

AT STARWOOD

Country Tableau on a Rock Stage

The kids who habitually stop in at the Starwood for a dose of hard rock must be startled at the neo-ruralist tableau that took the stage Monday (and also plays tonight). The performance has a definite country aura, and the two women fronting the affair, besides being assertively un-stylish by Hollywood standards, perform from chairs in the back-porch or living-room manner.

The central figure here is Dianne Davidson, whose reputation hasn't gone far beyond her native Tennessee. Her current teaming with former Mother Earth vocalist Tracy Nelson lends the proceedings a recognition factor and makes for the rare and impressive spectacle of two formidable singers sinking their teeth into some strong material.

Both take a somewhat stentorian vocal approach, and at times they indulge in overwrought passages that steamroll over, rather than complement, the nature of the song at hand. When they exercise control and focus, they bring passion and sensitivity to a varied repertoire dominated by country and country-tinged pop (highlights include Jesse Winchester's "Brand New Tennessee Waltz," "Bring It On Home to Me" and the Nelson standby "I Want to Lay Down Beside You").

Davidson is an assertive stage figure, even if seated, and projects confidence, purpose and a vibrant personality. The informality of the presentation is often excessive, interrupting the show's pace, but when they get down to business they serve notice that the day of the vocal virtuoso, of the technically proficient interpreter of quality songs, is still very much alive.

Second-billed Townes Van Zandt is even more incompatible with the Starwood image. A quasi-legendary figure associated with the Austin scene, Van Zandt is something of a cross between Woody Guthrie and Leonard Cohen, combining a ramblin' man mystique with a touch of contemporary angst.

His link to the folk tradition is evident in songs like "The Ballad of Ira Hays" and Lightnin' Hopkins' "My Starter Won't Start," and in Van Zandt originals. They incorporate modal tunes derived from old-time mountain music with engrossing narratives ranging from the down-to-earth to the delightfully apocryphal.

—RICHARD CROMELIN