

NIGHTLIFE

BY JEFFREY LEE PUCKETT, STAFF COLUMNIST

The shadowy poetry of Townes Van Zandt



PUCKETT

It might be that the only real legends are people you've never heard of, people like Townes Van Zandt.

Van Zandt is a thin, hard-looking man who has spent more

than half of his 50 years on the road, singing big songs in little rooms and sometimes sleeping on the stage afterward, hotel rooms being a luxury.

He's had a few moments in the sun — Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard had a hit with his brilliant "Pancho & Lefty" — but Van Zandt is more often found in the shadows, where he seems most comfortable. Although his life now includes a wife and two children, he still hangs around those shadows.

Van Zandt has said that he writes songs because he can't do anything else as well, not because he's chasing spotlights and gold records. His songs certainly don't cater to the Top 40; "Pancho & Lefty" was a fluke, owing much to star power. Van Zandt's songs are for those who look for something real — hard-earned knowledge delivered via precise poetry. Some are so good they don't seem possible.

To write a Townes Van Zandt song, "You've got to be in the right frame of mind and the proper physical condition at the proper time," Van Zandt said, somewhat cryptically, in a recent interview. "Sometimes it's real easy; sometimes it's craftsmanship.

"Sooner or later, it always takes some craftsmanship, but you've got to be prepared to be hit on the head. Some songs come from above, some sideways, and some from below. But in the end, you've got to rely on yourself, in a dark room, in the middle of the night."

Van Zandt talks slowly, flashing a sly, dry wit. After a while, you can tell he's a man who has gained perspective.

Van Zandt was born into a prominent Texas family. His family is full of lawyers and statesmen, with buildings named after them. There's even a Van Zandt County in East Texas.

"All that stuff I don't care anything about," he said.

Van Zandt's personal legend, though, was born of a hard life. Maybe the best way to put it is that he's

always endured: time spent in a mental hospital as a teen-ager, diagnosed as a manic-depressive with schizophrenic tendencies; a diet of reefer and Gaines Burger during the leanest years of his career; critical praise as opposed to paydays; countless stories of hard drinking complicated by endless bouts of even harder thinking.

Some people turn such a life into melodrama. Van Zandt had enough sense to turn his into art. His best songs — and there are a lot of them — explore and expose the human condition with painful honesty. The lyrics read well enough, with just the right touch of poetry. But, when sung by Van Zandt in that 600-year-old-sounding voice, well, sir, it's enough to bring you to your knees.

"Living's mostly wasting time, and I waste my share of mine, but it never feels too good," Van Zandt sings in "To Live Is To Fly."

Van Zandt's songs are almost always surprising and sometimes stunning. In "Pancho & Lefty," Van Zandt draws a parallel between a Mexican bandit and a Midwestern drifter, showing how we're all this close to being either tall tales or forgotten:

"Livin' on the road, my friend, was gonna keep you free and clean / Now you wear your skin like iron, and your breath's as hard as kerosene."

"Two words can be poetry, and, if you add one note on a guitar, you've got a song," he said. "It's not nearly as difficult as everybody thinks."

For the past few years, Van Zandt's records have been hard to find. He recorded for a European label until last year, when North Carolina's Sugar Hill label signed him. The result was "No Deeper Blue," which lives up the standard. No one but Van Zandt could write a song like "Billy, Boney and Ma," about a thief (Billy), his dead skeletal partner (Boney) and a kind old woman they try to rob, except that Boney falls in love.

That one sounds as if it came from sideways, above and below, all at once.

Van Zandt performs Friday night at the Macaulay Theatre, 315 W. Broadway, with Guy Clark headlining (8 p.m., \$13.50). They'll also be at Lexing-

ton's Kentucky Theatre, 214 E. Main St., Thursday night (8 p.m., \$15.50).

Focusing on Van Zandt today isn't meant to slight Clark, who's an equally amazing writer, just from a different direction. Most of Clark's dark songs would be lighthearted for Van Zandt, which should make their pairing near perfect.

Ask most folks, and they'll tell you Clark is considered the dean of Texas songwriters. He's just released a fine new record, "Dublin Blues," and his increasingly weathered voice is ideal for telling his genteel story songs.

Clark can turn a detail into a tear-drop or a grin — or both, as he does with "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train" — and boasts an almost grandfatherly authority. But he might kick my rear for saying so.

Concert calendar

Cincinnati: Monday at Riverbend Music Center, Seal, Des'ree; Tuesday, Bonnie Raitt; Thursday, Ted Nugent, Bad Company, Chris Duarte Group (502-361-3100).

Kings Island, Ohio: Sunday, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson (502-361-3100).

Lexington, Ky.: Thursday at the Kentucky Theatre, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt (606-231-6997).

Louisville: Tonight at Stage Door Johnnies, Palace Theatre, Quo, Black Butterfly, Division One, Krema, Haylo, Beau, Herlon Robinson (502-584-7777). Wednesday at Coyote's, Boy Howdy, 4 Runner (502-589-3866).

Friday at the Macaulay Theatre, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt (502-584-7777 or 800-775-7777).

Friday at Cardinal Stadium, Three Dog Night, Peter Dinklage (502-361-3100).

Next Saturday at the Louisville Zoo, Spyro Gyra, Johnny "Guitar" Watson (502-581-9798).

Ticket office

Cincinnati: June 21 at Bogart's, Bruce Cockburn (502-361-3100).

June 28 at Riverbend Music Center, Legends of Motown (502-361-3100).

Kings Island, Ohio: June 23, Jamie Walter (502-361-3100).

Lexington, Ky.: June 22 at the Kentucky Theatre, Bruce Cockburn (606-231-6997).

Louisville: June 18 at Kentucky Center for the Arts, Santana (502-584-7777 or 800-775-7777).

June 24 at the Palace Theatre, Christopher Cross; June 25, Earth, Wind & Fire; July 6, Patti LaBelle; July 8, Tom Jones; July 19, Pat Metheny; July 20, Natalie Cole; July 23, Engelbert Humperdinck; Aug. 6, Diana Ross; Aug. 7, the Doobie Brothers; Aug. 8, Ringo Starr and His All-Starr Band; Aug. 19, John Denver; Aug. 23, Chicago; Sept. 8, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Clarence G. Carter; Oct. 13, Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor and Her Blues Machine, Lonnie Brooks and His Blues Band (Tickets in person at the Palace and TicketMaster; by phone, 502-361-3100).

June 20 at Coyote's, '38 Special; June 22, Toby Keith (502-589-3866).

June 29 at Jim Porter's Goodtime Emporium, Pieces of a Dream; July 13, Marcia Ball; July 20, Fattburger (502-452-9531).

July 1 at the Louisville Zoo, Africa Fete World Tour (502-584-7777 or 800-775-7777).

July 2 at Phoenix Hill Tavern, Freddy Jones (502-589-4957).

July 8 at the Brewery, Babes in Toyland, Crain (502-361-3100).

Canceled: Lorrie Morgan, Doug Supernaw at Kings Island, July 30.

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