

MUSIC

Van Zandt renowned for songs, not voice

By PETE OPPEL
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FOR THOSE WHO remember the old Rubiyat — even long for the old Rubiyat — there's a place in town that just about recaptures those magical days when excellent, but unknown, songwriters had a chance to ply their wares.

(There used to be a place such as that in New York where a few of us loyalists used to hang out in the early '60s to hear this obscure chap who, when performing, used the name Blind Roy Gunt and, when writing, went by yet another name, Bob Dylan.)

A small little place on a corner of McKinney Avenue, across from Lombardi's and the Dixie House, called Poor David's Pub, is reminiscent of clubs such as these. And this past weekend, one of the excellent, but relatively unknown, songwriters had a chance to ply his wares there. This particular songwriter is not only a veteran of the Rubiyat — he played there, by his own count, three times — but someone who wrote one of his best and certainly his most well-known songs during one of his engagements at that famous Maple Avenue joint.

THE MAN IN question is one Townes Van Zandt, perhaps best known for his composition *Pancho and Lefty* that was recorded by, among others, Emmylou Harris on her best-selling *Luxury Liner* album.

Hopefully more artists will be releasing records containing Van Zandt's songs. According to his manager, Johnny Cash has just cut a version of Van Zandt's *No Place to Fall*, and a comparatively new composition, *Snowing on Raton*, has just been sent to Miss Harris. In addition, Van Zandt's manager said Cash has recorded two other Van Zandt works and Bobby Bare has put one on tape.

Now, Townes Van Zandt is not best singer in the world — in fact he ranks pretty far down the list among those who stand before a microphone and sing for money — but his songs are so appealing they more than make up for his shortcomings as a vocalist. And his non-professional vocal style actually adds to that appeal once the initial jolt subsides for the first-time listener.

VAN ZANDT OPENED his first set Friday night by walking onto the performing area (there's no stage at Poor David's — tables and chairs on the floor are just moved to make room for the performers), strapping on a guitar and saying "This song is called *Don't Take It So Bad*. I've got six tickets to the game Sunday. Hustle me after the gig."

As an introduction to song No. 2 he said: "This is called *Dolly Bell Blues*. I stopped telling jokes and I've stopped gambling, too, but I do have six tickets to the Dallas game."

He told a story involving the time he wrote *Pancho and Lefty*. About how he and a friend Daniel, whom Van Zandt described as "someone so straight he squeaks when he turns a corner," were stopped by a Dallas police officer on their way to the Rubiyat one night. About how there was a Billy Graham crusade going on at the Cotton Bowl during this particular week in 1973 and when Daniel, a Jew from Georgia, handed the officer his driver's license he said "Have you found Jesus?" The officer handed Daniel his license right back and told him to drive on.

BUT THE SONGS were the most important thing — his own and his interpretations of songs by others. Joe Ely's unrecorded *Indian Cowboy*, an unrecorded Dylan piece about a gambler and, the biggest surprise, a fascinating delivery of Bruce Springsteen's *Racin' in the Streets*, that lost much of its potency when Van Zandt forgot the lines of the final verse.

The song that drew the biggest reaction from the overflow crowd at Poor David's was Van Zandt's delightfully humorous *Talkin' Fraternity Blues*, about how he pledged a fraternity, willingly paid the dues realizing "if you want to have good friends it's gonna cost ya," and finally was tossed out because of his un-fraternity-like behavior at a social function.

Opening for Van Zandt was a marvelous local bluegrass group called The Draw String Band, which plays Poor David's every Sunday night. Among their best offerings were a unique rendition of *Sittin' on Top of the World*.