



“Waitin’ Around to Die:”

The Short Tragic Life of Townes Van Zandt (Part 2)

by Scott Sosebee

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

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(June 5, 2023) This continues the series on Texas Musicians.

Throughout the last half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Townes Van Zandt spent most of his time playing music on the road and regularly drunk and high. The drugs and booze were his escape from the demons that lurked in his head, although those demons were also the likely source of inspiration for the music he produced. Those who saw him in those years often left his shows mesmerized by his talent, although equally perplexed by how he so often wasted it. Joe Ely recalled in an interview when Van Zandt died how he met the man who would influence his own songwriting. He said that Van Zandt turned up in Lubbock in 1969 flat broke and trying to find a way to get home to Houston. Ely was twenty-one and he and Jimmie Dale Gilmore had just formed The Flatlanders. He met Van Zandt at a Lubbock club and he said he had never seen someone “so skinny.” He carried a backpack that was full of his latest album, *Our Mother the Mountain*, and he gave Ely a copy. He and Gilmore learned to play every song on the album and from that point on there was a little bit of Townes Van Zandt in every song he wrote and played.

The episode in Lubbock was representative of what Van Zandt’s life had become. A succession of cities, in a succession of small clubs, and spending whatever money he made on alcohol and heroin. That finally caught up with him—for the first but not last time—in 1971. In the fall of that year, he overdosed on heroin and came close to dying. He spent months in a hospital and a rehab facility and moved back into his mother’s house. He recovered sufficiently by early 1972 to once again make music. He moved to Austin and became part of the growing music scene in Texas’ Capital City. He tried mightily to stay clean and sober, but that was a losing proposition for his addictive and troubled personality. He was also something of a

vagabond, moving back to Houston, then Nashville, New York, and then into a small mountain cabin in Crested Butte, Colorado in another attempt to stay sober. His friends tried to help. Guy and Susannah Clark were probably his closest friends and they tried to help ease the pain that caused him to self-destruct. Susannah Clark called Van Zandt “one of the sweetest souls she had ever met,” but also one “hell-bent on self-destruction.” His creativity also slipped during this period, and he did not record another album again until 1975. He mostly became content playing and hanging with unknown folk singers. He became particularly irate at what he called the “snooty Nashville hierarchy.” Ely, who shared Van Zandt’s irritation with the mainstream country/pop music poobahs who reigned over Nashville, shared that Van Zandt would in one breath mock those “Nashville elites,” and then in the next breath cuss them for hindering his success.

While Van Zandt battled his troubles, the compassion of his soul drew him to others who clashed with the same ones he did. His son John spent a year living with his father in Austin, and he told a reporter that his father “surrounded himself with desperate people that he thought he could help.” Friend Harold Eggers recounted how Van Zandt—who was by no means wealthy—“would go down to skid row in whatever town he was in and give most of the money he had to street winos.” He once challenged a young Steve Earle, who was seemingly on the same path as his hero Townes, to “quit ruining your life.” But, he went on, “if that is what you want, let’s get on with it,” and he produced a revolver and began to play a game of Russian Roulette.

He met and married songwriter Cindy Morgan in 1978, but it was another self-destructive relationship, and they would divorce in 1982. The 1980s seemed to offer some promise for Van Zandt. His periods of sobriety became more frequent, and he once again found his creative vibe. He released, *At My Window*, his first album in nine years, in 1987. He married again in that year to Jeanne Munsell, with whom he would have a son and a daughter. He and Jeanne moved to Nashville where Van Zandt made at least an accommodation with the Nashville music grand masters. Other acts began to record his songs: Mudhoney, a pioneer of Grunge Rock, recorded his “Buckskin Stallion Blues” (with guest vocalist Jimmie Dale Gilmore) in 1991, and a Canadian folk group, Cowboy Junkies, brought him on tour with him and also recorded his music.

But Townes Van Zandt was never going to conquer whatever it was that steered his life into gutters. He made an acclaimed tour of Europe in 1990 which held the promise of resurrecting his career. He stayed sober for the entire duration, and he became a star, particularly in Germany. But, by 1993 he was in self-destruct mode once again. His and Jeanne’s marriage broke apart and he notoriously took the stage at La Zona Rosa, in Austin, so drunk that he could not finish a single song. When the show was over, he collapsed and was hospitalized for a week for “exhaustion.” His lifestyle had also caused his music to suffer. His voice,

which had once been haunting but lyrical, had become a thin variation of its former self and halting when he tried to perform. His songs, never ones that would be called cheerful, became even darker. His 1994 “No Deeper Blue” sounded almost like a suicide note. Still, he loved to perform and while he never played large venues, crowds would come to hear him in small clubs, perhaps now, as a spectacle to see what would happen.

Friends tried to get him to stop drinking (he had kicked the heroin habit, at least), but it was useless. He almost died of pneumonia in 1994 because he refused to seek treatment; he was saved only because former wife Munsell checked on him and made him go to the hospital. He was painfully thin and refused to eat most of the time, making small saltines and cheese his meal. On Christmas Day 1996, he fell and broke his hip at his home in Smyrna, Tennessee. He lay outside for more than an hour before he drug his way inside, where he called Munsell. Still, he refused to go the hospital and lingered, in great pain, at Munsell’s home. She convinced him to let her get him to the hospital on December 31, but it was too late. X-rays revealed that he had an impacted femoral neck fracture in his left hip and despite surgery to try to repair the damage he died on January 1, 1997, at the age of 52—a creative but abusive life cut tragically short.

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