

'Hum of the road' brings Van Zandt to Missoula

Preview

■ **Townes Van Zandt** in concert, Saturday, Oct. 14, 8 p.m., University of Montana Ballroom. Tickets are \$9 general admission and \$8 for UM students, faculty and staff. Children 12 and under get in for free. Tickets are available at the University Center Box Office, the Adams Field House Box Office and Worden's Market.

By **MIKE McINALLY**
of the Missoulian

Townes Van Zandt is calling from his natural habitat — a hotel room somewhere on the road.

The singer-songwriter — much-esteemed and much-covered by his songwriting peers — is on the road again, playing a series of shows where it's just him, his guitar and his songs.

The show last night, at the Highway 30 Roadhouse in Oregon, went fine. Coming up: Shows in Idaho and Montana, including one Saturday night in Missoula.

Van Zandt calls it "the hum of the road," and he loves it.

"It's real," he said in a telephone interview Thursday. "It's a real curing process."

In fact, he said, when he gets home, "I wake up early: 'Where's my guitar? Where do I have to be?' And then I realize I'm in my room."

"You have to get some rest sometime and all that," he said. But after too long at home, "I get bogged down and bored and become a couch potato."

Van Zandt is probably better-known for the recordings other people have done of his songs: Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard hit No. 1 on the country charts with "Poncho and Lefty." Nanci Griffith covered "Tecumseh Valley" on her "Other Voices, Other Rooms" album. Emmylou Harris and the Cowboy Junkies have recorded Van Zandt tunes.

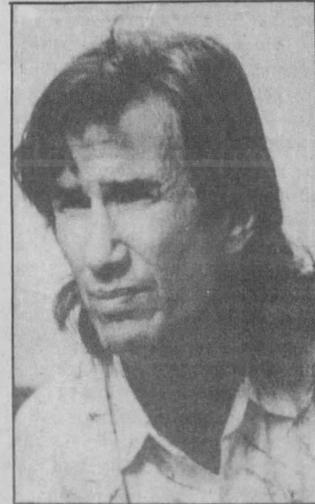
Van Zandt's recording career is a bit spotty: His latest studio effort, "No Deeper Blue," is a satisfying album with some terrific songs — but the 1994 release was his first studio record in seven years. Another 1994 release, "Roadsongs," is an unusual effort in that it features live recordings of Van Zandt singing songs by other people, including Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen and longtime Van Zandt influence Lightnin' Hopkins.

But it was Elvis Presley who was the first inspiration for young Van Zandt, who spent some time growing up in Billings, where his father worked in the oil business.

Van Zandt recalls watching Elvis play that legendary gig on "The Ed Sullivan Show." His sister and some of her girlfriends were watching as well. The ladies went nuts. Young Van Zandt took notice and asked Santa Claus for a guitar.

Van Zandt's dad said, "I bet Santa Claus would give you a guitar if you learned 'Frauline,' " the old Luther Williams song. Van Zandt did. He still performs the song on occasion.

When he was in college, Van Zandt's influences broadened: Lightnin' Hopkins. Bob Dylan. Mozart. They've all contributed to the development of the man Steve Earle called "the best songwriter



Townes Van Zandt

in the whole world."

Some songs "come in a flash," Van Zandt said. "Some you have to use a little craftsmanship." If it becomes apparent that he needs to force a song, he bags it.

The key, he said, "is being able to recognize when it could be a song. Part of it is being in the right place at the right time."

Live, Van Zandt said, he decides what the first song will be minutes before going on stage. He makes the rest of the decisions as the show develops. He doesn't work from a set list. "I always felt that putting a piece of paper on the back of a guitar was pretty tacky," he said.

He worries about getting requests for a song that he's forgotten how to play. "I hate to get in front of an audience and start playing a song and forget it. ... It's a real pleasure when somebody makes a request that I know."

After each show, it's back on the road.

Besides, he said, "There's nothing else I can do. I can maybe work in a convenience store."