A LEGEND IN THE SHADOWS

Townes Van Zandt was one of the most gifted singer-songwriters of his time, but he never sought fame, and it never really came his way. Still, during the Outlaw era, he became a songwriting legend, and many well-known artists flocked to record his work.

He was born on March 7, 1944, in Fort Worth, Texas, and his parents expected him to be a lawyer or go into politics. But at age twelve, he saw Elvis Presley perform on television, and “I realized you could make a living just playing the guitar,” he later recalled. His father gave him one for Christmas, and he fell in love with rock & roll and blues music. He also read classic poetry by Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Frost.

In 1965, he enrolled at the University of Houston to study to become an attorney, and he also performed in bars, entertaining the rowdy crowds with funny songs he’d written.

A year later, his father died, and Van Zandt decided to quit school to tour coffeehouses and become a serious songwriter. Within six years, he had recorded six albums on a small record label, filling them with his own brand of country, folk, and blues music. His lyrics were laced with poetry, romance, and storytelling. “A lot of my best songs,” he said, “are where every single word is where it’s supposed to be.”

Though Van Zandt didn’t want to be famous, other artists noticed his gifts. Emmylou Harris and Don Williams, now both Country Music Hall of Fame members, took Van Zandt’s “If I Needed You” to the Top Five in a 1981 duet. Perhaps Van Zandt’s most famous song, “Pancho and Lefty,” became a #1 hit in 1983 for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, also Hall of Famers. Many other artists, mostly based in Texas and Nashville, picked up his songs to record.

Van Zandt never recorded on a major label, and he often lived on little money, spending long stretches at the Nashville home of his closest friends, Guy Clark and his wife, Susanna. He also suffered from alcohol and drug addiction. Eventually, his health declined, and on New Year’s Day 1997, he died, at age fifty-two, in Nashville of a heart attack following hip surgery.

“The only reason Townes stayed alive as long as he did was that he had more songs to write,” said his friend and fellow musician Michael Timmins. “... When those songs were done, it was time for him to go.”

SOURCES
American Songwriter,
Austin City Limits, The New York Times,
Sing Out!, Texas Monthly

LISTEN
“If I Needed You” (recorded by Emmylou Harris and Don Williams)
“Pancho and Lefty”
“Rex’s Blues”