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Singer

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1968, when a friend asked him to come to Nashville, he agreed.

"I wasn't even thinking in terms of a record deal or a publishing deal," he admitted. "I was just thinking I'd never seen Nashville. Plus, I got a free ride in my friend's new Cadillac."

That kind of innocence carried over into Van Zandt's simple, unadorned singing and songwriting, which immediately won him a recording contract. He produced seven albums for the Tomato label in the '70s. Then legal entanglements and his own heavy drinking forced him to re-evaluate his lifestyle.

A recluse by nature, he retreated to Colorado, to a mountain home where he could find time to write songs. Meanwhile, new versions of his compositions were showing up on the country-music charts. Emmylou Harris and Don Williams had a hit with "If I Needed You." A couple of years later, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard scored big with a remake of another of Van Zandt's old favorites, "Pancho and Lefty."

That was enough to draw him out of retirement. He figured he had enough new songs to record an album, and "At My Window" appeared in 1987. The next year, a live album was released.

But the capper to Van Zandt's career will most likely be the 60-song anthology that is in its final stages of production. The project was an immense undertaking; Van Zandt spent the good part of three weeks in an Austin recording studio laying down his guitar and vocal tracks.

"The sessions usually lasted from 12 noon to 12 midnight," he explained. "The last day, we did the rough mixes, and I came out of the studio at 6 a.m. after being there for 19 hours straight. All the way home on the plane, I was trying to decide how I felt — happy, relieved, saddened — and I just discovered I didn't feel anything. I was so numb. Mainly, this little voice inside my head just kept saying, 'It's finished. It's finished. All right.' "

Chances are slim that Van Zandt would be able to establish a career in the same way if he were starting out today. In these days of complex business deals and multi-million-dollar record contracts, a musician can't just walk in off the street and play. Record sales are the barometer by which the industry measures success, and you're only as hot as your latest recording.

"I used to see a lot of country," Van Zandt reminisced. "Mostly, it seems nowadays young people don't have the same opportunity to travel and hone their craft. They still play around town whenever they can, which isn't much, but they go into a basement with a tape machine and work on getting a good enough tape to send to a record company to get a record deal and then the record company will put them on tour."

The one thing that hasn't changed, according to Van Zandt, is that every song still begins the same way — one person sitting down with a guitar or at a piano, picking out a melody, creating something from nothing. He's quite impressed with the music he hears coming from today's generation of folk singers, like Cowboy Junkies.

"They sound like no other band I've ever heard," he said. "There's an overall texture when they play that's real unusual, real soft. I've seen people just mesmerized by it. I toured once with John Lee Hooker, and I saw that happen to his audiences a lot. It's real heavy, like voodoo, with the whole room swaying back and forth, and that kind of happens with Cowboy Junkies too."

Asked to compare the two eras of folk music, Van Zandt gives high marks to the contemporary acts. He doesn't even take off points for the relatively carefree life they lead.

"I don't think their music suffers just because they don't do it the old way," he said. "All great folk songs are real primitive sounding, regardless of what they're recorded on. It's more of a style, a simplicity. It's not that all the beautiful, simple songs you hear today are beautiful and simple because the person playing them learned how to play on a cigar box with strings on it, like Woody Guthrie probably did. Some expert musicians do some beautiful stuff."

In contrast to the vagabond lifestyle he used to lead, Van Zandt now knows where he's going to be performing several months in advance. He is also discovering some advantages to being on tour with an act that is currently selling a lot of records — and concert tickets.

"It's really enjoyable. A real piece of cake," he laughed, recalling how soundly he had slept on the tour bus the previous night. "When I get home, my wife, Janine, is going to freak out when I tell her we have to move out of the house into a bus. I mean, I slept like a rock.

"It's almost obscenely easy. Every day, I step out of a real nice hotel, into a real nice tour bus, and then into another real nice hotel. I don't have to catch my own planes or taxi cabs. Although I do have to do my own laundry . . . but I guess I can handle that."

Townes Van Zandt will open for Cowboy Junkies at the Westport Playhouse on May 29.

Law

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prospective jurors whether they watch the show — and to make sure he does, too.

"Any lawyer who doesn't watch 'L.A. Law' the night before he's going to trial is a fool," he said.

Such acknowledgments have come begrudgingly. Indeed, the first generation of commentary on "L.A. Law" in the legal literature, during the series' initial season, belabored how unrealistic the program was, even though the scripts were written by expatriate lawyers.

Some charged that the series treated the practice of law the way Vermont sugarmakers treat maple sap: that is, boiling away 98 percent of it, then peddling the sweet residue.

And, for whatever reason — to show off, to feel sorry for themselves or simply to find fault — practitioners clamored to proclaim that the life of real lawyers is far, far duller and considerably less libidinous.

"In a typical day in La La-Land, beautiful lawyers drive beautiful cars to the beautiful office, discuss sex with twins at a firm meeting, leave for court to win a case that is not only on the 'right side' but very lucrative, then go to a beautiful dinner with tonight's beautiful sexual conquest," David Machlowitz wrote in the American Bar Association Journal.

Some cheerleaders for the profession complained that the characters were unbelievably odious — "so selfish and despicable that no one could care what they do or don't do the following week," Ruth Hochberger wrote in the New York Law Journal.

