



To Live's To Fly: The Ballad Of The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt by John Kruth
[Da Capo Press ; 2007, ISBN 978-0-306-81553-9]

This twenty-seven chapter, three hundred plus page biography seeks to capture the essence of what many consider to be the finest songwriter spawned by the great state of Texas. The author, John Kruth, is a New York based – Greenwich Village actually – folk musician and writer whose published debut in the field of biography focused upon the life of blind jazz musician Roland Kirk [2000 ; ISBN 978-1-566-49105-1].

Kruth succinctly points out in his Introduction, **Still Lookin' For You**, that as his researches into Van Zandt's life progressed he uncovered 'a situation.' Two camps were still engaged in an acrimonious battle over Van Zandt's intellectual property. On the one side stood the Eggers brothers, Kevin and Harold. Kevin founded Poppy Records the label that signed the twenty something Texan back in the latter half of the nineteen-sixties. Townes also recorded for Tomato Records, which surfaced a few years after Poppy, figuratively, 'went up in smoke,' while Harold was Townes' 'on and off' road manager during the closing decades of the musician's life. On the other side of this 'divide,' stood his eldest son John Townes Van Zandt II [b. 1969] and Jeanene Van Zandt, Van Zandt's third wife, mother to William Vincent aka Will [b. 1983] and Katie Bell [b. 1992]. Harold has been labouring on his own Townes biography for over a decade and declined to contribute to this tome. Similarly Susanna Clark, Guy's wife, declined to contribute. Townes, the couple's best man, reputedly, for many years phoned Susanna on a daily basis.

Commencing with **"Live And Obscure"** in 1987, Harold has leased a stream of 'in concert' recordings to a series of small labels. I have to say that as a long time fan of Van Zandt's music, and sadly a purchaser of the aforementioned releases, the eventual repetition of 'pretty much' the same songs merely served, on the one hand, to dilute Van Zandt's legacy. Although a 2005 Austin court decision, and a 2006 agreement between the parties appeared to resolve the matter in favour of the Van Zandt family, fresh litigation was launched early last year. Some wounds never heal!

Having established that he trod on eggshells while composing this tome, in the opening chapter, **Where I Lead Me**, Kruth traces Van Zandt's once moneyed oil-family a bloodline that has featured judges, state legislators, and even a late nineteenth century poet. John Townes Van Zandt was born on 7th March 1944 in Fort Worth and lived there for eight years, before his parents adopted, for a time, a somewhat hobo lifestyle. There was a year spent in the West Texas town of Midland, then four years in Billings, Montana **[+]** followed by three more in the Chicago suburb of Barrington. While living in Billings, Townes witnessed one of Elvis Presley's early television performances and within a matter of months owned his first guitar. His first public performance was at a weekend sock hop in Chicago where he performed tunes popularised by Elvis, Ricky Nelson and Hank Williams.

Aged sixteen Townes was despatched as a boarder to Minnesota's Shattuck Military Academy, where he continued to play music, excelled as an athlete but educationally was an average student. A few years on he enrolled, initially, as an economics major at the University of Colorado in Boulder but following some "wild escapades," during the second semester of his sophomore year, his parents

removed him from college and signed him into a medical facility in Galveston where he underwent three months of electric and insulin-shock therapy.

Drink, drugs and depression subsequently became the bane of VanZandt's life, devils with whom he constantly wrestled. In that regard there's early reflections from his first wife Fran Peterson whom he had met at U.C. in Boulder – the pair subsequently enrolled at U.T. in Houston, and were married in late August 1965 - but Townes abandoned his studies for a career in music when his father, Harris, passed in January the following year [aged 52!]. Chapters 6 through 15 chart Townes' circa 1967 Nashville introduction to Kevin Eggars, the rise and fall of Eggars' Poppy imprint [which he sold to U.A.], and focus in detail on the half dozen albums he cut for the label in as many years. Eggars' resurfaced in 1977 with Tomato Records, released Townes' legendary double album **Live At The Old Quarter** followed a year later by the studio collection **Flyin' Shoes**. During this period, Tomato also reissued five of Van Zandt's earlier solo efforts. Along the way there's mention of **7 Come 11** the 1974 recording that finally saw the light of day almost two decades later, on Tomato, as **The Nashville Sessions**.

