

A Deeper Blue

The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt

by Robert Earl Hardy

Number 1 in the North Texas
Lives of Musicians Series

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Cover photo courtesy of Roy Tee

To my favorite Texan, my mother
Frances Mahala Hardy
(1924–2006)

And, with abiding love, to my wife
Marsha

And in fond memory of
Jim Calvin
Roxy Gordon
Johnny Guess
Mickey Newbury
Dale Soffar
Peggy Underwood
and
Townes Van Zandt

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Acknowledgments

IN 1999, I RETURNED TO Texas for the first time in twenty-five years. My mother was celebrating her seventy-fifth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of leaving her Galveston home and moving east. I was as happy as she was to see Galveston again, where I had spent many hours as a child, collecting shells on the beach, watching the shrimp boats come in, studying old maps and reading old books, and absorbing the quiet charm of my grandmother's bungalow on Avenue S, with the shades drawn against the heat of the day. Galveston, Texas, is the true source of nourishment from which this book springs.

The second or third evening of our return visit to Galveston, while my mother stayed behind at the Galvez, I took my wife, Marsha, out to see the town. We wandered toward the Strand and stumbled into a little place called the Old Quarter Acoustic Café, where it was open-mic night. Along with three or four other patrons, we sat through a couple of average folk singers, then Rex Bell, the proprietor, sat down and played a few songs, including his own "Whiskey Maybe," Blaze Foley's "Oval Room," and Townes Van Zandt's "I'll Be Here in the Morning." As he played a few more Van Zandt songs, I remembered listening in wonderment to "Pancho and Lefty" on my local underground radio station's early-seventies all-night broadcasts, and I recalled that I still had an old vinyl copy of *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*. I was intrigued. We sat at the bar and talked with Rex until closing time, listening to stories about his days playing bass with Lightnin' Hopkins and about his exploits with—and his love and respect for—Townes Van Zandt. At some point, somebody mentioned that Townes' story would make a great book. That evening with Rex Bell was the Shiner Bock-fuelled occasion during which the seed for this book was planted.

Over the years since, many individuals have generously and enthusiastically given their time and energies to help the book grow. I especially acknowledge and thank my wife, Marsha, for providing me with the strongest, most unflagging support imaginable. The many hours we spent poring over tapes and transcripts together, talking with friends and colleagues, and discussing the details and patterns of Townes' life and music, plus the hours she spent transcribing interviews, reading the manuscript, offering suggestions, helping compile sources and obtain permissions, and generally staying deeply involved—were hours essential to this book's existence.

Also in the engine room were Anne Bailey, who provided thoughtful research on a number of difficult topics; Ruth Sanders, who was kind enough to share with me the fruits of her unpublished research, including her personal interviews with one of the principals; and Lisa Uhlman, who transcribed interviews and provided research assistance—I thank them all. I also acknowledge with thanks the support of Nick Evans and Jeff Horne of Heartland Publishing in England, the authors and publishers of *Songbuilder: The Life and Music of Guy Clark*, who offered sincere advice and encouragement and shared valuable contacts. Also sincere and heartfelt in the support that they consistently showed for this project are Doug and Susan Darrow of Houston, Texas. In our travels through Texas, Marsha and I enjoyed the hospitality of many friends, old and new, including Bianca DeLeon, who welcomed us into her home, showed us around Austin, and offered friendship and encouragement. In our travels through Tennessee and vicinity, again, many friends helped us on our way, particularly our dear Kentucky friends, Jimmy Gingles and Joan Morgan. Through Jimmy Gingles, we also got to know and love Jimmy McKinney, a great spirit to whose memory I offer a fond toast.

A number of individuals provided audio and video recordings of live performances (as documented in Audio and Video Sources), and I thank them all, especially Len Coop (whose Blue Sky Home Page Web site is the most comprehensive online source of information on Townes), and also Aleksandar Lazarevic, Marilyn Kay, Jess Codd, and Rodney Hamon. Also, Patrick

Hurley has been a loyal correspondent and a valuable source of information and encouragement.

Songwriters have a special kind of affinity for Townes Van Zandt, and songwriters were often able to offer special insight to this inquiry. Foremost among them, closest to my heart, were Guy Clark, Susanna Clark, and Mickey Newbury. Their contributions to this book mean the world to me, and I thank them profoundly. David Olney and Eric Taylor—two of many contemporary songwriters influenced by Townes—were also invaluable sources of insight. In one memorable episode in researching this book, Taylor phoned one night and challenged me to a round of over-the-phone arm wrestling, explaining that he and Townes had engaged in this activity more than once. In addition, for her encouragement as well as her work in the field, I thank Kathleen Hudson of Schreiner University in Kerrville, Texas, founder and director of the Texas Heritage Music Foundation and author of *Telling Stories, Writing Songs: An Album of Texas Songwriters*. I also offer acknowledgment and thanks to the many contemporary journalists, writers, and photographers who took Townes as their subject during his lifetime and whose work informed my work.

