

A LEGEND IN THE SHADOWS

Among the most gifted singer-songwriters of his generation, Townes Van Zandt never sought fame — and popular success never came his way. But during the Outlaw era, he became a songwriting legend, and a legion of well-known artists flocked to record his work.

“He was a songwriter who was both mythic and obscure, a mystery to most of the world,” music critic Paul Zollo wrote, “yet considered one of the greatest by the greats themselves, by artists such as Willie Nelson, Doc Watson, Emmylou Harris, Waylon Jennings, Jerry Jeff Walker, Mickey Newbury and more.”

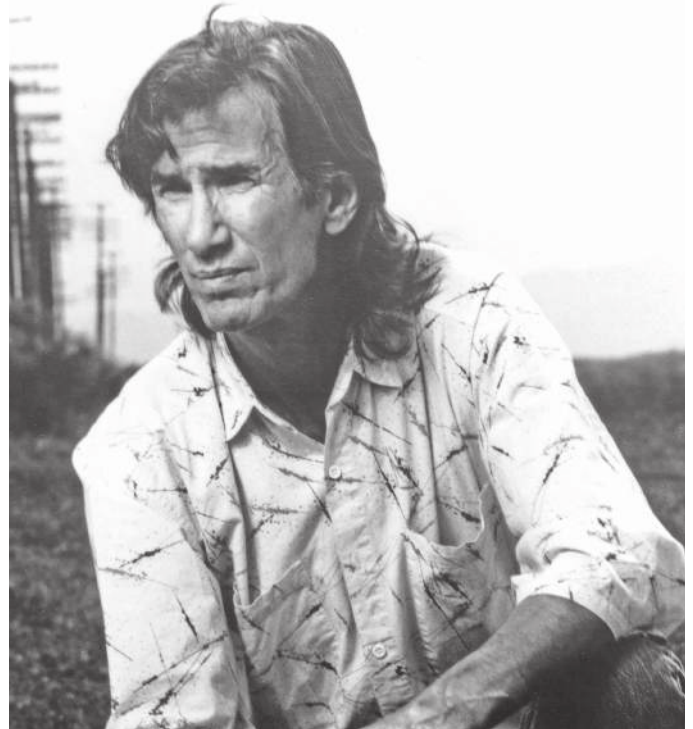
Newbury, a songwriting legend himself, said: “Anybody who can’t recognize the genius of Townes Van Zandt, I don’t want to spend more than five minutes talking to them.”

Born on March 7, 1944, in Fort Worth, Texas, Van Zandt was a member of a prominent local family, and his parents expected him to pursue a career in law or 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 soon became obsessed with rock & roll, as well as blues music. He also soaked up poetry by such masters as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Dylan Thomas.

In 1965, he enrolled at the University of Houston to study to become an attorney, but in his off hours, he performed in local bars, entertaining the rowdy crowds with humorous songs he’d written. Once he heard Bob Dylan’s anthem, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” he changed his focus: “I realized, man, you can write songs that really do make a difference.”

After his father died in 1966, Van Zandt quit school to tour coffeehouses and develop his own blend of country, folk, and blues music. Within six years, he had recorded six albums on a small record label, filling them with songs laced with profound poetry, sweet romance, and sad stories. “A lot of my best songs,” he said, “are where every single word is where it’s supposed to be.”

Though Van Zandt actively shunned fame, other artists took notice of his gifts. When Emmylou Harris saw him play for the first time, she later recalled, “I was stunned. I had really never seen anything like that before. I thought he was the ghost of Hank Williams, with a twist.”



Harris and Don Williams, eventually 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. Van Zandt’s influence spread wide, particularly among Texas- and Nashville-based artists, and many picked up his songs to record.

Van Zandt never recorded on a major label, and he often lived on a shoestring, spending long stretches at the Nashville home of his closest friends, songwriter Guy Clark and his wife, Susanna. Van Zandt was also dogged by bouts of crippling depression, as well as alcohol and drug addiction that he was never able to escape. The substance abuse frequently left him unable to perform. Eventually, his health deteriorated, and on New Year’s Day 1997 in Nashville, he died at age fifty-two 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 Michael Timmins, a member of the band the Cowboy Junkies, which toured with Van Zandt in 1990. “That was the only thing that kept him on this earth. . . . 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”