

Bill Hedgepeth

Hearing Townes Van Zandt

Now I know all about you and how you like to put on as if you're familiar with everything that's current, but in order for us



to proceed past this sentence and get down to serious talk, it's going to be necessary for you to come right out and just admit in all honesty that you have not heard the name "Townes Van Zandt." Or if by chance you have, you're still probably unable at this point to say for sure whether it's a person, a suburban housing development or a new brand of mentholated cigarettes. Well I'm here to tell you.

Townes Van Zandt is an angular, 28-year-old Texas-born singer-songwriter who somehow lives completely on the outside — of almost everything. I suppose what makes him "relevant" here in the journalistic sense is that in spite of the fact that he exists in a manner so out of step with the standard flow of life, there nevertheless seems to be something inevitable about him — and I don't quite know what.

For one thing, he is possessed with a strange and inherent gentleness (strange, because it's so rare, if not actually out of place, in an adrenalin-driven culture like this one). Second, he regards himself vaguely as a "folk singer" at a time when folk singing is officially passe and records his work on a label you probably never heard of. And finally, he's a genuinely rootless soul, a full-time road person who lives nowhere, who owns only what he can carry in his hands, and who does what he does at those stop-over

points between his comings and his leavings.

And what it is that he does is this: Townes Van Zandt (appearing this week at the Bistrotro) writes the absolutely finest and most hauntingly poetic songs you can possibly hear or hope to wrap your mind around. He's the best there is. And that's a fact.

At the moment, the whole music scene — like most everything else — is languishing along in the doldrums, what with Johnny Cash now intoning jingles for an oil company and what with rock music having devolved to the level of repetitious honks & gronks designed merely to serve as background vibrations for crowds of stoned young hairballs.

Thus, at a time such as this when no one seems to be listening, any performer who, by his lyrics alone, can induce an audience to shut up and stop smoking is either an outright mystical phenomenon or awfully damn good. And this is what Van Zandt does, and is. He unfolds himself, and even the most callous dopesucker is impelled to sit transfixed and awe-struck.

Townes performs entirely alone and sings, for the most part, about aloneness — songs of delicate and unstudied eloquence that almost invariably have to do, in one way or another, with leavings or partings or, at best, brief stays before going somewhere else.

And you sit and you listen and you change, because after a while the images he paints begin to seep inside and weave themselves together. And before long, before you are able even to become conscious of it, Townes Van Zandt has suddenly managed to sing you back to someplace deep within yourself: someplace filled with the hollow echoes and dark reverberations of aloneness. Which is where you first started out. And where, in all likelihood, most of you still remains.