

One Man's Music

The Life and Times of Texas Songwriter Vince Bell

by Vince Bell

Number 3 in the North Texas
Lives of Musicians Series

University of North Texas
Denton, Texas

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Foreword by Kathleen Hudson © 2009 University of North Texas Press

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The dead level best thing I ever did in music
was to find someone to share it with.
This book is dedicated to my wife, Sarah Wrightson

and to my father

This is one man's music and not a history of a time or people nor any other person's story. If there are errors or oversights they are unintentional.

My appreciation and gratitude goes to all the people who helped me bring this to print after a decade of writing, editing, and publishing two separate books, and especially to Karen DeVinney, Dr. Gretchen M. Bataille, and everyone at the University of North Texas Press who inspired me to write my story.

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And to Vince Pawless, because we both have many more stories to tell.

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“Young people ask me sometimes, ‘Well, Mr. Van Zandt, I would like to do what you do. How do I go about it?’ Well, you have to get a guitar or a piano. Guitars are easier to carry. And then you have to blow everything else off. You have to blow off your family. You have to blow off comfort. You have to blow off money. You have to blow off security. You have to blow off your ego. You have to blow off everything except your guitar. Sleep with it, learn how to tune it and no matter how hungry you get, stick with it. You’ll be amazed at the amount of people that turns away.”

—Townes Van Zandt

From an interview with Margit
Detweiler, 1996

ONE MAN'S MUSIC

One man's music plays
like one man's heart.
There is no giving in
right from the start.

Oh, my love,
one man's music
is my love.

One man's music sings
like one man's song.
Some lead beyond the van,
some string along.

One man's music stands
the weight of time.
Like diamonds in the rough
for one to find.

Foreword

Other music autobiographies give us the culture and history surrounding the artist, the circumstances of his or her life. Vince Bell does this; he also invites us to enter his personal realm of suffering and to attempt to heal along with him, compelling us to look deeply at our own relationship to pain and struggle.

But this is more than a story about a tragic car accident that left Vince in a coma for four weeks. A Foreword presents a few words *before* the body of the book, but it should also let us look *forward* to the book. Vince Bell's story is ultimately uplifting and inspiring, a story of pain, suffering and also hope woven into one rich tapestry that is, indeed, one man's music. We all have songs to sing and stories to tell; Vince Bell invites us into his head to hear his songs and his stories.

Vince Bell is often mentioned along with Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Stevie Ray Vaughan (who was playing with him on his last session before the wreck), Tom Waits, Randy Newman, Eric Clapton, Neil Young and Lucinda Williams, and his songs have been performed and recorded by Little Feat, Lyle Lovett, and Nanci Griffith, and others. And for good reason do these troubadours choose his words to sing. No one can tell this story quite like Vince. He describes scenes that we can see, feel, and smell, such as an icy blast of cold air in a room with Townes Van Zandt. Or the texture of a mouthful of beets that he can't taste because the tasting part of his brain has not yet healed.

Seeing the healing through his eyes and heart gives the reader a chance to understand a man motivated by a rare calling, the pull of

his art from death to life. As a student of literature for over 45 years, I see his story in a literary context; we can compare him to Kafka, Rimbaud, Van Zandt and Billy Joe Shaver, all men who had to tell their story as part of their choice to live.

We not only hear Vince's story, but we also read the stories of those around him through interviews. That choice takes us on a full circle around the event. What friends saw happening to him becomes as important as what he felt inside. Vince's essays on life through and around his guitar add another context to this book. Reading the book provides a well-rounded version of one man's life, reminding us that much can be gained from gathering other perspectives on how we live our own life.

Many would give up, when Vince just asked for more opportunities to fail in the hope that one day he would emerge victorious. Now time finds Vince visiting conferences and schools across the country, telling his story in an effort to encourage and educate. This book documents the journey, thus calling us to question our own journey through life. Are we still on the court playing ball as is Vince Bell? Do we value life enough to work this hard? Finishing this book will leave you with your own serious questions to answer. One just might be: "What would I have done?"

