

Biography

Photograph by Wood Newton

In the end, life is a private act.

We do not know what it feels like when another man thinks his thoughts. Exactly how it seems to him as he trembles in the sweetness of his visions or the corruption of his nightmares, no one will ever know. Thus, at a certain point, explanation stops. We see what we see, hear what we hear, read what we read, and are puzzled about the rest.

The night before I met Townes Van Zandt, I lay awake in bed reading a long article written about him by a writer named Bill Hedgepeth. The adventure therein was Hedgepeth's as much as Van Zandt's—it was his dead earnest pursuit of a songwriter-poet up to the edge where explanation stops.

Like this story, passed along in Townes' wry voice, about his days at the University of Colorado when he would lock himself up in his apartment for a week "taking my phone off the hook, being drunk all the time, drinking Bali Hai wine, playing the guitar, listening to Lightnin' Hopkins, and Hank Williams, and early Bob Dylan. . . Then I'd come out at the end of a week of this and throw a giant party.

"I lived on the fourth story of this apartment building, and at one point during one of those parties, I went out and sat on the edge of the balcony and started leaning backwards. I decided I was gonna lean over and just see what it felt like all the way up to when you lost control and you were falling.

"I lived in Fort Worth till I was 8," he once told a writer, "Midland till 9, Billings, Montana, till 12, Boulder, Colorado, till 14, Chicago till 15, Minnesota till 17, then back to Colorado till 19, Houston till 21. And then I started traveling." This same writer was also told by several people that Townes was "a derelict, a rambler and rowdy, and more or less the greatest living songwriter in America."

He began playing guitar at 15, and he says he learned his second chord at 21.

Townes stands up and surveys the twine design with satisfaction, then moves his paraphernalia around to the back of the outhouse and starts hammering nails in there. This summer he's itchy. Every summer for the past seven years, he's traipsed deep into the Colorado wilderness, alone on a horse. This year he isn't going (maybe), because he and Lomax have decided the time is ripe to make the most of his songs from a business viewpoint.

This spring, after years of a career with about the same level of acceptance as an excellent volume of poetry, reviewers in magazines like *Crawdaddy*, *Esquire*, and *Rolling Stone* are getting ecstatic over Townes' writing. This came about because Emmy Lou Harris had the good taste to record Townes' song "Pancho and Lefty" on her *Luxury Liner* album. Now some reviewers are spending about as many words on that one song as they are on the whole rest of the album.

Townes' songwriting credentials are impeccable. Back in Houston he hung out with fellow scuffling writers like Mickey Newbury, Guy Clark, and Jerry Jeff Walker. Now most all his friends credit Townes with being a major influence on their own writing. "Townes is somebody who looks a little like Hank Williams—even writes like Hank Williams probably would have written," Newbury said. "But I tell you, I think Townes is better. Now my songs are a lot less involved than Townes'; his are really involved. But at the same time, they're deceptively simple. Somehow or other, they work and evoke an emotion, but you can't put your finger on it."

"Townes was the biggest single influence on my writing," Guy Clark told one writer. "Working around a poet like him, you learn not to throw away a phrase for a rhyme, or a word for a pattern. You learn to keep your work clean."

Townes' recorded legacy of songs is embodied in six albums on the Poppy label:

- 1968 *For the Sake of the Song*
- 1969 *Our Mother the Mountain*
- 1970 *Townes Van Zandt*
- 1971 *Della Mama Blues*
- 1972 *High, Low and Inbetween*
- 1973 *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*

These albums, caught up in multifarious distribution deals, have been virtually unpromoted. Nonetheless, they have gathered unto themselves a diehard cult of 20-30,000 fans, of whom Lomax is surely the supreme example. ("Now Townes has got to be the definitive cult figure's cult figure," he stated shortly before becoming Townes' manager. Then he fumed, "Who else can you name who has six excellent albums, who is the writer of 20 or 30 of the prettiest songs ever, yet who is virtually unknown? So unknown, in fact, that his 'producer' named the last album 'The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt.'")

The back of the outhouse now decorated, Townes and I wander into the cabin. It's the kind that in Tennessee is called a shack. It has no plumbing, no phone, and is truly beautiful. The kitchen table is a slab of wood gently swaying on chains hooked to the ceiling. One wall is papered with red foil Christmas wrap and one with a giant poster of earnest carolers fa-la-la-ing away.

Townes checks a rough wood rocking chair upended on the front stoop, and verifies that he's glued one rocker very solidly back on. His wife, drifting around under a cloud of red hair, is explaining how it would be feasible to have an indoor cold-water shower. Here, the abyss seems no deeper than the alley between two hills in the distance.

Townes songs are enigmatic, fluttering out of the pale beyond explanation. They don't arise from his 'roots'—he was consistently uprooted as a child. They don't arise from his memory—he is lacking 20 years of that. Townes says they often come sizzling straight out of his subconscious.

"Bukka White used to call them sky songs," he told writer Joe McNally, "cause he'd reach up and pull 'em out of the sky. It seems to me that they just kind of come through me almost. Just all of a sudden K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K (that's a sound approximating lightning). Write this down. K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K, there's another line. K-K-K-K-K-K-K-K! It kind of goes from the top of my head out my right arm."

