

cover story

Townes Van Zandt

Songwriter helps fans through bad times

by WAYNE BLEDSOE
News-Sentinel staff writer

The last thing he remembered was the sound of footsteps behind him.

It was sometime after midnight. After getting paid for a show at the Down Home music club in Johnson City, singer/songwriter Townes Van Zandt was packing his guitar in the trunk of his car when he heard steps on the asphalt behind him.

"You remind me of that damn Jerry Jeff Walker!" said the voice as Van Zandt turned around. Before he could figure out who the voice belonged to, someone punched him in the face, knocking him to the pavement.

"I woke up with my nose against the gas tank," Van Zandt said, still mystified about the incident. "My money was still in my pocket. My guitar was still in the trunk."

Van Zandt and his wife, Jeanene, sit in an interview room at the Nashville Fan Fair. He is tall and lanky, dark as a western Cherokee, with thick black hair that's turning gray. He speaks in a friendly slow voice that occasionally drops to a mumble.

Although he is known for poetic and somber songs, not everyone has the same reaction to Van Zandt's work as the irate man in Johnson City — even if maybe his grudge was really against fellow Texas songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker.

Van Zandt's following includes many songwriters and recording artists. Michael Martin Murphey calls him the "father of Texas folk." Guy Clark, author of such classic songs as "Desperado's Waiting for a Train" and "L.A. Freeway," calls Van Zandt "the best there is or ever was," and Steve Earle calls him no less than "the best songwriter in the world."

Writer John Lomax managed Van Zandt for two years. Lomax once took out a three-line classified ad in Rolling Stone magazine advertising a Van Zandt fan club. By the end of the year he had a stack of letters from people telling how Van Zandt's songs helped them through bad times — sometimes even saving them from suicide.

Although Van Zandt gets such reactions from people who know his work, most would only recognize his name if they looked closely at the songwriting credits for the Emmylou Harris/Don Williams hit "If I Needed You" or the Willie Nelson/Merle Haggard hit "Pancho and Lefty."

Van Zandt says most people think Nelson wrote "Pancho," but that's OK as long as the name and address are right on the royalty checks.

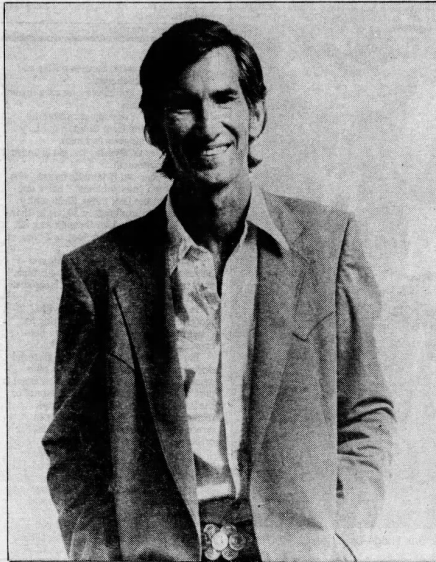
He says his recognition has increased 50 times over since Nelson's recording.

"Now I get applause when I go out, whereas previously they would go to the restroom." He jokes, but he barely smiles.

It's hard to imagine that the quiet, folksy Van Zandt was first inspired by Elvis Presley. One night his older sister had some friends over to watch Presley on a television show.

"Just like a little brother, I was in there making trouble." Then he saw Presley.

"Here's this guy who's got all the money, girls and Cadillacs in the whole world and all he's doing is standing there playing the



Singer/songwriter Townes Van Zandt

guitar. I decided that's what I wanted to do."

His first step was to ask his father for a guitar for Christmas.

"My Dad said, 'You know, Santa's favorite song is 'Fraulein.' I bet if you wrote Santa a letter and said that the first song you'd learn is 'Fraulein' he'd get you a guitar.'"

Van Zandt wrote: "Dear Santa, I promise I'll learn 'Fraulein' if I get a guitar for Christmas. Love, Townes."

"Santa came through and I came through, and I still play that song."

Many years later Van Zandt played Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" for his father. His father said it was good, but maybe he should write his own.

"That's the sort of comment that just shoots through your eyes and into the back of your head," says Van Zandt. Before long he was writing his own songs.

Some of those songs are "a little dark," says Van Zandt. Indeed, titles like "Waiting Around To Die" are not the sort of thing that appears on Top 40 lists. As an example, Van Zandt recites the last lines of "Noth-

ing," "Being born is going blind/dowing down a thousand times/to echos strung on pure temptation/sorrow and solitude/these are the precious things/and the only words worth remembering."

Lines like this are what grabbed the attention of critics. As despairing as these songs seem, Van Zandt writes some that are far sadder. Some are so sad he throws them away before anyone can hear them.

"Once they get to that level they don't bother me, but I know if I throw them away, they won't bother anybody else. I figure nobody needs to hear this."

"I dig them out of the trash can if I can get to them," interjects wife Jeanene.

Still, Van Zandt says he doesn't need more of a reputation for singing sad songs than he already has.

He says he is not generally depressed, it's just the way he writes. He calls himself a recluse who spends most of his free time at home or living off the land in the mountains. A lot of that comes out in his work.

His new album, "At My Window," is much less downtrodden than earlier efforts. In fact, some songs display a contented

Van Zandt's album vital but difficult

review

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In his first album in nine years, Townes Van Zandt sheds his mourning clothes.

On the cover of "At My Window" (Sugar Hill Records) Van Zandt leans against a kitchen sink. He looks comfortable, and that's exactly the way the music inside sounds.

Van Zandt is known for sad songs, but little on "At My Window" seems sad. More often, he expresses a reaffirmation of love and faith — not that all of Van Zandt's lyrics are easy to understand.

Sometimes, the lyrics are downright primal, like insistent rhythm of "Ain't Leavin' Your Love." But more often the words and music glide along so gracefully that the poetry of Van Zandt's work can easily slip by. You must listen to most of the songs several times to fully appreciate. And each time you listen they reveal more depth and texture.

On numbers like "The Catfish Song" and "For the Sake of the Song" Van Zandt weaves images and phrases together so beautifully that you sometimes forget he does this with a voice that is less than beautiful.

His voice is rough and strained. He does not so much sing as growl and moan. On happier testaments he sounds like a bullfrog in love. Still, it's a voice with no apologies. It's honest and real.

The same honesty goes for the production and musicianship. Producer Jack Clement isn't trying to hide anything. The arrangements are simple and relaxed. Particularly nice are the blends worked with Van Zandt's running buddies Donny Silverman and Mickey White.

Silverman's saxophone and flute and White's guitar are not showy or garish. They trade licks like canoeists paddle downstream.

"At My Window" may not be everyone's idea of a good time. Van Zandt's voice takes a little getting used to, and his lyrics require closer listening than most on the market.

But to those willing to take the time this album that can be enjoyed for a long time.

sweetness and hope, something that might help Van Zandt pull in a larger audience.

"We get some reviews sometimes that are real good reviews, but kinda tacked on the end will be something like 'If you're looking for a good time on the town and you wanna have some fun then don't go see these guys.'"