Sam Phillips wrote the foreword for my first book on Texas songwriters. That fact alone reminds me of the privilege I have in writing a foreword for Vince's story of his life, his music, his journey. Just as Sam let others know to look forward to my book, so I want you to look forward to all you'll learn in Vince's story.

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Sorcerer's Apprentice

I've played music since I was a B-flat cornet-packing kid. I've grown up in music, worked to distraction in music, married unsuccessfully in music, and I've been at it for several wifetimes. High musical seasons and adventurous women they were. But even before those delightfully shaped dreadnoughts tacked through my life and always in their wake, there had been only one guitar. It leaned up against a wall or a speaker box and cast ever-blooming, ever-changing melodies from an honored niche in all their houses.

My guitar and I began like a storm in the screened-in second story of a house in the Montrose, an older part of Houston. It was a lawless, hip world-within-the-world, an attitude as much as a place to live, and an anything-goes lifestyle with a soundtrack familiar to everyone in jeans under 30. The musical messages that spoke to us were broadcast from one of several radio stations downtown or on Lovett Boulevard. I was 19 years old when I moved lock, stock, and bicycle into a filthy, roach-infested little flat there. The rest of the city outside the loop dissolved into irrelevance.

The Montrose had seen many a fine day and by the '70s was conveniently overlooked, but it persevered in a discarded kind of way. It

was full of rundown two- and three-story brick, stucco, and shiplap houses where the long-haired but balding survivors of the '60s lived. Every kind of human perturbation was partially obscured by a verdant, elephant-eared undergrowth. There was a lot of new paint over a lot of rotten wood. Most of the lawns needed mowing. The roads ran parallel to one another like staves on a sheet of music. Dotted the staves like notes were huge live oak trees. They were stately, ruddy survivors, shading the streets and former avenues. Everything in sight was indelicately in the process of being rained to the ground, but our trendy civilization, powered by the music of the day, blossomed in the cast-aside old town setting.

After we took up residence in that shabby and inexpensive part of town, our lives were gratifying, penniless, illuminating, painful, boring, self-reliant, ill-advised, proud, haphazard, surprising, lucky, heartbreaking, flush, and arduous. We lived our lives off-center in a broken-down but vital part of urban Texas where we couldn't be found if we didn't want to be.

We had everything a young musician with a brand-new guitar could want. We even had our own newspapers and magazines. We lived to get our picture in one, or an article featuring our latest gig. We kept the corner music store in business with all the strings we broke. The local colleges were good for a coffeehouse date from time to time, and the washateria took all the quarters we earned in tips. Night by night we were sorcerers' apprentices. Our robes might have been a little long, but we were casting the first spells of our art in hamburger joints.

There were cool places for us to be seen with our instruments, usually bars, head shops, or late-night eateries among store-fronted fleets of the uncool. We never left a guitar in the car. Better to lose our wallet. That nonsense could be replaced. So we unconditionally hefted the six-string along and slid it below the edge of the table under our feet.

With an address in the Montrose a couple of floors above the street, the cheap Japanese guitar I learned my first chords on and I were at the center of the known universe. We had a backstage pass to a solar system that seemed to revolve around us. The mean age of everyone I would meet in a day was 22, and the gas was 19.9 cents a gallon. I can remember that walking to a different post office a few blocks over from my apartment at Fairview and Van Buren seemed like being in a movie with subtitles. So we never left the neighborhood more often than required.



Look of the Loner Looking at It

*I*n those days I was relentless in my pursuit of a resounding, large-bodied guitar like those I had seen that were known as dreadnoughts because of their shape. There were several capable brands, but the one for me was made by the C. F. Martin Company. I looked in all of the big cities within a day's drive: New Orleans, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio. Come full circle, I saw the one I would have given the world for at a music store in downtown Houston. It had a defiantly darkish top, unlike the other pallid, almost white spruce-tops I had seen in a year's worth of hunting. It cost as much as you could pay for a guitar of that style, and had come to the bayou town from another store as flood damage from a Corpus Christi hurricane. It simply had the look of the loner who was looking at it.

