

Atkinson: I'll Be Here in the Morning

# I'll Be Here in the Morning:

The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt

Brian T. Atkinson



Townes Van Zandt never was a good fit for this earthly world.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Fort Worth native, a cult figure at best outside the Austin and Nashville music communities during his lifetime, knew his time here would be short. “I don’t envision a very long life for myself,” a youthful Van Zandt says early in Margaret Brown’s 2005 documentary *Be Here To Love Me*. “Like, I think my life will run out before my work does, you know? I’ve designed it that way.” He lived fast and wrote faster, even as his blueprint devolved into alcoholism and drug addiction.<sup>2</sup> Like his childhood hero, Hank Williams, Van Zandt died on New Year’s Day. He rests in Fort Worth’s Dido Cemetery.

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Van Zandt baited his demons for 52 years, a journey further darkened by severe manic depression and electroshock therapy, before dying at his Tennessee home in 1997.<sup>3</sup> Along the way, he became one of the modern era’s most elegant lyricists. Consider the opening lines of “Quicksilver Daydreams of Maria”: “Well, the diamond fades quickly when matched to the face of Maria/All the harps they sound empty when she lifts her lips to the sky.” Every word frames the woman’s beauty.

Van Zandt believed his craft demanded high sacrifice. “You have to blow off your family,” he said. “You have to blow off comfort. You have to blow off money. You have to blow off your ego. You have to blow off everything except your guitar.”<sup>4</sup> Many music critics agree that at least two dozen of his songs—including “If I Needed You,” “Marie,” “Snowin’ on Raton,” “Rex’s Blues,” “For the Sake of the Song,” and “A Song For”—justified his claim. Others cite high-water marks, such as “Pancho and Lefty,” “Flyin’ Shoes,” “To Live’s To Fly,” “Tecumseh Valley,” and “Lungs,” as unparalleled lyrical masterworks. Remarkably, he composed his most timeless lyrics before age 30.<sup>5</sup>

Van Zandt’s disciples have labeled him a poet and prophet for four decades, but the songwriter’s own reckless and reclusive behavior stifled widespread notoriety.<sup>6</sup> Living in shacks without indoor plumbing and performing fall-down (or fall-asleep-onstage) drunk concerts at Austin’s Cactus Café and elsewhere fueled his myth as a brilliant but tragic figure. His was art ripe for posthumous renaissance.



Recent history has obliged. Van Zandt has gained broader appreciation in the 13 years since his death, and biographers John Kruth (*To Live's To Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, Da Capo Press, 2007) and Robert Earl Hardy (*A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt*, University of North Texas Press, 2008) have chronicled his life in detail. Songwriting pupil Steve Earle, who refutes theories that his tutor was ahead of (or simply beyond) his time, cracked *Billboard's* Top 20 in May 2009 with his Grammy-winning tribute album, *Townes*. Earle says, "I don't think [Townes] was a misunderstood genius. He shot himself in the foot constantly."<sup>6</sup>

Most critics agree that the troubled troubadour produced his finest recorded work in Houston. Taped over a consecutive seven-night stand at Rex Bell and Dale Soffar's Magnolia City club in July 1973, *Live at the Old Quarter* showcases Van Zandt's raw narratives, solo and acoustic, before a rare full house. "I used to go see him at the Old Quarter when I was a kid," says

worthy of them? Did he deserve them? Did he earn them? Did he treat them well? No. But he was a manifestation of grace to all of us. This very weak human vessel carried the weight of these incredible gifts of grace so admirably. God doesn't choose the strong and the noble to do the work. He chooses the weak and foolish, so the wise things of the world confound us.<sup>8</sup>

Townes Van Zandt often mentored and learned from other songwriters, shared stories, and relied on peers and followers alike to ground his self-destructive behavior. The following are selected interviews with both Van Zandt's contemporaries and some younger artists who have drawn inspiration from his songwriting, if not from his personal lifestyle. As the interviews reveal, Townes Van Zandt was a complex, often troubled, occasionally joyful, but always thoughtful and creative songwriter whose near-mythic status is grounded in both fact and fiction.

The gifts that he had and the inspiration he gave and received were truly spiritual gifts. Was he worthy of them? Did he deserve them? Did he earn them? Did he treat them well? No. But he was a manifestation of grace to all of us.

Jesse Dayton, a current Texas roadhouse staple. "I'd be the only one in there with the waitstaff. It'd be like seeing Bob Dylan and Hank Williams all rolled into one—if he wasn't drunk, of course." Dayton continues:

Townes went from moaning these country blues to having this really smart folk sensibility without ever seeming like less of a hillbilly. To me, "Tecumseh Valley" is the saddest song I've ever heard. I intentionally don't listen to that song, because it makes me bawl like a baby. Townes had an intellectual side to his music that wasn't something he was copying. I mean, Dylan has come out and said that "Pancho and Lefty" is the best song ever written.<sup>7</sup>

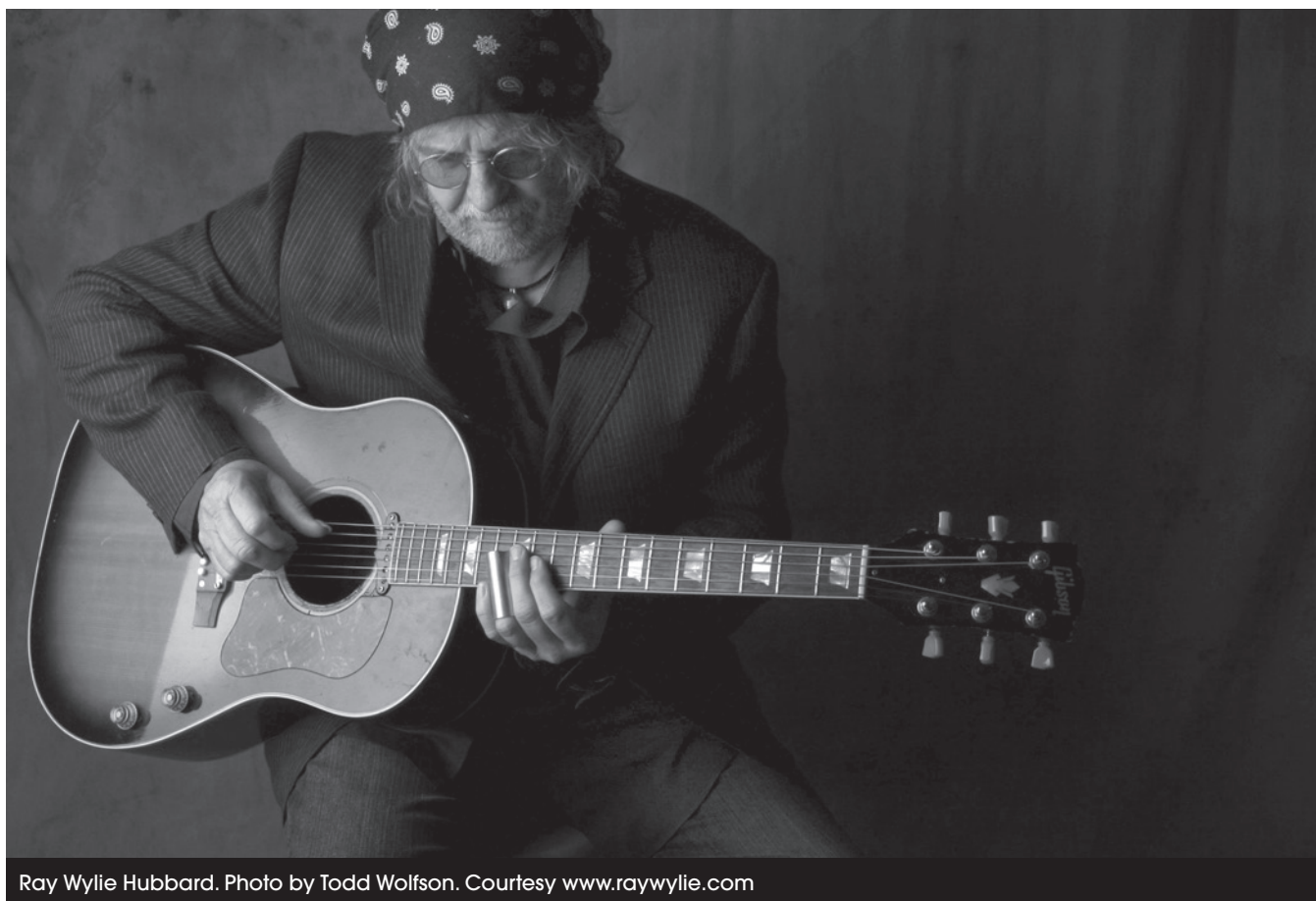
"Townes was covered with more grace than about any human being that I've ever had the privilege of knowing," says singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked, who crossed paths with Van Zandt at the Kerrville Folk Festival.

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### Ray Wylie Hubbard

Hubbard's mystical Hill Country blues directly echo the Texas songwriters that Van Zandt most revered—Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb. In turn, the 63-year-old Wimberley-based singer, who wrote Jerry Jeff Walker's 1972 anthem "Up Against the Wall Redneck Mother," admired Van Zandt's novelistic eye. "Townes would write these incredible songs, but he understood the craft of it," Hubbard says. "He had the rare combination of inspiration plus craft." Hubbard's most recent metaphysical meditation, the 2010 album *A: Enlightenment, B: Endarkenment, Hint: There Is No C*, well suits Austin's Cactus Café, the intimate University of Texas venue where he witnessed many Van Zandt concerts.<sup>9</sup>

**Ray Wylie Hubbard:** One of the first times I ever really remember Townes was in the late 1960s or very early 1970s when Jerry Jeff Walker was playing in Nashville, Tennessee. It was kind of Jerry's big debut there, but I don't remember where it was. Everybody showed up, and Townes was there. Of course, we were all drinking, and Jerry was out front playing. Townes bet me \$100 that he'd go onstage and stand on his head for the whole song while Jerry did "Mr. Bojangles." I bet Townes the



Ray Wylie Hubbard. Photo by Todd Wolfson. Courtesy [www.raywylie.com](http://www.raywylie.com)

\$100. Jerry started playing “Bojangles,” and Townes went out there and stood on his head the whole time. That was the last time I gambled with him.

