

He's worth the listening

Townes van Zandt's eccentricities grow on you

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Townes van Zandt, who ends a three-night stand at Steamboat 1874 tonight, is an acquired taste. To the uninitiated, his music can seem terminally laid-back, verging on somnolence. His lyrics can seem impenetrable, his stage-presence something that sets you to itching. But listen to him enough, and something can click in your brain. You view the familiar Texas landscape as if it were Mars, and odd people surround you, playing cards and drinking whiskey. Couplets like "Loretta is my barroom queen/Wears those sevens on her sleeve" make perfect logical sense. Sure, you say, nodding sagely. Knew a gal once had threes.

Needless to say, Townes Van Zandt is not tearing up the charts, nor is he selling out the Special Events Center. The cosmic cowpeople have always seemed to regard him with ambivalence, as if to say, nice guy, but a little, you know...weird. Not that this has kept them from recording his songs, the most notable example being Emmy Lou Harris' waxing of "Pancho and Lefty." So what you have here is a classic case of the unjustly-neglected artist.

It's a real shame. As he proved Thursday night, he is a fine — albeit low-key — entertainer, pacing his sets perfectly, and interspersing his own songs with inspired choices of others', including an unrecorded Joe Ely song, "The Indian Cowboy," Ernest Tubbs' "Blue Christmas," and a brilliant reading of Bruce Springsteen's "Racing in the Streets" that omitted the last verse, the pretentious one that's always ruined the song for me.

The real feature of the show, of course, is Townes' own songs. It's hard to say what most of them are about, although there's certainly never any problem understanding them when he's singing them. Thursday's standouts included "To



Laid-back Townes van Zandt

Live Is To Fly"; "Pancho and Lefty"; a song about poker in which the cards take sides and war against each other called "Mr. Gold and Mr. Mud"; a Texas landscape entitled "Snowing On Raton"; and

"Two Girls," which gets my vote for the weirdest, most affecting song of the evening, launching off into lyric territory lesser men would flee.

This time out, van Zandt is ably accompanied by Rooster Roland on second guitar and Jimmy Gray on bass (and lead vocal on Lefty Frizzell's "Always Late"), and the interplay between them ("We can't deal with life, but we can play!" Townes quipped at one point) is something to watch. Townes himself never seems quite comfortable on stage, telling odd jokes ("Time flies like an arrow, but fruit flies like a banana.") which elicit a mild response from the audience and occasionally just drifting off into space.

None of this sounds like a recommendation, but it is. Townes van Zandt's eccentricities, his haunting songs, and his strange stage-presence add up to something very special. His music is completely unique — it's not progressive country, Dylanesque folk music, or L.A. singer/songwriter stuff — and few performers working today can equal the impact of his best songs. His obscurity is as much his fault (he rarely tours, almost never outside Texas when he does, and he's never, as far as I know, been to either New York or California) as anybody's, yet now that he's out from under a recording contract that aided and abetted that obscurity, maybe his odd vision will spread to the rest of the country. He's certainly got the respect of some of the best local songwriters (Butch Hancock and Jimmy Gilmore were there Thursday, and all kinds of people have been known to show up to watch him), and that's a start. Until he becomes better-known, thank your stars that you can see him tonight, and then go off and do it. At worst, you'll be puzzled and happy.