

Townes Van Zandt May Be Getting A Boost From Willie And Merle

By DAVID HIBBS

Staff Writer

AUSTIN — He has accumulated many thousands of listeners across the nation over the past 15 years.

But the music of Texan songwriter-singer Townes Van Zandt wasn't played to the millions via strictly-formatted radio until Emmylou Harris and Don Williams made a hit out of his "If I Needed You."

Oddly enough, Van Zandt wrote that one in his sleep — if his commentary in a songbook published in 1977 in Houston is to be believed.

"This is the only song I have ever written while sleeping," it says in the book. "I dreamed about being a songwriter and this was the song I was writing."

"I woke up long enough to scribble it down in a notebook by my bed and went back to sleep. Loop and Lili (in the third verse) are parakeets."

The song was copyrighted in 1972. He has also written many fantastic songs while awake.

Van Zandt was interviewed last week a couple of days after performing at Zeeder's, a small Austin club being run partly by his fellow

songwriter Danny Epps of Elgin.

The biggest news lately: Van Zandt is cautiously awaiting the release of an already-pressed single by Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, in which Van Zandt has an important interest.

Nelson and Haggard apparently are looking for a hit with Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty," and are naming their album after it as well.

It has long been a popular number at Van Zandt performances, and was recorded previously on an album by Emmylou Harris.

While reminding himself that in the music business you should try not to believe anything of this order until it's actually in your hands, he says he has heard the LP will be released in July, with "Pancho and Lefty" as a single preceding it.

"Lana Nelson is a good friend of mine, Willie's daughter. She got the song to him and she's my source of info about the whole thing," Van Zandt explains.

"Everything she's said has been correct, and she says it's going to be the first single, so (it's) ninety-nine point ninety-nine. All they got

to do now is show it to me."

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Surely, one would think weren't Nelson and Haggard aware of this song (another 1972 copyright) for years?

"They never had a copy of the words and the tape," Van Zandt said. "I made Lana a tape — I taped a gig at Liberty Lunch (in Austin) and edited two or three songs."

The intensified interest in recording his songs has been building for several years, before the Emmylou Harris-Don Williams single, he said. "I kind of started a bit before that, with Bobby Bare and George Hamilton the Fourth."

Specifically, Bare did album versions of "Tecumseh Valley" and "White Freightliner Blues," and Hamilton did one called

"Close Your Eyes, I'll Be Here in the Morning."

"And," he notes, "Doc Watson did 'If I Needed You' five years ago."

"It's been a real pleasure for me, a real privilege, you know is the way I look at it — the people that have cut my songs, there haven't been a whole bunch of them, right? But the ones that have are just like top flight. You know, like Doc, and Emmylou and Don, and now Merle and Willie."

Van Zandt said his professional career started in 1966 or '67, at the end of the folk music boom, in a club in Houston called the Jester Lounge where they would hire five or six performers on a typical night and pay each one \$10 or thereabouts.

"I did it for like six months, struggling through the latter half of college, and being a folk singer on the weekends. And folk singing just finally took over."

"It seems to me that it would be much harder to start now than it was then," Van Zandt opined. "It's changed now...to get a gig you have to have an album out, or you have to be a local star."

Within a few years, he had hooked up with blues players like Lightning Hopkins and Big Mama Thornton and Sleepy John Estes (more on that below), opened a national tour for John Lee Hooker, landed a Nashville recording contract and more.

He plays fairly regularly now in Austin, Houston, Dallas and San Marcos, and does separate tours of the East Coast and West Coast about once a year.

"My first out-of-town gig was here (Austin) at a place called the Eleventh Door, which was on Red River and Eleventh, which is now Symphony Square, the main building.

"It used to be like a real funky little folk dive...I met some far-out people there.

"I played there one time with Sleepy John Estes. It was funny, man.

"I'd pick him up at his motel, and then give him a ride home afterwards. I'd pick him up, and I'd knock on the door, and he'd be asleep, right, and it's like this time of night or, you know, seveh.

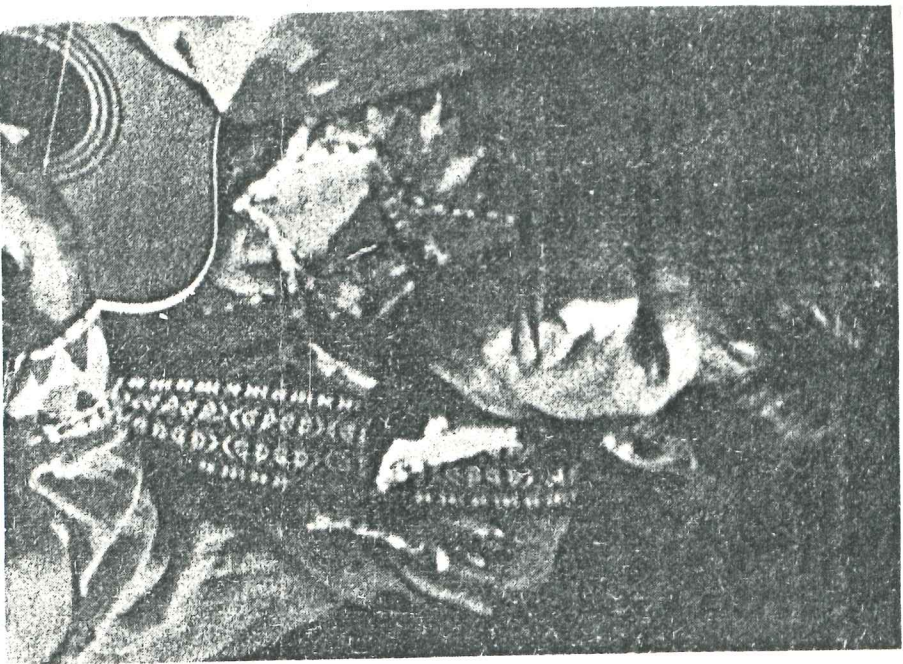
"He'd take a minute or two, rumbing, and getting up out of bed — 'Mr. Van Zandt, he'd call me.