Earlier on, back in the 1970s, he was really witty, sharp, and funny. He had a certain charisma about him. Later, you know, he was drunk a lot and wasn’t as “on.” But there were times when he was. *Live at the Old Quarter* was Townes in his prime. He was always gracious, cordial, and funny when I’d see him.

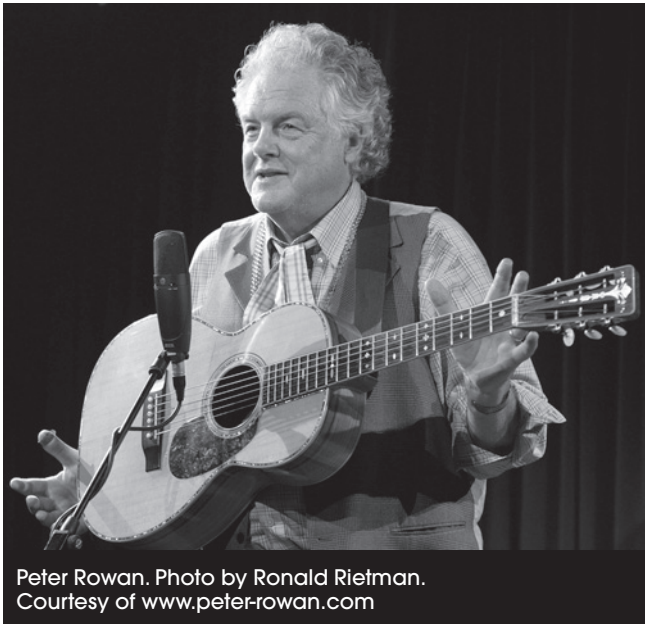
I played with Townes at one of his last performances in the States before he died. This was around October 1996. The show was in Granbury, Texas, of all places, at the Granbury Opera House. It was a fundraiser for the opera house in this little town, because they were refurbishing it. They had Townes, Terry Allen, and me do a songwriters-in-the-round, and with the three of us, I think the term would be *irreverent*. Townes got there a little drunk and everything, but he pulled it together.

We had a great night. There were all these elderly ladies with their minks and the tiaras and the evening gowns, and they were all down front, because this is an opera house. Townes went off on some story about how he was playing at a wedding and he had to borrow some sex toy to play slide or something. The whole evening was like that. It was a lot of fun, but I knew that

was one of the last times I’d see Townes, because he was leaving for a tour in Europe. He was very frail at that time, and both Terry and I knew. Europe can really wear you out.

Townes and I weren’t like running buddies, but I’d go see him play in Dallas, and we’d hang out. We did this benefit in Dallas for an Indian school or AIM, the American Indian Movement. Townes was the singer, the fundraiser. So, I show up just to see Townes, but he’s like, “Hey, man, it’s really good to see you. Do you want to get up and sing a song?” I said, “No, not really, it’s your gig.” “Ah, come on up, do a song,” he says. He gets up there and does about three songs. Then he says, “Here’s my good friend Ray Wylie Hubbard,” and gives me his guitar. I start playing, and then all of a sudden I see Townes walk out the front door. He’s walking down the street. I finished my song and he’s still gone. I had to do like three or four songs, and then finally he showed up again.

I saw him perform the spring before that gig with Terry Allen, and he was sober. He had been on the wagon for about three weeks or a month, and he just came out and did the deal. There were nights when it was just magical to watch him perform. He’s out of the old school of folk singer, the guys who would tell the stories and then play these incredible songs. There were



Peter Rowan. Photo by Ronald Rietman.  
Courtesy of [www.peter-rowan.com](http://www.peter-rowan.com)

the nights when it was magical, and then there were the nights when you got this feeling in your stomach and would just think, “Okay, Townes, that’s enough.”

When it comes to his songwriting, though, the question is, “What’s not to admire?” To another songwriter, you look at his songs and they’re just as powerful as anything you’ve ever witnessed. Whether it’s Hemingway or Shelley, you know. Those songs are just the best there are. His songwriting is on the level of Whitman. You could hold his songs against any of the great writers. They’re just so well done—every word, every idea. They pull you in and reach something within me that’s just somewhere else. They’re remarkable.

In Austin, he set the bar at places like the Cactus Café, which is really good because there are now so many of these young writers in Texas who are aware of him. I think it’s nice to have someone like Townes, and they can really aspire to that level of writing. I don’t think anyone will ever surpass Townes, though. Onstage at the Cactus Café, there’s a picture of Townes, so you walk in and say, “Okay, this is the real deal. It is about the song. It is for the sake of the song.” You better have it together when you play there.

Townes’s reputation is awesome. My big three, of course, are Townes, Guy Clark, and Billy Joe Shaver. But there hasn’t been a young Townes or a young Guy or a young Billy to come along. There are a lot of really good writers in Texas, like Slaid Cleaves and Hayes Carll, but there hasn’t been that Townes to come along yet. And I don’t think there ever will be. All the planets need to line up or something for that. In certain circles, you say “Townes,” and everyone goes, “Ahhh,” and everyone is aware of him. He’s the pinnacle.

If it were a perfect world, Townes would be as well known as Bob Dylan. There’s a mystique about Townes. When people discover him, it’s just enlightening. I try to turn people on to him, and that’s just it. Enlightened. They’re instant fans. But it’s like William Blake, who I don’t think was published in his own lifetime. Now it’s like, “Wow!” Townes deserves to be recognized, but the way the music business is, I don’t know if it’ll happen, if he’ll achieve as much fame as Bob Dylan. But if he would, it would raise everybody’s standards. Once you hear Townes and you compare everything to him, it’s gotta be pretty good to work.

A lot of it with Townes is the subject matter and the way he could turn a phrase and tell a story. It was a complete songwriting package. I mean, “Bad news from Houston/All my friends are dying” [from “White Freightliner Blues”]? It’s like, “Whoa, *man*.” He just said it so nonchalantly, but it’s so powerful. The word “poet” just keeps coming to mind. I mean a *real* poet. There are lots of people out there who have poetry books who aren’t real poets. Townes was.

I think Townes had an effect on me as a songwriter in a subconscious way. I didn’t try to write like Townes, but I want to write with quality. There’s a certain quality and integrity about his writing. I try to put forth the best time and effort to make the best song I can, and that’s something Townes might have affected. Somewhere in there, maybe about 15 years ago, I wanted to be a real songwriter. I always played in these honky-tonk bands, but I realized that to be a better songwriter I’d have to be a better guitar player.

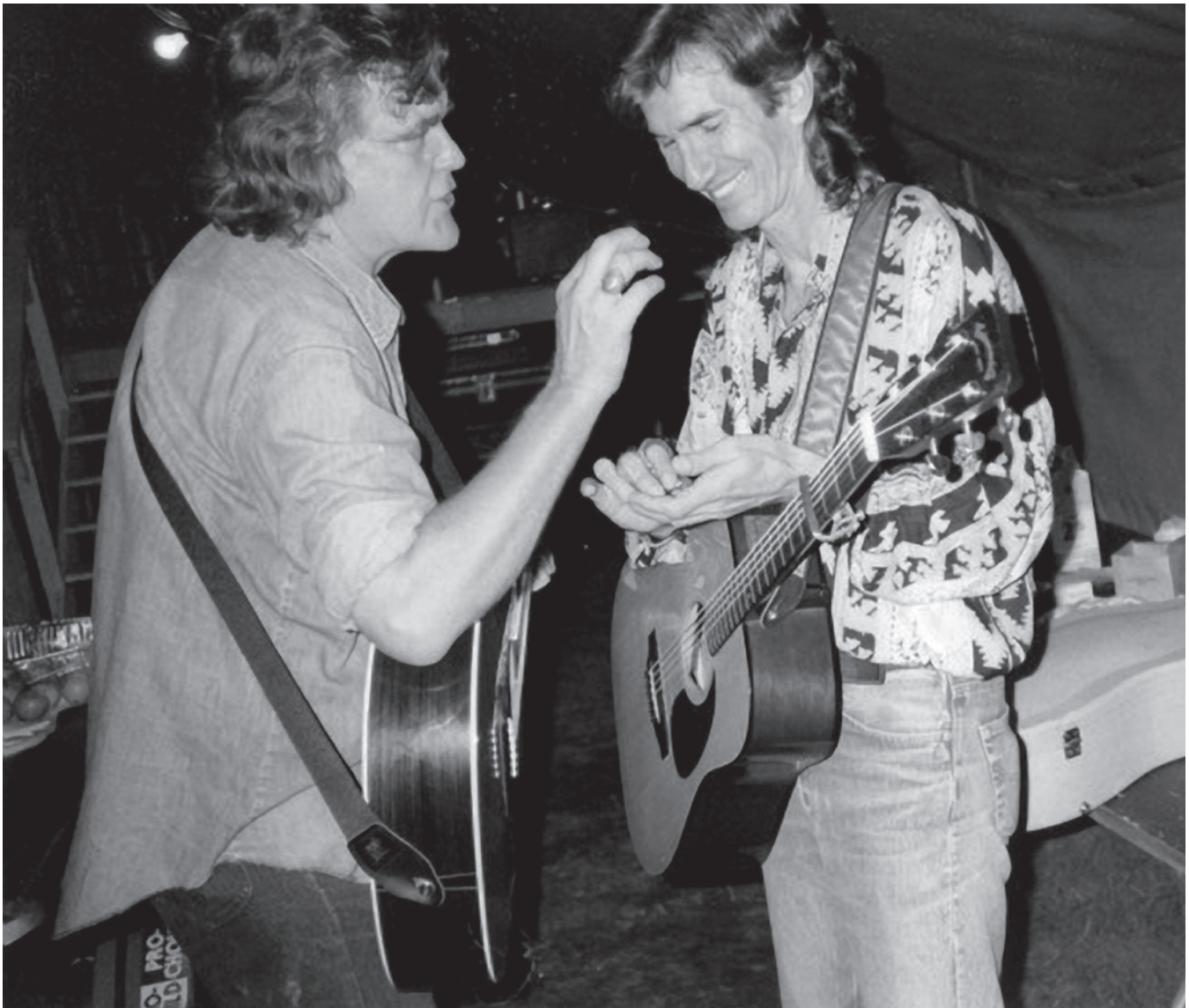
Townes was a really good guitar player. His finger picking, his Lightnin’ [Hopkins] licks and things, he was really, really good. So, for me, I didn’t want to be Townes Van Zandt or Guy Clark, because I knew I couldn’t write that caliber of a song, but I wanted to be able to play in front of Townes’s audience. I wanted to write songs so that I could play the kind of places Townes would play. So, it wasn’t a conscious thing about Townes influencing me, but I did want to be a better player and really write songs that had a little depth and weight to them.

