Eccentric Townes Van Zandt Veers Into Extremes In Concert

By Chris Dickinson
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SINGING SONGWRITERS sometimes can be a dicey proposition. But Townes Van Zandt is a sensitive singer-songwriter who can reduce even the hardened critic to tears.

It took him a while to hit his stride Thursday night at Off Broadway, but those who were willing to weather his ups and downs were amply rewarded. Best known for covering the Merle Haggard/Wife Series for “Pancho and Lefty,” Van Zandt is an eccentric Texan who sometimes veers between extremes in a like setting.

This night was no different. Rarely does a man with grey hair, nearly combed uncombed during his first set. Sitting on a stool with a guitar in his hands, Van Zandt was a study in how fragile a thing genius can be.

His normally trucked but moving storytelling fell into disconnected rambling. As much as I honestly adore this man, it was painful watching him try to pull himself together during this wildly uneven show. Although he eventually made it through decent renditions of “The Dairy Hill Blues” and “Two Girls,” it was a set that never lifted off into true Van Zandt style magic.

All of this made his second set another sort of study — the sort where you finally learn why fellow Texas songwriting legend Guy Clark and Billy Joe Shaver consider him one of our great American original.

“Do you remember if I told you (yep!)?” he asked, looking out into the darkness. When told to try the true blue fans who hadn’t left Van Zandt bore down into the song with quiet conviction, and there wasn’t a sound in the house besides the quiet patter of rain on the roof.

From then on out, he never once lost his grip on that fragile, heartbreaking space all of his songs inhabit. His hoarse, dirt-simple voice and twitchy picked guitar gave life to his range talents.

In the folk-ballad “Tennessee Valley,” the distinctive girl singer worked the crowd into a fierce proclamation, and did well in the midst of those harrowing lyrics. Van Zandt flawlessly segued into a stark version of the Rolling Stones’ “Dead Flowers.” This piece summed up Van Zandt’s unique métier — he never ever shies away from telling the truth, as painful as it may be.

But telling the truth is such a raw human emotion that Van Zandt has paid for it. In this night we heard on his lined face and shaky manner, which is why any fan approaches one of his shows with enormous patience.

It’s easy enough to spend your money on safer, less demanding acts, the ones that won’t shatter your sleep at night. But Van Zandt is an honest, original artist. You can’t pick him. You can’t package him. When the moment is right in an intimate room, he creates magic out of great internal pain. And the vision that vulnerable brilliance, is worth the lost sleep.