

Townes Van Zandt
By Dave Hoekstra

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The blown-gasket blues of Townes Van Zandt suggests he might have been another Hank Williams Sr., while smooth-driving songcrafting points toward commercial country pop potential.

But Townes Van Zandt is content with being Townes Van Zandt.

The reclusive fortysomething Texas singer-songwriter is best known for writing "Poncho and Lefty," covered by Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, and "If I Needed You," which has been recorded by Emmylou Harris. Van Zandt cuts to the heart with the warble of a process server and the wisdom of a surly judge. The simple power of his music presents more complex paths.

"If you listen to the music, you do get that impression," Van Zandt said in an interview from his Nashville, Tenn., home. "But if you live the life and are buffeted by all the other things that happens to one, it seems that just from lifestyle, I never could have been anything other than this kind of traveling folk singer. I'm just a lone voice on the prairie.

"I was real wild and crazy for a long time. I had no address, phone or anything like that. 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."

Van Zandt will make a rare local appearance with Guy Clark and Robert Earl Keen Jr., in "An Evening of Texas Songwriters" at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at the Old Town School of Folk Music. Van Zandt said he hasn't played Chicago since the twilight years of the Earl of Old Town and the Quiet Knight, about a decade ago. He did, however, appear in a larger setting in 1987 at Navy Pier for "The Flea Market."

Van Zandt and Clark are good friends and they sometimes share billings (they co-headlined last summer at the Bottom Line in New York). They are both individualists in rugged Texas textures. Van Zandt hails from Fort Worth, while Clark is from Monahans, in West Texas. But where Clark's songwriting absorbs gruff personal detail, Van Zandt

veers off into self-effacing humor (he even named an early album "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt") and the rural blues that so often color his moods.

Each has been embraced by the new generation of Texas singer-songwriters such as Michelle Shocked, Lyle Lovett and Steve Earle, who said, "Townes Van Zandt is the best songwriter in the whole world and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that."

Van Zandt began playing guitar at age 15 and is fond of saying he learned his second chord at age 21. "Back then it was Lefty Frizzell and Hank and the boys - Hank Snow, Hank Williams," Van Zandt said. "Then Elvis came along and that changed everybody. Bob Dylan was a big influence on me in terms of songwriting. I remember listening to (Dylan's 1965 political breakthrough) 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' and realizing you can really say something with a song."

Van Zandt's father was in the oil business, and he must have been somewhat successful, because the family had a housekeeper, named Frances Edwards, who hipped the young Van Zandt to spiritual music.

"A lot of the spirituals I heard were holy roller (Pentecostal) types," he said. "I went to church a lot with Frances, who lived with us. She was part of the family. I got blasted by those spirituals, which were mostly rhythm. I never sang in a church choir or anything like that. In the white religions most of the spirituals are so long and drawn out and non-rhythmic, they're hard to keep track of."

The Van Zandt family moved around a lot. They left Fort Worth when Townes was 8 years old and made stops in Midland, Texas, Montana and northwest suburban Barrington.

"I lived there during my first two years of high school," Van Zandt said. "I skied at Wilmot (in Wisconsin). But I attended (a private military) school in Minnesota. Except for now (he lives in Nashville) and Barrington, I always lived west of the Mississippi. Colorado a lot and Texas mostly."

Van Zandt landed in Nashville in 1968 after Houston songwriter Mickey Newbury, who wrote the 1968 hit "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)" for Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, heard him sing talking blues at the Jester Lounge in Houston. Newbury introduced Van Zandt to Jack Clement, the legendary Johnny Cash producer and original Sun Records engineer. Clement gave Van Zandt a stark, contemporary sound that bridged the backroads of Texas with

Nashville. Today, Van Zandt is a partner with Clement in their Silver Dollar publishing company.

"I met Jack and all of a sudden I was making a record," Van Zandt said with a chuckle. "I had never thought about it. I was just traveling around, hanging out and being a folk singer. There were always places to play for \$10 or \$15. Sometimes it would even be \$50 in Houston, Austin or Denver. That phase for a musician is gone. I don't know anybody who does that. You have to have at least have an album or be a super hot local act to get a job. You can't get jobs on the spur of the moment anymore."

Van Zandt's debut album was "Our Mother the Mountain," released in December, 1969. That was followed by "Townes Van Zandt" in November, 1970, and "High Low and In Between" in 1971. The early songs were so tightly woven it was impossible to read between the lines, but if you could, you'd see the urgency of a gutbusting songwriter. Here's Van Zandt from his 1971 composition "To Live Is To Fly":

We all got holes to fill and them holes are all that's real

Some fall on you like a storm

Sometimes you dig your own.

For much of the last two decades, the early Van Zandt catalogs were considered collector's items, only available on CD through Charly Records in England. Besides applying the finishing touches on a brand-new album that Van Zandt will shop around for a deal, he has recorded two-thirds of a 60-song anthology (some old, some new) for the revitalized Tomato Records. Van Zandt expects the anthology to be released as a three-CD set.

It should make an excellent companion piece for the re-released first eight Van Zandt albums (covering 1969-1979), now available on Tomato (through Modern World Music, 143 Avenue B, Suite 5A, New York, N.Y. 10009).

"I really don't keep track and they really don't tell me exactly," Van Zandt said of the reissues. "It's great that they're back out. I've been getting ripples in the four months they've been out. It's been my case for a number of years now, but I play places where people come because I'm playing. It used to be when you'd start off, you'd play places where people don't care who's playing. It's a big deal, and the re-release of those records has helped that out. Even though they didn't tell me anything about it."

"But then, I'm kind of a recluse," he continued. "I have two severely different lives that are about 50-50. One is on the road music and doing records, and the other is getting Will (his son with his third wife) to school in the morning. I'm not a real recluse, but I'm not far from one."