

Pop

The lone stars' state

Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt are classic Texas songwriters

By Lynn Van Matre

When it comes to singer-songwriters, Texas always has produced more than its share, from pop pioneers such as Buddy Holly to latter-day country legends like Willie Nelson. And nobody seems to be sure why—not even Texas singer-songwriters themselves.

Guy Clark, who hails from Monahans, Texas, speculates that it might have something to do with "the independent approach to life" that seems to be second nature to Texans, musically gifted and otherwise. Ft. Worth-born Townes Van Zandt theorizes that "music just seems to come easier" in the Lone Star State, with "more little places to play and more people who play on the weekends."

Concludes Clark, "It's just one of those mysteries."

In recent years, some of the people who started out "playing on weekends" and went on to greater glory have included Grammy Award winner Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, Michelle Shocked and Steve Earle, country/folk/rock artists in their 20s and 30s who can be numbered among the current crop of Texas singer-songwriters. None of the new kids can explain why Texas seems to spawn so many good songwriters, either, but there's no mystery about their musical influences. Nearly all are quick to cite Clark and Van Zandt.

Very talented, fortysomething folk/country tunesmiths, Clark and Van Zandt have yet to hit the commercial bigtime as performers—but both continue to cast Texas-sized shadows as influential cult figures. The longtime friends, along with newcomer Robert Earl Keen Jr., share the bill Saturday at the Old Town School in what amounts to a Texas singer-songwriter mini-festival.

Has the fact that trendy types such as Lovett, Griffith, Shocked and Earle regularly sing their praises in interviews made any difference in Clark or Van Zandt's careers?

"Well, it's flattering when it happens," says Clark, whose sixth and most recent album, "Old Friends," was released in late 1988 on Sugar Hill, a small North Carolina label. "I don't know that it translates to anything, but it's nice."

Van Zandt, who is happy when his records sell "maybe 40,000 copies apiece and pay for themselves," notes, "I think that when you do something for as long as I've been doing it, it just gets to



Texas singer-songwriters Guy Clark (left) and Townes Van Zandt (above) are vastly influential cult figures.

the point where you can't hardly be denied.

"But," adds Van Zandt, who jokingly titled one of his in-concert albums "Live and Obscure," in a wry nod to his less-than-superstar status, "I think that crew of people like Lovett and Griffith have brought a new popularity to the whole deal of being a singer-songwriter, and that helps."

Clark and Van Zandt first met as performers on the Texas folk club circuit in the mid-1960s and became friends almost immediately. (These days, both live in Nashville with their families, "because that's where the music business is.") Clark, who was working days at the time as the art director of a Houston TV station, had grown up listening to country and western and Mexican music; later, he switched his allegiance to hardcore traditional fare and sought out such Texas blues greats as Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb.

"Being around Mance and Lightnin' was a real education," recalls Clark, who started his career playing traditional folk and blues, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. "They were unique. You couldn't really copy what they were doing, and that was the lesson I learned from them—to be yourself, whatever that is."

Singer-guitarist Van Zandt, who cites Elvis Presley as his earliest musical influence, was writing original material when he and Clark met. "I liked

Townes' literate approach to songwriting," says Clark, who was inspired by Van Zandt to begin writing original material himself. Today, songwriting royalties account for the bulk of both artists' incomes.

Clark, whose overriding songwriting philosophy remains "be yourself, and write about what you know best," tends toward story songs fraught with flashes of humor and subtle, reflective truths. He has written about everything from the death of a parent to the value of old friends, and a lot of the songs he has written or co-written have been country hits for other artists.

Clark's "Fair Shake" was a hit for Foster & Lloyd; "She's Crazy For Leaving" was a hit for Rodney Crowell. "Heart-broke" was a No. 1 country hit for Ricky Skaggs, and "Desperados Waiting for a Train" was popularized by fellow Texas singer-songwriter Jerry Jeff Walker in the 1970s and most recently reprinted by Highwaymen Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson and Waylon Jennings.

Other artists who have covered Clark's songs include George Strait, Tammy Wynette, Steve Wariner, Gary Stewart, Lacy J. Dalton, the Everly Brothers, Bobby Bare, Earl Scruggs, David Allan Coe and Townes Van Zandt.

Van Zandt wrote the Emmylou Harris-Don Williams country hit "If I Needed You," and Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard teamed up to record his "Pocho and Lefty." Others who have re-

corded his tunes include the New Grass Revival, Bobby Bare, Hoyt Axton, Linda and Robin Williams, and Guy Clark.

More consciously poetic than Clark, Van Zandt has turned out a handful of humorous talking blues on such topics as getting drunk on Thunderbird wine and pledging a fraternity, but he is far better known for lyrically plumbing the depths of despair. His most evocative songs tend to be about sensitive loners born to ramble, doomed-loves and romantic betrayals, and people struggling with a variety of demons. He is fond of saying that half his fan mail comes from mental institutions.

"Well, actually, I'm exaggerating a little bit," admits Van Zandt. "First of all, folksingers don't get all that much fan mail. But I do get quite a few letters from people with problems who say that listening to some of my songs helped them."

"I don't know why I write really depressing songs," says Van Zandt, who estimates that about half of his songs "are made up or just surreal" and the rest are drawn from personal experience. "I'm kind of a melancholy guy, I suppose."

"Over the years I've had some trouble with depression," adds Van Zandt, who also has struggled with drug and alcohol problems. "I'm not a real bouncy guy. But I figure I'm about normal."

Neither Clark nor Van Zandt would mind selling

more records, but neither is unhappy with the way things have turned out.

"What I do is so eclectic and strange it's hard for record companies to put it in a marketing slot," says Clark, who recorded two albums for RCA and three for Warner Bros. in the 1970s and '80s. "It's not country music, it's not dance music, it's not contemporary folk. It's more of an intellectual experience, and I can understand why that makes it hard for a major label to get radio airplay for my records. But I'm not bitter about it at all. I knew exactly what I was getting into, and I set out to do it."

"I love it when other people do my songs, and I love performing," adds Clark, who, like Van Zandt, tours regularly in Europe as well as in the United States and draws fans ranging in age from the college crowd to the fortysomething set. "And as soon as I get 10 good new songs together, I'll be talking to some [major labels] about my next record. Those avenues are still open, even though I decided to go with an independent company for my last album."

"I never thought I would sell that many records," says Van Zandt, who has eight titles available on the Sugar Hill and Tomato labels and is at work on a 3-CD retrospective anthology. "The records that do sell a lot are so far removed from the kind of things that I do. . . . But I make a comfortable living now. And I like touring; I like seeing the new hotels and the new skylines."

"Sometimes I swear to myself that I don't want to be on the road anymore," adds Van Zandt. "I don't want to get on another airplane. But then my agent calls with a booking and I say, yeah, I'll be there. So I'm sure I'll be doing this until I drop or the plane drops."

Surprisingly, given the frequency with which they share concert bills, Clark and Van Zandt have yet to team up for a duet on stage.

"We always wonder how come we've known each other for 20 years and haven't done one duet yet," marvels Van Zandt.

"Well, neither of us really are sidemen," says Clark, laughing. "We know two or three songs we could play together, and we've talked about doing it sometime. But the truth is that neither one of us really can play or sing good enough to play with anybody else."