

# Gamblin', ramblin' and writing gems

Bob Dylan's coffee table bears witness to Country's adoration of Texas rambler Townes Van Zandt. **DAVE DAWSON reports.**

*"Some times I don't know where this dirty road is taking me, some times I can't even see the reason why, but I guess I'll keep a gambling, lots of booze and lots of rambling, man, it's easier than waiting around to die."*

Townes Van Zandt

**T**OWNES VAN ZANDT vividly recalls the first movie he made — he suffered painful bruising when he fell deep into a large Texas rabbit warren. Armed with a rifle and bottle of Seagram's whiskey, Townes introduced his dog and his girlfriend, in that order, to the camera.

The singer was showing the crew of Heartworn Highways just how big the rabbits grew in the Lone Star State. But Townes lost his footing and plunged into a gaping abyss in the arid Texas soil before emerging to perform his song 'Waiting Around to Die'. Van Zandt, son of a Texas rancher and oil man turned lawyer, also lost his girlfriend before she saw the movie.

"They caught me on a fairly festive morning," thrice-wed Townes told EG on the eve of his first Australian tour.

They were filming me at my Texas home for 'Heartworn Highways'. The sound and film crew were from New York and Sweden and they genuinely thought I had some giant rabbits down there in that big burrow. I realised that so I played it to the hilt.

"They were so impressed with my fall they left it in the movie. I just walked around, ad-libbing. It wasn't like real acting. I didn't have to learn any lines. It was so different from any other part."

Although Townes, 46, has stumbled a few times since from battles with the bottle, he hasn't fallen from grace or success. And like the character he played in 'Heartworn Highways' he has re-



Steve Earle may think he's better than Dylan, but Van Zandt still looks like Col Joye.

gained his footing on the international country, folk and blues music concert circuit.

Townes is best known for the songs 'Poncho and Lefty', 'If I Needed You', 'White Freight Liner Blues' and 'Tecumseh Valley', which were hits for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris and Don Williams, Hoyt Axton, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Bobby Bare.

But it was 'Heartworn Highways', made in 1976 and released in 1978, that was the catalyst for the singer being known way beyond the music scene. "They had an opening in New York," Townes added, "I saw it with Odetta. A lot of explicit language — especially by David Allan Coe — made it hard for it to be ever seen on American TV."

The obscenities of former convict country star and actor Coe, a Mormon who once boasted seven wives and claimed to have killed a fellow prisoner, earned it an 'R' rating and international infamy.

'Heartworn Highways' also brought together recent tourist

Steve Earle, then a teenager, and his mentors Van Zandt and Guy Clark.

It was the embryo of a relationship that peaked when an Earle quote was used as a marketing ploy for Townes' 10th album, 'At My Window'.

The singer revealed he was embarrassed by Earle who said "Townes Van Zandt is the best songwriter in the whole world and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that."

That was a hard act to follow for the reclusive Texan who met his third wife Jeanene the day after John Lennon was slain in New York.

"I had no idea the quote was on the album cover until I got a few advance copies," recalls Townes. "It was so silly, I got incensed and told the record company to take it off before they pressed any more. But I was too late. I know Bob Dylan and I've seen his bodyguards. If Steve Earle thinks he can stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in his

cowboy boots and say anything he's mistaken."

Van Zandt was born into a ranching family in Fort Worth — once known as Cow Town — gateway to the wild west and Texas panhandle.

Townes' world is a dark planet populated by gunslingers, rambles, gamblers, outlaws, foot-loose lovers, hookers and lost souls seeking solace with vast armies of strangers.

In 'Poncho and Lefty', they have "breath as hard as kerosene, wear their skin like iron and guns outside their pants for all the honest world to feel". They drift from oilfields and cattle ranches of Texas to the bluegrass plains of Kentucky, deltas of Mississippi, bayous of Louisiana and concrete jungles of New York.

Even though the geography of the singer's tunes may pertain to the northern hemisphere, the themes and sentiments are universal. Like fellow Texan and close friend, Guy Clark, who toured here last year, Townes has a strong following in the Aus-

tralian legal profession. His lyrics have been quoted in detail by members of 3AW's 'Lawyers, Guns and Money' radio team in pleas to the bench and also in reply in judgments. But it was Townes' way with words which almost brought a premature end to the life and humor of his mother — also a Texan lawyer.

Van Zandt and record-company boss Kevin Eggers decided to call their 1972 album 'The Late Great Townes Van Zandt'.

"He thought it was a great joke," Townes recalled. "I hadn't talked to my late mother at that point for about six months. I lived back then from one suitcase and one guitar case. If she didn't hear from me she would just think I was doing fine. She made a point of buying all my new albums — she wouldn't let me give them to her. She would get all dressed up and go to the store. When she went and bought that one it flipped her out. She thought I had died without telling her. She got phone calls from all over saying how sad they were to hear the news. I'm glad I finally called. If there was a joke it didn't work for her."

That album, produced by Cowboy Jack Clement who first recorded Townes after he was discovered by Mickey Newbury, cost \$55,000. It was a far cry from 'Live At The Old Quarter Houston, Texas', the first of Van Zandt's two live albums.

"It cost about \$160 to record that album," Townes revealed. "It was just me and a guitar. I knew it was being recorded because I was staying with a friend — we were carrying his Teac four-track down each night. It was done as well as any of the studio records."

The singer, whose first album 'For The Sake Of The Song' appeared in 1968 and has never been re-released, also has an unreleased album. "It's probably in a vault somewhere in Nashville," says Townes. "They ran into money problems. But I have re-recorded some of those songs."

"It wasn't just meeting my wife that made me quit drinking. All the craziness got to be too much. Now I've got all these responsibilities. I've got a son Will, seven, and I feel great now playing and singing. I had 20 years of guitar and sulziscing with no responsibilities."

► Townes Van Zandt performs at Madigans, 400 Sydney Road, Brunswick, on Saturday, 22 September and 5 pm on Sunday, 23 September.