

Steve Earle  
*Townes*  
Biography

Steve Earle had two reasons for coming out with this long-planned tribute to Townes Van Zandt now. The first reason is practical. Earle is currently pushing himself to finish a years-in-the-making novel, and he wants to see it in print before the publishing business goes belly up.

The second is a more personal concern. Like all artists worthy of the name, Steve Earle loves the truth, and in the case of Van Zandt, he sees that the waters are muddying before his eyes. Very often over periods of years, the truth first becomes myth and myth later becomes truth. In regards to his teacher, hero and friend Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle was not about to let that happen.

“I’m very thankful that when I got out of jail I started meeting people like Jay Farrar and other people his age that knew Townes chapter and verse,” he says. “I’ve always been very thankful for that. But a lot of what powered that is a take on roots music that comes from alternative music, and the crowd that kind of attached itself to Townes was the same kind of people that have *White Light / White Heat* in the front of their record collection so everybody knows how intense they are when they have a party. I love that record, but I don’t think I’ve listened to it all the way through since I bought it.”

“I’m tryin’ not to kill myself,” he laughs.

Van Zandt’s reputation has been under something of an overhaul since the dawn of the 1990s. Since then, Van Zandt toured with the Cowboy Junkies, was covered by Mudhoney, and famously claimed to be “the mold that grunge grew out of.” It was the Townes whose often-drunken ‘90s concert performances (and litany of ghoulish, fly-by-night live releases of dubious pedigree) were his only calling cards to a whole new generation of fans, who tended with some justification to view him as a Texan amalgam of Hank Williams, Charles Bukowski and Keith Richards. Too many seemed more in awe of his excesses than his songs.

By the time of his death at 52 on New Year’s Day of 1997, flannel-clad kids with still-hip goatees revered Van Zandt as drunken master, iconic elder statesman, and hell-hounded troubadour. Within weeks of his death, the men’s room at Nashville’s student-heavy Villager Tavern bore the graffiti “Townes Van Zandt died for your sins.”

“It would be really easy to make a Townes record that way and a lot of people try to spin him that way but I don’t see him that way,” says Earle. “I see him as one of the greatest songwriters who ever lived, and what happened to him, the shit that kept happening to him, and what finally happened to him, it happens to people...It almost happened to me.”

Of course, to a certain degree, the image the *White Light / White Heat* contingent of fans took from Van Zandt was valid and even somewhat true. The trouble is, a little truth can be worse than none at all. The public Townes Van Zandt the ‘90s knew was a ghostly, flickering image on black-and-white TV, a man drowning beneath his own poor choices, his eroding abilities, the crushing expectations of his fans. He was a doomed genius from central casting.

The Townes Van Zandt Steve Earle knew was large-screen and hi-def, a man of glorious contradictions, fearsome abilities and head-spinning complexity. Before Earle had careers as a rockabilly artist, young gun in the neo-traditional country movement, outlaw rocker, stone-cold junkie, and his triumphant rebirth as a Grammy-winning neo-Woody Guthrie and actor/activist/writer of prose/citizen of the world, he was a teenager literally in

thrall of Townes Van Zandt. Virtually everybody he came across for a period of ten years viewed him the same way. “If you knew Townes when I met him, he was literally itinerant, really didn’t live anywhere, but kind of based in Houston,” Earle says. “Most of us then were living somewhere on his migratory path and were waiting with bated breath for him to come blasting through. We lived for it – every single fucking one of us. Most of us were players for sure, but other people too, everybody from complete ne’er-do-wells to people who kind of went back to normal once Townes was gone.”

“Townes is the reason I am the way I am more than anything else,” Earle continues. “What I always was, sober or using. I made a decision to write songs at the level of art whether I made any money or not, and I made that decision based on knowing and witnessing Townes doing it.”

Van Zandt started shaping Earle long before the elder singer knew the younger existed. Van Zandt was already a demi-god in 1969 when Earle, then 14 years old, first heard his name in a San Antonio coffeehouse. After a few abortive attempts at completing his freshman year of high school and running away from home, Earle was finally expelled from school and allowed to live on his own. Not long after that, Earle spontaneously decided to move to Houston with his young and charismatic musician uncle Nick Fain.