His music, his albums still are some of my favorites. I listen to him quite a bit, and even though Townes is not here, his songs are pretty timeless. They’ll be around, because what he did was he created art. Not just art, but great art. It’s not disposable tunes. They have incredible value and they can still knock you down today. I think the more people find out about Townes, the more it’ll make them strive to reach that quality of songwriting. Townes was just a natural.<sup>10</sup>

#### Peter Rowan

Rowan’s most memorable songs (“Panama Red,” for instance) often match Guy Clark’s sharp storytelling with Van Zandt’s





Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark at Winnipeg folk 1991. Photo courtesy of Eric Ambel

nonlinear dreamscapes. Rowan, a Boston native whose 40-year career began with bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe and blossomed with Jerry Garcia's Old & in the Way, gained intimate access to one of Texas music's great friendships on triple-bill tours. "Townes leaned on Guy in a way that probably enabled him to stay alive longer," Rowan says, "but Guy needed Townes in his life just like Townes needed him."<sup>11</sup>

**Peter Rowan:** Townes and I played some shows together in Massachusetts back in the 1970s. He was always so unique. He dressed in this kind of beige corduroy suit and moccasins; the suit was perfect and the moccasins were really comfortable. We were on the road together—Guy Clark, Townes, and me—and we played this festival. I guess he'd been on kind of a tear, and he bought himself a leather jerkin. He had on this beautiful

white shirt and jeans and this jerkin. He kept saying, "Man, do you know what this is? This is a *jerkin*." I was like, "Well, yeah?" He said, "This is what they wore here for centuries, *jerkins*." He wouldn't take the thing off, and he wore it the whole tour, that giant leather vest. He was so proud of that jerkin. Then he gave it to somebody.

What we had was on the level of a poetic friendship. Every time I saw him near the end of his life, he'd throw lines at me. Like saying, "Look what I came up with." I really couldn't keep up so much with the lifestyle. I just don't have it in me. I don't have the gene. I mean, there were some serious drinkers in our family, and I saw what it did to them. My philosophy is to just trust the mind as it is. That's just my way.

So, Townes and I hung out, and I would drink with him. I

mean, it can't be any secret, the man would have a measure of vodka before breakfast. Mostly he was fine. That's what fueled him, kept him going. Sometimes when he'd go over the edge, it became scary; he became prophetic. He'd be very dramatic, kneel down in the middle of the floor and talk, just spouting poetic phrases that were almost terrifying in their honesty.

Being friends with Townes meant bearing witness unto Townes and with Townes. Guy Clark was probably the best man, because Guy really knew how to lasso him. Townes was American to the core—he had the wild, crazy heart of an American Indian. He could have either become a successful businessman or been the wild child, and he chose the wild child.

I remember we were playing in Berlin, and it was the beginning of Townes's last big run, probably between 1979 and 1986. By 1981 or so, Townes was gearing up for probably the last big touring effort of his life. Germans loved him. Townes had the energy and the lubrication and the warmth of the alcohol helped him deal with the pace that he set for himself. I mean, this guy never sat still. He'd book a 30-day tour in

another 10 quid. This time I give it to him and show him what I'm having trouble with, the lines in the song.

I played the guitar part and he sang the lyrics right there, put them in the song: "Followed my footsteps where I wander/ Followed my dreams I found you/Feel your heartbeat here beside me/All my dreams come true." I wrote them down, and he went back downstairs. Townes comes back up a while later, and he's lost his shirt, literally. He asks me for some more money. I say, "Hey, man, what about the second bridge? Check this out." He came up with the lines to another bridge: "Sure as morning follows nighttime/Sure as moonlight follows the sun/ Sure as wind blows cross the prairie/I'll be there when you need someone." So I gave him the 10 quid, and then he won it all back. It was a good night.

I got very friendly with him at the end of his life. That fall of 1996, I went down to Nashville to stay with him and Jeanene and his little boy and girl. We were all going to have dinner, and Townes went out for some cigarettes, and Jeanene said, "Well, I don't know when he'll be back." And at about 11:00 that night,

It was so sad to see, that he had no idea of the respect that so many had for him. I don't know why that was, but I just thought that somebody should tell this guy how good he is.

Holland. I have no idea where he'd play, but it was just a-go. It was all a green light. He did everything to get his message out, to say what he had to say. He was always on the road. Then he took a break, and he died.

He always had to keep the party going, basically. Townes and Guy and I did this tour in England, and after the show, of course, we're all at the hotel bar. There's a big entourage of followers, and Guy would shush the entire room and hand Townes his guitar. And Townes would very humbly sing some of his great tunes. Guy was just adamant—*Shush, be quiet!*—and he was gracious about it, but Townes's ability, his genius *was* to be heard.

There was a night on that same European tour when I was up in my room working on a song, "I'll Be There," on a Rowan Brothers record, and Townes was downstairs gambling, the nightly poker session. Maybe dice. He also liked to pitch pennies. I was struggling with the bridge, and Townes comes upstairs and says, "Can you loan me 10 quid?" He's lost all his money. So, I say, "Sure," and give it to him. He goes back downstairs, loses that money and comes back up again for

he called from a bar. I think maybe he was afraid of closeness. What we were going to do was just hang out, but when he called me he was out at a bar. So, I got in my rental car and I went out to the bar. And there he was, out on Hillsboro Road at this bar, playing pool, and he was taking comer after comer and losing and putting money on every shot. The stakes had to be high.

He was playing pool with someone that he had known when he was in the sanitarium, when he was under psychiatric evaluation. It was this person that he had picked up who knew Townes and who was talking about killing himself. And his mission that night was to hang with this guy and basically make sure that he wasn't going to kill himself. There was just no privacy with Townes; he had to be with other people all the time. At the bar, there was an audience, a whole barroom full of people. Townes was holding court. I didn't have much to do with the conversation. This guy was just goin', "You know, Townes. You know what it's like, man. You know how it is, man." Townes gives him some cryptic reply.

It was kind of like he was a guru to people who were on the edge. We were basically up all night and I ended up getting



Kris Kristofferson. Photo by Marina Chavez. Courtesy of ellis-creative.com.

a hotel room. We were 10 miles from Townes's house and I thought, "Man, he still has to be in a hotel." We stayed up all night drinking and talking and by sunrise that guy was too tired to do anything dramatically violent. I said, "Townes, where did you find this guy?" And he told me that it was someone he'd known in the sanitarium. He said, "I didn't find him. He found me." He said they always found him. I think it was a combination of them finding each other.

Anyway, after I left that weekend, I heard Townes was in the hospital. The last show I did with him, I have pictures from it, was in Arkansas. They are the most moving pictures I've ever seen—Townes was almost transparent in them. We played together on stage that night and Townes was so fragile. I remember while we were playing together looking at him and thinking, "Brother, you're outta here." He was always mentally there and "on," but physically he was gone.<sup>12</sup>

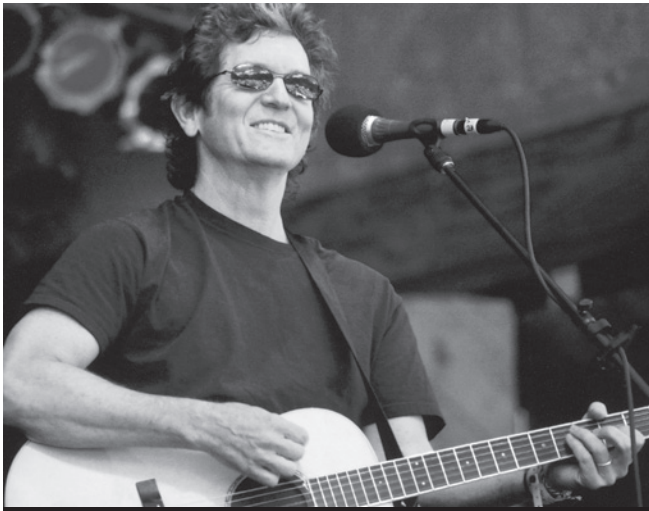
#### Kris Kristofferson

Few artists rival Kris Kristofferson's achievements as a songwriter ("Me and Bobby McGee," "Sunday Morning Coming Down," "Help Me Make It Through the Night"), actor (*Billy the Kid*, *A*

*Star is Born*), and academic (Rhodes Scholar). Before joining the 1980s country supergroup The Highwaymen (with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson), the Brownsville, Texas, native crafted some of Nashville's most literate country music of the 1970s. "I heard so much about Townes from Mickey Newbury, who was really serious about songwriting," Kristofferson says. "He said Townes was the best, and that included Mickey and me, so I figured he was serious."<sup>13</sup>

**Kris Kristofferson:** The first time I met Townes was when we were filming *Songwriter*, which was that film Alan Rudolph directed with Willie Nelson and me. We were filming in Austin, and I got the word that Townes was out there in the audience as an extra. Alan let me do this introduction of him, as a "songwriter's songwriter." He kept it in the movie. I remember when Townes stood up, when I introduced him, I could see, it was so sad to see, that he had no idea of the respect that so many had for him. I don't know why that was, but I just thought that somebody should tell this guy how good he is. He was so pleased just to be recognized, and it was obvious to me that he hadn't gotten the feedback that I thought he deserved, the respect that people like Willie and Merle Haggard and I had for him.





Rodney Crowell. Photo courtesy of Brian Atkinson

Like a lot of us, he was in love with the beautiful loser ideal, the guy who was trying to be Hank Williams and die when he's 29. It's a very seductive role model because it's everything that you admire in somebody like Hank Williams. It was the same way with Johnny Cash when he was killing himself. A lot of people thought that was the way to go—to burn out rather than to rust. It's a sad thing for me, because it's so obvious that that's who Townes had decided to be. It's a sad way to go. People should know that Townes was the brains behind "Pancho and Lefty," and that self-destructive stuff kept him from being famous.