Hard to play because the strings were unusually high over the fret board, it was typically unforgiving. That feature made you strong. The feel of the instrument's neck was balky compared to other brands, and it was bigger than Texas in the low end. But it was a tempo machine: you could generate the rhythm of a saw or a drum. It would play music, too.

To play acoustic music in that uncomfortably warm, semitropical city you went to a little coffeehouse called Sand Mountain on Richmond Avenue, or to the Old Quarter in downtown. If you wanted to stand under the corny red light and play, you had to play at those places.

Most everyone I saw performed with this particular brand of guitar, shapely cousins of the dreadnought I so coveted. A 1968 Martin D-28 dreadnought acoustic guitar. The dark one that had the look of the loner.

The guitar you owned and played was a symbol of your vision. It bestowed a kind of identity among us musicians and writers. With your strings in hand, it was as if you belonged in that arty, dilapidated part of Texas. You strapped them proudly, imposingly, daringly on your hip like a large-caliber revolver. Just like a tousle-haired artist smelling of paint thinner with gracefully fluted brushes like an arrangement of flowers in his back pocket, or a writer with a busy lapel of ball-point pens and a thick, dog-eared journal in his satchel. You could rest assured, if you couldn't be recognized in a carping musical crowd for your tuneful genius, your guitar surely could.

From the very start, I didn't want to play other people's songs as much as I wanted to write them myself. The acoustic guitar was a necessity. It was like having an orchestra hung around your neck. Creating just the right notes where the lyric was the important part could so energize the message. Most of my performances over the next 30 years were with that same guitar. I stood behind it at most every gig since around the time the first NASA astronaut walked on the moon. It introduced me and my compositions up and down a crazy line on a road map starting in the shadow of that dank, tempestuous Texas city and at length winding from San Francisco, California, to Vienna, Austria.

There was some living between the two of us. Sometimes we were like conquering heroes, sometimes like a couple of friendless thieves stealing away in the night. It was a rewarding relationship, as close

as my skin, that I developed with a “piece of wood and steel,” as my friend Richard Dobson called it.

Early on, I knocked the wind clear out of the guitar like an accordion when I fell belly-down on it. I was being Elvis's little brother in front of an oval garage-sale mirror. The phone rang in my \$75-a-month apartment while I was practicing a nervous-kneed but windy stance. I cut my eyes across my shoulder in a back-and-forth staccato to my cloudy likeness. It was all in time with the cadences I played. While hurriedly climbing up a couple of stairs that led to the telephone in the hallway, I tripped with the guitar strapped around my neck. The sound was sickening as I fell flat on the instrument.

As I lay on the floor with the guitar underneath me, the phone stopped ringing. I carefully rolled over like a grieving lover, sat up, and squeezed my eyes shut for a split second. In shock when I opened them wide, I saw that the guitar's side and back had seven cracks. Seven cracks? Emergency lights and sirens whined in my head. I tuned the strings down in fast motion, set the guitar on a pillow, and searched out someone in the phonebook who could look at it. I was at Mr. Gestantes's violin shop at light speed and put the poor instrument lying broken as hell up on the counter. The old man eyed it up and down through a pair of tarnished, wire-rimmed bifocals.

Past the point of being unglued, I managed, “Well, is there anything you can do, sir? Is it as bad as it looks? I-I just can't believe this.”

Mr. Gestantes looked a little annoyed, and eyeing me over those thick glasses said, “Settle down, boy. You just re-sculpted it a little bit. Leave it with me. You can pick it up in the morning. Now go on,” as he began to lose interest. “I got work to do.”

In the end, he didn't even glue the cracks that ran for half a foot along the grain of the bottom. Dismissing me entirely when I came to pick it up, he said, “Doesn't need it. It'll be fine.”

He charged me a couple of bucks for my tirade as I laid the spruce top in the cardboard case as if it were the body of that lover. The guitar and I returned to the apartment in a light rain. I resumed rehearsing the stance and the tunes.

