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FLORENCE MORNING NEWS



Contributed photo

Singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt will perform at Theatre on the Green in Cheraw at 7 tonight.

Going to Townes

Singer-songwriter coming to Cheraw

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FLORENCE — Townes Van Zandt has fond memories of this town.

"I've been in jail in Florence," the 52-year-old folk singer-songwriter said.

Then, he thinks again.

"(Florence), Alabama, actually."

The overnight stay in jail, according to Van Zandt, was for restraining a friend who went crazy in a motel room. They had walked three days for some crooked record company representatives, who promised to return and help singer-songwriter Blaze Foley record his album.

Van Zandt watched Foley hallucinate and become extremely violent after feeling pressure to finish the album. Before it was over, he had thrown a chair through the window and spit on a police officer. Van Zandt says no drugs were used at the time. He was released the next day and the charges against him were dropped.

That incident is a square in the quilt of Van Zandt's life. The eccentric writer of the country hit "Pancho and Lefty" has a reputation among artists for writing simple, yet stirring songs. He believes his abilities to touch the emotions have attracted such artists as Cowboy Junkies, Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard to record his work.

Songwriting is only part of Van Zandt's music career. He's toured the United States and Europe for the past 30 years, taking his gritty folk songs to clubs and theaters like Cheraw's Theatre on the Green. Tonight, Van Zandt will perform at 7 at the Theatre. The band Two Dollar Guitar, featuring drummer Steve Shelley of the alternative rock band Sonic Youth, will open.

Fame has been good to the colorful singer and songwriter who, like a rock star, occasionally interjects "babe" in his interview with a female reporter. But Van Zandt has been a silent partner to the successful, leaving the glory to those who merely use his songs.

He keeps life simple. He resides in a cabin near a lake in Mt. Julia, Tenn., with his Brittany spaniel, Feather. He goes to town for food, cigarettes and an occasional accessory to help with his songwriting. He pays his bills by touring, giving his songwriting royalties to his second ex-wife Jeanene and two children, Katie Belle, 4, and William

* Singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt will perform at Theatre on the Green in Downtown Cheraw today at 7 p.m. Opening is the band Two Dollar Guitar, featuring Steve Shelley of Sonic Youth.
* Tickets are \$10 and available by calling the Cheraw Arts Commission at (803) 537-8422.

Vincent, 13. He remains close to his family and allows Jeanene to be involved with his career. She produced his latest Sugar Hill album, "No Deeper Blue."

The inspirations that soon become songs are also simple. Van Zandt takes from nature and the world around him. "For most of the time, I guess they're crafted by me, but they come from outside of me and through me and I've been at it enough to where I can craft them into a form," he explained. "I can hear screams in the middle of the night when I'm asleep, but they're crafted into forms."

Craftiness turns inspiration into songs rich in detail. "The Hole" could be mistaken as mountain folklore passed down generations, with an evil woman as its main character and a warning to avoid her soul-killing trap. A homeless man laments his life and love in "Marie." The spooky, Irish-flavored "Billy, Boney and Ma" tells the twisted tale of two crooks rehabilitated through maternal care.

As lyrics provide the pictures, Van Zandt's vocal twang and folksy guitar-based sound dominate the album. But he breaks away with some musical diversions, including the bluesy "Goin' to Memphis" and even a lullaby for his daughter.

"I always go for dynamics," Van Zandt explained. His next album, to be produced by Shelley, will be no less than eclectic, he says. "It could be some rockers, some stories," he said. "I have one I think it's going to be a reading with an oboe behind it."

The album will also mark a musical departure, as Van Zandt goes for the grunge. The friendship between the songwriter and drummer Shelley is opening new doors artistically, while broadening Van Zandt's appeal among listeners.

"Luckily I went from blues to folk music — I guess I went from blues to folk music — then I managed barely to skip over bluegrass into grunge," he said. "It feels like I really don't have to shave anymore."