Finally, I want to give special acknowledgment to the people who spent significant parts of their lives with Townes Van Zandt and—believing it was important that his story be told fully and truthfully—willingly, tenderly, and forthrightly shared their memories for the sake of posterity: Rex Bell, Vince Bell, Jim Calvin, Royann Calvin, John Carrick, Guy Clark, Susanna Clark, Jack Clement, Bianca DeLeon, Richard Dobson, Steve Earle, Joe Ely, Rex Foster, Marshall Froker, Jimmy Gingles, Joe Gracey, Jimmie Gray, Frank “Chito” Greer, Darryl Harris, Grace Jameson, Crow Johnson, Cindy Van Zandt Lindgram, Fran Lohr, John Lomax III, Bob Moore, Lyse Moore, Todd Musburger, Bob Myrick, Mickey Newbury, David Olney, Danny “Ruester” Rowland, Luke Sharpe, Dale Soffar, Donna Spence, Bob Sturtevant, Eric Taylor, Michael Timmins, Peggy Underwood, Bill Van Zandt, Jeanene Van Zandt, Will Van Zandt, Mickey White, Jeanette “Jet” Whitt, Earl Willis, Nick Wilson, Claudia Winterer, and all those whose off-the-record contributions informed this work.



Introduction

High, Low, and In Between

TOWNES VAN ZANDT WAS A songwriter and a traveling minstrel—a folk singer, no less—in an era when practicing these crafts had long since become anachronistic, evocative of a long-gone era in American life—of Jimmie Rodgers riding the rails of the great American West; Woody Guthrie tramping the highways from dustbowl Oklahoma to the migrant camps of California; Robert Johnson playing guitar with the devil at a Mississippi Delta crossroads; Hank Williams driving from roadhouse to roadhouse across the South, drinking and singing with the Drifting Cowboys—an archaic art form, a mythic mode of living. But like these other American originals, Townes Van Zandt was fully invested in his craft, and his craft was inextricable from his life, and this investment and integration gave rise to great art, which is timeless.

As an artist, Van Zandt made no compromises; he lived out his destiny on the road, practicing his craft until he simply couldn't

anymore—the embodiment of the troubled troubadour. He was certainly a troubled man.

Townes Van Zandt was troubled throughout his life by alcoholism and manic-depressive illness, and he was constantly battling the demons associated with these conditions. He made attempts to settle down into family life, but it was always a struggle. He made attempts to pursue commercial success with his music, but mostly those attempts came up short. He had a spiritual bent that always trumped his material concerns—and, for better or worse, those of his family. He said he lived for the “hum of the wheels,” and in hope of hitting “that one note” that would connect with “just one person,” and save that person’s life. He was deeply serious about this goal—which he believed without question was his life’s calling—to the extent that he “blew off everything” to pursue it, refusing to compromise. In an interview published October 17, 2002, in the *Houston Press*, his oldest son, J.T., succinctly summed up his view of the price they both paid for his father’s single-minded pursuit of that goal: “As a father he had a lot of unforgivable shortcomings that can’t be excused by his music.”

The lack of compromise that made family life impossible for Van Zandt made his music possible. For thirty years, he wrote beautiful, deeply inspired, brilliantly integrated lyrical and musical evocations of his inner life. He gave sometimes magical performances in his engaging, insouciant Texas folk-blues style for what must always be described as a cult audience, even though a couple of his songs reached the commercial heights. “If I Needed You” was a number three record for Emmylou Harris and Don Williams in 1981 and “Pancho and Lefty” was number one on the country charts for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard in 1983. But Townes never got the break that would take his career to the next level. In fact, he seemed to confound commercial success with a determination second only to his determination to make his music honest, meaningful, and lasting, like the music of his

hero, Hank Williams, and his mentor, the Texas bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. At that, it can be argued, Townes succeeded.

When he left this world at age fifty-two on New Year's Day 1997—forty-four years to the day after Hank Williams' death—Townes Van Zandt left behind a solid and lasting body of work, as original and as deeply personal—yet as naturally a part of a great tradition and as all-encompassing and universal—as any created in twentieth-century American music, embodied in beautifully realized songs like “To Live's to Fly,” “For the Sake of the Song,” “Don't You Take It Too Bad,” “Rex's Blues,” “Lungs,” “Nothin',” “Flyin' Shoes,” “Highway Kind,” “Snowin' on Raton,” “Marie,” and of course “Pancho and Lefty” and “If I Needed You,” among many others.

