

## Townes Van Zandt – I Shall Be Released - catching up with recent developments on DVD and CD, and in print

I have to admit there's a certain degree of tongue-in-cheek humour about the main title of this feature. Irony even. Black humour. In fact, very black humour. The sadness is, I know an injustice is being perpetrated in [and on the] public, but it's leavened by the helplessness of a personal and total Townes addiction. In due course, I intend reviewing a recently released, *full length*, Townes Van Zandt concert DVD and three CD's that have surfaced in the last couple of years which we failed to review in Folkwax at the time, plus have a quick look at other TVZ product about to hit the marketplace. I'd like to think that the royalties from these products are, without nary a hitch, dutifully making their way to his blood heirs – his oldest child J. T. Van Zandt, and Jeanene Van Zandt, Townes' third wife, for the financial benefit of herself and her children, Will [William] Vincent and Katie Belle, but knowing the record industry.....

It's worth noting that during his lifetime Townes released nine *official* studio albums. Half a dozen of them appeared in a burst of activity from 1968 through 1973, "**Flying Shoes**" arrived in 1978, "**At My Window**" in 1987 and "**No Deeper Blue**" was cut in Ireland and released in 1994. "**The Nashville Sessions**," released in 1993, is a *studio album*, cut at Cowboy Jack Clement's Studio, but based on the fold-out liner is of an enigmatically undefined vintage. Apart from "The Spider Song" and the closing cut, "Upon My Soul," the ten other songs appeared on Townes' recordings from 1977 through 1987, although Van Zandt is known to have performed all of the songs in live situations as early as 1974. Considering the pointers I've already provided, I'd say the studio vintage of "**The Nashville Sessions**" was circa the mid-seventies. The live double album "**Live At The Old Quarter**," was released in 1977, but had been cut at this famous Houston songwriter venue, on a *hot summer's night*, during a five-day *residency* by Van Zandt, back in July 1973. A few [more] live recordings trickled into the public domain during Townes' final decade on this mortal coil – five in fact, but since that fateful day when he passed over - January 1<sup>st</sup> 1997, unchecked, the trickle has become a flood. Of course, the signs were already there. Sundown Records, a defunct Austin, Texas imprint released a collection titled "**Rear View Mirror**" in 1993. Darn, if the German imprint Normal didn't reissue it in 1996, upping the track count from the original seventeen to twenty. Same title, different track listing. Initially a 2000 copy limited edition the late 1996 European release "**Abnormal**," was reissued in 1998 bearing the same name [by the same label], but containing three different tracks. A music fan and his hard earned cash can easily be parted.....he can be confused, misled even.....but *the big issue* remains, was *the piper* actually being paid?

OK, before moving on, let's summarise, by the time he passed, sixteen albums bearing Townes name, had appeared in a span of almost thirty years.....

Since his passing, and *totally ignoring the [scurrilous], almost daily, repackaging of his official catalogue* – in particular, those releases dating from 1968 through 1978, no less that a dozen further CD recordings bearing Van Zandt's name alone [+], have surfaced in the public domain in a span of eight years. Of those releases, eight have been live recordings, of varying worth and sound quality, one was a radio interview with music [\*], and three have been based on previously unreleased studio cut material. If I had to pick out any of the foregoing for praise, they would be Dualtone's "**A Gentle Evening With Townes Van Zandt**" recorded at Carnegie Hall in November 1969, and Compadre's "**In The Beginning**"- basically Van Zandt's 1966 Nashville demos recorded by Cowboy Jack but rejected for commercial release at the time. The most curious of the latter gaggle, "**Texas Rain – The Texas Hill Country Recordings**" appeared in 2001. Townes often talked, in his later years, about his "*pension fund recordings*" or his "*kids college fund recordings*." They were one and the same. To my knowledge some sixty-duet tracks were recorded [of Townes songs already available in the public domain] with some fifty or so performers involved in the project – many of them major folk and country performers - yet a mere dozen cuts have seen the light of day [so far]. Theoretically "**Texas Rain**" was the first of a set of, possibly, five discs, but we've seen nothing more. Have the tracks been conveniently lost? One thing is certain, don't tell me they never existed.....