A few years later, the guitar and I lived rent-free in Houston, in a tent in my keyboard player Dan Earhart's yard, maybe 15 blocks from my long-ago upstairs apartment where the music began. We called it "the wildlife refuge." It was the right price and it had location, location, location. You could find me, a blue dog, a chaise lounge, and a typewriter in a green army tent there on several undeveloped acres. There were abandoned culverts around the property and large live oak shade trees throughout. And like the rest of that part of town, no one ever mowed the lawn.

Because of the phalanxes of blood-crazed mosquitoes I slathered down with DEET. At night the flashlight attracted them by the zillions. The only thing between me and a drone of uncountable insects was the glowing, thin skin of that surplus-store tent.

The backyard abutted the unfenced, overgrown space. Sometimes it rained so hard and got so deep so fast that Dan would take pity on us and let the dog and me come indoors to dry out some. When the rain came down the hardest, he would always have an espresso pot of Bustello just beginning to boil and a tray of some beat Mexican pot. Coffee and marijuana: drug maintenance and the first two things you needed to start a rock 'n' roll band, even ahead of a new set of strings.

The monsoon lasted most all year, so the guitar was always in his front room way before us. Life was funky in flippers.

The wheels kept turning while my fingertips drummed out movements of another three-minute wonder on a long, green Samsonite-looking counter-top covered with salt and pepper shakers. There

were breakfasts in varying states of completion and paper-napkin dispensers. I was balancing on a barstool in a Houston diner. It was late, and I was hauling that 28 I had played to maybe six people. All night. And I think all six were now here in the diner.

Another cup of coffee, a quarter for the service, and I paced around the local warp in space/time poking at numbers and letters on the jukebox. I wrapped the gray wool muffler around my neck again. It was cold in the Calcutta of the western hemisphere.

The cook was gay, worked the late-night shift, and pierced people's ears on the side. Eric Taylor dared me, so I gave "Cookie" 15 bucks and he popped me in the left ear with a little machine that looked like a pop gun without the stock. So much for my chili size. I began to warp like cardboard. The neon-lit room became a director's cut of *Twilight Zone* with the short-order cook, the waitress, six kooky-looking types, Eric, and me in it.

I punch-drunkenly stumbled into the night slung to that guitar like it was a shield, the spanking stud of gold burning in my left lobe. From the driver's seat of my vomit-green Rambler American I tossed the chili-size doggy bag in a dumpster. The next day nobody noticed my earring.

Left Wichita Falls after a gig at a little club run by Jim Richey that was the former restaurant to a quiet '50s motel owned by a family of Pakistanis. It was called the Flamingo. We musicians called it the Flaming O. Most of us played it every couple of months. Didn't much have to bother writing this one down in the date book. It was on the itinerary for a flock of Austin-to-Dallas acts for a while. Like today, some great opportunities to hear Texas music were sometimes up in Tornado Alley along the Oklahoma border.

I left the next morning late after a night that had lasted till damn well dawn. I was in a hurry to do something 250 miles away. There were

cops all along this route, and I was severely compromised from the vat of beer I had wallowed in the night before. In other words, I was rather crispy around the edges and probably more worried about dying than getting pulled over. I'd gone almost 40 miles and it was already blinding and hot as blazes on that two-lane back to Fort Worth.

I hunched down over the steering wheel in "The Rock 'n' Roll Hotel," my white Chevy utility van. The windows were down, the vent was open full blast, and my hair was blowing under the pith helmet I wore. Out from under a pair of sunglasses, I sweated in a 60-mile-an-hour wind until I looked in the rearview mirror into the flatbed behind my seat. There was a pile of guitar stands, the tire iron, a can of 30-weight rolling around, mic cords, a clothes bag, and a spare tire. But wait just one minute, that guitar in its case was not infuckingcredibly there.

I had done some pretty out-there things in the past, and apparently I wasn't through yet. But this one stung all the way back to the joint in that stifling, overpowering heat. Forty retraced miles later there was the damned guitar waiting for me, right where I had left it, behind the stage at the Flaming O. I drove at light speed all the way back to where I was when the light had come on. Then I could kick one foot up on the dash and settle back into being in a hurry about something I couldn't recall.

