solo (1:44-2:13)

Note: The final seven measures of the harmonica solo are repeated at the end of the song.



Hancock as Modern Cowboy

The sights and sounds Hancock experienced while plowing Lubbock fields became the context in

which he composed his first solo album, and that environment permeates his performance of both “Dry

Land Farm” and “Texas Air”. In an interview with Chris Oglesby (2002) about this period in his career, Hancock stated: “My theory is that all of the rhythms that we experience every day get programmed into us, at least into our unconscious... [Those] rhythms that apply during a day can be compressed down into a two-minute song.” While “Dry Land Farm” captures the restless energy and the farmer’s frustration with the West Texas wind, “Texas Air” provides a snapshot of the farmer at a slower pace, with time to reflect on the land and air around him. These songs evoke contrasting characterizations and sounds of West Texas wind through a variety of performance strategies on the harmonica, capturing both the ferocity and tranquility of Texas air that surrounded Hancock while plowing Lubbock’s fields.

But these songs, and the *West Texas Waltzes* album, are not just evocations of Lubbock’s rural landscape; rather, they enable Hancock to negotiate the complex relationship between an artist and region, or a farmer and his land. Drawing on the iconic imagery of West Texas, Hancock anchors himself in the deep regional tradition of the singing cowboy (albeit modernized by his mechanical steed). These songs present diverse conceptions of rural space, revealing the dynamic nature of West Texas as desolate yet bountiful, inhospitable yet somehow tranquil. Despite his struggles with the hardships of dry land farming, “Texas Air” suggests that the West Texas farmer is bound to and holds a deep appreciation for the region’s environment and nature. These songs become a powerful vehicle for social commentary and the expression of conflicts that exist between rural and urban values, allowing Hancock to become a voice for dry land farmers in Lubbock County, whose hard work is often ignored by government and overlooked by a society increasingly determined to develop rural spaces. Hancock’s album thus emerges as a tribute to the land and its farmers, lamenting and rejoicing the West Texas region in which he was raised, and capturing the many shades of wind that he encounters from the seat of his tractor.

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Notes

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² For Luke Bryan's charting on "Rain is a Good Thing", see <http://www.billboard.com/#/song/luke-bryan/rain-is-a-good-thing/14116691>.

³ For comparison, Montreal, QC, receives (on average) 39 inches of rainfall alone per year (see <http://www.theweathernetwork.com/statistics/summary/cl7011309/caqc0441>). This figure does not include snowfall.

⁴ Today, Lubbock is also the center of a large cattle and oil producing region (Gumprecht 1998, 65).

⁵ George Hancock (no relation to Butch) has wittily reflected that "you can tell a West Texan by watching him drink: he never completely empties his glass because of the sand that collects at the bottom" (as cited in Gumprecht 1998, 66).

⁶ Hancock has never revealed the identity of the "two-faced president"; one can assume that it reflects a general distrust of the government in the 1970s, including Richard Nixon, whose Wage-Price Controls had serious consequences for farmers (Yergin and Stanislaw 1997, 60-64) and even Gerald Ford.

⁷ On "Dry Land Farm" it sounds as though the recording engineer used only one microphone to capture Hancock's performance, further emphasizing not only the role of the voice in the mix but also the simplified recording strategies. The recording captures a space that suggests that Hancock is singing and playing harmonica directly into the microphone, but that the acoustic guitar remains un-miced to give the effect that it is behind (or supporting) the singer