



Van Zandt:

an original



By Paul Cullum

Some folks write real nice songs. Put in a good eight hours to turn an honest day's melody. Something catchy you can hum along with. Others believe so strongly in the music they write that they will sacrifice a great deal for it. Both types can be credible and successful as songwriters, learning their crafts as sincerely and adequately as master locksmiths or cobblers. But then there are those who live their music. Who lend themselves so totally to it, through experience and image and emotion, that it's impossible to distinguish where artist leaves off and art begins. Such a man is Townes Van Zandt.

With his three-day stay at the Rome Inn beginning last Thursday, he proved that the loyalists are out there and that the growing streetlight of public awareness about him is finally picking up some momentum. Verbal spokesmen have tried to link Townes to the Woody Guthrie tradition, by way of people like Dylan, just because that's the bus that happens to run by their house. This comparison is at best unfaithful. The Guthrie Revival is exploitive by nature, polishing up cheap populist idealism to auction at commercial prices, the whole process summed up pretty well by a character like David Carradine.

Townes Van Zandt is a folk purist, in the same way that Taj Mahal and Link Wray are purists — in that they remain true to uncorrupted musical ideals, regardless of their evolutions. The nature of what they do prevents them from jumping on bandwagons. The similarity to Guthrie, and to Dylan after him, comes from parallel musical lineages, perhaps even with common ancestors. But that's not the same as being related.

That kind of person, the traditionalist, is accused by many of being a dying breed. But that can't be, because God and Justice wouldn't allow it. Observers say that Townes has cleaned up his act as of late; trashing the jokes in the name of professionalism and going solo with a focus on the songs. He's just intercepted some notes that were written on the wind. Now, when he hits, and granted by observation that only seems about one in three nights, the word professional defines everything about him. Clearly, his stage presence and manner outranks former back-ups and current touring companions Rex Bell and Mickey White, The Himmeridge Mountain Boys, who are no lightweights by any means. But it also puts him above

contemporaries like Guy Clark, who sat in a guest set Saturday.

Townes Van Zandt is going to break into the limelight very soon. He's got a good hold now, and once he makes it over the crest, it's downhill coasting with the wind at his back. Forces of Grapevine Destiny are at work, which say that whenever someone is booked on the next flight out for Fame, word sweeps the musical community and everyone tries to be the first to give him that "first lucky big break." For a while, it was fashionable to do Billy Joe Shaver songs. Now the wheel is turning. Townes has taken a number and been seated.

Viewing the shows over the weekend, it was interesting watching the performer's interaction with the crowd. Townes is properly gracious and entertaining and humble alternately. All are tools. Sometimes the crowds would be quiet, and his songs could linger, suspended over the stillness of the room. But sometimes the crowd was rowdy, and lyrical strains were trampled to death by the noise. The point is that both were played the same.

Once the song begins, an isolation drops in, and the audience he plays to becomes an inner vision, an internal ideal of places where only he knows he can go. And people around him aren't really that relevant. It's not that he's not grateful, because he is; it's just that he would play with or without the audience. He doesn't have a lot of choice.

So the music is there for the asking. Townes is at his best with the bittersweet minor-based blues, the poor man's lament. He plays both the song and the role of the stoic, and life rides by him. And with, at last, backing by a reputable label, and a new album in the works following this tour, everything points to the sky, and maybe some turnabout success. But his music is capable of producing an emotional movement in his audience, and that's all the success that any artist could ever ask for.

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