There were also gripes about the unrealistically polyglot makeup of the fictional firm.

In another article in the New York Law Journal, Arthur S. Greebler, a lawyer in Far Rockaway, N.Y., suggested facetiously that among the "lessons" the show taught was that every law firm should hire "(a) an irate black, (b) a tall Hispanic, (c) a short Jewish guy and (d) a tall WASP woman to improve (e's) love life."

There were complaints over the preposterously democratic mores at McKenzie, Brackman, where the lowliest summer intern could berate a senior partner and still be offered permanent employment.

To anyone with even a smattering of sophistication, "L.A. Law" does seem like soap opera with a veneer of legalisms.

For all of the legal lingo that the characters throw around with the ostentatiousness of fledgling law students, strict legal accuracy goes by the boards whenever the demands of drama dictate.

The series' courtroom perorations are more sound bites than summations.

Court conditions are positively utopian; here is a world in which the elevators come right away, and no one else ever gets on.

But to many real-life clients, these fictions have become reality.

"After watching the show, clients believe they can give you their file on Monday, that you'll tell them the trial is scheduled for Wednesday, and to expect a favorable verdict by Friday," says Aaron Shmulewitz of the New York City law firm of Parker, Duryee, Rosoff & Haft.

Another New York City lawyer, requesting anonymity, laments that "L.A. Law" recently led some clients, clearly impressed by Harry Hamlin's histrionics, to dismiss him.

"It was absolutely clear they wanted the questions asked the way Kuzak asks them," he said.

At the Chicago firm of Schiff, Hardin & Waite, the program had a different but even more deleterious effect.

A few years ago, in a discussion of the adventures of the lotharios in "L.A. Law," the firm's managing partner remarked to a local legal newspaper: "Lawyers should maintain tridional relations with their clients. They should have sex only with their secretaries."

Not everyone in the firm found that amusing, and the following week, the partner stepped down.

Berg

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"He called again the next day, and told me that he had thought about it, and decided that I was right, and he withdrew his request."

The passages remained, and Berg said that Ruth Goldwyn Capps, the producer's elder child, was pleased that someone had finally told her side of the story of her long estrangement with her father.

Samuel Goldwyn, born Schmuel Gelbfisz in Poland in 1879, walked halfway across Europe before finding passage to this country in 1895. He arrived penniless and unable to speak English, like so many of the other men who were the foundation of the American motion picture industry. They were mostly recent immigrants, mostly Jewish, all gambling, egotistical, rude, insensitive, paranoid men. And yet, at the same time, they were dreamers, men with vision, men with a certain sensitivity to beauty.

Most of all, they were ambitious men whose ultimate quest was to leave a mark on the world. Most had minimal education, so they were in awe of writers.

Berg said one of the things that intrigued him most about Goldwyn was the fact that he was basically an independent for practically his entire movie career. Despite the presence of his name, he was not part of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Sam Goldwyn was difficult enough so that partners came and went, and he continued to make movies.

Berg spent three years in the Goldwyn vault, eight years researching a man who denied his daughter over a baked potato.

It was served at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, and although 12-year-old Ruth, visiting as part of a divorce decree with her mother, thought it was perfectly edible, Sam looked at it and considered it undercooked. Sam pitched a fit, berating the waiter, the head waiter and the maitre d' and, of course, embarrassing the child. A few months later, father and daughter met in New York, and Sam invited her to accompany him on a trip to Europe.

Berg wrote: "As he spoke, Ruth could only think of 'weeks of "baked potatoes," ' " She declined. He threw her out of the Hotel Astor, and it was many years before they saw each other again.

Berg sees a few continuing themes in Samuel Goldwyn's movies. They were immaculately made. They were filled with emotion. They dealt with lost love.

" 'Stella Dallas' is the perfect example," Berg explained. "He made it twice, once in the silent version, and again with sound. The story of a mother's love lost is one that Goldwyn could never forget. 'Wuthering Heights' is another fine example.'

"In his later years, when he was 90 [he died at 94] and practically forgotten, he would sit in his screening room and look at 'Wuthering Heights' and 'The Best Years of Our Lives' over and over again."

For "Dead End," Goldwyn came on the set every morning to clear away the garbage and litter that had been placed there to depict a slum. Dirt was not "the Goldwyn look."

"People don't go to the movies to look at other people's kitchens," he once said.

That's a rare example of Goldwyn using the English language correctly. Usually, he butchered it, and Berg spots Goldwynisms around like chocolate chips in cookies.

When Lillian Hellman's play, "The Little Foxes," was a Broadway hit, Goldwyn decided to buy the movie rights.

"It's a very caustic play," his story editor reported.

"I don't give a damn what it costs," Goldwyn said. "Buy it!"

And after he did, Goldwyn never referred to it except as "The Three Little Foxes."

NO KIDDING

Original Names of Seven Major U.S. Cities

1. San Antonio, Texas — villa of San Fernando de Bexar
2. Sacramento, Calif. — New Helvetia
3. Austin, Texas — Waterloo
4. Cincinnati — Columbia
5. Tulsa, Okla. — Tulsey Town
6. Newark, N.J. — Pesayak Towne
7. Orlando, Fla. — Jernigan

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