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# 'Poet Laureate of Texas' Rambles Into Music City

By ROBERT K. OERMANN

The lost sheep of the songwriters' fold returns to Nashville this week.

Townes Van Zandt has been described as "the father of Texas folk," "the premier poet of the time," "the best writer in the [country] genre," and "the most influential songwriter to come out of Texas." One of the few figures in modern music who is truly a cult figure, Van Zandt is a classic example of the rambling troubadour.

He's a sterling specimen of the breed. Possessed of a madman/poet's charm, a quixotic nature, a pixilated outlook, and a sideways view of life, Townes Van Zandt has spent much of his quasi-legendary career disappearing from view.

He's released eight brilliant LPs, all critically-acclaimed but impossibly hard to find. He's a

mesmerizing live performer who is one of the lonely few maintaining the coffee house folk tradition.

"It looks like I'm forever gonna be a folk singer," he said during a phone conversation last week. "I'm never gonna be a Conway Twitty."

In a 90-mile-an-hour world, Van Zandt retains a quiet, calm, courtly pace. Although renowned for his crazy, carousing barroom escapades he seems to speak from a well of infinite gentleness, tenderness and wisdom.

The Texas native has spent several sojourns in Music City as a "songwriter's songwriter." For years, though, the only business figure who cared enough to promote him was manager/publisher/journalist John Lomax III, the man who kept him on disc and in the public eye. Even he couldn't resist titling a 1973 LP by the brilliant-but-perpetually-obscure entertainer *The Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*.

City that his commercial breakthroughs began to come.

He'd long since returned to Texas when Emmylou Harris and Don Williams took his *If I Needed You* to the top of the country charts in 1981. Two years later lightning struck from out of the blue when Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard chose his *Pancho & Lefty* as the title tune, hit single, and centerpiece of their duet LP. Van Zandt had a cameo role as one of the *federals* in the subsequent music video of the song which played in movie theaters coast to coast.

A typically ambitious tunesmith would have capitalized on the hot hit and immediately blazed up and down Music Row with tapes of other potential hits. Not Van Zandt. He spent the whole time his name was on everyone's lips in Nashville holding up in Texas, peacefully organizing his business affairs.

"*Pancho & Lefty* brought everything to a head, what songs go where and all. Nobody knew who owned what. I've finally got my business straight. As of 20 days ago, my song publishing is "open." In other words, one of America's greatest living song poets is up for grabs when the prodigal son returns to Nashville.

"I'm not as prolific, but I still write a bunch. There are a lot of

Slowly, achingly slowly, performers began to discover his brilliant songs. Folkies Steve Young (*No Place To Fall*), Robin & Linda Williams (*None But the Rain*), and Doc Watson (*If I Needed You*) were first.

But it wasn't until Van Zandt forsook the wilds of Williamson County and the misery of Music

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