

Remember his name: Van Zandt's finally on the way up

Ever since Emmylou Harris and Hoyt Axton recorded separate versions of Townes Van Zandt's *Pancho and Lefty*, the music industry press has been alive with stories and reviews of the Texas born poet/singer. In typical fashion, the music press is way behind.

Sometime back between '67 and '70 a kid named Butch Ritter blew through Dayton with his banjo. He was in town through the good graces of the Air Force and, when he wasn't on base, he was playing the local coffee houses with a collection of mountain songs, original ballads and tunes he'd picked up from folks he'd played with or heard back home in Oklahoma.

Townes Van Zandt was one of the folks from back home. The music that Butch played was simple, but the lyric was always haunting, there was always an image just beyond those conjured by the words.

For the *Sake of the Song*, Townes' first album, was released on the Poppy label in 1968. Poppy was known for producing first rate albums that couldn't be found anywhere because of a poor distribution system. They released one album a year for Townes until 1973. For the most part they were all ignored.

I FOUND my first Van Zandt album in the discount bin of a record store in a huge mall in, of all places, New York. Several years ago I found two more in a used record section of a local disc shop. They are still among the favorites in my collection because of the uncluttered nature of the music and power and depth of the lyric.

This is all important because Townes Van Zandt will be at Gilly's (second billed to John Lee Hooker) on May 1. He has just released a new album, on a new label, and has started to gain recognition beyond the faithful few who have followed his career for the past decade.

Since legends don't often visit Dayton, it is only fair to explain a little about the man and his music.

Van Zandt is an original. He can not be compared to Dylan or Paxton or even to Woodie Guthrie. If he must be fitted to a notch, Van Zandt is a folk purist writing about things he doesn't always understand himself.

Pancho and Lefty, the one Van Zandt tune that most people are likely to be exposed to, is a perfect example. On the surface it is a simple ballad of a Mexican bandito (Villa?) and his sidekick. Like most of Townes' material it is more than a simple story and analysis of the themes of friendship (unstated relationships) and betrayal have received more press than all of Townes' other works.

FOR THE SAKE of the *Song* covers the full range of emotions that seem to run rampant through the mind of Van Zandt. *I'll be here in the Morning* is a

tender love song of reassurance that "your softest whisper's louder than the highway's call to me . . ." Several bands later, Townes follows with *Talkin' Karate Blues* in which he attempts to learn the art of self defense from a rather large, unfriendly Oriental who manages, in the process of instruction, to remove one of the author's arms which has the same net result as Van Zandt explains, "who's gonna pick on a guy with just one arm?"

The levity doesn't last long with Van Zandt and he closes the album with *Waitin' Around to Kie*.

Van Zandt drifts between hope ("I've been turnstiled, junkpiled, railroaded too/I've been laid low but don't you know/I'm still in love with you") and despair ("Tomorrow's half of all you've got/treat him good 'cause when I'm gone he'll stay").



The album, *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, titled in tribute to the notoriety he had not gained by 1973, includes *Pancho and Lefty*, and closes with three tunes that are so different in character that it is almost impossible to imagine they were created by the same person.

IF I NEEDED YOU asks the lover's question, "Would you come to me, would you run to me to ease my pain" and comforts with, "If you needed me I would come to you, I would swim the sea to ease your pain." It is followed by what is perhaps the most depressing tune Van Zandt has written, *Silver Ships of Andilar*.

Silver Ships is a sea saga with overtones of *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and all the imagery and power of that classic. It clashes violently with the final tune on the album, a tongue-in-cheek ditty aptly named *Heavenly Houseboat Blues* with classic lines like "The bow she is made of solid silver/the hull she is made of solid gold/she ain't too much along the lines of floating/but she's yours babe, to have and to hold."

When Van Zandt comes to Gilly's a week from Monday he will be the warm up act for John Lee Hooker. Because he's unknown to most, he can be expected to be a pleasant surprise. It will still be a few months before Time and Newsweek pick up on this rare poet/singer/hobo. If you see him at Gilly's you might still be able to say you knew of him before he became a media event.