

Van Zandt offers easy empathy

By JOE FROLIK
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Few singer-songwriters are regarded more highly by their peers than Townes Van Zandt. And that esteem surely must be shared by anyone who caught Van Zandt's two sets Wednesday night at Steamboat 1874.

In the course of 2½ hours, Van Zandt offered a wide range of tunes from his long career and introduced some new material as well. He also covered a handful of songs by other writers including Bob Dylan, Bo Diddley and Keith Richards and Mick Jagger.

Tall and lean, with every dark brown hair in place, Van Zandt appears almost vulnerable onstage, an impression reinforced by the emotion he injects into his songs, so many of them so sad. But the image of vulnerability only helps endear him to his audience as listeners immediately empathize with the victim of so many heartbreaks and hassles.

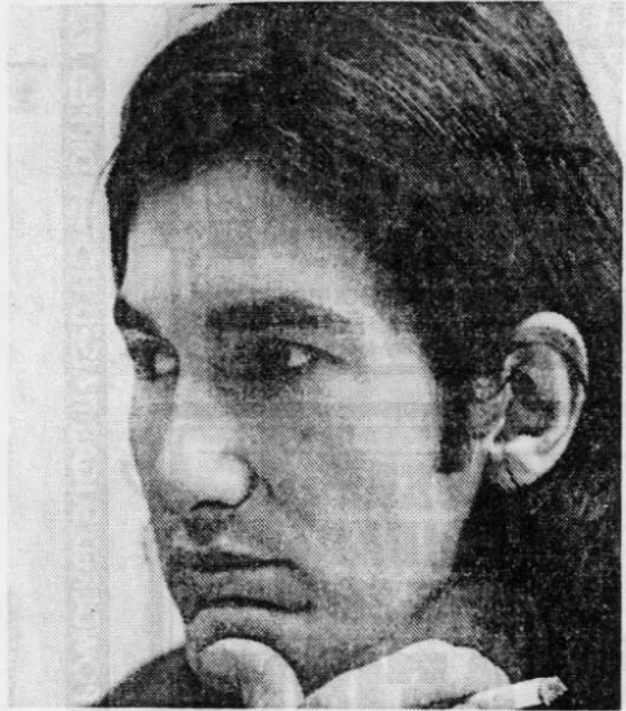
Van Zandt further endears himself with the stream of bad jokes he tells between songs. Even Van Zandt admits his jokes are crummy — "I don't know any good jokes," he quipped after one bomb — but he tells them so earnestly you laugh anyway. Just to make this rather forlorn young man feel more at ease you laugh.

But Townes Van Zandt doesn't need to look vulnerable or to top Johnny Carson to captivate an audience. All he needs are his guitar, his surprisingly expressive voice and his music, a rich blend of blues, folk and country styles.

Van Zandt's songs truly are masterpieces. Failed love, fading rural splendor and wanderlust are major themes, but Van Zandt writes about them so well the cumulative effect is not depressing. It's a rare songwriter who can manage that, but no one who's heard the man ever argues Townes Van Zandt is an ordinary artist.

Among the songs Van Zandt included in his Wednesday night sets were "Buckskin Stallion Blues," "Mr. Mud and Mr. Gold," "Loretta," "Don't Take It Too Bad," "White Freight Line Blues," "Roving Gambler," "Flying Shoes," "No Deal," "Quicksilver Daydreams of Maria," "I'll Be Here in the Morning," "Colorado Girl" and "Poncho and Lefty." All were presented in such a beautiful, often haunting fashion it was difficult to look away, even for an instant, from the workshirted, 35-year-old folkie singing them.

Which in a way was too bad because Van Zandt was accompanied by a fine three-piece band — Owen Cody on fiddle, Dan Rowland on electric guitar and Jimmy Gray on



Townes Van Zandt: bad jokes, good songs.

bass. Cody played some extremely nice fills, especially on "Brand New Companion" and "Freight Line Blues." The other two sidemen took the spotlight for one song each — Gray for "Elaine," a raunchy, western swing ditty; Rowland for the tongue-in-cheek "You Almost Look Chinese" which he dedicated "to all the Taiwanese."

Guitarist Richard Mason opened the show with his usual fine set. Mason did not play his usual acoustic guitar solos, however, concentrating on blues standards rather than his own compositions.

Those who missed Van Zandt's two-night stand on Sixth Street get another opportunity to hear him Monday evening when he helps close the Kerrville Folk Festival. If Wednesday night's performance is any indicator, Townes alone would be worth to the long drive to Rod Kennedy's 8th annual Hill Country hoedown.