

# Van Zandt songs evoke heartache

By JOHN LOMAX III

NASHVILLE — "If hangovers and romantic heartaches could sing, they would sound, I think, like Townes Van Zandt. If barrooms had a story to tell, they would tell them with his voice." — Allan Jones, Melody Maker.

Born March 7, 1944, in Ft. Worth, Townes Van Zandt's eight albums contain self-written songs the equal of any written by a contemporary American songwriter. Though known to far too few record buyers, Van Zandt's music has evoked comparison to Hank Williams, Bob Dylan, Jimmie Rodgers, Lightning Hopkins and Woody Guthrie.

A product of the same Texas singer-songwriter circuit that yielded John Denver, Mickey Newbury, Guy Clark, Michael Murphey and Rodney Crowell, Van Zandt somehow has failed to receive the commercial rewards his talent merits.

There are several reasons Van Zandt's fame hasn't spread. He's a folksinger who came along 10 years too late for that boom and his songs were about 10 years ahead of the times.

In addition, his albums have all been recorded for tiny, now defunct independent labels, Poppy and Tomato Records, companies unable or unwilling to give him the coordinated publicity and touring "push" necessary to elevate an artist from "cult" to mainstream status.

Those factors alone would be sufficient to condemn any artist to obscurity. Van Zandt's quest for success has also been damaged by a lack of management expertise. Despite the fact that his first album, "For the Sake of the Song," was released in 1968, Van Zandt spent all but a little over a year of that 15-year span without competent management.

He doesn't have a manager today, and he also lacks a recording contract.

But you'll be hearing more about him because the popular artists of the day are finally discovering the beauty of compositions Van Zandt wrote 10 and 12 years ago.

Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard are no strangers to this lanky Texan's tunes. They have released Van

Zandt's 1972 composition "Pancho & Lefty" as their second single from their first duet collaboration.

A haunting tale of double-crossing Mexican bandits, "Pancho & Lefty" was recently made into a stunning video piece starring the two stars in the role of the two outlaws.

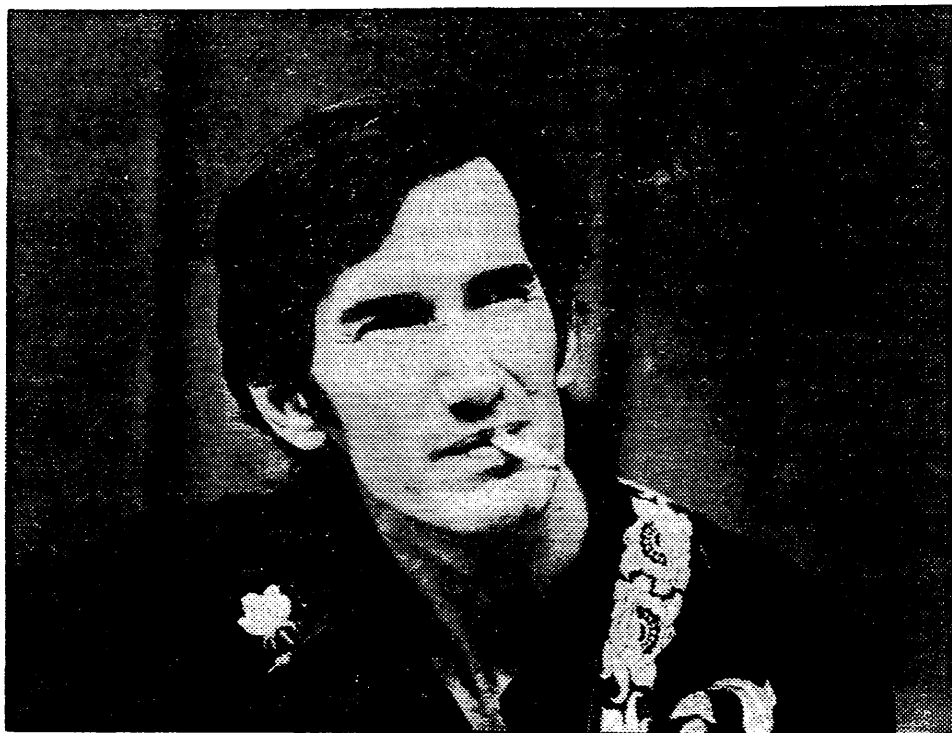
Officials of CBS Records are very hopeful that "Pancho & Lefty" can crack through MTV's ban on "country music" video.

Viewers familiar with Van Zandt can also spot him in the video, portraying the captain of the "federales," the Mexican soldiers in pursuit of Pancho.

Emmylou Harris, another Van Zandt fan, recorded "Pancho & Lefty" six years ago on her "Luxury Liner" album. Two years ago, Emmy and Don Williams reached back to that same album for "If I Needed You," one of Van Zandt's best love ballads. The song went to No. 1 on the country charts and it remains the only duet track ever released by Williams.

And David Allan Coe is familiar with Van Zandt, too. A casual listener to "If I Needed You" followed by "Would You Lay With Me (in a Field of Stone)?" reveals remarkable melodic similarities, yet Coe's song, which was a No. 1 hit for Tanya Tucker in 1974, bears only David's name.

After traveling from colleges to "listening rooms" to saloons, Van Zandt has settled in Austin. He lives quietly, writing, singing and sailing his tiny boat. Willie Nelson has fronted him some studio time so Van Zandt can at least make demos of his recent material.



Townes Van Zandt

During a recent trip to Nashville to tape a segment of Bobby Bare's Nashville Network cable-TV show, Van Zandt seemed calmer and more mature than he has in years.

Not long ago he married for the third time, and his wife recently gave birth to William Vincent Van Zandt. His fans fervently hope his settled domestic situation will put an end to Van Zandt's days of fist fights, car wrecks and overnight trips to jails.

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