

# Sink-ing 'no deeper'

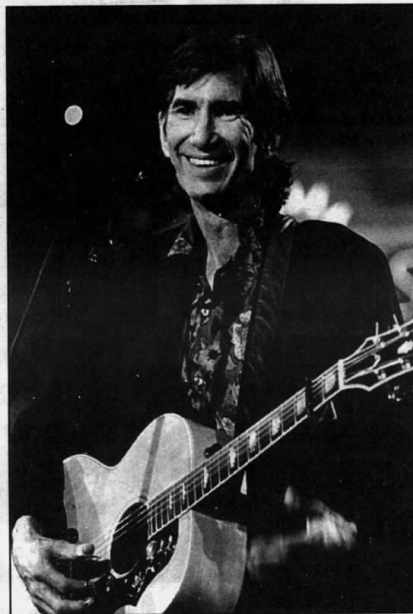
Van Zandt hangs in the real balance between melancholy and redemption

Turn the page and look at the picture: A homeless man is trapped in the soul-eroding purgatory of a government waiting room. His woman is pregnant, living under a bridge and depending on her man to salvage some sort of succor to prop up the wreckage of their lives for one more day. But it's not to be: "Unemployment said I got no more checks/They showed me to the hall," he sings. Dejected, the man makes his way back across town to his homeless bride and his unborn baby, only to find both lying cold, two more ghosts set adrift to wander a landscape of broken dreams.

Turn the page again: Another man stands in the sunlight, stunned with happiness, watching his little girl play: "There is no deeper blue in the ocean that lies/As deep as the blue of your laughing eyes ... Swim with the swans and believe that upon/Some glorious dawn love will find you ..."

Turn the page once more: Yet another figure, this one a rake and a rambling man, beats it around the corner, one step ahead of a passel of cops with a low degree of tolerance for footloose troubadours. Safe for the moment and glad of it, he unlimbers his guitar and begins to toy with a playful tune, stringing words together like brightly colored gems on a strand of melody: "If I was Washington, valleys would I forge for/If I was a fat man, fun would I gorge for/If I was Ghengis, gold would I horde for/I wish I had a dollar a day ..."

All three characters are drawn from the tracks of a new album, *No Deeper Blue*. And all three, it might be argued, are



Townes Van Zandt is 'real interested in dynamics, going from an electric blues to a lullaby' on *No Deeper Blue* with producer Philip Donnelly.

Rodgers: a lanky man with a guitar on his back, a freight train schedule wrapped around a pint of whiskey in his pocket, and the grim shadow of TB or Hodgkin's disease haunting his dreams. Straddling the line between the blues and country music, such men conjured up a raw poetry that shimmered with glorious dreams and moaned with irreconcilable despair.

"I'm never gonna be a Conway Twitty," Van Zandt said ruefully one time, and he was right, in terms of being a conventional, accessible show-biz star. Why else would he title one album *Live and Obscure* and another *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*?

He was born in Fort Worth in 1944 and moved to Houston in his youth, where he fell in with two other fledgling Bayou City musicians, Guy Clark and Mickey Newbury. Folk music was the name of the game back then in the early '60s, but Van Zandt drew much of his musicianship and inspiration from local bluesmen such as Lightnin' Hopkins.

Van Zandt, Clark and Newbury all emigrated to Nashville in the latter part of the decade and set up shop, a bohemian Texas troika marooned in the land of Nudie suits and Minnie Pearl jokes. Van Zandt's first album, *For the Sake of the Song*, was released in 1968.

Van Zandt has cut nearly a dozen albums since, though much of his early catalog remains out of print. But a lasting affiliation with Sugar Hill Records has resulted in four releases: 1987's *At My Window*, which mixed new and vintage material; 1989's *Live and Obscure*; last year's live album of cover tunes, *Road Songs*; and the

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john t. davis

**Townes Van Zandt**  
(with Richard Dobson on Friday and Barb Donovan on Saturday)  
**When:** Tonight through Saturday, 9 p.m.  
**Where:** Cactus Cafe  
**How much:** \$8 tonight, \$10 Friday-Saturday, at the door  
**Information:** 475-6515

facets of that album's creator, Townes Van Zandt, a man who has spent most of his life seemingly disappearing from view.

Though he is acclaimed as the laconic, iconic dean of an entire generation of Texas and Nashville songsmiths, and although songs such as *Buckskin Stallion*, *Poncho and Lefty*, *Tecumseh Valley*, *For the Sake of the Song* and *If I Needed You* stand as adamantine monuments of the songwriter's art, their creator remains strangely insubstantial.

It's easy to envision Van Zandt as one of those dusty, Depression-era balladeers such as Woody Guthrie or Jimmie