

Folk memories

Townes Van Zandt, who died Jan. 1, sang the life he lived.

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Theater Critic

It's time to sing the blues the dust-blown, sun-baked, wine-soaked.
Texas blues.

Word came down last week that Townes Van Zandt, a gaunt Texas songwriter with a gift for bleak, poetic imagery and harsh humor, died near Nashville on New Year's Day. According to the Associated Press, the 52-year-old singer suffered a heart attack while recuperating from hip surgery.



It was the final note of a career that sometimes meandered as aimlessly as some of the rambling characters in his songs.

As a tunesmith, Van Zandt bridged the gap between blues and country. As a lyricist, he never blinked when it came to life's ambiguities and unhappy endings. He wrote of wanderers, bums, drunks, and outlaws -- imbuing them with a hard-edged romanticism that set him apart as a singer-songwriter.

Van Zandt never really achieved celebrity status. He was too raw, too unpredictable. Periods of heavy drinking alternated with stretches of sobriety. His performances could be sharp or sloppy, depending on when you saw his act.

He was a relatively frequent visitor to Lawrence and Kansas City in recent years. Sadly, at his final local performance ---a date he shared with his old friend and colleague, Guy Clark, at the Drum Room--- he was at his worst, playing and singing badly and forgetting his own lyrics.

For a generation of singer-songwriters and folk-music freaks, Van Zandt was an influence and an inspiration. Many of them, including yours truly, played their Townes LPs until they wore out. Then we waited impatiently--in most cases, for years for his albums to be reissued.

A recent CD, "High, Low and In Between," takes its title from one of Van Zandt's best albums from the early '70s and pairs it with another of his best efforts, "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt."

The latter album includes his most famous song, "Pancho and Lefty," and supposedly derived its title from an episode in which Van Zandt overdosed and literally died for several seconds before being revived.

The artwork on that old LP captured the two sides of this moody songwriter. On the cover, he sits impassively, his face closed and distant. On the back, he is shown laughing like a madman and shooting an obscene gesture at the camera lens.

That was Townes Van Zandt--fragile, introspective, angry and explosive. He was one of a kind and his passing leaves a void that cannot be filled.

For an old folkie, there's only one fitting gesture: Pick up the guitar and pick a tune. Townes is gone but his songs are alive. And so they shall remain.