

Long & lanky troubadour

Legendary Texas
songwriter,
Townes Van Zandt,
to bring enigmatic
aura to Raoul's

STORY BY LUCKY CLARK

How often does a bona fide living legend come to town? Well, we in Maine have had that happen quite a few times in the past couple of years, but this time we're getting treated to an extraordinary singer-songwriter — Townes Van Zandt — who's coming to Raoul's on Forest Avenue in Portland next Friday night, March 17.

This long and lanky Texas troubadour rates legendary status for songs that have been a staple of the Nashville scene for years: "Poncho And Lefty," "If I Needed You," "To Live Is To Fly," "For The Sake Of The Song," "No Place To Fall" and "Tecumseh Valley."

Folks who have taken his songs to their hearts (as well as into their albums) include Willie Nelson, Guy Clark, Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, Steve Earl, Cowboy Junkies, Mudhoney and the Tindersticks.

As a performer of his own material, Van Zandt's gruff, world-weary vocals beautifully and simply portray the passion and compassion of his powerful songs. Not since Bob Dylan and Woodie Guthrie, has there been such a vibrant voice for the common man than this soft-spoken, gentle soul.

The first of March found Van Zandt back in his Tennessee home after an exhausting bout of touring, where he was reached for a brief telephone interview:

"We just got back about an hour ago from Alaska," he explains, sounding very tired. There's a lot of child-like laughter in the background when he answers the phone. "My wife and my daughter met me at the airport. My little girl . . . we'll have to bear with her in the background, I think," he adds with a chuckle.

When asked if he's ever performed in Maine, Van Zandt says: "One time, I thought I had a gig in Burlington, Maine and it turned out to be Burlington, Mass. Me and this friend of mine from Tennessee drove all the way up there . . . Man, there's no people or anything around . . . it was then that I realized that I took 'MA' to mean Maine, when it means Massachusetts. I ended up driving all the way back to just outside of Boston for the gig.

"But I have been to Portland before," Zandt suddenly remembers, "not as a solo performer, but with Guy Clark — that was about 10 years ago. Why?"

It seems this famed songwriter is not kept up-to-date with his



Photo by Peter Figen

Townes Van Zandt, whose songs are a staple of the Nashville scene, is coming to Raoul's at Forest Avenue, Portland, on Friday night, March 17. His latest release from Sugar Hill Records is "No Deeper Blue."

itinerary. He doesn't know he'll be coming to Portland in a week.

"That's smooth news to me," he growls, "they don't tell me nothing . . . it frustrates me no end!"

When he discovers the venue he'll be playing, however, irritation vanishes.

"We'll be at Raoul's — what is it — Roadside Attractions? That's where Guy and I played! Good deal, that's a great gig . . . really great!"

Talk then turns to "No Deeper Blue" his latest Sugar Hill Records release, which happens to be Van Zandt's first studio album in nearly eight years.

"That's my new record, and it's startin' to take off. It was recorded in Ireland with all Irish guys playing. Well, a Croatian played the bass . . ."

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When his daughter lets loose with a piercing crow of joy, it brings the interview to a screeching (literally) halt.

"That's Katie Belle," Van Zandt explains, "she just turned 3 a few days ago — on Valentine's Day, actually — and the song 'Katie Belle Blue' was written just for her. It's a pretty song and my favorite one, I think, on the record.

"It was hard to play for a while," he confesses, "cause of the verse that goes: '*Come someday/I'm bound away/Wind and wings on the water/Whatever may/You must stay/And remain my beautiful daughter.*'"

Well, my job is not to choke up on stage when I sing it — it took a while to learn how to sing it without choking up."

His incredible — and he'll tell you — God-given, talent of being able to take simple, common words and have them create powerful, moving songs is legendary in itself. But as far as he's concerned, it's nothing special.

"Sometimes it comes straight-away," Van Zandt states, explaining his own songwriting style. "Sometimes it takes a little craftsmanship . . . usually, it's more straight-away. I'm writin' 'em pretty much steadily. Well, not steadily, but I can tell when one's really going to be good."

"You know, all songwriters write in different methods at different times," he chuckles again. "I think it's just the chair you're sittin' in at the proper time. And the song comes straight down from the ceiling and hits you in the head. You have to be alert. If it hits a dentist in the head or a truck driver in the head, he wouldn't know what was going on. But I've been at it enough years, so when that hits me in the head, I *know* it."

How many years has he been at it, anyway?

"Well, I think I played my first professional song in about 1964 . . . but back to 'No Deeper Blue,'" he segues, "all 14 songs are my songs, of course — me and the Lord's — but those Irish boys played on

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— TOWNES VAN ZANDT

them all. In fact, I got to play with them some when I went out to support the album in Dublin."

Now, when he comes into Portland next Friday, who will he have in his U.S. supporting band?

