

Eccentric Townes Van Zandt Veers Into Extremes In Concert

By Chris Dickinson
Post-Dispatch Pop Music Critic

SENSITIVE singer-songwriters can often be a dime-a-gross proposition. But Townes Van Zandt is a sensitive singer-songwriter who can reduce even the hardest 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 penning the Merle Haggard/Willie Nelson hit "Pancho and Lefty," Van Zandt is an eccentric Texan who sometimes veers between extremes in a live setting.

This night was no different. Bone thin with graying hair, he nearly came unraveled 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 fractured but moving story-telling fell into disconnected rambling. As much as I honestly adore this man, it was painful watching him trying to pull himself together during this willy uneven segment. Although he eventually made it through decent renditions of "The Dollar Bill 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 one where you finally learn why fellow Texas songwriting legends Guy Clark and Billy Joe Shaver consider him one of our greatest American originals.

"Do you remember if I did 'Loretta?'" he asked, looking out into the darkness. When told no by 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 there on out, he never once lost his grip on that fragile, heart-breaking space all of his songs inhabit. His hoarse, dirt-simple voice and

tarkly picked guitar gave life to his tragic tales.

In the folk ballad "Tecumseh Valley" a destitute girl seeks work in the city, falls into prostitution, and dies alone. In the midst of these harrowing lyrics, Van Zandt flawlessly segued into a stark version of the Rolling Stones' "Dead Flowers." This piece summed up Van Zandt's singular artistry — he never, ever shies away from telling the truth, as painful as it may be.

But telling the truth in such a raw fashion exacts a great personal toll. That Townes has paid for it is written 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 disturb your sleep at night. But Van Zandt is an honest-to-god artist. You can't pre-

dict him. You can't package him. When the moment is right in an intimate room, he creates magic out of great internal pain. And that vision, that vulnerable brilliance, is worth the lost sleep.

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