

Van Zandt's songs sting, and stick

TOWNES VAN ZANDT - In concert with Michael Hurley at the Tam, Tuesday.

By Jim Sullivan
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You want sadness, resignation? If you were at the Tam Tuesday night, you got sadness and

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quietly compelling set of country-folk music by Austin-based singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt. Van Zandt, whose last album was 1979's "Flying Shoes," takes the low road - a poetic, pained path that he travels with others such as Leonard Cohen and Nico.

The lanky Van Zandt sits on a stool with a guitar, far enough away from the audience, he says, "to dodge the beer bottles." No beer bottles were hurled, but anyone hoping for an easy, gentle uplift had to have been disturbed. Van Zandt's sound - the melodies, rhythms and harmonies - was not, in itself, disturbing. But the words often conveyed a sense of despair - and the combination of words and music formed a steady, downward spiral. Over the course of his 80-minute first set, Van Zandt navigated a course through the waters of anguish and loss.

Some sample lyrics: "She'll lead you down through misery / She'll leave you low, low, low as can be" (in "Rex's Blues"); "I ain't much of a lover, that's true / I'm here and I'm gone and I'm forever blue" (in "No Place To Fall"); "Often, Van Zandt put the blame on himself. In "Just Looking For You" he confessed: "I tried to tell myself that I tried, but it just ain't true / ... Still looking for you."

When all hope seemed lost, Van Zandt, who sings with his eyes shut, might look up between songs and opt for deadpan humor: "Time flies like an arrow and fruit flies like a banana."

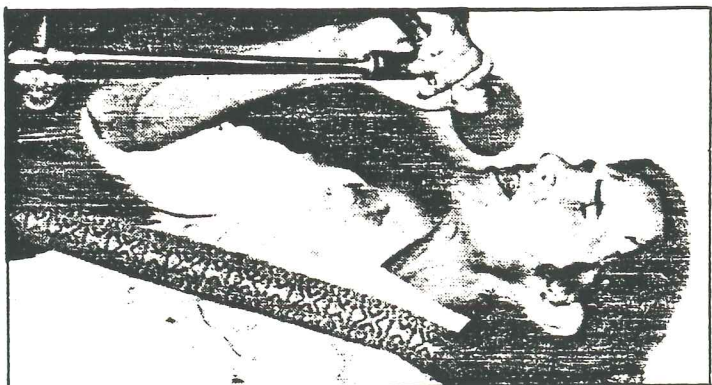
Van Zandt, 40, was accompanied by acoustic guitarist Mickey White, who's been playing with him for 10 years, and ex-Bostonian Danny Silverman on flute, lyricon and saxophone. They lean melodic color, complementary hues of minor-key melancholy. If there's a genre called "chamber country-folk," that's where Van Zandt belongs. The somber moods he creates are not unlike those of the late English folksinger, Nick Drake. Like Drake, Van Zandt's skill is pulling this off without seeming like a self-pitying jerk. He doesn't attempt to jerk tears melodramatically. The melodies are mostly calming, familiar. The rhythms along gracefully. The intricate wordplay and despairing

themes - those are what sting and stick.

Michael Hurley, who followed Van Zandt's first set, connected with a skewed set of country and bluegrass.

"We'll break out the razor blades next set," Van Zandt promised a friend after the opening set. Is he as sad and forlorn as his songs suggest?

"I'm somewhere down there," he answered after a pause. "The blues are always with you. But I don't go around and mope. These days I have a real beautiful family [a wife and two children]. If I'm happy, I'm either in a sailboat or playing with my kids. If I'm sad, I'm sitting on the couch with a pint of Jim Beam." He says those are the times when he writes. And, recently freed from a web of music-related lawsuits, he soon hopes to record with Nashville producer Jack Clement.



TOWNES VAN ZANDT ... "The blues are always with you." GLOBE PHOTO BY PHIL SPRING