

Life a mixed bag for songwriter Townes Van Zandt

By Russ DeVault
Staff Writer

Townes Van Zandt, a gifted songwriter who may or may not show up to sing Sunday at Blind Willie's on North Highland Avenue, claims his choice of heroes is what has made his life difficult.

"They're Vincent van Gogh, Albert Schweitzer and Lightning Hopkins. I've tried to pick a compromise between those three guys. Talk about being torn apart at the seams — I sit around every day, smoke cigarettes and wait for my first fit," he says.

Van Zandt also writes poetry, which, he says, requires an approach very different from the one used to write songs such as "Pancho

and Lefty" and the ones on "At My Window," his new album.

"You have to put the guitar down in the basement to write poetry," he says. "If it's in sight when I get a good line, there goes the poem. . . . It's a song.

"Poetry is harder to write because if you have a six-string [guitar] or 88 ivories [a piano], that gives it a flow. In a song, you don't have to decide whether there should be a comma here or there or what because the music flows over that."

Van Zandt, 42, says he's a "novice" poet, but he thinks he can be better than most current practitioners of the art. "I just want to run up on stage and strangle them. I hear people reading stuff like, well, let me make you up one," he says,

barely pausing and then solemnly reciting:

"There's silver on top of the water hydrant, there's green upon the lawn; if I put a .38 to your ear, my love you'll soon be gone."

In addition to "Pancho and Lefty," Van Zandt has written hits such as "If I Needed You" and "Don't You Take It Too Bad," but his unpredictability has limited his recording and performing career. He has recorded eight albums — all critically acclaimed and for small labels — since 1968, but "At My Window," released by Sugar Hill Records of Durham, N.C., is his first since 1979.

A native of Fort Worth, Texas, Van Zandt says he spent his childhood in Billings, Mont., Boulder,

Colo., and Chicago because his father was in the oil business, and moves were frequent.

Van Zandt, who moved from Texas to Nashville in 1976, says he has "been in and out of mental hospitals," but he adds that his current marriage has helped stabilize his life.

"I was married a couple of times before I found my real wife," he says. "But, hey, I ain't no fake. If you're going to play the blues, you've got to have them."

■ **Townes Van Zandt:** Performing, at Blind Willie's, 828 N. Highland Ave. N.E., Sunday. 873-2583 for times and price.