Townes wrote with a writer's eye. It's like the difference [between] the stuff that Willie Nelson was writing and what the Tin Pan Alley writers were writing. It's all real creative writing, as opposed to being a hack. Townes's songs are completely original poetry, but he's a real poet because he wrote from the heart. He had the tools. Unfortunately, he had that death wish.<sup>14</sup>

### Rodney Crowell

A youthful Rodney Crowell witnessed Van Zandt's duality firsthand as he entered Nashville's songwriting community in the 1970s. "Townes was fond of me, but he picked on me, man," the 61-year-old Houston native says. "He was smarter and faster and quicker than me, and I was always on guard. I don't think I've ever been picked on by anyone better than Townes Van Zandt picked on me." Crowell, who peaked as a commercial artist when 1988's *Diamonds & Dirt* produced a record six consecutive number-one singles, agrees with the argument that Van Zandt helped shape his own legend.<sup>15</sup>

**Rodney Crowell:** Townes would have been the fastest gun in the West. We played this game where you put your hands together and hold them in front of you, and the other guy puts his hands on his hip and he tries to slap your hands before you can move

them away. I couldn't get my hands out of the way because he was so quick. He had lightning reflexes. Then, you know, he'd say, "My turn," and he'd hold his hands out and I'd put my hands on my hips and try to whack his hands, and I'd miss them. He just was lightning fast, and he had a lightning-fast mind, too.

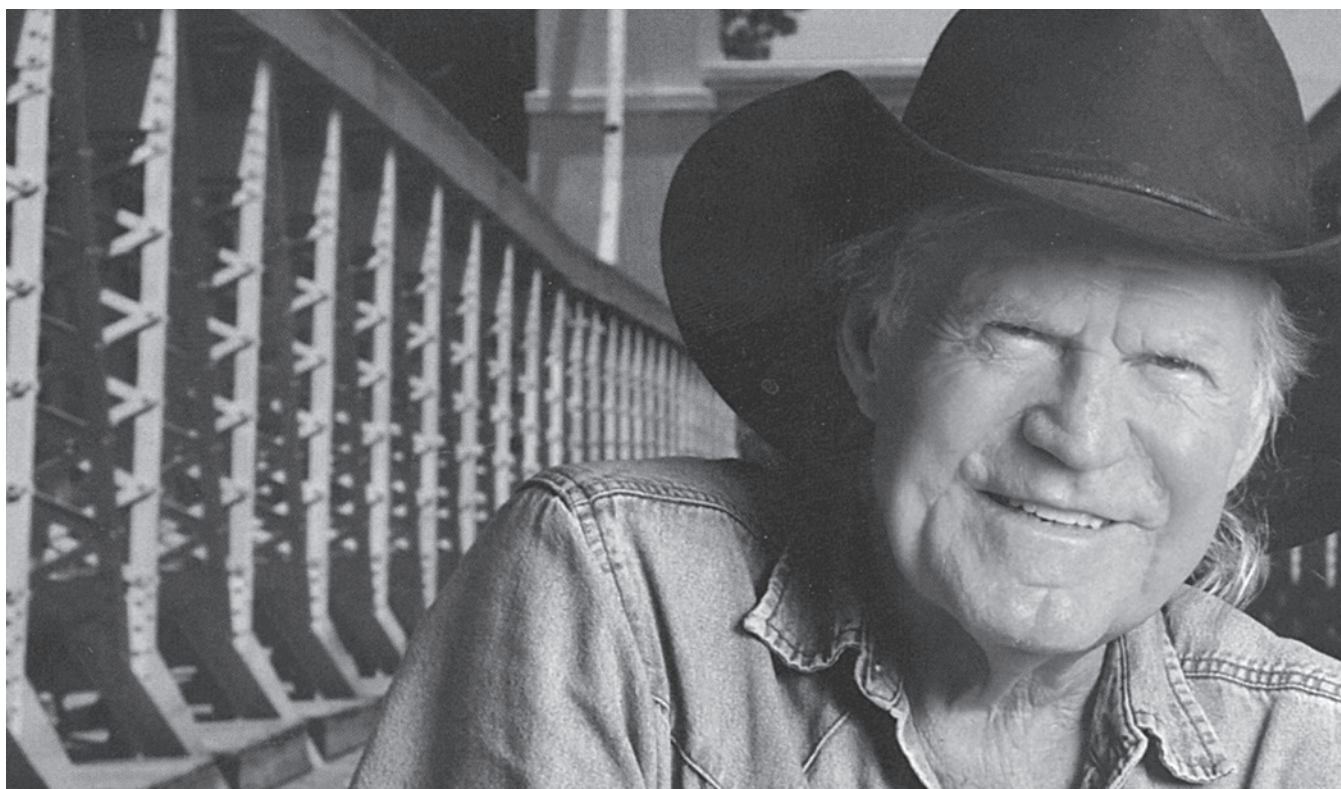
Guy Clark was the center of the group, the curator. Townes was Guy's pretty exotic friend. Townes was closer to Guy than he was to anybody else. In the beginning, Townes just thought I was a punk, you know. But I'd gladly let him smash my hands to pieces just to hang around and pay attention to what was going on, to see what I could pick up about writing songs.

On occasion over the years we'd play on the same bill together. Early on, it was breathtaking to see Townes perform. He was so good. Later on, I couldn't watch it. It made me too sad; the alcohol had really diminished his capacities. In the early- and mid-1970s, probably from 1972 to 1977, he was just so good. Townes or Bob Dylan would be the pinnacle of the singer-songwriter-performer. But I think Townes saw to it pretty well that he wouldn't be as well known as Dylan. He fed his enigma. Townes would be in town sometimes, and we'd be downstairs drinking wine and playing guitars, and Townes would be upstairs kicking heroin. He was just this exotic guy, like, "Townes is upstairs coming off smack." It was kind of romantic.

I had a panel truck, and one night we'd been out on the lake drinking and playing music all night. I was driving this truck, like a bread delivery van with one seat in it. Had a couple lawn chairs in it. Townes and Skinny Dennis were riding in the lawn chairs. When we drove back into town, I was gonna drop Townes off at this girl's place, but he and Skinny Dennis had gotten into sort of an argument.

Dennis was serious about it, but Townes was playing, lying in the weeds. They got into this real escalated argument. I'm in the front and said, "Look you guys, I'm trying to drive." We're all drunk, and I didn't want us to all get hauled to jail. So, when we finally made it to this place, Townes flung the door open, took a beer bottle and broke it open on the side of my panel truck. He grabbed Skinny Dennis, who was about six-foot-seven, 120 pounds, held him down with the broken bottle and said, "I'm gonna cut his throat, I'm gonna cut it right now, I'm cuttin' his throat up—I've had *enough* of him." Skinny Dennis thought it was for real, and I was trying to pull Townes off of him, trying to stop it. It was 4:00 in the morning and on the sidewalk. I'm grabbing at Townes, and he seemed out of his mind. All of a sudden, he stopped and started laughing and said, "I got you both!" He wasn't anywhere near as drunk as he was acting.

When you caught Townes in the afternoon, that's when you'd get to know the sweet boy. He was a really sweet, sensitive guy, very charming. Susanna [Guy Clark's wife] was the access to his sweet side. Townes would usually be a gentleman around her,



Billy Joe Shaver. Photo by Matt Lankes. Courtesy of James G. Odom

and Susanna was always saying, “Ah, that other thing, that’s just his act. He’s really a sweet, smart boy.” And he was—extremely smart, extremely charming, extremely talented. He was an absolute enigma of the highest degree.

I’ve said this to everybody: Steve Earle emulated Townes, and I emulated Guy. When you’re younger, you emulate someone you admire, and then eventually you find your own thing. That’s what I did. That’s what Steve did. I’m sure Steve would say that. Townes’s influence on Mickey Newbury was profound. Newbury was one of the great, sensitive poets. For him, it was the Beatles and Townes Van Zandt as the starting places.

I play “Pancho and Lefty” almost every night. They’re all great—“If I Had No Place to Fall,” “Greensboro Woman,” “Tecumseh Valley,” “White Freightliner”—but “Pancho and Lefty” is my favorite. “Pancho was a bandit, boys/His horse was fast as polished steel/He wore his gun outside his pants/For all the honest world to feel.” Don’t get no better than that. I grew up with crazy, drunk people who were poets, but he was plugged into a different light socket.<sup>16</sup>

#### Billy Joe Shaver

Shaver’s earthy yarns link sacred and secular with a devil’s grin. “Faith gets in there almost every doggone time [I write a song],” the Waco-based singer says. “I don’t want to say anything bad

about it, man, but it kind of gets me looking like some kind of preacher. Townes was a Christian. We talked about that a lot.” Shaver and Van Zandt, who both served as inspiration for Jeff Bridges’s Oscar-winning character Bad Blake in the 2009 film *Crazy Heart*, also wreaked havoc together as burgeoning songwriters.<sup>17</sup>

**Billy Joe Shaver:** I met Townes in the early Sixties in Houston, Texas. He and I used to play this place called the Old Quarter. I had been writing all my life, but I was just getting started playing in front of people a little bit. Townes coaxed me to get in front of them, but he was just dangerously good. Then Townes and me got to running around together and raising hell, and he’s crazy as a damn bat. We’d go out and get all tanked up, take LSD, or anything we could get our hands on.

My wife Brenda just hated Townes. She always had to come pick us up in the middle of the morning after we’d gone off to raise hell somewhere. Then there was this time Townes had somehow acquired these leather pants, and he had his face all painted up with tears like a clown. She knew we was higher than a kite. She said, “This is it,” and reamed his ass, chewed him out real good. She took him wherever he had to go, then she got a hold of me. I mean, that night, she quit me. Left me with \$10. I said, “Just take me out to the highway,” and she did—she took me to the interstate.

Actually, I was on Highway 10, trying to get to L.A. Couldn't get a ride. Finally, I decided I'd just get on the other side of the road and go to Nashville. First guy that came by gave me a ride all the way to Memphis. He gave me a hell of a ride, and I didn't have but that \$10. So, Townes is probably the reason I went to Nashville. It was just an accident. Brenda went back to Waco, and we got divorced again.

