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## YOU'RE MISSING: Townes Van Zandt

- Article by: Justin Guinn
- Posted: 07/12/2012

“If I had a nickel, I’d find a game. If I won a dollar, I’d make it rain. If it rained an ocean, I’d drink it dry, then lay me down dissatisfied.”

-Townes Van Zandt, “Rex’s Blues”

I discovered [Townes Van Zandt](#) at the Edmonson Pike library in Nashville, Tenn. It was *Live At The Old Quarter* that I stumbled upon. Before that point, I had no idea how awesome and vast the movement of music could be. Since that point, I have found no other music with the same power.

Townes was a songwriter’s songwriter. His close confidant and quasi-protégé Steve Earle once said he’d stand on Bob Dylan’s coffee table and proclaim Townes as “the best songwriter in the whole world.” He’s the kind of person legends do no justice. He was quick with a joke, generous as a monk, and wild as a grizzly bear. His music features these same qualities. Whether a talking blues rag, mournful melody, or something entirely unique, Townes’ music carries the weight of the moon like it’s a leaf floating to land.




Two qualities hold his songs above all else: the poetry in the lyrics, and his fingerpickin’. There’s a reason no other person has written songs on Townes’ level. No other person has felt and communicated the pinnacle of highest and deepest lows as Townes was able to do. Like Hank Williams before him, he lived his songs, for better, but most often, for worse. The lyrics burst with truth because the lyrics are his life. Take, for example, the harrowing opening verse from “Waiting Around to Die”:

“Sometimes I don't know where / this dirty road is taking me. Sometimes I can't even see the reason why / I guess I keep a-gamblin', / lots of booze and lots of ramblin'. It's easier than just waitin' around to die.”

These dreadful lyrics, matched with his wailing voice, produce an aura that's eerie, yet surprisingly relatable. In fact, his lyrics so strongly move listeners that many depressives who have heard Townes admit to finding comfort in his music.

His fingerpicking is owed in large part to the guitar style of Sam Lightin' Hopkins, who was a great influence for Townes and fellow Houston musician. His guitar floats through the songs, keeping rhythm with low bass notes while taking melodic runs on the high strings and vice versa. It's something truly astonishing in its own right, but when matched with Bard-like lyrics, the combination becomes an intensely inspiring, seemingly effortless sound.

Greats like the late Doc Watson, Emmy Lou Harris, and Robert Plant and Allison Krauss have recorded Townes' songs. Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard took his cowboy ballad of friendship and betrayal, “Pancho and Lefty,” to number one on the Billboard country music charts when they recorded it in 1983. His music has inspired the likes of Garth Brooks, Kings of Leon's Caleb Followill, Conor Oberst, and Lyle Lovett, just to name a few. More importantly than the numerous musicians he has inspired, Townes' sound has comforted all those who've given it a listen. Whether a lifting comfort or a sonic companion in a deep dark hole, his music is otherworldly, yet personally resonating.

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