

A Rumor In His Own Time

by Michael Goldberg

Used to be, I was gonna solve the world's problems," said Townes Van Zandt. "I was gonna keep the sun from burning out by writing a particular song and playing it up towards the sun."

Townes Van Zandt is a Nashville-based folksinger. He is best known for a witty and telling ballad, "Pancho and Lefty," that Emmylou Harris recorded and which was the highlight of her album, *Luxury Liner* (Warner Bros.).

"Pancho and Lefty" is the tale of two men, one becomes an outlaw, the other a coward who never takes a risk. The song depicts the hopelessness of either course. Townes ends it like this. "Now the poets tell how Pancho fell/Lefty's livin' in a cheap hotel/ The desert's quiet and Cleveland's cold/ So the story ends we're told/ Pancho needs your prayers it's true/ Save a few for Lefty too/ He just did what he had to do/ Now he's growin' old."

Townes Van Zandt's ability to poignantly capture the existential dilemma in simple verse should have enabled him to become a popular folksinger of his generation. But Van Zandt became a folksinger towards the end of the Sixties when folk music went out of fashion. It has never come back into fashion and subsequently Van Zandt is, as Tom Waits likes to say, "A rumor in my own time."

Though he has recorded seven albums, most of them were for a small obscure label, Poppy Records, and almost nobody heard or bought them. Van Zandt is known only to those who scrupulously study liner notes for the songs he contributed to albums by Hoyt Axton, Doc Watson, Emmylou Harris and others. For the small pockets of folk music fans located around the country who were hip to Van Zandt in the late Sixties, he remains a well-kept secret nobody has managed to reveal to the general public.

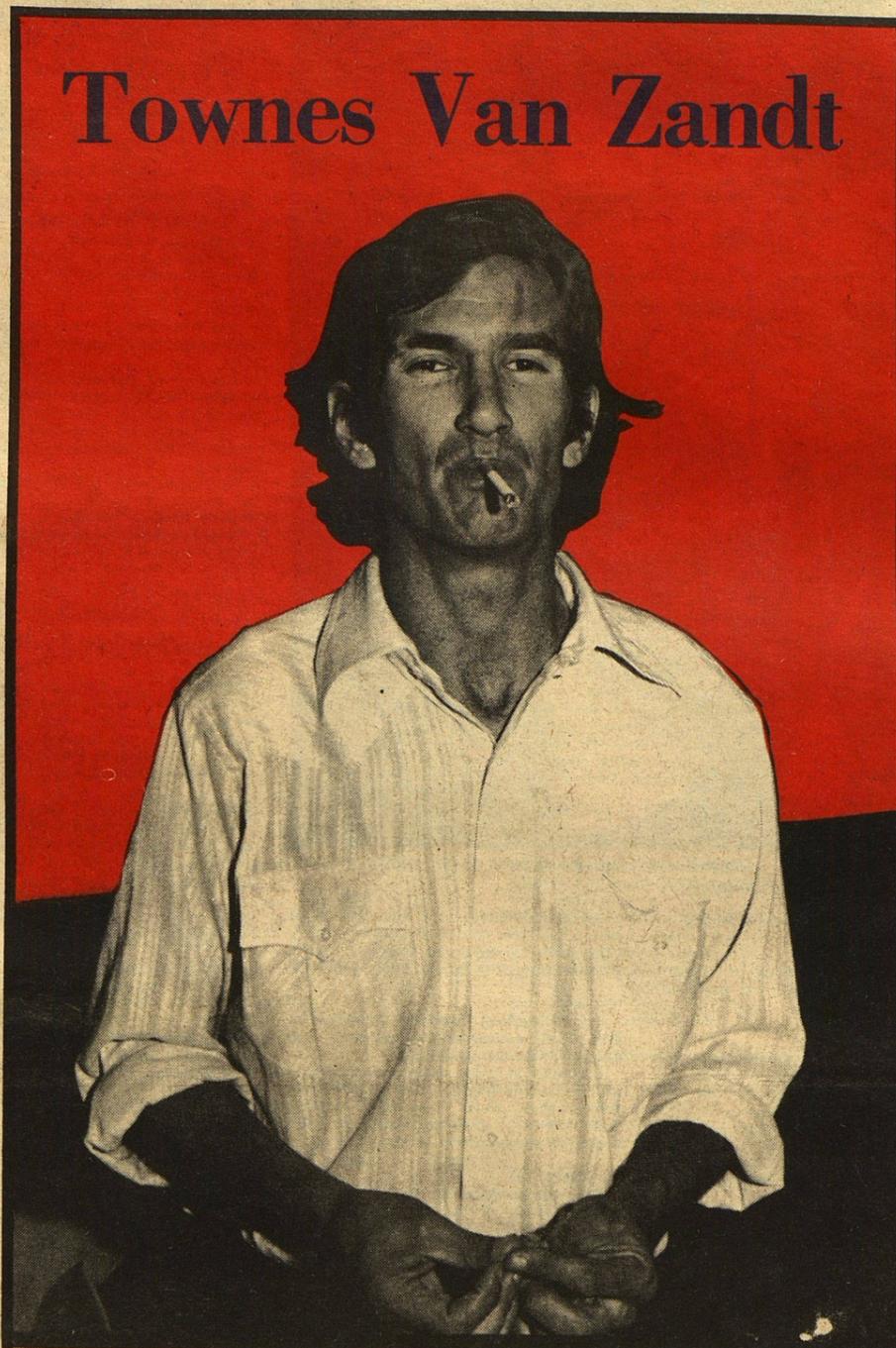
Sitting in an empty dressing room at the Great American Music Hall, Van Zandt looked tense and nervous. Like Anthony Perkins in "Psycho" or De Niro in "Taxi Driver," he seemed to be a time bomb ready to explode -- the ordinary man who one day picks up a hatchet and murders five children in cold blood. Yet despite frazzled nerves, he claims to have mellowed some. "Now man," he said, "I just go out and play. I figure you can change things in your own brain and a few other brains who are listening at a particular time but you can't stop the world in its tracks. That's what I became a folksinger for, to alter the course of the universe."