"Mr. Estes."

"And we'd get in the truck, you know, head for the gig. He'd get into the truck and immediately go to sleep. We'd get there and I'd wake him up.

"We'd get there and I'd go on first and play, and come back in the dressing room — he was asleep. I'd wake him up and he'd go out and play.

"Then take him home — he'd get out in the truck and



Townes Van Zandt

when we got to the motel, and get him inside the door. And when I was closing the door, he'd be hitting the bed and go to sleep."

Hence the name, Sleepy John Estes.

One of Van Zandt's main mentors was the late Lightning Hopkins, whom he played with "a bunch of times."

Beginning at the beginning of his musical influences, he recounted:

"Well, first it was like Hank Williams, I mean just in terms of starting to play. Hearing music out of a car radio when I was four, you know, driving through oil fields—it kind of just imbeds itself, right?"

"Hank Williams, then like Bob Will, and then after that it was Elvis. At which point I saw Elvis on Ed Sullivan—I was a little kid and decided, 'Maybe that's what I can do, get a guitar and learn how to play.'

"That was a big step, right? So it was Elvis and Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee (Lewis).

"And I played, I kind of strummed three or four chords for a long time...After five or six or eight years of playing, or whatever it was, I was still just Strum Eddie.

"But I kind of discovered jazz, and then through jazz, blues. Which was Lightning Hopkins, who I later met, I made of point of meeting.

"I learned from Lightning that, you know, you don't have to strum, you can hit a note."

Van Zandt then studied intensively, as he explains:

"But then, by buying a case of Valley High wine and locking myself in my apartment at the University of Colorado, and taking the phone off the hook and staying for a week, and listening to Lightning over and over, soon I learned that you can use notes.

"And then along about the same time, Bob Dylan would

come out with 'The Times They Are A-Changing...Bob Dylan, I kind of learned from that you could use words that mean something, as opposed to 'Tell your ma, tell your pa, love your wah-wah.'

So there he would be, holed up in the apartment, 'these two records on the record player...Lightning would play, and Bob Dylan would play. Turn them over. Bob Dylan would play. Lightning would play. Turn them over...'

As for current plans, Van Zandt is getting ready to tour the West, starting with Austin on July 9 at Emma-joe's. Then, he says, Lubbock, Denver, the Vancouver Folk Festival, Seattle, San Francisco, "greater L.A.," San Diego, El Paso, Alpine and back here (Zeeder's again, around late July).

Then, he said, he plans to work on a new album, his first in several years. He recorded a half dozen or so during the late '60s to mid-'70s, but they were pressed in relatively small quantities and now qualify as collector's items—\$20 is a typical price for one in a used record store.

"It looks like Rodney Crowell and Guy Clark and me and Mickey (White, Van Zandt's great guitar-playing partner) will kind of all produce it." He says it may be done partly in L.A., partly in Austin.

He doesn't have a label yet, but if "Pancho and Lefty" happens as expected, that could make it much easier. And if Crowell is involved, that could also help, he pointed out.

"Plus I've also thought about doing one with Mickey and I, Mickey producing it, because he's produced a couple of real good records.

"Two-thirds of one on Pat (Mears, an outstanding Austin singer-songwriter) —

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ever quite got finished. And that one on Lucinda, 'Happy Woman Blues.'"

Van Zandt's fans will be glad to hear he has plenty of unrecorded songs to include on the next album, some of which he just hasn't got around to pushing in Nashville:

"I always keep thinking, 'God, I got to go to Nashville, you know, I got to go to Nashville for a week...I have to make a tape, and make about 10 or 15 copies and just take them to producers. Spend one afternoon, have all the appointments set up, you know.

"But when I have the time to do it, I don't have the money. And when I have the money, I don't have the time to do it. Plus on top of that, at the drop of a hat, I'm gone fishing."

He said he usually needs a solitary place to perfect a song: "Motel rooms a lot. I'm in the middle of Nebraska with nobody I know within 500 miles—that's the best place.

"It's got to be completely nobody around...Can't even hardly be anybody in the next room almost, unless you just get this flash and start writing, which happens about half the time.

"The other half of the time it's more craft or whatever."