

Townes Van Zandt: The Strange World Of Creative Genius

By JAMES ALBRECHT

But I guess I'll keep gambling. Lots of booze and lots of rambling. Well, it's easier than just waiting 'round to die... ("Waiting 'Round To Die")

Songpoet Townes Van Zandt is one rare creature. With a history of bouts with bizarre behavior almost as legendary as his music, this Texas singer-songwriter has managed to elude all but a cult following of admirers after seven critically acclaimed albums. But his growing band of supporters is also one of the strongest and most loyal of any artist.

Critics endlessly rave about Van Zandt's sensitive songs of desperation, loneliness and heartache. Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Dris Kristofferson and Mickey Newbury are counted among his fans. Hoyt Axton, Steve Young and Doc Watson have recorded Van Zandt compositions and he hit on a brief bit of notoriety when Emmylou Harris cut his "Pancho and Lefty" for her "Luxury Liner" LP. Townes enjoys a glorious reputation

as a songwriter, but he also seems to enjoy a notorious reputation as one of America's wildest hellraisers—a character trait witnessed and shared by his two close friends, singer-songwriters Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark.

"Townes 'n' me 'n' Jerry Jeff, we go way back," relates Clark. "Man, there were some pretty wild nights. You know, Townes is pretty crazed sometimes, and we had some pretty wild drinkin' sessions... and I mean serious drinkin'."

"Yes, I'm a wild son of a gun," Townes told CountryStyle rather matter-of-factly. "I try not to believe in reincarnation, because, boy, my next life is gonna be murder, after the way I acted this time."

Friends tell about the time Townes bought a new car and took a friend out for a joyride, demolishing the car—and nearly his life—by driving the vehicle through the front of a bar. After the crumpled debris was kicked out of the way, Townes got out of the car, walked

to the bar, and ordered a drink.

Then there was another time at a party when Van Zandt was sitting on a window ledge wondering what it would be like to fall four stories to the ground. Shrugging, he let himself drop. Miraculously, he was unscratched—didn't even spill the wine he carried with him. Friends scurried down in an elevator in shock, and Townes was standing up lighting a cigaret when their rush knocked him down.

"It hurt more being knocked over than falling four stories," says Townes.

When living in Austin three years ago (where radio station polls have Townes coming in third behind Waylon and Willie), on one drinking spree with a musician friend, Townes and his comrade cleverly covered themselves with garbage and went to some of his favorite bars telling club owners that they would kindly go away if they could have \$3 for some vodka.

And then there's the time he performed for an exclusive girls' school and climaxed the evening with a nude

appearance in the school swimming pool... and the time he shoved a cherry bomb down a toilet, destroying a large portion of a Minnesota dormitory sewer system... and dozens of other tales.

But lately Townes has been mellowing since living in rusticity in a wooden shack some 30 miles south of Nashville. His new wife Cindy (they've been together for five years), keeps him healthy with three meals a day, despite lacking the luxuries of electricity, gas, running water or a phone. And Townes avoids lunacy and finds song inspiration by working around the home and riding his horse across the 800-acres he rents for a measly \$30 a month. Up at six, to bed at nine.

"Cindy's my lady now," says Townes, in a dry, often emotionless manner which leaves one puzzled as to whether he's telling the truth or pulling your leg (you can never really be sure).

"When Cindy's around I stay straight. I'm as serene as they come. But you live a certain way on the road, and on my days off sometimes I get crazy. Every three or four days I go crazy for a day or two."

Actually, Van Zandt's latest outburst into the berserk was way back at the 1976 disk jockey convention in Nashville when Jerry Jeff and Townes took over a couple of hospitality suites and ended the night in drunken fan postage jamming with Waylon, Guy Clark and others.

Townes contributed to the act by making repeated attempts to stand on his head—most of which sent him toppling into drums and microphone stands.

Van Zandt maintains that he's not living very differently now—he's just not getting caught. Not counting traffic violations, it's been three years since his last arrest.

"The formal charge was public drunkenness and disorderly conduct," says Townes, 34 going on 60.

"They caught me. I was sitting on top of a telephone pole with no clothes on in the middle of the night and I refused to come down... I had some clothes on... I had cut-offs on... but I woke up in the morning in jail and I had to go before this lady judge... that was horrible..."

"They gave me your basket where you put your wallet and belt and all that. Boy, I couldn't wait to get my basket back because I had like nothing on me, and I thought I'd have some change—maybe a dollar—and I can get

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a little half-pint and sober up... I had a basket and a belt—nothing else."

Although lucky to be alive, Townes has never been a fortunate one. He's suffered several broken bones and teeth. "These front four have been changed four times," he says, proudly displaying one of gold. "They've been sucked out by Mexicans, horses and motorcycles." Shortly before beginning a tour to promote his first album in five years ("Flyin' Shoes") on his new label (Tomato), he was riding with a friend ("He wasn't drunk, either") who totaled a truck around a tree, breaking Van Zandt's arm in three places.