The shadowy poetry of Townes Van Zandt

It might be that the only real legends are people you’ve never heard of, people like Townes Van Zandt.

Van Zandt is a thin, hard-looking man who has spent more than half of his 59 years on the road, singing big songs in little rooms and sometimes sleeping on the stage afterward, hotel rooms being a luxury.

He’s had a few moments in the sun — Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard had a hit with his brilliant “Pancho & Lefty” — but Van Zandt is more often found in the shadows, where he seems most comfortable. Although his music now includes a wife and two children, he still hangs around those shadows.

Van Zandt has said that he writes songs because he can’t do anything else as well, not because he’s chasing spotlight and gold records. His songs certainly don’t cater to the Top 40. “Pancho & Lefty” was a fiscal, owing much to star power. Van Zandt’s songs are for those who look for something real — hard-earned knowledge delivered via precise poetry. Some are so good they don’t need a voice.

To write a Townes Van Zandt song, “You’ve got to be in the right frame of mind and the proper physical and mental preparation at the proper time.” Van Zandt said, somewhat cryptically, in a recent interview, “Sometimes it’s real easy, sometimes it’s craftsmanlike.”

“Some or later it always takes some craftsmanship, but you’ve got to be prepared to be hit on the road. Some songs come from above, some sideways, and some from below. But in the end, you’ve got to rely on yourself, in a dark room, in the middle of the night.”

Van Zandt talks slowly, flashing a shy, dry wit. After a while, you can tell he’s a man who has gained perspective.

Van Zandt was born into a prominent Texas family. His family is full of lawyers and statesmen, with buildings named after them. There’s even a Van Zandt County in East Texas.

“All that staff I don’t care anything about,” he said.

Van Zandt’s personal legend, though, was born of a hard life. Maybe the best way to put it is that he’s always endured: time spent in a mental hospital as a teen-ager; diagnosed as a manic-depressive with schizophrenia, a drug of refection and Gaines Burgar during the leanest years of his career; critical praise as opposed to paydays; countless stories of hard drinking complicated by endless bouts of even harder thinking.

Some people turn such a life into melodrama. Van Zandt had enough sense to turn his into art. His best songs — and there are a lot of them — explore and expose the human condition with painful honesty. The lyrics read well enough, with just the right touch of poetry. But, when sung by Van Zandt in that 600-year-old-sounding voice, well, sir, it’s enough to turn your knees.

“Living’s mostly waiting time, and I waste my share of time, but it never feels too good.” Van Zandt sings in “To Live Is To Fly.”

Van Zandt’s songs are almost always surprising and sometimes stunning. In “Pancho & Lefty,” Van Zandt draws a parallel between a Mexican bandit and a Midwestern drifter, showing how we’re all close to being either tall tales or forgotten.

“Livin’ on the road, my friend, was gonna keep you free and clean. Now wear your ash like iron, and your breath’s as hard as kerosene.”

“Two words can be poetry, and, if you add one note on a guitar, you’ve got a song,” he said. “It’s not nearly as difficult as everybody thinks.”

For the past few years, Van Zandt’s records have been hard to find. He recorded for a European label until last year, when North Carolina’s Sugar Hill signed him. The result was “No Deeper Blue,” which lives up to the standard. So, too, but Van Zandt could have written a song like “Bobby and Ma,” about a thief (Billy), his dead skeletal partner (Bony) and a kind old woman they try to rob, except that Bobby talks a lot.

That one sounds as if it came from somewhere, above and below, all at once.

Van Zandt performs Friday night at the Macademy Theatre, 315 W. Broadway, with Guy Clark headlining (8 p.m., $13.50). They’ll also be at Lexington’s Kentucky Theatre, 214 E. Main St., Thursday night (8 p.m., $15.00).