Far from changing the universe, Van Zandt, instead, shrank his personal world. For the past four years he has been a recluse. Tales of his death occasionally leaked north from his home in Austin, Texas. Poppy Records folded in the early Seventies and Van Zandt didn't pursue another label, choosing instead to hole up in Colorado for a time and then in Austin.

He lived in a slummy trailer court in Austin and didn't perform outside of Texas. Even his local appearances in funky Austin and Houston dives were infrequent. Van Zandt was (and is) a heavy drinker and he earned meager wages helping an elderly blacksmith. "It was hard times in Texas," he slurred. "No money. Playing for \$40 or \$50 and splitting it among 10 friends and everyone barely getting by. Tobacco Road. Tortilla Flat type of times."

One of the Houston dives Van Zandt played was an infamous brick 18' by 36' bar called the Old Quarter. In the summer of '73, he made an appearance there which drew an overflowing crowd. Though inebriated to a degree few non-Texans can comprehend, the audience managed to keep their participation to a low level, leaving the performing to Van Zandt. He was in great form that night. Accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, he sang all his great songs and the whole performance was recorded. But the years passed and no album was released.

Two years ago Van Zandt moved from Texas to Tennessee. He found an old one-room cabin, 20 miles south of Nashville on an 800-acre farm, that he now rents for



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\$30 a month. The cabin is fairly inaccessible down miles and miles of often muddy road. An outhouse stands behind the cabin. It's an isolated existence in which Van Zandt, on occasion, "receives" a song.

"I never think about what I'm gonna write or how I'm gonna write it," he says, lighting his third cigarette in 15 minutes. "It's always like... (he makes a sound like lightning striking a tree)... and there's a line. I put it down and whatever it's about, that's what the song is about. It's here's a line, here's the song. It just appears from the video of my brain in the finished form. Bukka White said they came from the sky."

Last year *Live at the Old Quarter*, Houston, Texas suddenly made its appearance on a new label, Tomato Records, formed by the man who once ran Poppy. "To Live Is To Fly," from that

album, is indicative of Van Zandt's perceptive writing:

*Days up and down they come
Like rain on a conga drum
Forgot most, remembering some
But don't turn none away
Everything is not enough
And nothing is too much to bear
Where you been is good and done
All you keep is the getting there
To live's to fly
Low and high
So shake the dust off your wings
And the sleep out of your eyes.*

One writer once said of him, "Townes carried the terror and the sorrow of a sensitive man who has looked into the abyss and seen... the abyss." His songs and delivery are infused with an under-

standing of the hopelessness of existence. Yet he can appreciate the small joys that make life worth living. And so many of his songs express those joys. "Loretta, she's a barroom girl/Wears them sevens on her sleeve/ Dances like a diamond shines/ Tells me lies I love to believe."

Because of his career failure, heavy drinking and dirt poor existence, Van Zandt is seen by those familiar with his work to be somewhat of a tragic figure. Confronted with that observation, he agreed with some reservations. "It might be true. I mean it's just living pretty fast I guess and being semi-crazy. That reputation I got from being in and out of the hospital a few times. Just going looney."

Asked if that still happens, he said, "Well, days off it happens a lot. If you're playing night after night and all of a sudden you got a day off, nowhere to drive to. So you and the boys get a jug and sit in the room and get blissed and all of a sudden you get crazy."

The son of a wealthy Fort Worth oil family, Van Zandt first turned on to the idea of being a musician when Elvis played on the Ed Sullivan show in 1956. "Seeing Elvis on Ed Sullivan was the first time I realized that playing the guitar was even something people did for money. Before that I just thought people played guitar for fun and then had a job. Then it snapped, that was his job."

When he got out of high school he also, "got through all that teenage identity crisis, I just came out of it a folksinger." Van Zandt entered the Houston folk scene in 1968, playing with folksingers like Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark. "The folk boom ended about 1966," he said. "When I got there it wasn't like it used to be. Used to be ten folksingers a night, place full seven nights a week. Everybody would get \$10 a night. But those places have been gone for years. The prices for folksingers went down."

Now, however, Van Zandt has a brand new album, *Flying Shoes*, released by Tomato Records. Tomato is also releasing all of his previous Poppy albums. And, buoyed by the notoriety that Emmylou Harris' cover of "Pancho and Lefty" has given him, Van Zandt is touring the country for the first time in nearly 10 years. Accompanied by a fiddle player and a lead guitarist, he is finally becoming more than just a fading rumor.

Van Zandt says that even in these disco/ rock 'n' roll times, he occasionally finds young kids asking for advice about being a folksinger. "When somebody asks me how to do it, I just tell them, you just have to be willing to starve and blow everything else but folksinging off. I mean if you have to make a decision about how to go about it, forget it. I mean it's supposed to grab you and drag you and give you no choice whatsoever."

And was that the case for him? "I resisted for a while, just because I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know there was such a thing as being a folksinger. But I didn't resist it for long. Because it's the wild side of life. You're always on that side of life, which is where I'd be anyway. But this way I play the guitar, instead of being 100 percent wild."