Brenda just hated Townes so bad. But she got cancer, you know, and she died in 1999. The doctor told me this one time that she probably wouldn't last the night. In my last desperation, I told her that I had a dream that she went to heaven, and Townes was there to meet her. She says, "By god, I'm gonna live." And she did. She lived for another year. She hated him, but I laid so much stuff on him. I'd go out and get into trouble, then I'd say, "Well, Townes." And that didn't help him. "That son of a bitch," she'd say. But you always got to have someone to lay it on.

has his head together enough. He'd get crazy, but he's smart enough to figure things out and get you out of them. Townes and Guy are both good guys, but together they were just dangerous on the stage. They're both such great writers. That night at the Bluebird in particular—man, I wish I had a tape of that.

After Townes got married to Jeanene, I didn't see him much. At that point, there were just so many friends. I'd go over there, and there'd be so many that I didn't know. Steve Earle was just a baby, and he was hanging out there. My boy [the late guitarist] Eddy [Shaver] was just a baby, and he was hanging out there, too. Eddy just hung out with me and played [the guitar]. He played with Guy for a while.

Townes knew I cared about him. We'd go up to Vermont and play a lot. One time we were playing cards and—I couldn't believe it—I won money off him. If I hadn't won that money, we wouldn't have had any to leave town, the way Townes spent

I thought it was cool that people used to say that Townes would always have five new songs every time you'd see him—long, sad songs.

We were playin' one night, me and Townes and Guy Clark and Gary Nicholson at the Bluebird [Café] in Nashville, not long before Townes passed. We set four chairs down around a table, didn't even have a microphone. I mean, it was so packed, but everybody could hear because they were quiet as a mouse. We just had a big old time. Townes and me got to playin' spiritual songs—but Guy don't really like that, I don't think, but we sang spiritual songs—and we talked that night. I said, "If you go, you're ready, aren't you?" Because I'd known him longer than anyone, I guess. He said, "Yes, I am." I'm sure Townes went to heaven. If there's a heaven, and I'm sure there is, Townes went. He was a good-hearted man with a good soul and a real sweet person.

But he'd fight, and he had a good punch. I didn't see that very often, but if it came down to it, we could go. I could fight, too; I boxed. If we'd get thrown down on, it wouldn't take much until everybody would leave us alone. We'd get thrown down on many times, and sometimes people would try to roll us. We was always wobbling around, screwed up on something. But there wasn't no sense in them trying, because him and me together, we could probably whip six, seven men, I'd bet. It just didn't hurt because we were on stuff. That was mostly early on in Houston. Houston is really rough.

When Townes came to Nashville, he found a new group of people that he'd hang out with—Skinny Dennis and Guy Clark and all the great writers. Guy was a great writer, and still is. Guy

it. I always thought he let me win it because you just couldn't beat him. Townes or Guy, you couldn't beat either at pitching pennies. I didn't gamble with Townes much because he'd take you for all you had.

Sometimes he'd get drunk and borrow money. He'd borrow \$30 off me, and then he'd come back around and say, "Hey, can you loan me \$30?" I'd say, "Damnit, Townes, I'm the same guy you borrowed \$30 from a while ago." He was making the rounds, just picking up anything he could get, but he did give away more than he ever got, I do know that. If you needed money, Townes would give you every damn thing he had. If he had \$10, he'd give you \$10.

I have a real funny story about Townes. We were out in Arizona, and it winded up being just him and me out there wandering around. Neither of us had a car, so we were just out there hitchhiking. He had this little Indian kid who was hanging around. Townes had this eagle feather hanging from the end of his guitar, and he kept tryin' to give it away, this real nice Martin. I mean, there ain't no telling how much it was worth, it had one of those three-piece backs. I said, "Townes, I'm just not gonna let you do this. I'm taking this guitar right now." And, of course, he didn't give me no fuss about it.

I told him I was gonna send it to Guy, because Guy would take care of it. I put it on an airplane and sent it to Guy. Brenda would wire me money because I was doing good with *Honky*





Todd Snider. Photo courtesy of Brian Atkinson

*Tonk Heroes* out, all that stuff Waylon did. I was making a little money, but I'd usually run out of it around Townes, which is why I had Brenda wire some to me. I went to the airport, and I taped up the guitar case. But before I did, I looked inside, and there were three or four songs in there. I didn't even look at them; I just wrote on them "C-," "D," and put an "F" on one. Then I wrote things like "needs work," like the way somebody would grade it in school. I never told anybody this. Guy would laugh his ass off, because he was the one that ended up with the guitar. I don't think they ever knew where that came from. Anyway, I taped up that guitar, and I sent it on.

About a month later, Guy says, "That danged guitar, it ain't got here yet." I said, "God, I can't believe that." So, he gets to checking on it, and it turns out that thing's gone all around the world. It had stickers on it from China, Alaska, everywhere. For some reason or another, that guitar got shanghaied. And I dared not say what I'd done inside of it. It might have been "Pancho and Lefty" that I put the "F" on. I never did tell Guy that I messed with them songs, but that was way the hell-and-gone back there, man—way back in the 1970s.

Townes as a songwriter had his own deal. We're all from Texas, but for some reason Guy and me have more of the Texas flavor. Townes went all over the place. Townes actually came from a real wealthy family, and I remember he always had a really nice place to stay, when he stayed put. Of course, my wife, she'd say, "Get out the razor blades. Townes Van Zandt could make a lot of money selling razor blades at his shows." I'd say, "Brenda, that's art." She'd say, "Shit."

I didn't get to see Townes much after Houston. We'd just hang out every now and again. That night at the Bluebird was the last time I'd sit down that close to him. He seemed to be

in pretty good spirits. I was asking him about that, probably because when I hugged him, I felt a bone. I knew he was back on that stuff again. I asked him if his heart was in the right place, and he said, "Yeah, I've got Jesus in my heart."

Behind the wall, there's something on the other side. You can't destroy nothing here. Try to burn something, and it turns into smoke, turns into something different every time. Townes appreciated it. I loved old Townes, everybody did. You just couldn't help it. You couldn't keep from it. I mean, he was a mess, so you had to have unconditional love for Townes. He wasn't gonna try to win you over—you either loved him or you didn't. Brenda claims that she didn't, but I know that she did. If she didn't, she wouldn't have come and picked us up so many times.<sup>18</sup>

#### Todd Snider

"I thought it was cool that people used to say that Townes would always have five new songs every time you'd see him—long, sad songs," Todd Snider says. "Of course, he'd never remember them if you saw him again. That's what Jerry Jeff [Walker] told me one time." The 41-year-old Snider, an often-satirical songwriter who cut his teeth in Central Texas and performs today as a guy-and-guitar folk-singing troubadour much like Van Zandt, met the songwriter backstage at a John Prine gig in Nashville in the early 1990s.<sup>19</sup>

**Todd Snider:** This is kind of a sad story, really. I go to the club, and [songwriter] Keith [Sykes] says, "Come on, you can go into the dressing room." I kind of knew John [Prine] a little bit. So, I get in there, and it's John and Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Nanci Griffith, and Keith and me. They were gambling, and they were *fucked up*. They were playing the dice, and everybody was drunk. Guy Clark was yelling, and I just sat



James McMurtry. Photo courtesy [www.lightningrodrecords](http://www.lightningrodrecords)

there by myself. Right when I saw Townes, I knew who he was. I was really excited to meet him, really overwhelmed.

He seemed really sad, like a really sad person, and Keith had said that he's always really sad. So I'm sitting there watching them gamble, and out of the blue Townes comes over and sits right next to me. He grabs my arm really hard, and he'd just met me. He didn't even know I sang, and he grabbed my arm and said, "All of this is *so wrong*," and I got scared. Like, "What's going on?" He said again, "All of this is *so wrong*." And I said, "What's wrong?" And Guy Clark yelled, "Goddamnit," over the gambling. Townes looked at me and rolled his eyes and pointed at Guy, who was gambling and really drunk, and Townes was like, "That. All of it. This is fucked up." He wouldn't let go of my arm. "I gotta get outta here, I gotta get outta here," he said.

He ended up playing that night. He just sat there for a while, and it was his turn, and he played a couple times. Then everybody else had a big party afterwards, but he didn't go to it. The band played that night, but when his songs were done, he was done. He was drinking vodka from the glass, but he was pretty upset about it. Maybe he'd taken the cure by then. This is probably about '92, maybe '93. Jack Ingram saw him onstage in the last year [of his life], and Townes started crying. Jack said he played about four songs, started crying, and Guy Clark came out and took him offstage.<sup>20</sup>

### James McMurtry

McMurtry's politically provocative songs ("We Can't Make It Here" and "Cheney's Toy," for instance) may diverge from the Guy Clark and Billy Joe Shaver songwriting mold, but his keen storytelling (such as "Ruby and Carlos" and "Fireline Road") fits flush. McMurtry met Van Zandt at the Leon Springs Café in Leon Springs, Texas, in 1985. "He was sober that night, so I wondered what all the fuss was about, why everybody seemed

to be so scared of him," McMurtry remembers. "He was very friendly. He'd talk to you directly and look you right in the eye."<sup>21</sup>

**James McMurtry:** I only did a couple of shows with him, but I talked to him backstage a bit and he was quite entertaining. The last time I saw him he was talking about the last time that Harold Eggers let him drive. He was on the interstate going through Arkansas in the middle of the night, and Harold, his road manager, was sleeping under the shell of the pickup behind him. And this voice in his head said to him, "Make that exit," so he did. "Hang a right by those mailboxes," so, of course, he did. "Hang a left here," so he did. Then the voice said, "Step on it." So, Townes says, "I'm going down this dirt road at 70 miles an hour and H wakes up in the back and he says, 'How'd we get on the back road?'" Finally, he gets through to me, and I come to a tearing stop about 10 feet in front of one of them orange and white barriers, and the creek bridge was out." That was the last time Townes got to drive, because he listened to the voices. It made enough sense to me that he listened to the voices. Probably where he got the songs. He didn't question the voices, but it's dangerous when you drive like that.

When I saw him perform, the result just depended on the night. When he was on a good night, he was unbeatable. If he was drunk, it was embarrassing. It ran the whole gamut. Sometimes it would come the whole way around the back side—he would be so drunk and so embarrassing that you wouldn't want to miss it. There was a show at La Zona Rosa in Austin where Townes was too drunk to make it, so Guy Clark came out and just played Townes's show for him basically. Townes stumbled off the stage, but he went off stage left where there wasn't any door. So, he was there walking back and forth around the wall for around 10 minutes trying to find the door through it, when there wasn't any. Robert [Earl] Keen said he was at that show, and people were going out the front door in droves. The doorman's saying, "You don't know who this man is," and the customers are saying, "I don't give a fuck who he is, I want my money back."