During the lost decade 1978-1987, between **Flyin' Shoes** and **At My Window**, Jeanene Munsell arrived in Townes' life [married in March 1983, they remained friends following their 1994 divorce], there's mention of the 'dry years' 1990-92 following which Townes descended into the final abyss of abuse that culminated in his passing on 1st January 1997 [aged 52!]. Townes' final studio album **No Deeper Blue** [1994] was recorded in Ireland and produced by guitarist Phillip Donnelly, plus there's mention of the disastrous Memphis recording sessions in late 1996 overseen by Steve Shelley of Sonic Youth [who declined to contribute to this volume]. By that stage Van Zandt was in agonising pain from an untreated broken hip sustained weeks earlier during his final European tour. In terms of foreign visits, there's brief mention of Townes' 1989 New Zealand tour [p. 242] and while he performed almost annually in Europe/U.K. from the late eighties until his passing, sadly, scant details are furnished. The tale about buying a 'new/used' jacket in a charity shop in York, England during a mid 1990's tour as told to me by musician/tour manager Michael Weston King is amusing and poignant. On a personal note I clearly recall the night Townes signed my copy of the Adephe Records 1972-75 Kerrville Folk Festival double album. Having signed his name next to his photograph and added a Dali style moustache to it, he spotted a picture of the late Kenneth Threadgill. By that photograph he wrote the simple dedication "God bless you Sir." Assuming you're aware of Threadgill's contribution to Texas music, it was one of those goose bump raisin' moments. Gazing through the opaque mist Van Zandt still experienced flashes of crystal clarity.

As for segments of 'padding' in this book that truly disappoint, here's a few examples.....the seven page, third chapter **The Glint Of The Randall Knife** boils down to a blow-by-blow account of a feisty encounter with Guy Clark rather than offering insights [by Clark] on Townes. Where Clark is referenced elsewhere in this work, the quotes appear to be drawn from other sources. In **Welcome To Gnashville**, we learn that Cowboy Jack Clement still owns the Gibson J-200 that Johnny Cash strummed while recording "Ring Of Fire." This two paragraph interlude [pp. 82] raises the question, what relevance to Townes life story? In pp.119 there's mention of the Townes' annual summer pilgrimage to Colorado, but 'no meat' regarding his 'days spent living in the wilderness' are subsequently hung on those bones bar mention of pickin' sessions in Crested Butte in pps. 137-141. Fellow Greenwich Village resident Jack Hardy [the founder and godfather of Fast Folk] once regaled me with tales of the summer days he spent with Townes, one year, after running into him in the unspoilt Colorado wilderness. By my reckoning Jack and John are familiars, yet it's an opportunity missed. Lodged at the end of the biography are thirty pages of Bibliography, a selected Discography, Acknowledgments and an Index.

I found at times the book could have benefitted from tighter editing. Here's a couple of examples....
pp. 33 there's the somewhat repetitious "...and later became known as one of the world's best-known baloonists" could have been worded a little better eliminating one "known."
pp. 34 needless repetition again "...and took it upon himself to call his parents. He called Mr. Van Zandt and asked him....."

Over a decade ago I penned the sleeve notes to eight U.K. reissues of Townes' Poppy/Tomato catalogue. One of the things that had disturbed me during my reseach work was the constant

reference to 'the three d's' [drink, drugs and depression] whenever anyone wrote about Townes. I saw Townes perform on many occasions during the late nineteen-eighties, and was privileged to share an afternoon with him, albeit in the company of others, during the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival. His pécadillos apart, one thing that impressed me that day was his irrepressible sense of humour. During the period I wrote the sleeve notes, I asked musicians who knew Townes for their stories about him. My favourite came from the then New York, now Buenos Aires, based songwriter/recording artist Richard Shindell. Dating from the period before Richard became a performing musician, the following conversation took place in the men's restroom of, that famous New York listening room, The Speakeasy. Shindell was stood facing the porcelain, as guys do, when he noticed Townes in a similar position next to him. Richard struck up a conversation with, *"Mr. Van Zandt I'm a really big fan of your music, would you sing "Flying Shoes"?"* To which Townes replied succinctly *"What? Now?"* Through it all, that Texas born gentlemen possessed a razor sharp wit. Thank the Lord he exercised every opportunity to share it with us.....

I hold the opinion in the period 1968-1972 that Townes had said pretty much said all he had to say lyrically by his fifth Poppy album. Over the ensuing quarter of a century he only recorded five more studio albums featuring material he penned. His catalogue is, however, now peppered with live, historic and 'pseudo studio' recordings that exceed the aforementioned total. By the time I reached the closing chapter of **To Live's To Fly: The Ballad Of The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt**, like the late Danny Sugarman's reflection on the Lizard King Jim Morrison and Ben Fong Torres' take on Gram Parsons, while acknowledging Townes' melodies and words I concluded that in many respects his was a life wasted.

Proof that the road goes on forever, the University of North Texas Press is scheduled to publish the Robert Earl Hardy authored **A Deeper Blue: The Life And Music Of Townes Van Zandt** in April this year. Kruth's book is insightful but it's also incomplete and there lies the rub regarding Townes Van Zandt, the enigma. But then, how do you catch smoke in a bottle?

P.S. I deliberately added a few 'personal Townes reminiscences' to this review.

Note.

[+] – According to the liner **"The Nashville Sessions"** liner notes, the Van Zandt's only spent a couple of years in Billings, followed by another couple in Boulder, Colorado, and less than three years in Chicago. But who knows.....

Arthur Wood.
Kerrville Kronikles 01/08
[1800 words]