

## Van Zandt rewards the faithful

By GEOFF GEHMAN  
Of The Morning Call

**F**or Townes Van Zandt, the unconscious is a great collaborator. He conceived one of his best-known tunes, "If I Needed You," in a cough-syrup-and-antibiotics-Technicolor dream. He was asleep when he decided to ask an old musician friend to produce his latest recording — in Ireland. Of songwriting in general, he's said, "You have to be in the right chair at the right time."

Van Zandt, who will perform tomorrow night at The Tin Angel in Philadelphia and Sunday night at Godfrey Daniels in Bethlehem, has played musical chairs throughout his career. From time to time it's been stalled by excessive alcohol, a singing voice only a producer could love, and a devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. It's not for nothing one of his recordings is called "The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt."

Fellow composers have polished Van Zandt's reputation by popularizing his earthy, honest material. Emmylou Harris and Don Williams hit paydirt with "If I Needed You," while Willie Nelson minted "Pancho and Lefty" (Bob Dylan has done it live). Nanci Griffith showed her respect by adding "Tecumseh Valley," Van Zandt's portrait of poverty beating opportunism, on her tribute CD, "Other Voices, Other Rooms."

"No Deeper Blue," Van Zandt's latest Sugar Hill release, certainly rewards

this faith. Produced in Ireland by Philip Donnelly, who played guitar on Van Zandt's 1978 recording, "Flying Shoes," it's an extremely happy marriage of quiet desperation, unadulterated optimism and Celtic-streaked blues.

"Marie" is a typically rough, understated, first-person tale of a man whose pregnant girlfriend dies, homeless, under a bridge, while he searches for work. "Katie Belle Blue" is a lovely lullaby to the author's daughter. "Billy, Boney and Ma" is a long spoken ballad about a pair of outlaws, whose alliance ends when an elderly woman fattens up one of them, who happens to be a talk-



Townes Van Zandt will perform tomorrow in Philadelphia and Sunday in Bethlehem.

ing skeleton. In "If I Was Washington," Cajun, Dixieland and Irish strains wind around a tasty, talky ditty made for a campfire.

Van Zandt's vocals are as gritty and as oddly fragile as ever. "I'm never gonna be a Conway Twitty," he's admitted. Well, he's never going to be as flexible as sandpaper-throated John Prine, either. But he's affectingly weary and sorrowful, and his cowboy/hobo inflections are perfect for his lonesome road songs. Besides, the Irish musicians supply plenty of lyricism.

But, then, Van Zandt has long been comfortable roaming other musical territories. He's borrowed the guitar stylings of Sam "Lightning" Hopkins, toured with the Cowboy Junkies (who dedicated "Crescent Moon" to him), and played all sorts of quirky numbers. A typically quirky choice on a 1994 live recording of cover tunes is "The Shrimp Song," from the Elvis Presley vehicle, "Girls, Girls, Girls."

"I've always thought I'd like to write just one good song," Van Zandt has said, "that would save somebody's life somewhere on this earth." He's done that more times than he can imagine, even in his dreams.

Townes Van Zandt will play tomorrow night at the Tin Angel, 20 S. 2nd St., Philadelphia (information: 215-928-0978) and at 7 and 9 p.m. Sunday at Godfrey Daniels, 7 E. 4th St., Bethlehem (information: 867-2390).