That six-string and I outlived the most opulent clubs, the most hole-in-the-wall dives, and generations of listeners in the message-hungry towns of the world. Beginning in 1971, we played our musical style to an ever-deepening cadre of people. We often arrived and left alone. Hot, humid, lovelorn, hungover? Roll down the window. The privilege of surviving yesterdays too many to count is to see that both that great, big-sounding guitar and I are still talking to each other.



Sweat Like a Boxer

The Old Quarter was a rundown, two-story stucco-over-brick blockhouse of a building with iron bars across broken, cloudy windows. If you played in Houston, this was the gig everyone wanted. The entrance was ten-foot-high barn doors that could not be locked without a chain and a stout two-by-four. They hung below a rusting, wrought-iron signboard swinging in the sticky humidity from the Gulf of Mexico.

The joint on the forgotten corner of Austin and Congress streets looked like an abandoned building. It was within earshot of the nightly howling that issued from behind the bars of the Harris County Jail for Women. Across a block of broken cement making a patchwork wasteland of parking lots was what you would certainly call several floors of America's most pissed-off gentlewomen.

Dale Sofar, one of the owners of the Old Quarter, drove a Jeep to the club every night with a pooch named Pup next to him and a keg of beer in the back. With a water bowl behind the bar, the little dog confidently roamed the block around the club like a policeman taking names. Inside, the dog would promenade on top of the bar before falling asleep in the middle of our sets. Ownership of this four-footed

lady-killer seemed a touch murky between Dale and the other owner, Wrecks Bell. Wrecks lived upstairs in a room with nothing but a mattress on the floor, a bass guitar without a case in the corner, Lightnin' Hopkins records everywhere, and a water bowl for Pup.

Like the dog, I was there every evening, gig or no, hauling spent kegs or stacking boxes of empty beer bottles for Joy Llewellan and Jan Holly, the young ladies who bartended. When they didn't have busywork I'd still be there, playing pool for money on a quarter table. More often than not, I made more money shaking down the perma-pressed tourists who unwisely challenged me to a game of nine-ball than I did downstairs playing for the cover charge.

But play I would. Most any night of the week. The problem back then was that not many wanted to hazard into the old part of town to watch a kid learn how perform his own songs, regardless of how hip and cool it was.

One night I teed it up for a skeleton crew of an audience, maybe eight people. In the front row there were a couple of collegiate-looking types. A blonde girl, but not too blonde, and a tall guy, but not too tall, sat there squeaky clean. They were so suburban they glowed.

In front of them on a pedal-sewing-machine frame converted into a bar table sat a large birthday cake with lots of green icing. As I completed the first low-key, downtown, 45-minute set of the night, the couple giggled and complimented me on the wonderful music.

The disarming young girl said, "It's Buster's birthday. You've made it so nice with your music, we want you to have a piece of his birthday cake."

So I said, "Sure. And thanks."

She replied, "Have a lot of the green icing. I made it myself."

Ten minutes later I heard a buzzing in my ear. After a short while, I realized it wasn't going away anytime soon. I looked around the bar, and our youthful couple had made the rounds of the place, giving

large pieces of that cake to everyone who was interested, including one of the owners.

When I belatedly began the next set, I felt like I was in an elevator going up. I looked down in front and the young couple, back in place with a large empty cake pan, could have been posing for a horror movie. I looked at them as squarely as I could under the circumstances and said, “You didn’t, did you?”

They nodded up and down slowly, as if in a trance. They were demoniacally smiling but their faces weren’t moving. They had put LSD in the green icing. After the shock wore off that the entire bar had been stoned by a couple of kids from West Houston, the rest of that night the jukebox played the tunes and the beer was free from a bartender seemingly without a care in the world. I didn’t make much in tips, but I guess I didn’t work that hard, either. I sure smiled a lot before I came down the next day.

