

HEADLINERS

Van Zandt takes a trip to the hole

Drunk but slowly functioning, Townes Van Zandt sits nearby what used to be his home in Smyrna, Tenn., guitar resting on his knee.

"It's raining, so I'll play you a slow blues," the gaunt, legendary Texas songwriter announces. He is 51 years old but looks older and frailer thanks to years of hard living and alcohol.

His fingers spring to action, so familiar with the pattern they've performed so well for so many years.

Lightning flashes a little too close, and the session retreats inside the woody home in this nondescript town near Nashville. Although he doesn't live here anymore, the house is soaked with Van Zandt's presence. Besides, royalties from such classics as "Pancho & Lefty" and "If I Needed You" helped buy the place.

On one wall in the living room hangs the painting "Snake Eyes" by artist Jett Whitt, used for the cover of his latest album "No Deeper Blue." A stockpile of Van Zandt's CDs is kept in a back room.

The home is familiar territory, but now he's a visitor. Van Zandt has been divorced from his third wife, Jeanene, for three years but is still somewhat dependent on her. This day, she trimmed his hair to get him ready to pose for a photo, and put out a spread of nachos and other finger-food.

Van Zandt, his worn jeans and shirt as offhanded as his address, shrunk from the food. The raging thunderstorm outside was appropriate given the melancholy temperament of a guy who titled an album "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt" when he was 29 years old.

Still, he wears a sincere, broad smile this day and pulls together enough energy for some wrestling with his children Will, 13, and 4-year-old Katie Belle. He has another grown son, John Townes II, from a previous marriage who lives in Texas.

Van Zandt says he's more a creature of the road than any particular address. When he's not on tour he sometimes takes long drives early in the morning for the sake of the movement.

"No Deeper Blue," was recorded in Ireland with producer Phillip Donnelly. With this album, Van Zandt takes listeners on a trip to "The Hole," where demons threaten to "gobble up your soul." And the "No Deeper Blue" title refers not to the depression he so often explores, but "... the ocean that lies, As deep as the blue, Of your laughing eyes." It's a tribute to the happiness his daughter brought him.

"Marie" is a chronicle of the desperation of homeless life. Startling lines of poetry dot the collection, as always. From "Cowboy Junkies Lament":

*"There's a hole in heaven where
some sin slips through
Close your eyes and dream real
steady
Maybe just a little will spill on you"*

Van Zandt grew up happily as a member of a prominent Fort Worth, Texas, oil family. His attraction to the life of an itin-



Townes Van Zandt

erant bluesman, driven by unknown demons, is something of a mystery even to Van Zandt himself.

His musical hero is the late Texas bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. But he also feels an affinity with earthier popular artists, including Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Cowboy Junkies and The Rolling Stones. In Nashville, his musical compatriots are singer-songwriters like Steve Earle.

From the time he started releasing albums in 1968, he stood out even from his peers in Houston who were not exactly slouches — Mickey Newberry, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker among them. Though he moved to Nashville and was produced by Cowboy Jack Clement (Johnny Cash), Van Zandt's own records never have been the stuff of mass popularity. His is a dedicated cult audience, with an occasional hit from a recording by Emmylou Harris or Willie Nelson.

When you tell the stories of whores, bums, gamblers and losers, and insist on their dignity, the popular audience is limited these days. Springsteen has pulled it off, but not many others.

Erratic (sometimes disastrous) performances haven't helped over the years. There were times when Van Zandt got to the vodka before, rather than after a show. Van Zandt says that happens about once a year nowadays, whereas it used to be once a month.

In a bedroom upstairs, he speaks of the rumors that have been flying about his health, particularly after he was hospitalized for over a month in 1994. "It turned out I had a little tiny touch of pneumonia and that was it," Van Zandt said.

"They couldn't believe I didn't have this or I didn't have that. It went from Parkinson's to Lou Gehrig (disease) to HIV to TB to polio to small pox."

"A Song For," the first song on "No Deeper Blue," written just before the illness, anticipates how

he came to feel during it, Van Zandt said. From "A Song For":

*"There's nowhere left in this world
where to go
My arms, my legs they're a tremblin'
Thoughts both clouded and blue as the sky
Not even worth the rememberin'
Now as I stumble and reel to my bed
All that I've done
All that I've said
Means nothing to me
I'd soon as be dead
All of this world be forgotten"*

"That's a real strange song, cause I don't really feel that way," Van Zandt said.

"I might have felt that way in the middle of the night when I woke up and wrote it down, but I don't feel that way. It's a heavy-duty song."

"I have a lot of heavy-duty songs. I've always thought if you took enough of them or any particular one seriously enough — if you took it seriously enough you'd be in trouble."

Jim Patterson
Associated Press

PAGE 19



Best Bets

AUG. 8-14, 1996

Concerts

Townes Van Zandt will perform at 9:15 p.m. Aug. 9 at Rancho Nevada, Exit 2 off Interstate 80 in Verdi.

Also scheduled for Aug. 9 is country rocker Jerry Jeff Walker who will perform two shows, at 8 and 11 p.m.

Only a few tickets remain for Walker's performances. For tickets or more information on either performer, call 345-6788.

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