



“Waitin’ Around to Die:”

The Short Tragic Life of Townes Van Zandt (Part 1)

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(May 29, 2023) This continues the series on Texas Musicians.

It seems that a number of the most talented artists of the world have been plagued by personal demons. Perhaps it is all a part of the creative process, but Hank Williams, Sr. battled alcohol and prescription drug addiction, Charlie Parker eventually died of a fifteen-year clash with heroin, and Elvis Presley, famously, died much too young beleaguered by an addiction to pain pills. Townes Van Zandt, a gifted Texas folk-country singer-songwriter followed the same self-destructive path. Van Zandt was but 52 when he died of a heart attack in 1997, and most of his life was—generously—a tragic mess. But, within that disarray he left us with some of the most poignant and piercing lyrical stylings any artist has penned. Van Zandt’s life and the fact that he was another of those musicians that was hard to pigeon-hole into a specific genre kept him from breaking through into the mainstream of the music industry, but he claimed an almost cult-like following among many of his peers and die-hard fans who hailed him as one of the most iconic musicians to ever take a stage.

John Townes Van Zandt was born on March 7, 1944 to one of the most prominent families in Texas history. Van Zandt County was named for his great-great-grandfather, Isaac Van Zandt, a man who served as the Republic of Texas’ Ambassador to the United States during the second Sam Houston Administration. His family went on to become prominent civic leaders of Fort Worth, serving on multiple boards, as attorneys, and in politics. His name even came from a prominent relative. He was christened Townes for John Charles Townes, his maternal great-grandfather, for whom Townes Hall, the main building at UT-Austin’s Law School, is named. Van Zandt became interested in music when he was nine when he saw Elvis Presley on the

Ed Sullivan Show. He asked for a guitar and essentially taught himself to play. His first wife, Fran Lohr, in an interview called him a “genius” and said that his mother told her that the public schools he attended could not even test his IQ because it was “so high.”

His parents had plans for their son to become a lawyer and probably enter politics, and they began to groom him for such a role early in his life. He enrolled at Minnesota’s exclusive Shattuck Military Academy, and then the University of Colorado-Boulder in 1962, which is where he met Lohr. But, his demons surfaced in Boulder and he began to binge drink and, while mostly a good student, his grades slipped. So, he left UC and came to Houston, where his parents had moved. They checked him into UTMB in Galveston where they received insulin shock treatments to deal with whatever problems they thought he had. They would diagnose him as manic-depressive. Eventually, he enrolled at the University of Houston and he and Fran married.

While taking pre-law classes at UH, he began to play and sing a bit at Houston’s Jester Lounge, where he met and even opened for burgeoning acts such as Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Doc Watson. But most importantly, he met and began to mimic Blues legend Lightin’ Hopkins. This was also when Bob Dylan burst onto the music scene, and his musical stylings led Van Zandt to begin to write his own songs. Still, music was just a hobby for the young Texan, and he was determined to make his parents proud and happy and become a lawyer. But, in January 1966 his father, at just 52 (ironically, the same age Townes would be when he died), died suddenly at the family home. His father’s death hit Townes Van Zandt hard and his life shifted direction. He decided to make music his career. He went on the road playing on shows with Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark. He spent as many as ten months out and away from Fran, although the two would have a son, John, in 1969. The road stoked his creative soul, and he began to write some of the songs that became his signature, such as “Waitin’ Around to Die.” A poignant line in that song was “I guess I’ll keep gambling, lots of booze and lots of rambling/Aw it’s easier than just waitin’ around to die.”

It was a telling lyric because that was essentially what Townes Van Zandt began to do. He traveled to Nashville and cut an album for small independent Poppy Records titled *For the Sake of the Song*. It included the aforementioned “Waitin’ Around to Die,” along with “Tecumseh Valley,” a haunting song about what it must feel like to fight depression, and the gimmicky “The Velvet Voices.” The record was not a commercial success, but it did well enough for Van Zandt to stay on the road, playing mostly small folk and blues venues. It also gave him enough money for booze and a new habit he had acquired: heroin. In between benders and shows he made five albums for Poppy. But the fledgling label did not understand Van Zandt’s true style and genius and they tried to turn his production into over-produced “Nashville Sound” pablum. Still, the lyrics were pure dark Townes Van Zandt. He and Fran finally divorced in 1970, although the marriage was over years before that. He wrote of the depression of lost love, of the vagaries of a rambling lifestyle, and how

there were always some who most people just did not understand. It was during this period that he wrote “Pancho and Lefty” and “If I Needed You.” Still, Van Zandt could not overcome those demons, and he refused to alter his creativity to suit the mainstream of the music business. So, he drifted on the outside of the industry, gathering a cult-like following among a few but obscurity among the many. The difficulties continued to fuel his worst elements, and it would almost kill him in 1971.

Next week: Part Two of the Story of Townes Van Zandt

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