Thirty years later I pulled up in a windy parking lot just off the Strand in Galveston, Texas. After leashing the dog to my arm, I walked into . . . the Old Quarter, with Wrecks Bell behind the bar. No pool table here, but, just like the original club back in Houston, the dartboard on the wall above an old sofa, made of some faded and fraying petroleum product, was as familiar as a recurring dream.

After a thousand roadhouse nights in a dozen countries on two continents, I asked somewhat self-consciously, “Can I bring my dog in here?” Wrecks rolled his eyes, “This is the *Old Quarter*, man,” as he popped the top off a cold Texas beer and handed me the water bowl for the dog.

My border collie fell asleep on the floor that night just like Pup had on the bar. I played the hours away to familiar attention from a roomful of people who had probably seen me first at the old Old Quarter.

I shut my eyes ever tighter while singing some of the same old songs, on the same old guitar, that I had performed there decades ago.

Perhaps it's true, I thought in the middle of one of them, that some of the dearest things really do not change.

Many of us Houston kids of the '70s grew up at the Old Quarter while learning to pinch the poetry just so, loving and hating, fighting and embracing, and every one of us sweating the shirts to our backs. I used to hate to play the opening sets because the sun wouldn't even be down at that time. You sweat like a boxer by the end of one set of songs.



Sinbad and the Silver Tooth

*I*t was Friday night and the witching hour was at hand. Townes Van Zandt was going to play at the Old Quarter. I put on my singer's uniform of anything-other-than-cowboy boots, tight-fitting jeans, and a working-class white shirt under a sports coat of some righteous non-color. And, of course, I packed along my bronze-string "cannon" 28 like an outsized ID card.

Townes was originally from Houston, and I had known him from other clubs. He was now living in Nashville, which made him extra famous at home, and everyone was buzzing about his return for this gig. The last time he teed it up at the OQ, he had recorded a double-set album of his immortals that turned up in everyone's record collection sooner or later. All my songwriter friends would be there. Now that I was sufficiently suited up, I was going to be there, too. I admired this man for displaying character in his simple but elevating work. I intended to embody the same in mine.

The Old Quarter was packed. I arrived just as Dale, the tall, slender, and tanned fellow who resembled a good-looking Groucho Marx, was making the introduction from a booking calendar in his hand. He was calm as he spoke and he smiled a lot. The large crowd

was settled more and more by his every comment and gesture. He was like the host of a variety show. No one could work a crowd better, including most of us who played his club. By the time the background music stopped, you could hear a pin drop.

At the same time, Townes climbed somewhat unsteadily down a flight of stairs from the upstairs back room. He sat off to the side of the barroom absorbing yet another brew to chase the whiskey in his other hand. His broad smile exposed a silver tooth that made him look reachable, like he knew something you very well might want to know. But his eyes stayed at half-mast and unimpressed, like he was sure not going to tell. Alcohol does funny things to people. He was the loudest thing in the room during his long introduction as he boisterously chuckled with the woman tending bar. The guitar hung loosely from his shoulder like a rifle. It swung around precariously as he swilled another shot straight from the black-labeled bottle and tipsily poured one for the bartender.

“Good to see your smiling faces, people. That’s the schedule for who’s going to play here in the next month,” presided Dale. “Now help me out and put your hands together for a great friend of mine and the only songwriter we could find on such short notice.”

The place erupted in an accolade. Just as quickly as it heated up, however, it settled down. We were all intent on every word for the better part of the introduction to the first song. But something was amiss deluxe. The first piece was a familiar song the crowd had been listening to for their musical lifetimes. They probably all owned the record that it appeared on. It was easy to suppose they could have sung it themselves. Some tried to that night, as if to help Townes to the recollection. He began that number, but before he finished a couplet of the verse, he stopped. Then he laughed and tried to regain momentum. Starting it all up again, jerkily stopping, and just as jerkily starting and stopping again.

“No really, lemme start over. Aw, lemme try another one.” To no avail. And when Townes realized that he just could not pull it off, he sat up straighter and tried to tell a joke that he could not remember the punch line to. He probably attempted the same tune ten times before he went grouching about for another. The black-labeled bottle was in charge now.

