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Townes Van Zandt is a musician's hero

TOWNES

helping me book some shows in small clubs and happened to be doing some of the same sort of work for Townes. She introduced me to some of his 1970s albums, and about one year later (1990) I found myself on a short European tour with Townes and Guy Clark and a few other solo acoustic-guitar types. Townes made quite an impression on me in spite of the fact that I was still in the neophyte stages of my introduction to Van Zandtism — still thinking that "Pancho and Lefty" was "probably his best song." Little did I (and do I) know.

The depth of material in the Townes Van Zandt catalog makes the Kentucky Wildcats bench look like the basketball equivalent of a wading pool.

The listener who digs right in to the Van Zandt oeuvre will find himself deciding on a new "favorite song" every three days or so. There is almost no limit to the number of masterpieces on these albums because nearly every song is fantastic, and because the songs reveal themselves so slowly. A line buried in the second verse of an unassuming song in the middle of an album will reverberate in a listener's memory until, maybe a month later, he or she will be staggered by some cataclysmic understanding.

"You're gonna drown tomorrow, if you cry too many tears for yesterday" is a pretty decent example, but the examples are many.

The striking wisdom of these lines seems to sit in their utter transparency. This is to say, the lines can mean almost anything, and, in each context they ring equally true. Here is one test of a great song (not merely a good one): It can stand up to a multitude of interpretations, arrangements, settings etc.

I will not soon forget my first meeting with Townes (nor my second). On the aforementioned tour, Townes and I rode together from town to town in a rented van driven by a Van Zandt road veteran named Luke who later became my harmonica player. I had little knowledge of Townes' history and habits, and so was quite taken aback when he wanted me to make a wager against him upon the occasion of our first stop on the highway. We had stopped for gasoline and Townes wanted me to stake 10 Dutch guilders on whether the pump would stop on an odd or even number. I am ashamed to admit that the paltry sum of 10 guilders (about \$6.50) was at that time, I decided, too much to risk on such frivolity. Townes reacted with the sort of gentle contempt which one associates with Buddhists



1973 photo

'Townes Van Zandt, the quintessential Texas drifter songwriter, is my hero principally because he stands for all of the most perfect poetry I can imagine, in addition to the fact that he can drink more than I can.'

and parole officers.

On that 1990 tour I discovered the joys of all that is hidden in the world of Mr. Van Zandt. The obscure songs, the sloppy covers, the failures that enshrine the successes. I heard "Lungs" and "Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold" and I began to develop a philosophy about self-sacrifice being the essence of art. Townes began to embody a character I had been trying to write about, a golem, a mythical clay creature brought to life by magic and prayer. In my story the golem himself was a sculptor whose work had to be fashioned from the substance of his own body. In other words, the golem would pull off one of his own arms and use the clay to make a little statue of an animal, or whatever. I abandoned the attempt to finish this story when I discovered Townes, because trying to write it seemed almost redundant. Townes and his gift would (and will) always be better than the character that I would have been able to create. The magic and prayers that made Townes a living, breathing artist are potent indeed.

The inner confidence and strength of

purpose needed to put together a body of work like Townes has is beyond the abilities of most of us mortals. Whatever is to be said about the disciplinary weakness of "artists," certainly it is just more victimization to deny praise and affection to one of those artists when they have truly created a masterpiece. Townes Van Zandt has written and sung many.

The second time I ran into Townes I was walking in downtown Austin, and I was surprised he even remembered me, as I had made an impression on our earlier tour only as a coward afraid to bet seven bucks. Townes had told my man Luke, the harp player, that he "only had one more album" in him, (the songs that turned into "No Deeper Blue") and that claim was very much on my mind, as I was nearly obsessed with his work at that time. I had about an hour to kill before my SXSW show, and I was trying to kill it when I heard a raw voice calling out my name. The voice seemed to be coming from across Sixth Street out of the throat of some guy who looked like Townes Van Zandt.

When I approached him and said hello, he grabbed my right arm and thrust my hand down into the crotch area of his blue jeans where I felt ... a pint of vodka! "OK," I thought, "the hero is showing cracks," but that was before I realized (some time later) that the cracks that appear in an otherwise flawless piece of marble are what distinguishes that particular piece.

People talk a lot these days about "heroes" and "role models," very often with little regard to what qualities actually inspire strength and goodness in those who are thought to be watching. Cultural figures, in this view, are supposed to be clean and white, and, above all, quiet. Townes Van Zandt reminds me of a Texan Lou Reed for a lot of reasons, but mainly because he doesn't seem to give a good damn what anyone thinks of him. He is not very clean and not very white. He is my hero, though, because his honesty to himself and to you and to me, has been paid in full at an awful price, a price that you or me could never afford. Like many great artists, Townes has, in effect, died for our sins. This is not meant to sound fawning, but only to acknowledge that in this crazy world we must take our heroes where we can find them.

Townes Van Zandt is a hero to me because he is still here, because his forthrightness hurts my shoulders, and because his lyrics make me cry.

Paul Kopasz, who leads the Kentucky-based Paul K and the Weathermen, knows a thing or two about writing sad songs himself.