

# True Blue

Legendary writer Townes Van Zandt lives to play music

By Jim Peterson  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SMYRNA, Tenn. — Drunk but slowly functioning, Townes Van Zandt sits nearby what used to be his home, 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 non-descript 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 Whititt, 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

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.

Van Zandt grew up happily as a member of a prominent Fort Worth, Texas, oil family. His attraction to the life of an itinerant 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 earlier popular artists, including Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones.

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. His is a dedicated cult audience, with an occasional hit from a recording by Emmylou Harris or Willie Nelson.

