

Townes Van Zandt
By Dave Hoekstra

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Townes Van Zandt, whose turbulent life was shaped by wanderlust, depression and a piercing sensitivity unmatched by any contemporary American folk singer, died late Wednesday.

The Texas-born troubadour suffered a heart attack in his Nashville home. He was 52.

Mr. Van Zandt had just begun work on a project for Geffen Records that was being produced by Steve Shelley, the drummer for Sonic Youth. It would have been the first major label release of Mr. Van Zandt's 16-album career, which began with the 1969 record "Our Mother the Mountain."

According to his former manager, John Lomax III, Mr. Van Zandt had played several mid-December shows in Austin, Texas, and he broke his hip during his stay. Mr. Van Zandt refused to go to the hospital, fearing he would delay the Geffen sessions in Memphis, Tenn., with Shelley, who had become a fan of Mr. Van Zandt's after hearing Mudhoney's version of Mr. Van Zandt's "Buckskin Stallion." Recording began last week and Mr. Van Zandt was in a wheelchair.

"Townes was in immense pain," Lomax said Thursday from Nashville. "After two days, he finally agreed to go to the doctor. But he wanted to go back to Nashville. So they drove back here and fixed the hip. He went home on Wednesday and had the heart attack."

His last Chicago gig was April 13, at the Old Town School of Folk Music with his close friend, singer-songwriter Guy Clark.

Mr. Van Zandt was born March 7, 1944, in Fort Worth, Texas. His father was in the oil business and the family's inability to lay down roots shaped Mr. Van Zandt's itinerant soul.

The Van Zandt family left Fort Worth when Mr. Van Zandt was 8 years old and made stops in Midland, Texas; Montana, and northwest suburban Barrington. "I lived in Barrington the first two years of high school," Mr. Van Zandt told me in 1990.

Of his life, he said: "I was real crazy for a long time. I had no address, phone or anything. I lived in the mountains and drank all the time. I gambled. I almost died a few times, but I'm past all that. It was Grand Ole

Opry material, right?

"I'd be too bashful to be anything else."

Mr. Van Zandt released "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt" in 1973. It is a timeless record that includes "Poncho & Lefty," Van Zandt's composition that Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson popularized as a duet, as well as a bluesy version of Hank Williams' "Honky Tonkin." Williams was a major influence on Mr. Van Zandt's songwriting. Like his hero Hank, Mr. Van Zandt died on New Year's Day.

Lomax first heard Mr. Van Zandt perform in 1966. Mr. Van Zandt's detailed blues-shaded style immediately hooked Lomax. "Townes had amazing lyrical compression," Lomax said. "To be able to compress the detail he was able to in a song and still have it come out poetically as well as visually is pretty amazing. He is as important a songwriter that this country has ever produced."

The son of folklorist Alan Lomax, Lomax managed Mr. Van Zandt from 1976 to 1978. "I'd put 'manage' in quotes," Lomax said. "I managed to keep him out of jail and managed to get him to the gigs. Once he phoned a bomb threat into a bar in Colorado because he couldn't get a drink. It cleared the place out. Townes walked up to the bar and ordered a drink. The bartender said, 'There's been a bomb threat!' He said, 'Yeah, I know. I called it in. I needed a drink.' Townes was a wild one."

Mr. Van Zandt is survived by several children. Services were pending.