The good nights were incredible. He was channeling something. That's the thing: he did not question the muse. If it made him write a goofy thing, so be it. He had to explain that line about Loop and Lil being parakeets, but he put it in the song anyway because that's what the dream told him to do. He dreamed that song ["If I Needed You"], and wrote it exactly as he heard it. His songs are raw, very close to the heart.

My soundman used to own a club in San Antonio, and he has some stuff he taped off the board of Townes and Guy Clark that is killer. Had to be the last couple of years of Townes's life. I wouldn't say anything in his playing and performing had decayed judging from that, or from what I heard at the Birchmere the last time I heard him play. It was in D.C. in '95.



Lucinda Williams. Photo courtesy [www.lucindawilliams.com](http://www.lucindawilliams.com)

I've seen Kristofferson stop a room the way Townes could, but part of that has to do with the people in the room, how well they know you, and how well they love you when you walk in.

You get that from working for years and years and years until you can develop a crowd like that. I never saw Townes play to a completely unfamiliar crowd, so I don't know what he could do with that. But he could certainly stop his crowd. He did that by working his whole life at it, so he'd have people that'd heard him for 15 years and they know every line in every one of your songs. They're gonna stop for you.<sup>22</sup>

#### Lucinda Williams

"I took from Townes what I took from any good songwriter," Lucinda Williams says. "It's the way he puts words together." The creative osmosis paid off. Williams, whose father, the poet Miller Williams, read at Bill Clinton's 1997 presidential inauguration, has created a rich collection of narrative songwriting over the past quarter century. Williams's 1988 self-titled release yielded hits (most notably, Mary Chapin-Carpenter's cover of "Passionate Kisses") and live staples (such as "Changed the Locks"), but her 1998 Grammy-winning *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, produced by Van Zandt disciple Steve Earle, is widely considered her hallmark.<sup>23</sup>

**Lucinda Williams:** I love "If I Needed You." That's one of his songs that really stands out. The melody and the simplicity and what the song says make it work. It sounds traditional,

like an old folk song. Sometimes those are the ones that people identify with, because it sounds familiar even when you listen to it for the first time. There's one song I wrote, "Jackson," off *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, that's probably one of the most closely influenced by Townes. In fact, when I recorded it, Steve Earle played guitar, and he said the way it was played was like a Townes kind of sound. You can certainly hear Townes in Steve's music. Townes had his own way of playing and phrasing.

I like his darker songs, too, like the one I covered on the *Poet* tribute album, "Nothin'." I really buried myself in his songs when I was trying to pick one to play for that album. It gave me perspective on his writing because I just pored through tons of his CDs. The darkness and the mysteriousness of "Nothin'" drew me to it; I like songs that are dark and brave at the same time. "Tecumseh Valley" is a great one, of course, and "Pancho and Lefty." Those are ones that people recognize. "Pancho and Lefty" is a brilliant song, and it tells a story full of wonderful imagery.

I met Townes in 1973 in Nashville. It was when I was first heading out on my own with my guitar and starting that whole thing. I met Townes briefly through some other people. Then I ended up later in Austin, and I would see him from time to time when I was there and living in Houston.

When I first met him, I thought he was a really good-looking guy. He was very striking and very mysterious. I was quite intimidated by him. I'd known about him as a songwriter, and I think I discovered his music around 1971. The first album I



heard was *Delta Mamma Blues*. I was pretty into him, pretty well versed in folk music and the whole singer-songwriter thing from the 1960s. I was definitely a fan of Townes's music from the start, but I admired him more from afar. He was a tall, dark, mysterious figure, a great songwriter, and I was just a kid in his eyes, just a little girl with a guitar. I wasn't on his level, so I don't think he took me very seriously until sometime later.

I never could really talk to him. He liked to talk in riddles. It's kind of hard to explain what I mean by that, you had to be around him and know his personality. He was a very perceptive individual, very smart and witty and fun, but I always felt that he kept his guard up to some degree. He was always joking around. I think underneath that there was this tenderness and perception, but I never got to know that side of him. It was always cloaked behind his joking around. I wish I could have gotten to know him better.

I knew [the late Austin-based songwriter and Van Zandt's close friend] Blaze Foley a little better because I was around him more often, but he was somewhat guarded, too. I think most people who drink a lot tend to be like that to some degree. So, Townes was always this elusive figure to me. He'd drift in and out of town. He'd show up and I'd see him out and see him play, but there was a distance, too. I was quite a bit younger and just getting started, and he was already a legend. We didn't relate in the same way he and Guy Clark related, certainly—or even he and Steve Earle. There were other people he was much closer to. It was something of a boys club.

Townes was a brilliant artist, and also somewhat self-destructive. When you put those things together, you're not going to have the most consistent performances, but a lot of that was happening at a time when everybody was doing that anyway. A lot of people would get onstage and be stoned and drunk and whatever, and it sort of just went along with what was going on at the time. I don't think anybody made a big deal about it at the time because we were all drinking and smoking pot and getting crazy. Townes just took it a step further.

He was playing pretty regularly in Houston just before I got there—around 1975 or 1976—at a place called Sand Mountain. By the time I got there, I think he was living in Nashville. When I was playing around Houston, Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith were just getting started. I was a peer of theirs, and we were playing in the same clubs at the same time. Townes was someone we all looked up to.

Certainly more people know who Hank Williams is and Bob Dylan is than who Townes Van Zandt is. It shouldn't be that way, but that's unfortunately the way it is. It might take some time, but maybe over the years Townes's legacy will build. If you go up to someone on the street and ask them if they know Dylan, they'll say, "Yeah." They won't know Townes, unless

they've paid attention over the years. After people die, their legacy grows, and that's probably what'll happen with Townes. I've seen that happen with Blaze Foley.

The last time I saw Townes was in 1993 in Jack Clement's studio. I was with this guy who's a bass player that I was seeing at the time. Townes kind of picked up on something, and he was giving me a warning in his funny, self-effacing way, saying, "Watch out for this guy." He said to the guy, "You better treat her right." In his own way, he was protective and very sweet. He came to appreciate me as an artist.

His love songs were very romantic, very beautiful. I loved the earthiness of it. He had an obvious sense of place. Oftentimes, he'd have references to different parts of the country, like his song "Snowin' on Raton." I've done that a lot in my writing. He wrote a lot about cities and towns and rivers, and he used a lot of that imagery. When you heard Townes, you knew it was him. He had a way of writing very simply and sparingly, and yet being very evocative and effective. That's one of the things I've strived to do over the years in my writing.<sup>24</sup>

### Lyle Lovett

Twelve years ago, Lyle Lovett saluted his favorite modern Texas songwriters on *Step Inside This House*. The Houston-area native's covers collection honors mentors both close in spirit (Willis Alan Ramsey's "Sleepwalking" and Guy Clark's "Step Inside This House") and style (Steven Fromholz's "Bears" and Vince Bell's "I've Had Enough"). He nods most frequently to Van Zandt ("Lungs," "Highway Kind," "Flyin' Shoes," and "If I Needed You"). "I learned 'Flyin' Shoes' when I was 18," Lovett says. "I loved the chord changes, the lyrical idea of leaving everything you know and love behind and embarking on an unknown course. That notion's a very real thing when you're 18."<sup>26</sup>

**Lyle Lovett:** We'd just played an early evening set at the Kerrville Folk Festival, and I was walking offstage. There was Townes. He said, "Hello," and introduced himself and was a real gentleman. I'll never forget what he said to me—"I've never heard your music, but people whose opinion I respect say you're all right." I just thought, "Whoa." That really made an impression on me. What a nice thing to say. That was in the 1980s.

Guy Clark always talks about what a lighthearted, smart guy he was with a wonderful, razor-sharp wit. That's the Townes I remember. Of course, I saw him after his formative years in Houston, Texas, when he made the *Live at the Old Quarter* record. I'd hear him years later when he came through Houston and would play Anderson Fair. He was always really articulate.

He was always compelling, too. Townes Van Zandt obviously was a compelling writer, but he was a compelling *person*. When you're in a room with Willie Nelson, there's something about how personally quiet he is. You see people are drawn to him,

and he's the calm in the center of the storm that's happening all around him. Townes had that same quality of being a very focused, quiet, powerful energy in the middle of a room. Townes could be so still, and there's something mesmerizing about that.

As an interpreter, one goal is to live up to what Townes has written and what he said. But the real goal is to enjoy living inside a great work like that for four minutes, or however long it lasts. It sounds corny, but to be able to inhabit it, to be inside it and say the words and feel their meaning—that's a very real thing when you're onstage and playing a song, or even when you're in your living room playing a song. That's the fun of it. You really get to live through these pieces of music. With words as beautiful as his and with melodies as beautiful and strong, it's an emotional and very powerful experience.

Townes was brilliantly gifted at taking a very complex emotion or complicated idea and expressing it in a very accessible way. That's what's so powerful about his writing—there's a novel, a whole life behind a very simple line. I loved to listen to Townes talk about his writing, because he'd talk about it in mysterious terms. In the liner notes to one of his albums, he talks about "sky songs." They'd just seem to come out of the sky and through his arm and onto a piece of paper.

I heard him tell more than once about dreaming "If I Needed You," just waking up and writing it down. It was at Guy's house. Townes just woke up and played this song. In fact, it doesn't matter how he wrote it—"If I Needed You" is a great and beautiful song no matter how it came about. The romance of a story like that is just so hard to resist. The thing is, music is emotional, not intellectual. If you have to analyze and appreciate it, it's not the same as feeling it.

Townes reminded me of the old cowboys and farmers growing up here in Texas. They would say something to you that would have three or four different meanings, just to see how much of it you'd get, to see how much you were paying attention. Townes had that quality, that twinkle in his eye to test you out, to test your perception. He would see what you're made of. You have to wonder if he's doing that a little bit in his stories. It always makes me smile to think about whether Townes is being straight up and literal about what he's saying, or is he really checking you out?<sup>27</sup>

### Scott Avett

Over the past decade, the North Carolina-based Avett Brothers frequently have covered Van Zandt's "Greensboro Woman" in concert. "'Greensboro Woman' was easy just for its [geographic] point of reference, but I also cover 'Highway Kind' for my daughter," says 33-year-old Scott Avett. "She's two and a half months old, and she'll get real quiet when I play the piano when she's crying. It's so serious and dark, and I just love it. There's not another writer that I relate to more than Townes."



