

Lyrics Play Prominent Role In Van Zandt's Mood Hops

By PAUL KAZA

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Townes Van Zandt isn't exactly a household name with contemporary music fans. But his appearance Wednesday night at Hunt's captured the rapt attention of a full house that clearly knew his music — and were glad to finally see him play in Burlington.

Van Zandt's musical approach is deliberate and direct. Accompanied only by bass player Jimmie Gray, he presents his music without a lot of hoopla — allowing his sensitive lyrics to play a prominent role while the instruments provide a simple musical backdrop.

Van Zandt's compositions are generally centered by themes of serious emotion or satire, reflecting his frequent change of moods. "If I Needed You," recorded on his "Live at the Old Quarter" album, opened the set. "Two Girls," "The Shrimp Song," and "Indian Cowboy" followed, establishing a rotation of serious to satire — but with little change in rhythm.

"It's tough to get the crowd going early when we're in for a long night," he explained between sets. The energy drain is heightened when playing in a duo format, he said. Other appearances by Van Zandt may include up to six backup musicians, distinctly lacking during his Burlington show.

Van Zandt has a definite knack for satirical punches, as in his Dylan-like composition about joining a fraternity and learning "Greek": "I learned that son-of-a-beta backwards." Rex's Blues" revealed his Southern sense of humor: "Rex was so ugly when he was born the doctor slapped his mother."

"Pancho & Lefty," made famous by Emmylou Harris, drew enthusiastic recognition from the audience. The 1976 recording brought a number of new fans into Van Zandt's camp. "That was during acoustical music's last real popular period," he said.

Like most country artists, Van Zandt relies heavily on the images of places he's been. "Texas River Song" paints a pretty picture of the south, and Van Zandt makes no bones about his attachment to the area. Now residing outside Fort Worth, Van Zandt said "I always thought I didn't have any use for the East coast." But that was before he saw Vermont for the first time.



"This is a beautiful place," said the lanky Texan. I'd like to come back." The crowd at Hunt's would go along with that.

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