"I wrote 'Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold' in a sort of frenzy," he says as we sit on the couch looking through his book. "It just came pouring out of me. I couldn't stop, and I wrote so fast my hands were aching. Even I don't know what that song means."

Like poetry, Townes' writing is larger than the sum of its parts. Unlike a commercial hookline song, which can be diagrammed and analyzed into controllability, Townes' best songs are elusive. Even in those which are positive and seemingly simple, there is a shadow around each corner—suggesting a shape but not exposing the substance.

Until very recently, Townes' songs were considered too good for the commercial market. Before the Emmy Lou recording, they were cut by only the most fastidious connoisseurs of authentic music: Doc Watson ("If I Needed You"), Robin and Linda Williams ("None But the Rain"), and Steve Young ("No Place to Fall"). But Emmy Lou, after all, *does* sell records. So now, pioneering producer Allen Reynolds is doing a genuine commercial single of "If I Needed You" with new CBS artist Marcia Routh. And Hoyt Axton is picking up on Townes' material.

So, John and Townes are setting out this summer to build a publishing empire. They have also negotiated the release of a double album recorded live by Townes at the Old Quarter in Houston. Although Townes has supported himself for years playing solo dates with his guitar, bookings are stronger than ever. And more and more big national journalists are trying to phone the phoneless Townes.

Townes stands up and lopes back out in the yard with a big jug of fertilizer. As the mixture glugs out, he contemplates roaming over the countryside decorating barns and outhouses with twine trellis designs. "Now, if these little things aren't doing better when I get back from Atlanta," he sighs, looking down at the budding flowers, "I'll blow the whole thing up when I get back."

He's kidding, of course. . . I guess. Standing there threatening his morning glories.

*The days up and down they come
Like rain on a conga drum
Forgetting most remember some
But don't turn none away
Everything is not enough
Nothing is too much to bear
Where you've been is good and gone
All you keep's the getting there
To live's to fly low and high
So shake the dust off of your wings
And the sleep out of your eyes*

To Live's to Fly

Lola Scobey
Nashville, Tennessee
March, 1977

Discography

For the Sake of the Song (1968)

I'll Be Here in the Morning
Sad Cinderella
The Velvet Voices
Talkin' Karate Blues
All Your Young Servants
Sixteen Summers, Fifteen Falls

For the Sake of the Song
Tecumseh Valley
Many a Fine Lady
Quicksilver Daydreams of Maria
Waitin' Around to Die

Our Mother the Mountain (1969)

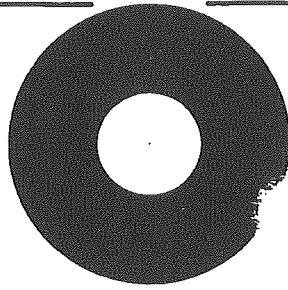
Be Here to Love Me
Kathleen
She Came and She Touched Me
Like a Summer Thursday
Our Mother the Mountain
Second Lover's Song

Saint John the Gambler
Tecumseh Valley
Snake Mountain Blues
My Proud Mountains
Why She's Acting This Way

Townes Van Zandt (1970)

For the Sake of the Song
Columbine
Waitin' Around to Die
Don't You Take It Too Bad
Colorado Girl

Lungs
I'll Be Here in the Morning
Fare Thee Well, Miss Carrousel
Quicksilver Daydreams of Maria
None But the Rain



Delta Mama Blues (1971)

FFV*	Come Tomorrow
Delta Mama Blues	Brand New Companion
Only Him or Me	Where I Lead Me
Turnstiled, Junkpiled	Rake
Tower Song	Nothin

High, Low, and Inbetween (1972)

Two Hands	No Deal
You Are Not Needed Now	To Live's to Fly
Greensboro Woman	When He Offers His Hand
Highway Kind	Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold
Standin'	Blue Ridge Mountains
High, Low and Inbetween	

The Late, Great, Townes Van Zandt (1973)

No Lonesome Tune	Fraulein*
Sad Cinderella	Pancho and Lefty
German Mustard	If I Needed You
Don't Let the Sunshine Fool You*	Silver Ships of Andilar
Honky Tonkin'	Heavenly Houseboat Blues
Snow Don't Fall	

Live at the Old Quarter (1977)

Side 1 22:00

Pancho and Lefty
Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold
Don't You Take It Too Bad
Two Girls
Talkin' Fraternity Blues

Side 2 23:00

Brand New Companion
White Freightliner Blues
To Live's to Fly
She Came and She Touched Me
Talkin' Thunderbird Wine Blues
Rex's Blues
Nine Pound Hammer*

Side 3 26:00

For the Sake of the Song
Chauffeur's Blues*
No Place to Fall
Loretta
Why She's Acting This Way

Side 4 23:00

Cocaine Blues*
Who Do You Love*
Tower Song
Waitin' Around to Die
Tecumseh Valley
Lungs
Only Him or Me

*Denotes outside material

