I’ll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt

In the HBO New Orleans-based television series Treme, real-life singer-songwriter Steve Earle plays the character Harley, a respected street musician. In a scene from season two, Harley pushes an up-and-coming violinist, Annie, to articulate what qualities a song must have to be “great.” They’re discussing John Hiatt’s “Feels Like Rain,” which Annie believes speaks through the metaphor of weather and love to the struggles of enduring life in New Orleans in its dark, post-Katrina years.

Older and wiser in the ways of both New Orleans and songwriting, Harley gives Annie a brief but illustrative history lesson: “Hiatt wrote that song twenty years ago, darlin’, when you still had training wheels on your bike and nobody had ever heard the name Katrina … That’s what makes it a great song.”

What distinguishes the great from the good, following this line of thought, is a song’s ability to transcend time and place, evoke shared experience or emotion, and to speak life’s themes in a common language. Or, as Chip Taylor says beautifully and simply in Brian Atkinson’s book, I’ll Be Here in the Morning, “In the best kind of music, I don’t care if I don’t know the specific names or the specific places. If it’s told from a true heart, I’ll be there, and I’ll know those people and I’ll get that feeling.”

Reading Atkinson’s compilation of musings on the legacy of Texas singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt is a little like eavesdropping on Harley and Annie as they walk the New Orleans streets, or standing in a room full of musicians come to pay tribute to one of their fallen. From mainstays of Texas music, such as Guy Clark and Kris Kristofferson, to newer, genre-straddling artists, such as Scott Avett and Grace Potter, the musicians interviewed here reveal deeply personal stories of the singular impact of Townes Van Zandt’s music and fashion a colorful and complex portrait of the man himself.

Van Zandt’s struggles with addiction and the physical and emotional tolls it exacted are as much a part of his image as the songs. Those who knew him still bear the scars of watching someone they loved and respected self-destruct. Ray Wy-