

# Van Zandt's clean, sober outlook puts emphasis on family

By Casey Monahan  
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A lot of Townes Van Zandt's friends haven't made it. Blaze Foley, B.W. Stevenson and John Vandiver are some friends and fellow Texas songwriters who have passed away, for a variety of reasons all rooted in hard living.

For Van Zandt, a 45-year-old native Texas songwriter who's lived in Nashville the past three years, growing older hasn't always been a graceful experience. Drugs such as alcohol and marijuana are often an inextricable part of the lives of those who create and play music, and he wasn't immune. Trapped into a job by talent, many don't get out alive if they are also trapped by addiction.

But Van Zandt is lucky. After numerous bouts with addictions, he gave them all up, save for tobacco, 1½ years ago. With a notorious reputation for extremely hard living that often resulted in poor performance, Van Zandt is firmly on the road to recovery.

"I have learned that there really are responsibilities, especially to your family," Van Zandt said recently over eggs at the Night Hawk. "It took me a long time to learn that. I can't think of anything — anything — wrong with

## TOWNES VAN ZANDT

Opening act: Jimmy LaFave  
Where: Cactus Cafe  
When: 9 tonight  
Tickets: \$6  
Information: 471-8228

my life right now. I have a beautiful family, friends and I am fortunate enough to have my health.

"It was real easy, knowing that I could play the guitar, that if everything came to worse, I could always make enough money to live on by playing guitar on Sixth Street or The Drag for nickels and dimes. Knowing that all along, it's really easy to blow everything off, and never take anything seriously. I did that for a long time. It was always 'where's the fun?'"

For more than two decades, Van Zandt was revered by many who considered him Texas' most gifted songwriter. But others wrote him off as a hopeless drunk. Accounts of him collapsing on stage were common. Once he didn't show up for a gig at the Cactus Cafe. Eventually he was discovered unconscious and nearly dead on a boat after drinking too much vodka. When Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard were No. 1 in the nation with Van Zandt's song *Pancho and Lefty*,



Staff photo by Mike Boroff

Townes Van Zandt has overcome addictions and sees a brighter future. 'I can't think of anything — anything — wrong with my life right now.'

Van Zandt was in Austin State Hospital drying out.

"A year and a half ago, it was getting close to the edge," he said. "People still loved me, but there is a certain point where you have to not only play and sing, but also

take care of your family, most importantly, and your friends and the whole planet Earth. I wasn't really connected.

"It's very different now. I am more productive writing, playing, singing and taking care of my son. But there are some things I don't do as well. I don't gamble as much. I am still up for it, but I don't instigate it anymore."

Van Zandt moved from Austin to Nashville three years ago, hoping to straighten out his life, record an album and live within the nexus of the business of country music. Still, it took some time before he was able to get sober and stay sober.

"I went to Nashville to record *Out My Window*," he said. "I had been there before, but the record had a lot to do with (my return), as well as just being around Music Row. I had to clear out (of Austin). Our house had become a Grand Central Station. I'd wake up in the morning and go out to the living room to see who was staying there. Another (reason for a clean start) was that Will (he and wife Jeanene's 6-year-old son) was of the age where my family just became very important.

"I live on the edge of Nashville. It's the first time I've lived in a real neighborhood since Clarksville, and that was barely a neighborhood back in the mid-'70s — it was more like Tobacco Road or Cannery Row. All the do-gooder hippies lived there, but there were a few dirty ones, like me, who lived there, too. Then the clean hippies moved in, and they decided the situation shouldn't be like that, that is should be nicer and cleaner. So I had to get rid of my goat and chickens."

Even though Van Zandt is now an established resident of Nashville, he still considers himself a part of Central Texas.

"I kind of figure that Austin is still my home," he said. "I have lived here a lot, and Jeanene is from (Austin), and my son Will was born here. At (the University of Texas) law school, there's Townes Hall. That's my mother's serious side. Her maiden name is Townes, and her grandfather was a famous Texas lawyer. Then there's Van Zandt County; that's my father's serious side. The Van Zandts and about three other families founded Fort Worth. I am definitely the first folk singer in the family. I figure (songwriting) has been kind of building up in the family and it broke out with me.

"I left home at 19; there wasn't any trouble, but I just left all that

See Van Zandt, F14