A Deeper Blue: The Life And Music of Townes Van Zandt

We acclaim our songwriters for their gift to distill our common experience into the words and music of a song. We wonder at the mystery of that creation and the source of that gift, all the more so if the artist lives a troubled life ending in early death. That, in a nutshell, is the legacy of Townes Van Zandt, one of the greatest songwriters Texas has ever produced. In A Deeper Blue: The Life And Music of Townes Van Zandt, Robert Earl Hardy, a music writer, guitarist, and transplanted Texan from the Washington, D.C. area, has drawn upon eight years of research to document Van Zandt's personal life and explore the meaning and impact of his songs. Hardy interviewed Van Zandt's family and friends (including wives and girlfriends), schoolmates, agents, club owners, producers, and fellow musicians, most notably Guy Clark and Susanna Clark. Hardy tracked down a wealth of printed material about Townes, as well as a substantial number of Internet sources, and compiled a list of Van Zandt's recorded legacy in original album releases from 1968 through 2004, along with live audio and video recordings directly referenced in the text. Though he presents no formal bibliography, Hardy has provided ample endnotes to document almost every fact and quote.

One voice missing from the interviews is that of Harold Eggers (brother of record producer Kevin Eggers) who served as Van Zandt's road manager in the latter years of his career. As a result, that part of the story becomes more of a recitation of dates and gigs lacking the anecdotes and personal details that characterize most of the rest of the book. That said, Eggers would have echoed many of the stories that emerged over Van Zandt's career, including both the musical triumphs and the daily battles with alcohol. (Full disclosure here: I first met Townes Van Zandt when Harold Eggers brought him to my office at the University of Texas. Much of what I know about Townes comes from Eggers's stories of touring North America and Europe, and from seeing Van Zandt in concerts—both successful and disastrous—in Austin).

A Deeper Blue is first and foremost a study of a gifted singer and songwriter. Hardy examines each of Van Zandt's best-known songs as they emerged during his career, exploring both music and lyrics with a musician's sensibility. Like most of us, Hardy wants to know where these songs came from and how they were written. His discussion of Van Zandt's best-known hit, "Pancho and Lefty," reflects the ambiguity and mystery surrounding his music and his psyche. Townes claimed to have written the song one afternoon in a motel room near Dallas, saying, "all of a sudden it was there, and I was beginning to write it down" (p. 124). Another friend, however, recalled that Van Zandt wrote the song in a hospital the previous year after a near-fatal drug overdose. Whatever its origins, "Pancho and Lefty"—in Hardy's analysis—embodies Van Zandt's own close relationship with his mother and his losing battle with the darker side of his persona, all cast in "a wistful fantasy of bandits and federales" (p. 126). We may never know for certain how each of Van Zandt's songs was created, but we learn that they followed no set formula or method. Whether written at a kitchen table, a hospital bed, or in the back of a tour bus, the music and words apparently gestated within Van Zandt until they were ready to emerge. As his creative offspring, the songs bear the unmistakable stamp of his personality—complex, sometimes ambiguous, tinged with melancholy, longing, or even despair, but leavened with humor and profound love. That was what made Van Zandt a great songwriter.

For all of his gifts, and for all that he did "for the sake of the song," Townes Van Zandt's personal life is a story of gradual descent into darkness. Townes was hard on everyone who was close to him, especially his own wives and children. Hardy pulls no punches about this, as he traces Van Zandt's life from its promising beginnings in a prominent Texas family to his bipolar disorder, rebellious behavior, drug abuse, and eventual alcoholism. Townes struggled with serious medical and psychological problems throughout his adult life, and his family and friends bore the brunt of his recurring episodes of self-destruction. It is necessary to chronicle this roller coaster ride through both darkness and light—as Hardy has done with such credibility and human detail—in order to appreciate the complex reality behind such stock phrases as "troubled troubadour" and "tragic genius," which have so often been used to label Townes Van Zandt.

What is perhaps most remarkable is that, with all the burdens Van Zandt imposed upon himself, he was still able to write songs of such depth and beauty. Robert Earl Hardy has performed a labor of love—sometimes tough love—to reveal the life of Townes Van Zandt in all its complexity, and his music in all its truth and beauty. Some say that to know an artist is not necessarily to know his or her art. However, in the case of Townes Van Zandt, his songs are tantamount to an autobiography. A Deeper Blue is a must read for anyone who would glimpse the soul of this true Texas original.

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