

The Townes Van Zandt Cult

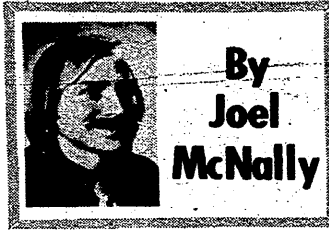
Wanna join a cult?

Don't worry. You don't have to dress up in a black nightie and go around with a charcoal X on your forehead or anything. All you have to do is admire a brilliant singer-songwriter-crazy person before any of the rest of the world catches on to him.

Townes Van Zandt is easy to admire, but hard to find. His albums, the most recent of which was released in 1973, are not usually sold in any of the likely places like record stores. Occasionally you will find a "cutout" in a big cardboard box in the corner of the store under 37 copies of "Tiny Tim's Greatest Hit."

Townes himself is even harder to find. After phone calls to New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Denver and Austin, I finally located him at a farm outside of Nashville. Well, I didn't really get him at the farm. There isn't any phone at the farm. Somebody had to go out and fetch him.

It was important to talk to him now — and important that you join up quick if you want to get in on this thing — because his songs are now starting to be recorded by Emmylou Harris, Hoyt Axton, Steve Young and other folks. Once very many people start hearing them, it is going to be all over. Successful artists aren't allowed to have cults.



Tracking Townes, I was told by people who hadn't heard from him in years that he was a derelict, a rambler, a rowdy and the greatest more or less living songwriter in America.

I asked him about the derelict part. "I figure there is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, it doesn't behoove any of us to speak about the rest of us," he replied.

That poetry stuff sounded so good that he started off on something about the dust of rumors covering his face and an arrow being slick and straight. He ended up with: "You know what I mean?" I didn't have the foggiest, but it sounded really good.

Townes said he wasn't really a fighting

kind of guy. He just gets rolled a lot.

"You know, you've played hard all night and you go somewhere for a couple of drinks. It's five minutes to closing so you make it a double. You guzzle it there and then you have to get out. You're waitin' for the cab and five guys get ya. It just kinda gets on ya.

"I told the doctor the last time it happened that I had broken my fingers in three joints. He said, 'Man, stay out of them joints.'"

It goes on like that. I believed everything he told me.

"I started playing at 15. I learned my second chord at about 21. All the guys in the mental institution were laughing at me because I only knew one chord. It takes a lot of gall to be a mental patient and laugh at someone.

"I went to the doctor just last week, right. I said I thought maybe I was a schizophrenic. He said, 'Man, that makes four of us.'"

Townes learned rambling at home as the son of an oil executive. "I lived in Fort Worth 'til I was 8; Midland 'til 9; Billings, Montana 'til 12; Boulder, Colorado 'til 14; Chicago 'til 15; Minnesota 'til 17; then back to Colorado 'til 19; Houston 'til 21 and then I started travelin.'"

But what about his music? And what about "Pancho and Lefty"? That is the song that Emmylou and Hoyt have out on current albums, and it has given Townes more national exposure than he ever has had. The song has impressed a lot of critics even if they can't figure it all out.

"Seriously, I'll tell you kind of the way I write songs. Bukka White used to call them sky songs 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. It's not like me sitting down and thinking about it. Just all of a sudden, kkkkkk (that's a sound something like lightning). Write this down. Kkkkkk, there's another line. Kkkkkk. It kind of goes from the top of my head out my right arm. So who knows what it all means?"

For all of you cult members out there, the real news is that a double-record live performance album is expected out around the end of May or so. It will review a lot of those songs that you can't find anywhere anymore and also include seven new songs.

Be the first on your block to know who Townes Van Zandt is. When everybody else finds out there is going to be one weird block party.

The Happy Booker Signs Billy Carter

By JOE EDWARDS
Associated Press Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Tandy Rice, Billy Carter's agent and the booker for 20 or so country music stars, has a motto on his desk: "There is no limit to what can be done if it doesn't matter who gets the credit."

There appears to be enough credit to pass around among Rice and his five salesmen at Top Billing, Inc. With the signing of Carter this spring to supplement a booking billboard boasting more Grand Ole Opry acts than any other agency, Rice's firm has become the trailblazer among Nashville agents.

Rice, 39, is a fast-talking, dynamic businessman with a background in public relations and selling. With his sudden emergence as a pace-setter, he's the happy booker.

"I love sellin' better than anythin else," he said among the clicking typewriters and ringing telephones at his agency. "I'd rather sell than eat."

Since becoming Carter's agent, Rice has been besieged by requests for interviews and has refused nearly all of them. He granted one recent interview "to set the record straight."

Mostly, he wanted to take issue with the portrayal of the President's brother as a beer-drinking good ole boy.

"The real Billy Carter is a decent, fine, good man. I can't say enough good things about him. He's a good father, a decent husband and a feet-on-the-ground businessman. That's the side that impresses me.

"He never sought to become a celebrity and has no desire to be one. We have never made a news release on him and probably never will.

"He did not choose us to capitalize on his celebrity status. Billy has turned down 99 per cent of the business opportunities that came his way."

Rice, who talks to Carter as many as five times a day, believes Carter chose his agency because "we out-hustled everybody."

"I would guess 30 individuals were after him. But I don't think they had follow-through. They wrote him a letter, then forgot about it.

"He's unique. There's a facade, then there's a serious, disciplined businessman. The other overtures were not made to him in a serious vein and weren't impressive to him. We didn't approach him that way."

Things weren't always so dandy at Rice's agency.

"I used to go get the mail and if we had four or five pieces, I would hoot and holler. Today, you can't get it all in the car sometimes."

When he bought the firm eight years ago, it had one telephone line, two employees and three artists. Now it has nine lines, 14 employees and a roster of artists that includes Jim Ed Brown, Helen Cornelius, Johnny Carver, Jerry Clower, Little Jimmy Dickens, Don Gibson, Jack Greene, Jeannie Seely, Tom T. Hall, Dickey Lee, Del Reeves, Red Sovine, Billie Jo Spears, Kitty Wells, Johnny Wright, Dottie West and others.

Rice says the buying public wants wholesome entertainment.

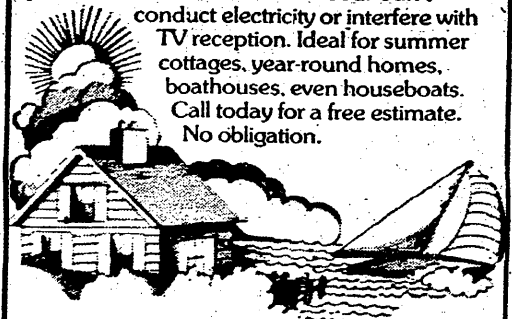
"I've noticed a craving for family entertainment," he said. "The biggest piece of pie goes to the family-oriented, wholesome show."



TANDY RICE

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