Sink-ing ‘no deeper’

Van Zandt hangs in the real balance between melancholy and redemption

Van Zandt, a man who has spent most of his life seemingly disappearing from view.

Though he is acclaimed as the laconic, ironic dean of an entire generation of Texas and Nashville songsmiths, and although songs such as Backskin Sudlers, Poncho and Lefty, Tecumseh Valley, For the Sake of the Song and If I Needed You stand as indelible monuments of the songwriter’s art, their creator remains strangely insubstantial.

It’s easy to envision Van Zandt as one of those dusty, Depression-era balladeers such as Woody Guthrie or Jimmie Rodgers, a lanky man with a guitar on his back, a freight train schedule wrapped around a pint of whiskey in his pocket, and the grim shadow of TB or Hodgkin’s disease haunting his dreams. Straddling the line between the blues and country music, such men conjured up a raw poetry that shimmered with glorious dreams and moaned with irremediable despair.

“I’m never gonna be a Conway Twitty,” Van Zandt said ruefully one time, and he was right, in terms of being a conventional, accessible show-business success. Why else would he title one album Live and Obscure and another The Last, Great Townes Van Zandt?

He was born in Fort Worth in 1944 and moved to Houston in his youth, where he fell in with two other bedridden Bayou City musicians, Guy Clark and Mickey Newbury. Folk music was the name of the game back then, in the early ’60s, but Van Zandt drew much of his musicianship and inspiration from local bluesmen such as Lightnin’ Hopkins.

Van Zandt, Clark and Newbury all emigrated to Nashville in the latter part of the decade and set up shop, a bohemian Texas trio, marooned in the land of Nudie suits and Minnie Pearl jokes. Van Zandt’s first album, For the Sake of the Song, was released in 1968.

Van Zandt has cut nearly a dozen albums since, though much of his early catalog remains out of print. But a lasting affiliation with Sugar Hill Records has resulted in four releases: 1987’s At My Windows, which mixed new and vintage material; 1989’s Live and Obscure; last year’s live album of cover tunes, Road Songs; and the

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