People didn't take long before they were making for the door. This wasn't the first time this local legend had pulled a swan dive. The poor fellow miscued almost all the chords and almost all the words. It didn't seem he could make that many miscues in between the passages he simply forgot. There was practically a rush to get out of the place.

Townes had dumbfounded himself by now. And you could no longer see the offhand, jocular glint of the silver tooth. It just wasn't funny anymore. For three sets that night he unsuccessfully attempted to finish a single song. Toward the end of the second set I couldn't watch anymore and went upstairs and won money on the quarter pool table. Probably got a little drunk myself.

I was flipped. I wouldn't leave, but I was flipped. All us young songwriters looked up to Townes. He had always shown us how far the creatively simple could go, that songs could be as revealing as a good piece of literature. His were songs for the songwriters. And this was what we all worked our fannies off for, the right to tell the story ingeniously, clearly, and in our own words. I wanted to feel sorry for him, but I was hard in an ignorant kind of way like someone who had no idea of his trials. I just knew he wasn't doing what I wanted him to do. But I knew the rules, too, and lived by them myself. This was an uncomfortable lesson in what not to do.

After a while, I tired of taking friends' money. The show was over. The room downstairs was now empty and dark. Where there had been loyal legions of diehard fans, now there was only a cold, unfulfilled vacancy. After climbing down those uneven stairs, I sat down

next to the still drunk but obviously dejected singer as people cleaned up the bar for tomorrow night's show.

I offered, "Tough one tonight, eh, amigo?"

He thickly intoned under his breath, "No one to blame but me. But shit [hiccup], I don't care. I've played this place a thousand times drunker than that [hiccup]. Listen, if you gimme a ride to this fancy downtown high-rise I'm staying at, I got some alcohol there. I'll get you drunk if you gimme a ride."

I couldn't see how I could turn him down. Hell, I wouldn't. I'd been brought up with the rumors about this colorful fellow. I guess I just wanted to be part of a rumor myself. It made me feel a little taller somehow to consider it. Be careful what you wish for.

Back then the opening act (that's me) was a lower life-form to the headliner (that was him). He was the famous writer, and I was just one of the new kids with a lot of ink in my pen who had modeled a few of my own early compositions after his. Before he moved to that country-and-western town, he once taught me how to play an A-minor chord in the back room of Sand Mountain Coffeehouse. I always loved the sound of an Am chord after that. Townes was a gracious fellow to have bothered with a hardheaded youngster like me. The difference between us was that he performed for packed houses, while I once defiantly nailed the quarter I made in the tip jar to the wall behind the stage.

So there we were finishing the last beers of the evening together. We toasted on the last drop and packed our guitars for the door. It was like I belonged, and I was thrilled to lead him right out the door into that windy, freezing midnight.

A frigid gale blasted me in the face. My station wagon was just a few steps away. As I keyed the tailgate door Townes broke off down the sidewalk into the cutting wind. "Whoa, wait a minute pal, my car's over here." He put his guitar down and stumbled farther over to a narrow

alley between the brick buildings. He began talking to no one I could discern as he struggled to reach for something between the buildings.

I could hear Townes entreating, "C'mon now. Don't be difficult. It's cat-killing cold out here tonight."

As I approached, he blurted, "Help me get ol' Sinbad out of here. It's too cold." I was stunned but obliged. Townes pulled a wino by the collar out from between the buildings.

"Listen, if you help me get Sinbad to the downtown high-rise I'll get you drunk." I couldn't think anymore. I was truly puzzled. The bizarre evening and now this.

"What the hell, get him in the backseat," I said, as I put both guitars in the rear of the wagon and closed it up. I was willing to pay any price to hang out with this songwriter. He crammed the oblivious fellow into the backseat and hurried into the front himself. I flew behind the wheel and turned the big V-8 over while turning the heater blower to high.

Then, while we made the block and headed uptown, the biggest surprise so far. "Damn, it smells. What the hell is that?"

