

Blues songwriter a surprise survivor

■ Townes Van Zandt's new album is a tribute to the happiness his daughter has brought him.

By JIM PATTERSON
Associated Press

SMYRNA, Tenn. — Drunk but slowly functioning, Townes Van Zandt sits nearby what used to be his home, guitar resting on his knee.

"It's raining, so I'll play you a slow blues," the gaunt, legendary Texas songwriter announces. He is 51 years old but looks older and frailer thanks to years of hard living and alcohol.

His fingers spring to action, so familiar with the pattern they've performed so well for so many years.

Lightning flashes a little too close, and the session retreats inside the woody home in this nondescript town near Nashville. Although he doesn't live here anymore, the house is soaked with Van Zandt's presence. Besides, royalties from such classics as "Pancho & Lefty" and "If I Needed You" helped buy the place.

On one wall in the living room hangs the painting "Snake Eyes" by artist Jett Whitt, used for the cover of his latest album "No Deeper Blue." A stockpile of Van Zandt's CDs is kept in a back room.

The home is familiar territory, but now he's a visitor. Van Zandt has been divorced from his third wife, Jeanene, for three years but is still somewhat dependent on her. This day, she trimmed his hair to get him ready to pose for a

photo, and put out a spread of nachos and other finger-food.

Van Zandt, his worn jeans and shirt as offhanded as his address, shrunk from the food. The raging thunderstorm outside was appropriate given the melancholy temperament of a guy who titled an album "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt" when he was 29 years old.

Still, he wears a sincere, broad smile this day and pulls together enough energy for some wrestling with his children Will, 13, and Katie Belle, 4. He has another grown son, John Townes II, from a previous marriage who lives in Texas.

Van Zandt says he's more a creature of the road than any particular address. When he's not on tour he sometimes takes long drives early in the morning for the sake of the movement.

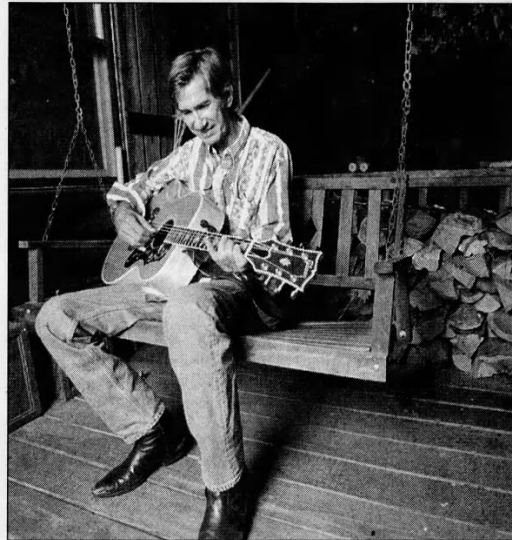
"No Deeper Blue," was recorded in Ireland with producer Phillip Donnelly. With this album, Van Zandt takes listeners on a trip to "The Hole," where demons threaten to "gobble up your soul." And the "No Deeper Blue" title refers not to the depression he so often explores, but "... the ocean that lies, As deep as the blue, Of your laughing eyes."

It's a tribute to the happiness his daughter brought him.

"Marie" is a chronicle of the desperation of homeless life. Startling lines of poetry dot the collection, as always.

From "Cowboy Junkies Lament":

*There's a hole in heaven
where*



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Townes Van Zandt plays a tune on the porch of the home belonging to his third ex-wife near Smyrna, Tenn.

some sin slips through

*Close your eyes and dream
real steady*

*Maybe just a little will spill
on you*

Van Zandt grew up happily as a member of a prominent Fort Worth, Texas, oil family. His attraction to the life of an itinerant bluesman, driven by unknown demons, is something of a mystery even to Van Zandt himself.

His musical hero is the late Texas bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. But he also feels an affinity with earthier popular artists, including Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Cowboy Junkies and the Rolling Stones. In Nashville, his musical compatriots are singer-songwriters like Steve

Earle.

From the time he started releasing albums in 1968, he stood out even from his peers in Houston who were not exactly slouches — Mickey Newberry, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker among them. Though he moved to Nashville and was produced by Cowboy Jack Clement (Johnny Cash), Van Zandt's own records never have been the stuff of mass popularity. His is a dedicated cult audience, with an occasional hit from a recording by Emmylou Harris or Willie Nelson.

When you tell the stories of whores, bums, gamblers and losers, and insist on their dignity, the popular audience is limited these days. Springsteen has pulled it off, but not many others.

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