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## Country/Folk

# Songwriting legends to perform

Musicians make Texas tradition a state of mind

By Don McLeese  
American-Statesman Staff

**T**exas school of songwriters, lesson No. 1: "My advice to anybody who asks is to just get a guitar, live with it, learn how to play it, sleep with it, and blow everything else in your life off — family, security, money, comfort, everything," offered Townes Van Zandt. "That's kind of hard advice to take, but it's the only way I can think to do it."

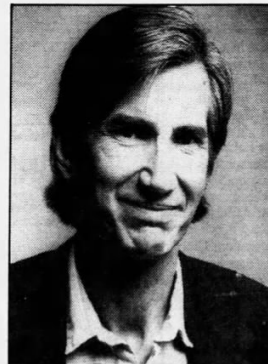
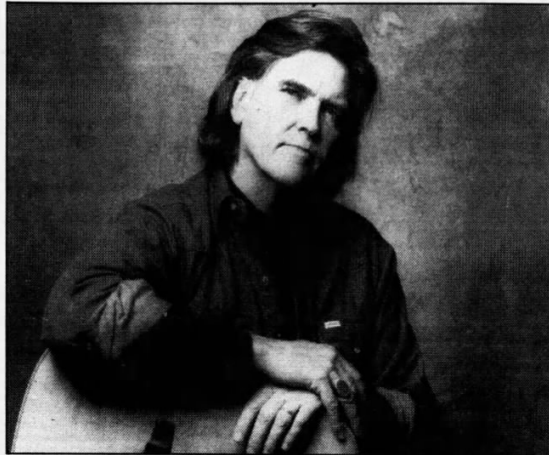
Like his advice, the hardest truths are often deceptively simple, or at least plain-spoken, in the music of Townes Van Zandt. Those truths will be manifested (and manifold) Saturday at the Texas Union Ballroom, where Van Zandt will share the bill with Guy Clark and Robert Earl Keen Jr. The show is a celebration of the Texas singer-songwriter, a continuity that stretches from Van Zandt and Clark — soulmates since they began performing professionally more than two decades ago, though the two write from very different perspectives — through a younger generation that encompasses the likes of Keen, Lyle Lovett, James McMurtry, Nanci Griffith and Steve Earle.

The deeper one probes into this notion of the Texas singer-songwriter, the more Texas seems like a state of mind rather than a matter of geography. Van Zandt and Clark remain the deans of the Texas singer-songwriters, though both are based in Nashville these days. For all his artistry, Rodney Crowell, originally from Houston, is rarely grouped with the Texas school (except when he writes with Clark), while Austin's Jerry Jeff Walker, a refugee from New York, is practically the archetype of the modern Texas troubadour.

What is the Texas tradition? From the story-telling at cowboy campfires there remains a strong narrative thread. From the rural dances that were major social gatherings there remains a ritual of music as sharing, as entertainment. Even the most personal material from Texas singer-songwriters has little of the ivory-tower introspection that so often marks other self-styled song poets.

What mainly distinguishes the tradition of Texas singer-songwriters, however, is a rugged individualism, a perspective that belongs to each alone. As Texas songwriters, what Van Zandt, Clark and Keen mainly share is a common respect for each other.

"Townes is my favorite writer, far and away," said Clark. "To me, he kind of transcends songwriting. He's just coming from a place, where his mind works, that's really unique. You know, that right/left brain thing, that sort of alpha state you get into where you don't really know where it's coming from?"



Singer-songwriters Guy Clark, top, Townes Van Zandt, bottom left, and Robert Earl Keen Jr., bottom right, bring their singular

He's extremely well-read, well-educated, but he has an uncanny way of tapping into that primeval source."

"Guy is kind of 'of the people,'" said Van Zandt. "People really relate to him. They tend to look at me more as a bit of an oddity, looking at things in a different light. Whereas with Guy, he's looking at it in the light they look at it in, and expressing it the way they would like to express it if they could. He's seriously original, and people really love him."

"The thing they turned me on to is the fact that you can write about really local stuff," said Keen. "When I first heard Guy Clark, I thought, hey, this guy's writing all about stuff in his own backyard. As far as their own writing abilities, I don't write like they do exactly. I like to write in a narrative style, which Guy's really good at, but I don't ever approach the amount of color and philosophy that Townes has."

All three Texans funnel their musical

style and rugged individualism, as well as great respect for each other's abilities, to the Texas Union Ballroom Saturday.

careers through the Nashville pipeline, though the artistry of each is too original for an easy flow. Too often in Nashville, music seems like a product in which writing a song has little to do with singing it, and singing it even less to do with living it. For each of these three, whatever success they've enjoyed as songwriters for others, it's hard to extricate their songs from their lives.

"I was just tapped on the shoulder from above and told to write these songs, as opposed to wanting to be a success in the music business," said Van Zandt, who received his widest exposure through *Pancho and Lefty*, a hit for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, and for the Emmylou Harris/Don Williams duet *If I Needed You*.

"What I do is between me and the Lord," he continued, "to examine and possibly alter the state of grace in which I live, and thereby the state of grace of anybody who listens."

Though he hasn't released a studio album of new material in almost four years, Van Zandt has been busier than ever over the last year. He has almost finished recording new versions of 60 older songs (including a duet with Freddy Fender on *Pancho and Lefty*) for a multi-CD anthology on the recently revived Tomato label. After completing that project at the Fire Station in San Marcos, he hopes to release an album of new material as well.

Clark also has plans for a new album in '91, his first since 1988's critically-acclaimed *Old Friends*, while his older albums will be reissued this summer on the Sugar Hill label. For all the success that he has enjoyed placing songs with others — Jerry Jeff's versions of *Desperados Waiting For a Train* and *L.A. Freeway*, Ricky Skaggs' hit with *Heartbroke* and Johnny Cash's cover of *Texas 1947* foremost among them — songwriting remains a personal affair for Clark.

"I mainly write for my own amusement, expression and pleasure," he explained. "I have no reason to go out and play for the folks unless I have new songs I've written, and I have no reason to write new songs unless I'm going to go out and play them."

Though he admits that he's more likely to rely on what he calls "the tricks of the trade" than Van Zandt might, he has no formula for writing a popular favorite like his *Homegrown Tomatoes*.

"That's the kind of stuff you can't make up," said Clark, who wrote the song while he was sitting on his porch, gazing at his tomato patch. "It just happens. Sometimes they just roll out unexpectedly, and sometimes they take a lot of work, a lot of concentration, just getting up every day and doing it. *Desperados Waiting For a Train* took three or four weeks of working at it every day."

As for Keen, the new kid on this songwriter's block, he's been overshadowed by the success of his college buddy Lyle Lovett (with whom he wrote *The Front Porch Song*) and misrepresented as something of a musical funnyman. His *West Textures* album from 1989 remains a minor masterpiece of Texas songwriting. Even the humorous songs have a serious edge to them and highlights such as *The Road Goes On Forever* and *Love's a Word I Never Throw Around* reflect the range and depth of his artistry. He hopes to record a followup this year.

At the suggestion of Steve Earle, Keen left Austin for Nashville in the mid-'80s, where other buddies such as Lovett and Nanci Griffith were finding encouragement for their singular styles. To his frustration, he wasn't received in the manner his friends had been, and he soon returned to Texas, though his booking and publishing still goes through Nashville.

"In retrospect I realize I was being a bit naive, but the first doors I walked into told me that something would happen if I stuck around for five years," he said. "And I told them there's no way. People like Nanci and Lyle — who

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