GREEK WEEK

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN WINTER 1989

Townes Van Zandt: A lonesome cowboy

Ride the blue wind high and free
She'll lead you down through misery
Leave you low come time to go
Alone and low as low can be
—Townes Van Zandt, "Rex's Blues"

By Mark Swartz

One part doomsayer, one part comedian, Townes Van Zandt sings

PICK OF THE WEEK

the blues as only a country Western singer can. Direct and sad, ironic and self-deprecating, the veteran Texas singer/songwriter's career stands as an archetype of the lonesome cowboy poet.

Since his debut record, 1968's *For the Sake of the Song*, Van Zandt has accumulated an ardent fan club among other songwriters. You can hear his influence in several more "popular" artists: John Prine, Lyle Lovett, Randy Travis. Guy Clark summed up the effect Van Zandt has on him as a songwriter, "Working around a poet like him, you learn not to throw away a phrase for a rhyme, or a word for a pattern. You learn to keep your work clean."

"Songwriters like my songs a lot," Van Zandt acknowledges. His explanation for this phenomenon is typically overly modest. "I'm a generation before a lot of those guys, so I would have been the right age," he guesses. "I was lucky enough to hit upon my own style. I had to do *something*. I couldn't compete on guitar or vocals."

Van Zandt's gruff and unpolished instrumental and vocal prowess — though starkly affecting if given a chance — may account for the lack of platinum on his walls. Album titles like *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt* (1973) and *Live and Obscure* (to be released later this year) own up to his status as a cult figure's cult figure. The closest he's gotten to topping the charts is when Emmylou Harris did it for him with a cover of his "Pancho and Lefty" in 1977. Subsequent interpretations of his material have earned him a modest living in royalties.

Townes Van Zandt will be singing his poetic lyrics this weekend at the Ark

Thanks to some attention from *Rolling Stone* magazine and continued endorsement by other artists, Van Zandt's latest release, *At My Window*, has been racking up some more impressive sale figures. Encouraged by this belated attention, Heartland records plans on releasing a multi-record retrospective of his material. "They're even going to print up some of those compact discs," he boasts, though there's a hint of good old boy suspiscion in his pride.

Despite the fact that he's been at it for more than two decades, or perhaps because of it, writing a song hasn't gotten any easier for him. "It's like an Easter egg hunt," he explains. If there's a hundred Easter eggs, the first 25 are the easiest to find. After that, it gets tougher." He borrows a term coined by folk blues forefather Bukka White, "Sky songs," to describe the way a song comes to him. "Sky songs are already done. They could have been written by anybody tuned into that

See Van Zandt, Page 7

Blues programs shine in today's radio wasteland

By Jed Thompson

If you're standing in a septic tank, the only thing you want is a scented handkerchief. This is the same feeling I get when wading through the cesspool of FM radio, dodging Miami Sound Machine only to step squarely into a pile of Bob Seger which is better, if only because it is dry with age.

But — just when the stench has made me giddy, and I taste the bile brought on by another U2 song — the handkerchief comes. Public Radio sends its sweet, healing scents to

See Blues, Page 7