The pitiful looking, frozen old alcoholic in a filthy metallic-green business suit had been defecating on himself for days in that alley. "Roll the windows down quick," I commanded. We virtually flew down the street going as fast as we could to outrun the awful smell from the backseat. The wind at 35 miles an hour froze us to the bone. At every corner there was a stoplight. And at every stoplight we held our breath. We could only hope the light would change before we ran out of breath.

We arrived at the swank high-rise parking lot. Townes drunkenly grabbed the old man and made for an elevator that would take them both to the sixth floor. I pulled into a space for my car and, though it was freezing cold, I rolled all the windows down to air the place out.

I then took the same elevator up with both of our guitars. The olfactory record of their passage was everywhere. I tried to avoid the overpowering stares of everyone who shared the ride with me.

Ding-ding, sixth floor. I exited like a shot and exhaled when I reached the end of the hall. I knocked on the apartment door. And distantly from inside, “C’mon in, make yourself at home.”

“Right,” my ass. I threw the instruments and my coat on a crushed velvet couch with claw feet and gold fringe a foot long.

My fingers began to get feeling back in them once more. I was going to find that hooch and thaw out the rest of me now. All I could see was a bottle of vodka and a half empty can of Dr. Pepper on top of the white French bureau in the resplendent apartment. The drawer handles were ornate brass affairs so large you could open a beer bottle with them.

Townes was behind the partly opened bathroom door on one knee. Steam billowed from the door. He had the dumbfounded old man in the Jacuzzi tub. His rancid clothes were already in a grocery bag on the floor. I crumpled the top closed for good measure.

“So, is this all you got? Vodka and Dr. Pepper?”

Then from the bathroom, “Hey man, do you see that sliding glass door to the patio?” I looked out the glass at the festooned buildings of downtown in the blisteringly cold winter wind.

“Yeah, I’m at the door now.” I wasn’t confused anymore, but I was still tipsy from the beer I had soaked up playing nine-ball. Would that I could have summoned some sober judgment about now.

“Well, go out on the patio and bring me one of those folding chairs around the glass table. Do you see it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I see it. Just a minute.” I opened the sliding door just wide enough to slip sideways out onto the arctic patio. I began to put one of the festive, summery-looking chairs under my arm when *SLAM!* goes the glass door behind me. And there was Townes weaving back and forth, locking the mechanism with a mischievous smile. I was truly fucked.

“Wait a minute, man,” my eyes widened in fear. “It’s FREEZING out here,” I pleaded as he weaved back to the bathroom to the naked,

dripping old-timer standing in the tub. My entreaties were to no avail. And there I stood with no cover, six floors up the side of a building at night in a subzero wind chill. I folded out the chair and sat down, resigned to my fate.

Meanwhile, Townes threw a sumptuous-looking towel around the poor old devil, which made things a little better to look at, at least for him. Then, like a hospital nurse, he helped the almost incapacitated man out of the tub, across the bedroom, and slid him between the shimmering silk sheets on the king-size bed. The man's eyes were bulging out from under the bedding like a cartoon character's. His head rested on a monogrammed pillow bigger than he was. He was bright-eyed now and talking some unintelligible wino gibberish at a hundred miles an hour.

Muffled behind the glass but smiling from behind that silver tooth again, Townes consoled, "Now, now. Take it easy. You're gonna bust a gut. Do you see that obnoxious kid out there? On the patio. Yeah, that frosty one. Do you think he's learned his lesson yet? Do you think we should let him in?" The wide-eyed bum was speechless but staring right at me.

I thought, Thanks a lot, old man.

I turned back to the beautiful but demoralizing glacial cityscape. A moment later Townes came around to the sliding door and flipped the lock open. And I was out of that chair and back indoors. As I shivered and shook on the end of the bed, the wino lay transfixed, staring at the chandelier on the bordered ceiling. Townes sauntered over to the chest of drawers, drying his hands on the towel, then screwed open the bottle of vodka over a couple of plastic coffee cups.

"How 'bout a drink, amigo?" one eyebrow higher than the other.

Shaking my head, I did believe I was thirsty. "Make it a double, no ice, and go easy on the Dr. Pepper, thanks."