While Austin has glommed on to much of the glory of the Texas singer-songwriter boom of the 1970s, it actually reached its fullest flower in Houston, in bygone clubs and coffeehouses like the Jester, the Sand Mountain, the Old Quarter, Liberty Hall and the still-existing Anderson Fair. By the time Earle got to town, the blues-infused Bayou City had already birthed the careers of Van Zandt, Guy Clark, and Mickey Newbury, and before it was all over, would midwife many more including Rodney Crowell, Lyle Lovett, Lucinda Williams, Eric Taylor, Vince Bell, and Earle.

Something about Houston in that time seemed to inspire songwriters. Early in the ‘60s, Willie Nelson wrote "Funny How Time Slips Away," "Crazy," and "Night Life" over the course of a single week in the city. Later, Jerry Jeff Walker would pen “Mr Bojangles” in an apartment above the Sand Mountain, and classic songs – quite likely the bulk of the songs of this album -- would flow from Van Zandt’s pen in a majestic torrent. Van Zandt once told me “The blues live in Houston,” and indeed they have always seemed to seep into all of the best music from the city, be it literally (through song forms) or more metaphysically, through the feel of the songs.

Because as ever, Houston was not all poetry and pickin’. Then as now, sadness and doom hang in the city’s heavy humid air. Earle remembers being a runaway when the serial killers Elmer Wayne Henley and Dean Corll were picking up and killing teen drifters. “Houston was big and dark and scary,” he says. “There is a part of Houston that I associate with the same kind of darkness from the ‘60s that I associate with the Mansons and Altamont – all the negative things about it from the very end. But it was also the place where I got to see Lightnin’ Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb in the same room at the same time, a couple of times, and I met Townes in Houston, too. Townes is from Houston and in a lot of ways musically, I’m from Houston,” says Earle.

And it was because Van Zandt was from Houston that Earle considers himself a Houstonian, for it was there that he launched his musical apprenticeship to Van Zandt, and also Guy Clark. Earle remembers that the teaching styles of the two masters couldn’t have been more different. Clark was always happy to be a true teacher, to share his craft literally in a way that was easy to understand. Van Zandt’s methods were more Zen and could verge on cruelty. He would heckle Earle at shows and tell him that to be a good songwriter he would have to read War and Peace. Earle would duly tackle all 1000-plus pages of

Tolstoy's historiographical fulminations only to find that Van Zandt had never read the damn thing himself. And yet to Earle, there was a lesson in there, somewhere.

"Guy said one time that people tend to forget that Townes was a funny motherfucker," Earle recalls. "He was the Henny Youngman of rock and roll – he could get away with the worst jokes. I remember opening for Townes at the coffeehouse at Texas A&M and Townes walked out on the stage and literally the first thing out of his mouth was 'I hear you people want to be called Agro-Americans now.' He hadn't played a fuckin' song and nobody laughed but me. Well, me and Eric Taylor, but nobody else."

Van Zandt's humor was just one aspect of his personality that was either missed or forgotten by the *White Light / White Heat* contingent. Another was the fact that early in his career, Van Zandt could both sing with power and authority and finger-pick his guitar like a bad-ass. And yet another was the way he could simply mesmerize a room with nothing but his guitar and his voice. He didn't need his fans to shush rowdies for him – he did it himself by simply commanding everybody's attention.

"He was one of the best solo performers I ever saw," Earle remembers. "There's a few others – Steve Goodman in his own way was as good as Townes; Loudon Wainwright in his own way is as good a solo performer as Townes. Steve Young's fuckin' incredible, a real bad-ass. There's just a few people. It's not something everyone can do."

Today, Earle stands among that rank, so maybe there really was something magical in *War and Peace*. Or maybe it was that Earle was just the most diligent observer of Van Zandt's shows in the early and mid-'70s and beyond, and thus both a hypnotic live solo performer and the ideal interpreter of his songs. Earle says his main goal with *Townes* was to perform the songs in as close to Van Zandt's original style as possible.

"I don't vouch for my memory as being 100 percent accurate, but it is the way I remember it, and a lot of these are the songs I learned to play and learned to play, period, watching him doing them," he says.

All but four of the songs on *Townes* were recorded first in Earle's cramped Greenwich Village apartment – just Earle alone with his guitar and his memories of the songs. Bass and drums were added later at Sound Emporium in Nashville by Dennis Crouch and Greg Morrow, respectively. "Basically I did not want to negotiate with a rhythm section when I recorded this stuff," Earle says. "I wanted the performances to be as close to my recollection of the way Townes performed this stuff as possible."

