

REVIEW / MUSIC

Folk is alive and well

TOWNES VAN ZANDT — *In concert with Alvin Crow Monday night at Jonathan Swift's.*

WOODSTOCK MOUNTAINS FOLK FESTIVAL — *With Happy and Artie Traum, Jim Rooney and others Sunday night at Jonathan Swift's.*

By Steve Morse
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Raise the subject of folk music to a lot of people and you get a ho-hum reaction that implies you're being nostalgic and sentimental. The folk movement died, remember? But though the music garners few headlines these days, there are still some performers — especially some who passed through Cambridge this week — who deserve far more recognition than they now get.

Namely, Townes Van Zandt. Of pedigreed Texan descent (one ancestor helped draft the Texas Constitution) he is not just a mesmerizing performer, but may be one of the premier poets of the time. Prey to manic depression, he has braved insulin shock therapy and a rootless life on the road (his gold front tooth replaced one lost in a post-gig mugging) to somehow end up living in a log cabin on the side of a hill in Tennessee.

Recent attention has come his way from Emmylou Harris recording his sublime ballad, "Pancho and Lefty" (with the lines: "Living on the road my friend/Was gonna keep you free and clean/Now you wear your skin like iron/And your breath's as hard as kerosene"). Harris's producer, Brian

Ahern, is expected to produce an album by Van Zandt later this year.

At Swift's, Van Zandt was lampooned by poor sound quality, but still satisfied with "Pancho and Lefty" (done more earthily than Harris), some Lightnin' Hopkins guitar licks, ghostly love songs, novelty tunes and talking blues (his "Fraternity Blues" was a devastating indictment of fraternity shenanigans).

Another Texan, Alvin Crow (with an eight-piece band), surpassed expectations with his Western Swing synthesis. He covered Bob Wills songs with authority (and greater passion than the more artsy Asleep at the Wheel), plus switched effortlessly into Chicago blues, Cajun, rockabilly and even bluegrass genres. He has an endearingly boyish voice, a knowledgeable fiddle (he once belonged to the Oklahoma City Symphony) and, one hopes, will hurry back here.

The "Woodstock Mountains Folk Festival" represented a reunion of the musicians who recorded the folk masterpiece "Woodstock Mountains" album last winter. John Sebastian and Eric Andersen did not show up, but the eight who did made up for the absence. Informality and loose jams prevailed, as Artie Traum glided through his blues rag, "Cold Front;" John Herald told of trying to crash New York in "Bluegrass Boy;" Rory Block took an uncharacteristically mournful moment for the gospel, "Long Journey;" and Jim Rooney peaked the living-room casualness with "Detour (There's a Muddy Road Ahead)."