During his lifetime Townes had a penchant for re-recording songs, even on his studio releases, so in the league table of folk/country singer/songwriters, TVZ never was a prolific scribe. A Woody Guthrie with chests full of surplus lyrics he was not. I'd contend that he had musically pretty much stated all he was going to say by the time his sixth release, "**The Late Great Townes Van Zandt**," appeared in 1973. Furthermore, has anyone released an album with a more premeditative title? I came to the latter

conclusion when researching and penning the sleeve notes for eight Van Zandt reissues back in the early months of 1997. The latter is a writing job over which I now harbour mixed feelings. Despite drawing the foregoing conclusion, it didn't deter me from buying every subsequent Townes release, while in the process retaining conscious knowledge of whether it was sanctioned by Van Zandt's estate or not!

Having got all of the foregoing off my chest, let's look at those four items I mentioned earlier. The first is a DVD titled "**Houston 1988 – A Private Concert**," filmed in 1988, in the early hours of the morning, in a room in a Houston, Texas, Holiday Inn. If only Holiday Inns knew which room, and which hotel, they could put a plaque on the door. Just think of the revenue potential guys.....hey, even you can jump on the Townes gravy-wagon. There's plenty of room [unintentional pun]!

The camera set-up on the DVD up is pretty basic, and filming is credited to Austin cameraman/videographer Hank Sinatra. It's mostly left profile, head on and right profile. Sadly there's no 5.1 Dolby sound, in fact no Dolby – there's audible tape hiss throughout [if you crank up the volume], and variable quality of sound across the seventy-minute duration. Of the fifteen songs that Townes performs, they include selections from his 1968 debut disc, namely "Tecumseh Valley" and "I'll Be Here In The Morning," through to "Snowin' On Raton," "The Catfish Song" and "Buckskin Stallion Blues" which made their recorded debut on "**At My Window**," the year before this video was made. What the listener expects to gain at a concert apart from live performance of, probably, already familiar music is an insight into why the person wrote the song. There are a few instances of that sprinkled through this set. Townes reveals that "You Are Not Needed Now" which first appeared in 1972 on "**High, Low And In Between**" was written about Janis Joplin who had died in 1970, while "Nothin'" was written after reading Nikos Kazantzakis 1955 novel, "**The Last Temptation Of Christ**." Translated into English in 1960, "Nothin'" was written by Townes around 1971, while Martin Scorsese's film of the same name was released in 1988, a fact he alludes to, albeit indirectly, before performing the song. Having seen him perform on a number of occasions, Townes could be humorously sharp – but this is, curiously, a *joke free set*, and he was equally prone to drift off into pointless narratives – there's precious little sign of that. At one stage between songs, he has to ask what the next title is – and then performs "No Lonesome Tune." Book-ending the DVD, and filmed post 1997, is an opening introduction by Harold Eggars Jr., while at the close there are personal reminiscences of Townes by Austin based performers Barb Donovan, Larry Wilson and Calvin Russell. The former trio also, respectively, perform Van Zandt's "Come Tomorrow," "Kathleen" and "Mr. Mudd And Mr. Gold." Donovan and Van Zandt cut a duet of the latter's "I'll Be Here In The Morning," and the track plays over the closing credits. The track turned up on the 1997 European release "**Documentary**" [and on the Varese Sarabande version of "**Live At McCabe's**"]. The 2000 DVD release "**Heartworn Highways**," based on James Szalapski's 1977 documentary, contained footage of a young Townes, and further backstage/performance footage was appended to a 2CD, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of "**Live At The Old Quarter**" released in Europe in 2003. For a start, the 30<sup>th</sup> Edition related to the recording date, and not the original release date! - while the four segments of Mpeg video footage lasting less than nine minutes were poor in picture and sound quality [hand held, audience camera] as well as in content. Slated at one stage for review in Folkwax, and actually penned, in consultation we decided to withdraw the album review thereby not supporting an example of what I described earlier as *the [scurrilous], almost daily, repackaging*. The rear liner of that CD reissue included the poignant, "*We strongly felt that we had to share these amateur recordings in spite of the quality*" – yeah right, and make a buck at someone else's expense!