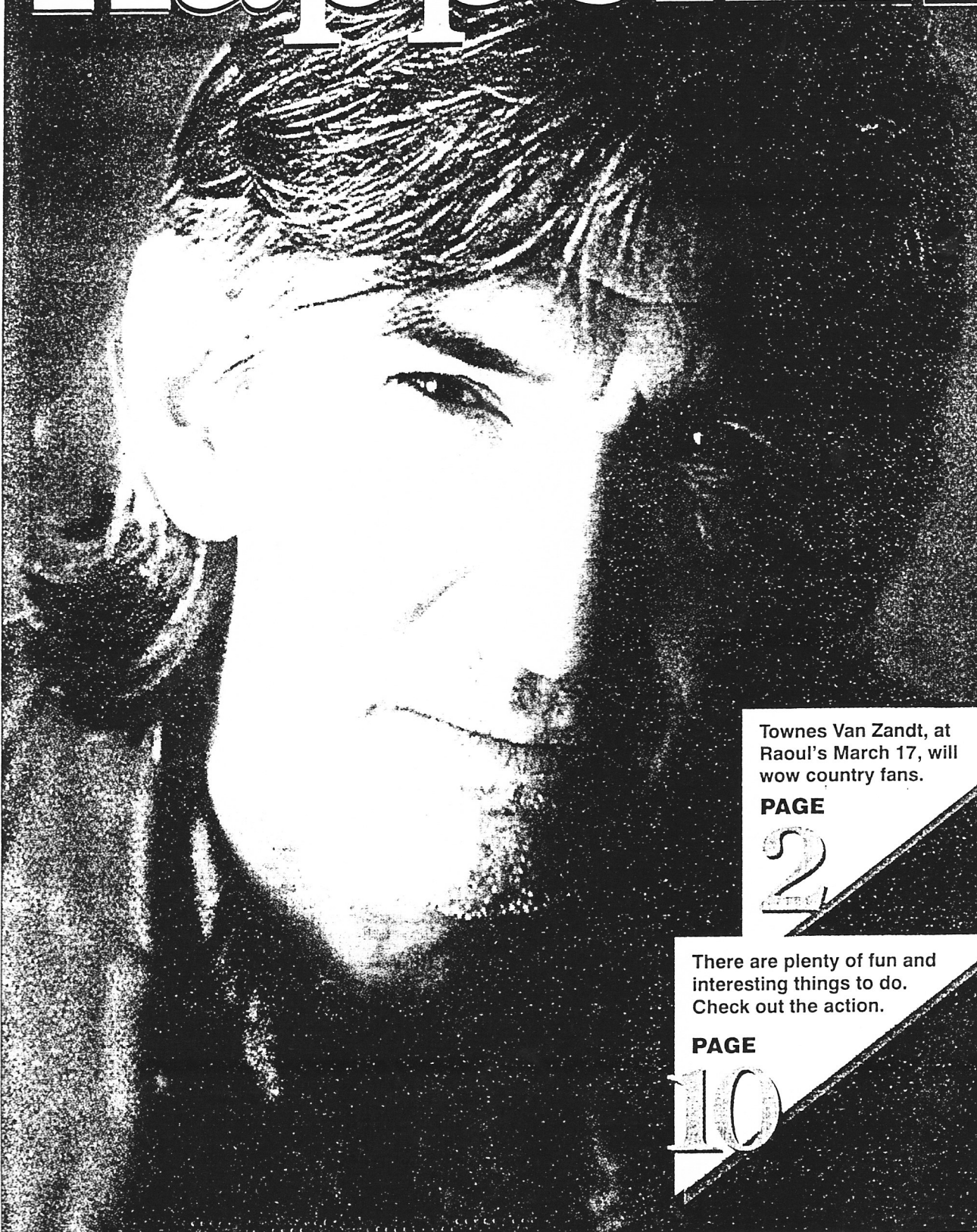
"I've been a solo (act) for about six to eight years — solo on and off all the time. I can get my songs across better that way — just solo with my guitar. It's a Gibson J-200 — it's big enough to hide behind — and sometimes, I swear, my guitar plays itself.

"Guitars are alive — I say that and people go, 'Yeah, far out!' —but I mean it. My guitar is alive! That wood ain't dead yet, you know?!"

This week around Central Maine and beyond

FRIDAY,
MARCH 3,
1995

what's happening



Townes Van Zandt, at Raoul's March 17, will wow country fans.

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There are plenty of fun and interesting things to do. Check out the action.

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Central Maine
Morning Sentinel

Townes Van Zandt's Triumphant Return

■ NEW YORK — Townes Van Zandt returned to New York to perform at the Lone Star recently, and found his old following glad to welcome him back. He has a new album on Tomato Records, after a period of several years during which his six previous albums have been hard to find and, for northern audiences, Van Zandt himself has been only a rumor.

He lived and performed here in the early seventies, but hadn't been to New York in over four years before the Lone Star stand. He has moved to Nashville from Texas, where he has had more success in getting his songs covered, most notably Emmylou Harris' rendition of "Pancho and Lefty," a remarkable song that is virtually the only basis radio audiences now have for knowing Van Zandt.

"Pancho and Lefty" deserves its acclaim, but Van Zandt showed during his set that the song's compelling story and ironic theme are no fluke. "Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold," "White Freight Liner Blues," "Loretta," all demonstrate a remarkable way with language and a skill with simple, country or blues-based melodies.

Were his performing skills on a par with his writing talents, Van Zandt would undoubtedly have long since taken his proper place before a much wider audience. But on stage he is decidedly uncomfortable, cutting short his songs and filling the spaces between with banter that has little in common with the music. His laconic humor works when he's singing, but the well received jokes he tells do not serve him well. He travels as a solo performer these days, and the spareness of his performance is frequently too severe to hold his listeners. Those who know what's there rivet their attention on him, not wanting to miss a word; for the uninitiated, that effort is likely to be too great to make.

With an lp easily available, and having announced an intention to come north to perform more often, Van Zandt should see his fortunes turning. His songs are so good they are likely to convert all who hear them. Now, he is too well-kept a secret.

Marc Kirkeby