Scott Avett. Photo courtesy of Brian Atkinson

The connection emerged clearly on the band's 2009 major-label debut, *I and Love and You*.<sup>25</sup>

**Scott Avett:** I pulled some vocal moves that Townes had used on a couple of his songs on [the title track to] "I and Love and You." It was just like a Townes Van Zandt song because it was just verse after verse after verse. I love that because the song moves and never gets hung up on a chorus. That's a true folk or country-folk song. [Producer] Rick Rubin was like, "Man, those two verses are just killing me and I want to hear it again." The song was eight verses, so we cut out two of them, took the sixth and took one and turned it into a chorus, took another and turned it into a concept and theme. So now you have a chorus, a theme-slash-bridge that ends up as an outro, and a whole new, refined song that keeps all the great elements of the verses. It doesn't work for every song, and it didn't work for a couple, but you have to be able to flex as a songwriter.

Townes's depth and despair came out in abstract wording that I relate to quite a bit. My brother [Seth Avett] is quite a formal writer who can write a very well outlined essay, whereas I just never showed the interest in school and kind of floated.

As I developed, I related to Townes because I'm guessing that he developed an orderly fashion about writing songs by default because he just wrote as he felt. Sometimes I hear a line and I think, I don't even know what that meant, but, god, it makes so much sense. I'm in a very direct point of relation with that because I'm living that life and writing songs. I understand the despair that the occupation carries.

Now, his despair came in other ways—the alcoholism and things working against him—that ultimately killed him, but I try to keep that out of the equation. I have a strong family and friend network that really allows that to stay out of the equation. I was reluctant to get into Townes Van Zandt, and for a stupid reason—his name. You know, you hear that name Van Zandt all the time. How many Van Zandts are there, and how easy is it to mix them up? Who needs another folk guy? I tell you, when I engaged him, there's not another writer that I relate to more.

Townes would say stuff like, "This is a pretty song," which could come off as pretty egotistical. You think, "Well, he owns that song, so he shouldn't say that it's so brilliant or so pretty," but those of us who are serious about songwriting know that you're not the writer. [The song] found you, and not the other way. I don't think Townes ever said his songs were pretty because he made them pretty. He's thinking, "This song came to me, and I'm fortunate that it did. It's not mine, but it's a pretty little song, and I'm gonna share it with you."

We make ourselves available to catch the songs when they come. I don't think they're brilliant new things; they've all been regurgitated over and over, but if I wake up in the middle of the night and I can't go to sleep and my family's in my face and I hear a song and I choose not to put it down, that's me neglecting to accept that song. I think there's a very spiritual and godly type thing that happens, and it happens to way more people than we know. It's just that very few of us choose to engage it.<sup>26</sup>

### Jim James

My Morning Jacket's Jim James focuses on less frequently examined angles. While critics and songwriters exhaust superlatives on Van Zandt's lyrics, the Kentucky native finds his natural aura more compelling. "The whole tone of his voice, his delivery, the way it sounds is like a time capsule," James says. "His voice is so sweet, but horrifically depressing at the same time." Many critics believe "Cowboy" Jack Clement overproduced early Van Zandt albums (such as *For the Sake of the Song* and *Our Mother the Mountain*), but James believes the pairing to be timeless.<sup>27</sup>

**Jim James:** We played Austin a lot, and some of my buddies there were always trying to get me into Townes. They kept saying, "You gotta hear this guy, you'll love him." I remember hearing about him and seeing articles, but back then I didn't really know

anything about him. A buddy of mine gave me a 20-song mix in 1999 with a bunch of Townes songs. The first time I listened to it, I didn't like it at all. A few months after that I found the CD again and said, "I'm gonna try this again," and I've never stopped listening to it since. I'm a big sucker for sad songs.

I don't know what drew me to Townes. I find that most of my favorite artists or albums are like that. I'll listen to something and think, "Well, that's okay," and put it back for a few weeks. Then I'll find it again, and it'll hit me. I don't know if I just wasn't ready for Townes or what. Lots of times I think you have to mature before you're ready for something like that. It's just the music, the melody, the production of his songs. I'm big on production, the way things sound. Like the flute on "Come Tomorrow."

I grew up on the band The Red House Painters—really depressing music. I started out listening to country through Hank Williams, Sr., and it was cool to find someone like Townes who was more melodic than Hank, more varied in his songwriting style. You get a funny Townes song like "No Deal," or you get a horrifically depressing song like "Kathleen." There are so many variables, and that's what I like the most about Townes. I think that he is great at conveying sadness, but then he'll have something goofy like "Turnstyled, Junkpiled" that's fun and frolicking.

Lots of times I won't pay attention to lyrics, and I don't pay attention to what the person is saying. I just get sucked into a song because of the way it feels, the dance that the song does. Townes's sad music uplifts you. There's a comfort there, being there and staying in that place: you're there with him, and you get through it.

I have some live albums, and I like that stuff, telling jokes about penguins. I love Townes's words, but for me it's just a feeling from what he does that I like. Something about that time period and the production, like "Turnstyled, Junkpiled," is just in such a neat realm of sound. It's indescribable. It sounds like nothing that's made today. I try to do that in our recordings, too, to keep it sounding as old as possible, but still futuristic.

I've covered "Be Here to Love Me" sometimes, and I like that one a lot. I've really been into "Come Tomorrow" lately just because it's such a sweet song. We tried to cover "No Deal" when I did a solo tour with M. Ward, and we sat around in the basement drinking beers working on it, but we couldn't master the delivery. Like "Tower Song," I would say that most of my favorite Townes songs aren't the depressing ones.

I think the thing that strikes me so much about Townes is that out of all the legends that we have, the legends we all hold up so dear, to me, he's one of the most human, one of the most ordinary people. I think that makes it more special. I just feel like he's touchable somehow. He's such a legend, but he's also a normal guy. Being a musician, you're always trying to—not



replicate, but live up to Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, the Who, Led Zeppelin. Maybe because Townes is a little more current, died so recently, he's more tangible. Just his voice, his delivery I really relate to because it's so human, so real. He doesn't sugarcoat it at all.

In today's world, there's so much emphasis on the physical and looking good and being this persona. In the music industry now all the bands that are popular are either boy bands or pop stars like Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears. They're airbrushed and worked out. Even on the alternative side, you've got the White Stripes that look like supermodels, and they're all dressed right and stylish. I feel like myself and the guys I play with, we're all just normal guys dressed in t-shirts, and we're a little overweight because we drink beer. Townes was just a guy who plays music, and that's where I relate the most. He didn't care about any of that bullshit or about being on magazine covers or going to award ceremonies or having a hot girlfriend. He just seemed like a guy that happened to write fucking amazing songs. That's what makes him so special.

You hear about Townes from people you love and trust, which is what makes it special. You don't see Townes on the cover of *Spin*. People have ways of bastardizing people's legend, focusing on the circumstances around their death or that they're an alcoholic or a drug addict. There's all this hoopla, especially about those who die young like Gram Parsons. I'd rather hear about how they wrote their songs, or what the song meant to them. That's what's important.<sup>28</sup>

### Butch Hancock

For the past 13 years, Butch Hancock has led the Cactus Café's annual Townes Van Zandt birthday celebration on March 7th. "Sometimes a song or two gets repeated once or twice during the night," Hancock says. "We talked about ending this show one time with the 'Snowin' on Raton' contest." The Flatlanders (Hancock's band with fellow Lone Star songwriters Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore) recorded Van Zandt's "Waiting Around to Die" and "Tecumseh Valley" on their *Live at the One Knite, June 8th, 1972* debut, and often perform his "White Freightliner Blues" in concert.<sup>29</sup>

**Butch Hancock:** When Townes played the Cactus Café, the room was packed, and it didn't make any difference if he was on or off. He mesmerized everybody. It was sometimes painful, always melancholy, and it'd reach deep into the heart. He played out the drinking thing a little more than it actually was. He was known to act it out. It eventually caught up with him some, but he was a great prankster and a great spirit.

Our annual birthday tribute has remained about the same structurally. [Cactus Café manager] Griff [Luneberg] keeps asking if I want to do anything differently, and I say, "Nah, let's



ButchHancock. Photo courtesy of [www.valdenn.com](http://www.valdenn.com)

just see what happens." There's not much real planning involved. [Former Van Zandt guitarist] Mickey White usually comes in to play, and we'd have a pretty good evening if it was just the two of us, but so many people who loved Townes and his songs come, and that variety makes it so special. I have a list of about 20 songs that I'm always revved up to do. I realize that some of the folks that come in to sing will pick those, but maybe not, too. Sometimes it's a totally obscure one that I don't know.

It'll just blow your mind sometimes when someone you don't expect goes over the top with one of his tunes. The songs are already up there at the top of the bar, but there are some great surprises. There's extra added attention and love because everyone loves the songs. You take the whole chain of songs, and I wish we could do all of them. There are the popular ones like "Pancho and Lefty" and "If I Needed You," of course, but there are so many other treasures that are more obscure. I guess most Townes fans are familiar with just about all of his songs.

If I knew what was most compelling about Townes's songs, I could make \$1 million in the music business—if I started out with \$2 million. I use the word "melancholy" a lot because his

songs are so face to face with sorrow, but there's a light that you can see. The songs draw you in and take you beyond. That's a rare mark of any kind of art. It pulls you in and sends you out with more than you came in with—and more than you suspected was in there. They work like gateways to other parts of your psyche.

Townes once told me to worry more about a song's tone than its meaning. That's the nature of poetry and art. A lot of people forget that and get caught up in the subject or the craftsmanship of trying to make the words all just right. If you get the tone of the poetry or piece of art right, that's the inexplicable thing. It's either there or it's not. If it is, everything vibrates to that. You'd be amazed. Lyrics can come from anywhere and everywhere if they're matched up to the tone. That's not necessarily the musical tone; it's the atmosphere that sets the resonance. Everything has to come up to that.