In the years since his death, Van Zandt has been repeatedly cited as a major songwriting influence and had his songs covered by a diverse host of respected artists, including Norah Jones, Alison Krauss, Lucinda Williams, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earle, Gillian Welch, John Prine, Nanci Griffith, Cowboy Junkies, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, and Guy Clark, among many others. Steve Earle is famously and repeatedly quoted as saying “Townes Van Zandt is the best damn songwriter in the world, and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that.”

So, one might ask, how is it that the “best damn songwriter in the world” was, like Van Gogh, so unheralded in his own lifetime? In fact, Van Zandt himself was a major contributor to—if not the architect of—his own lack of commercial success. “Why is Townes' career in such a sorry state?” wrote his manager at the time, John Lomax; then he answered himself: “Inept, haphazard management, record company ignorance, and [Townes'] own eccentric conduct.”¹ By all accounts, that pithy assessment is accurate. At the height of Townes' recording run, he titled his sixth album *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, a dark spoof on the lifeless state of his livelihood that caused many to assume that he was, in fact, dead. In a sense, it was frustrating for him

as an artist to know that his work was worthy but was so widely unrecognized. But in another sense, for the initiated, his obscurity—the magical “cult” status—clearly carried the connotation that his work was the kind of high quality, demanding work that might *never* make an impact with the masses. It was an elite obscurity, based on a demanding level of artistic quality that itself precluded commercial success.

But while he had nearly insurmountable obstacles to overcome from a commercial standpoint, from the beginning Townes Van Zandt had a clear vision of his artistic territory, a strong grasp of his tools, and no fear of confronting an ever-present metaphysical darkness. As one writer of the time said, “Townes carries the terror and the sorrow of a sensitive man who has looked into the abyss and seen ... the abyss.”² This was Van Zandt’s territory, which he explored with a highly articulate poetic and philosophic vision, although it was territory into which a mass audience was simply unwilling to venture. Its sources lay clearly in traditional American blues, country, and folk music—with influences as diverse as Shakespeare and Robert Frost—but the depth of Van Zandt’s vision was unique. And his vision never faltered, it only deepened. In a way, he didn’t have a chance during his lifetime; the public sponge couldn’t possibly absorb the tears his songs shed. Ten years after his death, it’s starting to sink in. Like Hank Williams, Townes Van Zandt’s monument stands firm: a serious body of work by a great American artist.

Besides the work and a compelling story, Townes Van Zandt left behind an enigmatic memory, permeated with the enduring sense of mystery that Americans require of their icons. But Townes Van Zandt can’t be understood simply as the mysterious troubled troubadour of American folk mythology, no matter how much he might have played into the myth and no matter how much others might have tried to cast him in that role. Townes Van Zandt was a complex man. It seems worth asking: Isn’t there something we can discover about him *as a man* that will help us understand his work?

This is the kind of question to which biographers naturally turn their craft. This book has taken shape as an attempt to tell the story of Townes' life—beginning, middle, and end—to shed some light on his creative process and his work, and to set his life and work in context and in perspective.

More than forty of Townes' family members, friends, colleagues, and contemporaries agreed to be interviewed for this book. Most participated with great interest and enthusiasm, often inviting me into their homes, showing me around town, engaging me in multifarious conversations, enduring meticulous follow-up calls, and introducing me to new sources and new friends. A few principals had reservations. I spent a day visiting and talking with Townes' third ex-wife, Jeanene, at her home in Smyrna, Tennessee, and she was gracious and forthcoming but insisted on a level of control over my manuscript to which I could not agree. However, I was fortunate to be able to accept an offer from Ms. Ruth Sanders to share personal interviews with Jeanene and Will Van Zandt that she conducted for an unpublished project, so their parts in the story are told from those primary sources in addition to secondary sources. Kevin Eggers, of Poppy Records and Tomato Records, agreed to speak only off the record, so his role in the story is delineated through secondary sources. Only one central figure declined outright to participate: Townes' friend and road manager Harold Eggers. His part in the story is also told through secondary sources.

One of his friends described Townes as a "whirlwind that passed through people's lives."³ A decade after his death, the dust from that whirlwind is only just beginning to settle. This book draws on the voices of the people who were closest to the center of the whirlwind that was Townes Van Zandt. My task has been to gather together the threads of these many individual voices, each with their unique variations and colorings, and weave them into a whole cloth.

A biography is necessarily filled with speculation, too, informed by and woven into the texture of fact and supporting

detail that holds the structure firm. This biography weaves the softer threads of informed speculation—abounding in mystery—in with the durable threads of memory and documented fact. Upon backing up and applying the perspective of time and distance, we begin to see how these diverse threads tighten into the warp and weft of a complex man's life.

So, here is the story of Townes Van Zandt, a man, “born to grow and grown to die.”