On the ever-terrifying "Lungs," Earle teamed up again with producer John King (a Dust Brother and veteran of Earle's 2007 *Washington Square Serenade* sessions) and guitarist Tom Morello [Rage Against the Machine, Audioslave], who strafes "Lungs" with a payload of six-string napalm.

Elsewhere, the album is something of a family affair. Earle's wife Allison Moorer harmonizes on "Loretta" and "To Live Is to Fly," while Earle's son (and Townes's namesake) Justin Townes Earle duets on "Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold," Van Zandt's stab at a TV western theme. The latter song was one of the four not initially recorded in Earle's apartment – at least not the second time. "I recorded a version of it [in New York], and I forgot that Justin is the way he is and I had to re-record it in Nashville at a tempo that was more comfortable for Justin," Earle says. "Which was faster."

"White Freightliner Blues," "Delta Momma Blues," and "Don't Take It Too Bad" were all recorded in Nashville with the a stellar lineup of bluegrass musicians -- mandolinist Tim O'Brien, banjoist Darrell Scott, bassist Dennis Crouch, and fiddler Shad Cobb.

In selecting the material on *Townes*, Earle sought the songs he was most personally connected to. Which are many: he began with a list too long to remember. That queue was

winnowed down first to 28 semi-finalists and later to the final 15, which range from obvious choices like “Pancho and Lefty” and “To Live is to Fly” to relative obscurities like “Colorado Girl” and “(Quicksilver Daydreams of) Maria.” There’s a blues that doesn’t advertise itself as such in “Brand New Companion” (“That’s just me doin’ Townes doin’ Lightnin’,” Earle summarizes) and songs like “Delta Momma Blues” and “White Freightliner Blues” that on the surface are blues in name only. To Earle, Van Zandt was a bluesman at all times, whether the songs were shaped in that form or not, and that includes the rollicking “White Freightliner Blues” (here presented in bluegrass form) and even his spare and lovely guitar-and-vocals reading of “Colorado Girl.”

“Townes was a blues singer,” Earle explains. “The reason there are so many of my songs that aren’t 12-bar, call-and-response, traditional forms of songs that are called ‘blues’ – songs like ‘Transcendental Blues’ and ‘Fort Worth Blues’ – comes from that famous Townes quote about the ‘blues and zip-a-dee-doo-dah’. And the Lightnin’ and Robert Frost thing. [Van Zandt once claimed Lightnin’ Hopkins and Robert Frost as his biggest influences]...But that zip-a-dee-doo-dah is a big benchmark and I don’t even want to think about people that don’t understand that line, or I don’t want to hang out with ‘em anyway. So ‘Colorado Girl’ is a blues, just a really pretty one.”

Earle also brings back to life elements of Van Zandt’s life that are now fading into memory. There was Van Zandt’s outdoorsy side, also emblemized here by “Colorado Girl,” which was borne of Van Zandt’s long solitary horseback rides through the high Rockies. There’s the off-kilter humor of “Delta Momma Blues,” and the Edvard Munch-like terror of songs like “Rake,” “Lungs,” and “Where I Lead Me,” but also the gentle thrills of songs-to-plant-morning-glories-to like “No Place to Fall” and “Don’t Take It Too Bad.”

Earle says he banged out “Pancho and Lefty” and “To Live is to Fly” on the first day of the sessions. That decision was arrived at by prison-yard analogy: “A lot of it was like being in jail,” he says. “The first day in you go out and pick the biggest motherfucker out there and knock him out so you get to keep your radio. I just wanted to get it out of the way.”

A few weeks ago, Earle told an interviewer from Rolling Stone Magazine that “Colorado Girl” was his favorite Townes song. Today, it’s “Don’t Take it Too Bad.” That’s not fickleness. Most Van Zandt fans go through a litany of favorite Townes songs every year, because he was that rare songwriter who could furnish you a different favorite song of all time for your every mood. What’s more, he was a writer whose palette of emotions ran to shades and nuances we haven’t yet named.

“He was a bad ass,” Earle says. “The difference between Townes and Bob Dylan is that while they were both really heavily influenced by the same kinds of music, lyrically Dylan was influenced more by modern French poets and the Beats. Whereas Townes was much more influenced by old-school, conventional lyric poets like Robert Frost and Walt Whitman. And it’s *cool*, it’s where a lot of the uniqueness of his voice came from. ‘Cause it *is* Lightnin’ Hopkins against Robert Frost, and it’s pretty startling. That makes Townes a lot more radical to me in some ways.”

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