The trio of CD releases I referred to earlier, in order of appearance, are "**Acoustic Blue**" [2003] featuring fourteen, mostly live, European recordings dating from 1994 and 1996, and from 2004 "**Rear View Mirror, Volume II**," featuring eighteen live recordings made Stateside between 1976 and 1979, and "**Live At The Jester Lounge, Houston, Texas 1966**." The former pair being respectively Tomato and Varese Sarabande [#] releases, they each bear a production credit of some form to Harold Eggars Jr. The four cover songs and eleven Van Zandt originals on "**Acoustic Blue**" – "Waitin' Round To Die" and "Kathleen" are performed as a segue - have all appeared in the public domain on previous recordings. As for "**Rear View Mirror, Volume II**," there are six cover tunes and thirteen Townes originals – a first time on disc performance of the traditional "Jole Blon," and yes, another segue, although a similar summation can be made of the contents. I guess the question arises, how often is Joe Public prepared to buy *retreads* of the same *old tyre*? **This almost incessant repetition is eroding the reputation of a unique musician.** And doubtless none of these words will staunch the flood.....

Finally, let's have a quick look at the "**Jester Lounge**" recording another Normal/Eggars project. In terms of overall chronology, it competes with the 1966 studio cuts on Compadre's "**In The Beginning**," and features live renditions of Townes' "Colorado Bound" and "Black Crow Blues" from that collection. Van Zandt's "Talkin' Karate Blues" turned up on his *official* debut "**For The Sake Of The Song**" [1968], "Talkin' Thunderbird Blues" on the legendary "**Live At The Old Quarter**," and Lightnin' Hopkins "Hello Central" on the live set "**Road Songs**" [1992]. Of the eight remaining cuts, it's an equal split between cover songs and Townes' originals. In the former category, there's "Cannon Ball Blues" [A. P. Carter], "I'm So Lonesome [I Could Cry]" [Hank Williams], "Trouble In Mind" [Richard Jones] and "T For Texas" [Jimmie Rodgers]. The humorous "Talkin' Birth Control Blues," plus "Louisiana Girl Blues," "Mustang Blues" and "Badly Mistreated Blues" have never appeared previously on disc, and are best thought of as *student pieces*. Despite the latter reservation, this recording succeeds in providing us with further insight into Townes where many of his releases, post 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997, have *abjectly* failed.....

One issue arises with regard to the latter release, it's my understanding that Harold Eggars Jr.'s first association with Townes, as road manager, began in the mid-seventies.

Elsewhere in the *seemingly never-ending* vault of Townes memorabilia, on Jeanene Van Zandt's site, Townes Van Zandt Central [ <http://www.townesvanzandt.com> ] you can purchase an almost two hour long DVD & video of a *full* Townes concert performance dating from 1991, titled "**Townes Live In Amsterdam**." The almost one hundred minute long Margaret Brown documentary "**Be Here To Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt**," her debut feature as a director, was premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September last year, and subsequently picked up by Chris Blackwell's Palm Pictures. It is due to be shown in theatres Stateside this summer, and a DVD release will follow. The film not only includes contributions from *the late great legend*, but Willie Nelson, Steve Shelley from Sonic Youth, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earle, Guy Clark and Kris Kristofferson. Also due in the summer of 2005, we'll be able to read, what, no doubt eventually, will become a handful of Townes tomes. It was written by John Kruth, author of the "**Texas Rain**" CD sleeve notes, and a Greenwich Village musician, poet and writer. Titled "**Rain On A Conga Drum**" and subtitled "**The Ballad Of The Late Great Townes Van Zandt**," in 1991 the Dutch SilenZ label issued a live German recording bearing the former name, while you'll recall that "**The Late Great Townes Van Zandt**" was the title of the Texan's sixth solo release.

And finally....please don't tell your mother, your grandma or even your prudish maiden aunt that I gave you this, but if you want a practical explanation of the *irritation* that really underpins this feature, go to [http://ippc2.orst.edu/coopl/tvz\\_dead\\_not\\_buried.html](http://ippc2.orst.edu/coopl/tvz_dead_not_buried.html) or [http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/dispatch/2002-06-14/music\\_feature.html](http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/dispatch/2002-06-14/music_feature.html) and read on.

#### **Note.**

[+] – In constructing this feature, I've ignored the 2001 American Originals release "**Together At The Bluebird Café**," a 1995 live recording, featuring Townes, Guy Clark and Steve Earle.

[\*] – It was titled "**Documentary**" in Europe, and "**Last Rights**" in the States.

[#] – "**Rear View Mirror, Volume II**" was released by Normal Records in Europe.

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[2300 words]