People talk about a spiritual relationship with songwriting, but I think you have to be careful by what you mean by "spiritual." I don't think songs come out of the air, but that refers to the nature of our minds. There is a deeper and wider and more all-encompassing part of our mind that sees the whole of existence as one big ball of wax. If a song is put together paying attention to that framework, you're going to have something that resonates. It may not do the same thing for everybody, but it plugs you into the rest of the universe. Townes's songs do that. They sound like a simple little love song at first and then all of a sudden—Zap!—he hits you with a line that makes you look death straight in the face.

Poetry jumps between concepts, one line right up against another. Some things don't seem right up against each other, but you put them there. If the tone is right, then the jump does extraordinary things for your empathy with the work. Townes's songs have a magic to them. They have that tone that invites you in, and you get to experience that atmosphere. Townes would've been 65 this year [2009], and if he were still around he'd probably be doing the birthday gig instead of me.

I don't equate the drinking and that lifestyle with the songwriting. I won't say that didn't create the songwriting, and I won't say that it contributed to it, either. It's like, Have you got a spare tire or not? Well, yeah, I may or may not, but right now, my four good tires have air in them. I guess the question doesn't compute too much for me.<sup>30</sup>

### Jack Ingram

"I first heard Townes's music the same way probably everyone else in the world heard his music," says Jack Ingram, 39. "That's through Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard[']s country chart-topping version of 'Pancho and Lefty'." The Woodlands, Texas, native's early Americana-influenced albums (such as 1997's *Livin' Or Dyin'* and 1999's *Hey You*) proved sturdy stepping

stones on the ladder to Ingram's commercial breakthrough, 2005's *Live: Wherever You Are*.<sup>31</sup>

**Jack Ingram:** Townes was opening for Guy Clark at Rockefeller's in Houston. By the time Townes's set was over, he was just crying. He wasn't even playing music anymore. Guy had to come out and help him off the stage. It was just really sad.

That's what gets lost in translation in the mythical folklore about Townes, and especially in how much he's grown in mythical stature—the real harsh reality about alcoholism. The idea that someone as big as Townes Van Zandt gets reduced to being helped off the stage by an old friend takes some of the fun out of it. Having seen that, for me it's like the cold, hard light of day. All those drinking songs, it gets to the heart of the matter that drinking songs are about pain. That night I saw Townes was before I was playing music out—when I was young, like 17 or 19.

Townes is a Christ-like figure in Texas. He's *the one*. I think that guys like Guy and those he ran with have lifted him up to that stature. They're still around to talk about him. For guys like me coming up, Guy Clark was probably more well known around the scene. Townes was never a mainstream character in the whole Texas music scene, for my generation anyway. I heard more mainstream guys like Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff Walker and Willie Nelson always talking about Townes Van Zandt in these reverential tones. But, as they say, the music business is kind on the dead but hard on the living. Couple that with these guys who are still alive and are legends in their own time talking about Townes in such reverential tones the after his death. He's become *the* songwriter, the poet from Texas.

For me, Townes was one of those guys I'd always heard about but had never listened to very much. Somewhere along the line I heard Guy Clark or Jerry Jeff Walker mention his name in interviews and liner notes, and at some point I went out and got a record, his greatest hits maybe. I took a night, and put it on the headphones, but I listened to Townes Van Zandt for a long time before I got it, before I understood what everyone was talking about.

It wasn't until I was probably 25 years old, driving in a van after playing a gig, that I got it. We were playing at the state fair in Oregon, and we had a 33-hour drive to Minneapolis. I had the post-gig driving shift from 3:00 a.m. until daylight, and I put in Townes Van Zandt. It was like when the light goes on—the same kind of mind-altering moment as when I finally got Bob Dylan's stuff. Everybody's supposed to love Bob Dylan, so you get a Dylan record and you listen to an eight-minute song with all verses and somewhere you get lost. You just kind of pretend to get it, until you have a moment of clarity with that kind of music.

I was driving in Montana or somewhere in the West listening to one of Townes's records. I put it in and the sun was coming up

and I was going 85 miles an hour through Montana, and it was like a light bulb came on. It was like, "Okay, I get it. This is more than music, this is more than words and melody—this is the real stuff. This is as big a message as any writer can have." I don't know what it is. It isn't any single line that gets you. You just know that this guy has a connection with a deeper place. I don't put in Townes to listen to a song; I put it in to listen to him.

Did Townes have an effect on me as a songwriter? Fuck, yeah! I don't pretend to understand to know exactly where he's coming from, but I do understand that he opened himself up to writing. He opened himself up to being led by something else to write the music. And that's what I got from him—to open up, and to write. To let things come out and say things in a poetic way. To not be afraid to use the language that I have.

I think a lot of people don't allow themselves to write in the kind of language that Townes allowed himself to write in. He didn't try to dumb-down the language that he had the ability

more seriously as a recording artist? I'm sure the drinking was part of the creativity on one hand, but I'm also sure that he could have gotten over that. I don't believe for a second that a mind like his, an artist like that needs anything to get to an artistic level that Townes had. And I think that anyone who would say that is just scared.

It's quite possible Townes was scared of success. There's nothing wrong with that. Looking at it that way, it maybe wasn't the alcohol that stunted his being more famous or well known or prolific, maybe alcohol was just a symptom of what was really behind it—being scared. I haven't had time with him on the couch, so I don't know. You can only speculate.

But guys like Townes influence the great songwriters. A guy like me is going to listen to Townes and be influenced by him. A guy like Dylan and like Townes and like Kristofferson—they permeate the fabric of what happens years and years and years from now in the songwriting culture. So, it doesn't matter if his

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What if we could get over wanting to write a hit, and songwriters could write a song, as Townes said, for the sake of it, if they didn't give a shit about somebody knowing their name?

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to use. That's part of what separates him. You can tell he's a poet. He's writing in this other structure, this other kind of poetry. He's melding poetry and folk music, which creates an interesting mix.

"Pancho and Lefty," that's easy to understand. I'm sure you can look at it and find the true poetry in it, but for me that's the simplest song that he has language-wise. If the majority of his work was as simple and easy to hum along to and understand on a surface level, I bet Townes would be a lot better known. I'm a huge fan of music and I'm very open to all kinds of it, and it took me seven years of listening to him to finally feel like, at whatever level I can understand music and poetry, it took me that long to just get to the surface level where I can say, "Oh, my god, okay. I get it." I feel relatively intelligent, and I'm a huge fan of music. Trying to understand it, trying to be a student of the music, it took me that long to get a grasp of what he was doing. That complexity and drinking all the time is probably what kept him from being better known during his lifetime.

I'm not a spokesperson for the evils of alcohol addiction, but I think people can have fantastic periods of inspiration doing whatever they have to do to get it. You do wonder what would happen with a guy like Townes if you'd get him in the studio with a clear mind to do more recording. What if he took himself

name is remembered and well-known 1,500 years from now. It's the fact that what he did is going to be a part of what happens later on. Townes Van Zandt has had a major influence on every songwriter that has picked up a guitar in Texas or Nashville for the last 30 years.

We all want to be remembered by name, but imagine if you could get past that and be remembered instead by deed. Maybe Townes was selfless about that, and that's why he didn't achieve the kind of success that other people look to as watermarks for that. Maybe he really, truly didn't care about that, and maybe that also goes into why he could write the way he did, why he wrote songs that people had to listen to hard to understand. He was writing on another plane. What if we could get over wanting to write a hit, and songwriters could write a song, as Townes said, for the sake of it, if they didn't give a shit about somebody knowing their name?

I see guys today that are great songwriters, but I don't see anyone else writing like Townes. Hayes Carll comes close, and he will get closer. I do think of Hayes as a guy who understands songwriting, understands where you should try to get to write about real, honest emotions. I don't think guys who are trying to take something from Townes and Guy and the real songwriters—Randy Newman, Tom Waits, Kristofferson,



Dylan—at least in my head, I didn't feel that kind of emotion until I was turning 30.

It's hard for me to say blanket statements about Townes. I have mixed emotions about him, his songwriting and his legacy. I know what his legacy is for me, and I think he's influenced the American culture. Think of bands like Wilco or Son Volt or guys like [Bright Eyes'] Connor Oberst, people who are songwriters' songwriters—they'll never mention Townes's name, but you know they've been influenced by him.

I think his legacy as a songwriter will be much bigger than anything I could ever talk about. On a human approach, I think it's sad that he died at such a young age, and basically by his own doing. I think that's a real tragedy. I don't know how you get his mythical status as a songwriter separated from his mythical status of this bullshit that alcoholism fueled his fire. I don't know how you separate those two with a broad stroke so people remember his legacy as this one thing. It's confusing for me, but he's one of the true ones. He's one that will last.<sup>32</sup> ★

### Selected Discography for Townes Van Zandt<sup>33</sup>

- For the Sake of the Song*, Poppy Records, 1968.
- Our Mother the Mountain*, Poppy Records, 1969.
- Townes Van Zandt*, Poppy Records, 1970.
- Delta Momma Blues*, Poppy Records, 1971.
- High, Low and In Between*, Poppy Records, 1972.
- The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, Poppy Records, 1972.
- Live at the Old Quarter*, Tomato Records, 1977.
- Flyin' Shoes*, Tomato Records, 1978.
- At My Window*, Sugar Hill Records, 1987.
- Live and Obscure*, Sugar Hill Records, 1987.
- The Nashville Sessions*, Tomato Records, 1993.
- Rear View Mirror*, Sundown Records, 1993.
- Road Songs*, Sugar Hill Records, 1994.
- No Deeper Blue*, Sugar Hill Records, 1994.
- The Highway Kind*, Sugar Hill Records, 1997.

## Notes

- 1 Brian T. Atkinson, review of *Be Here to Love Me*, directed by Margaret Brown, *Relix*, February 2006.
- 2 Rodney Crowell, interview by author, June 19, 2004: "The last four or five times I saw him, he just wasn't that electric cowboy that he was before," Crowell said. "That always made me really sad." Townes Van Zandt, "Still Lookin' for You," *At My Window*, Sugar Hill Records, 1987: "There ain't much that I ain't tried, fast living, slow suicide."
- 3 Atkinson, "A Cactus Café Legend Remembered," *Austin American-Statesman*, March 7, 2009, F2.
- 4 Stewart Francke, "Townes Van Zandt Interview," *Contemporary Musician*, December 7, 1992.
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- 7 Jesse Dayton, interview by author, November 5, 2008.
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