Songwriting legends to perform

Musicians make Texas tradition a state of mind

By Don McLeece
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Texas school of songwriters, lesson No. 1: My advice to anybody who asks is to just get a guitar, live with it, learn how to play it, sleep with it, and blow everything else in your life off - family, security, money, comfort, everything," offered Townes Van Zandt. "That's kind of hard advice to take, but it's the only way I can think to do it."

Like his advice, the hardest truths are often deceptively simple, or at least plain-spoken, in the music of Townes Van Zandt. Those truths will be manifest (and manifold) Saturday at the Texas Union Ballroom, where Van Zandt will share the bill with Guy Clark and Robert Earl Keen Jr. The show is a celebration of the Texas singer-songwriter, a continuity that stretches from Van Zandt and Clark - sometimes since they began performing professionally more than two decades ago, though the two write from very different perspectives - through a younger generation that encompasses the likes of Keen, Lyle Lovett, James McMurtry, Nanci Griffith and Steve Earle.

The deeper one probes into this notion of the Texas singer-songwriter, the more it seems like a state of mind rather than a matter of geography. Van Zandt and Clark remain the deans of the Texas singer-songwriters, though both are based in Nashville these days. For all his artistry, Rodney Crowell, originally from Houston, is rarely grouped with the Texas school (except when he writes with Clark), while Austin's Jerry Jeff Walker, a refugee from New York, is practically the archetype of the modern Texas troubadour.

What is the Texas tradition? From the story-telling at cowboy campfires there remains a strong narrative thread. From the rural dances that were major social gatherings there remains a ritual of music as sharing, as entertainment. Even the most personal material from Texas songwriters contains a little of the tower-tower introspection that so often marks other self-styled song poets.

What mainly distinguishes the tradition of Texas singer-songwriters, however, is a rugged individualism, a perspective that belongs to each alone. As Texas songwriters, what Van Zandt, Clark and Keen mainly share is a common respect for each other.

"They're my favorite writers, far and away," said Clark. "To me, he kind of transcends songwriting. He's just coming from a place, where his mind works in a wholly unique way. You know, that right-left brain thing, that sort of alpha state you get into where you don't really know where it's coming from."

Van Zandt's songwriting style and rugged individualism, as well as great respect for each other's abilities, to the Texas Union Ballroom Saturday.

Though he hasn't released a studio album of new material in almost four years, Van Zandt has been busier than ever over the last year. He has almost finished recording new versions of 60 older songs (including a duet with Freddy Fender on "Punchy and Lefty") for a multi-CD anthology on the recently revived Rounder label. For all the success that he has enjoyed placing songs with others - Jerry Jeff's versions of "Demide Waiting For A Train" and "L.A. Freeway," Ricky Skaggs' hit with "Heaven and Jenny's" and Johnny Cash's cover of Texas 1967 foremost among them - songwriting remains a personal affair for Clark.

"I mainly write for my own amusement, expression and pleasure," he explained. "I have no reason to go out and play for the folks unless I have new songs I've written, and I have no reason to write new songs unless I'm going to go out and play them."

Though he admits that he's more likely to rely on what he calls "the tricks of the trade" than Van Zandt might, he has no formula for writing a popular favorite like his "Homecoming Troubadour." It's "That's the kind of stuff you can't make up," said Clark, who wrote the song while he was sitting on his porch, gazing at his tomato patch. "It just happens. Sometimes they just roll out unexpectedly, and sometimes they take a lot of work, a lot of concentration, just getting up every day and doing it."

"Demide Waiting For A Train" took three or four weeks of working at it every day. As for Keen, the new kid on this songwriter's block, he's been overshadowed by the success of his college buddy Lyle Lovett (with whom he wrote "The Front Porch Song") and misrepresented as something of a musical functioning Joe. His West Texas album from 1989 remains a minor masterpiece of Texas songwriting. Even the humorous songs have a serious edge to them and highlights such as "The Best Use On Forever and Lore's A Word I Never Threw Around" reflect the range and depth of his artistry. He hopes to record a followup this year.

At the suggestion of Steve Earle, Keen left Austin for Nashville in the mid-'80s, where other buddies such as Lyle and Nanci Griffith were finding encouragement for their singular styles. To his frustration, he wasn't really in the manner his friends had been, and he soon returned to Texas, though his booking and publishing still goes through Nashville.

"In retrospect I realize I was being a bit naive, but the first doors I walked into they told me that something would happen, I stuck around for five years," he said. "And I told them there's no way. People like Nanci and Lyle - who

Continued on Page 10