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## A 'strange cat' but he writes well

By Walter Dawson



Just exactly what Townes Van Zandt has been doing these past three or four years since the last of his half dozen or so records came out on Poppy Records is anybody's guess. According to singer-writer Keith Sykes, who first met Van Zandt when he (Sykes) was living with Jerry Jeff Walker in New York, Van Zandt is a bit unpredictable. A question about the Texas singer brings this jumble of stories from Sykes:

"Well, man, he died, you know. Yeah, for a couple of minutes. I think he's done that twice now . . . and one time he got a new car, and him and this other guy drove it right into a bar. After they cleared away some of the rubble, Townes got out and ordered a drink . . . and at this party, he leaned out and started wondering what it'd feel like to fall, so he let go and fell four floors. Everybody just freaked out and rushed downstairs, but by the time they got there, he's standing up, lighting a cigaret . . ."

Of Townes, he's a strange cat. Real good writer, though.

Van Zandt's Poppy albums were cut in the late '60s and early '70s, and though none of them made much noise nationally, they showed an artist well-developed as a writer and stirring as a singer. Van Zandt's lack of commercial success seems largely attributable to his being around at the wrong time. His songs are mostly

folky-blues-country, sprinkled with lines as wonderful as a Nietzsche epigram, but he came long too late for the '60s folk boom and too early for the progressive country movement. Since that latter element has been introduced into contemporary music, however, it's strange that something more hasn't been heard from Van Zandt. Still, his name does crop occasionally in stories of Austin music, and in a recent Austin radio listeners' poll, he came in third behind Willie and Waylon.

Although he hasn't recorded lately, there is a new Van Zandt album out, a live double album called *Townes Van Zandt Live at the Old Quarter, Houston, Texas* (Tomato Records). The tapes were cut in '73, and they're rough. Like Van Zandt's songs, though, they're honest, sometimes painfully so.

Almost all of his best songs from his previous albums are here. "Don't You Take It Too Bad," "For the Sake of the Song" and "Why She's Acting This Way" are all philosophical yet straight forward in their psychological considerations, and his narrative songs, like "Loretta" and "Tecumseh Valley," come off with a natural beauty and depth.

Van Zandt's lyrics possess the passion and insight of an old bluesman, but he puts them together with the natural intellect of a man who knew in the first semester that English Lit. was going to be boring. He obviously knows the situations he's writing of, a knowledge much

farther than his age should allow for.

But that's what makes his songs so poignant and meaningful; he's young enough to let you feel some exuberance but emotionally he's been through enough to offer some worldliness.

Considering the quality and verve of the songs on this album, it's surprising that Van Zandt's songs haven't been picked up on by other artists, although one step in that direction was taken recently by Emmylou Harris, who included his "Pancho and Lefty" on her last album.

Vocally, Van Zandt, like Jerry Jeff, has a voice that frequently goes careening off the edge when it tries to take a corner, but his rich twang gives him a sort of weird constancy. It's a voice that's certainly likable, though not lovable.

Because it was recorded in a small bar whose acoustics obviously weren't the best, the new album suffers somewhat in comparison to Van Zandt's studio works, but since those earlier albums are almost impossible to find today, the new one serves quite well. At least until someone stumbles across Van Zandt on the sidewalk next to a four-story building, dusting himself off and lighting a cigaret, and decides to take him back into the studio.

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