

## ABSTRACT

### Days Up and Down They Come: Townes Van Zandt and the Search for the Meaning of Life and Death

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Texas has had a long standing tradition of excellent songwriting, and has been known to produce outstanding songwriters in each generation. Perhaps no time was filled with more prolific Texas songwriters than the late 1970's in which artists such as Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings dominated the country music scene. However, no songwriter from that era is as highly regarded in folklore and legend as the portentous Townes Van Zandt. Despite a long struggle with alcohol and drugs, Van Zandt's songwriting abilities have been unrivaled in music. Each of his songs have a literary quality that allows them to tap into otherworldly truths. Through study of his life and music, I have attempted to find out what Van Zandt has to say about what it means to live and die, topics on which he frequently writes. The music of Van Zandt gives an interesting look on the meaning of life, death, and sorrow given from the perspective of a true artist and poet.

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DAYS UP AND DOWN THEY COME: TOWNES VAN ZANDT AND THE SEARCH  
FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE AND DEATH

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

For those who revere Texas music and all of the lore that comes with it, there is perhaps no holier name than Townes Van Zandt. Although he is an enigma to many, and simply unknown to others, he carries a legacy that stretches beyond musical region or genre. He was more than a performer and treated a song though it were a living being in need of being grown, cultivated, and nurtured.

In order to understand the importance of Van Zandt in Texas music, it is important to understand what “Texas music” is. According to the Texas Music Office in the Office of the Governor, Greg Abbott, Texas music has “given American music its distinctive voice, and that’s no brag, just fact.” The office also defines the Texas musical spirit as “one characterized by taking chances, trying new ideas, melding your neighbor’s music into your own, all united by an attitude of, ‘Why not?’”

(Monahan) However, I believe Texas music is as much defined by attitude and tone as it is by region. It cannot be defined as a single genre or sound, but rather as a culmination of spirit and pride. Texas music ranges from Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys to Billy Joe Shaver to Ray Wylie Hubbard and to Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Although the musical styles of these examples vary greatly, the one thing they have in common is an independent spirit. Each artist listed refused to go with the grain, and rather chose to carve their own path. They explored their craft and reached

deeply within themselves to find their own ingenuity and create a unique space within the musical world; all of this while clinging to an identity that ties to their home state. I believe it is this proud, independent, and thoughtful approach to music that defines Texas music. Van Zandt not only exemplifies this definition of Texas music, he is a cornerstone upon which Texas music's history lies.

Van Zandt has garnered the admiration of hosts of songwriters and musicians, many of whom were and are great in their own right. Steve Earle is famously noted as saying that "Van Zandt is the best damn songwriter in the whole world and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that."(DeCurtis)

As a prolific songwriter of the greatest order, Van Zandt seemed to find the deep value and the spiritual nature of moments and objects inherent in the most mundane forms of life. Taking a long view of his art, I believe a trend emerges.

Although each song is different and has a life of its own, Van Zandt seemed to constantly look to define what it means to live and what it means to die. He seems to grasp for something more than what is plainly available to our mortal senses, as if everything we touch and see and taste can connect us to something greater.

Through his songwriting we can hope to grasp a picture of what his worldview of life and death holds.

The scope of this thesis will explore the life of Van Zandt and a close examination of his songwriting with the goal of contemplating his views of life and death as they are revealed in his songs. Van Zandt lived and breathed songwriting, so I propose to use songwriting as the lens through which to examine his expressed views and ideas.

After examining his writing, I will then look to his peers and find what they have to offer about Van Zandt's life and writing as further exploration into what he had to say about life and death. Through commentary from other songwriters such as Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, and Steve Young, a picture of Van Zandt's influence on the songwriting community will be helpful in examining the deeper content of his writing.

This thesis will examine these issues in four chapters. The sections will be, following the Introduction, divided into a chapter on Van Zandt's background and life, followed by a chapter examining his writing, a chapter discussing commentary made by other members of the music industry, concluded by a summarization chapter that will further explore some of my findings and discuss some final connecting thoughts.

### *Biography*

In order to gain a fuller understanding of why Van Zandt is important as a songwriter and to gain understanding of his worldview, it will be imperative to understand his complex life and how that ties into his songwriting. Gaining a perspective into his background including his familial ties, habits, education, and career will help provide insight into the things that motivated him and helped him become such a prolific writer.

### *Lyrical Analysis and Overview*

The next chapter will explore his writing more specifically. This chapter will not only look at how prolific of a writer Van Zandt was, but will seek to explore the

meaning behind many of his songs, and how they relate to his understanding of what it meant to live and die. Lastly, a conclusion about what Van Zandt believes living and dying means as expressed through his songwriting will be included in this chapter. The hypothesis is that Van Zandt sees life as a struggle that humans simply have to get through. Although there is beauty throughout life, we must grab it when we can, because overall, life is a bleak sentiment filled with disparity. Unlike the Christian narrative of life and death in which we are to serve God and fulfill an eternal purpose, Van Zandt's lyrics would seem to imply that life and death are simply defined by terms that we do not take part in, and that they are something that we just have to get through, much like a sad song.

#### *Commentary from Van Zandt's Peers*

This final body chapter will examine how Van Zandt's friends and contemporaries viewed his writing. Van Zandt has influenced many of the great songwriters in American music, and each has some insight into the incredible work that he produced. Through considering their comments, I hope to find more depth about what Van Zandt's work means to those who have studied it and cherished it. This will help provide further insight into his views on life and death and what his music had to say about such subjects.

#### *Conclusion*

Lastly, this chapter will serve as a summary of the contents of the previous three chapters. The main conclusions from each chapter will be laid out in a more concise manner, for easy identification and clarity. This will provide a final way to evaluate what the findings of this thesis are and present them side by side with the

goal of presenting a comprehensive statement on the faith and music of two extraordinary songwriters. Along with providing a summary of previous content, I will attempt to connect some of Van Zandt's writing to an outside source, specifically the Bible. Much of Van Zandt's writing speaks on truth and operates at an almost spiritual level. Thus, providing some comparison to a spiritual source such as the Bible will hopefully provide some lucidity into the findings of this thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Biography

Van Zandt once said about his own life: "I don't envision a very long life for myself. Like I think my life will run out before my work does, you know. I've designed it that way." (Brown)

An anecdote from Van Zandt's life as told by Guy Clark also sheds light on some of Van Zandt's views on his own life: "He said his whole life was built around one moment in time in the third grade. A teacher came in and said 'Okay, class, it's time now for science. Today we're going to study the solar system and the planets and the moon. The center of our solar system is the sun and the sun's a star, and by the way, they're all burning out.' And she proceeded to keep telling him more. It froze in his mind. He said, 'You telling me the sun's burning out? Are you serious?... Why do I have to be here on time and shine my shoes, comb my hair, and sit up straight?' He said from that moment on, he lived his whole life like that. It was like, 'Excuse me, ma'am, are you hip? The sun is burning out.'" (Atkinson)

In order to better understand these quotes, and how Van Zandt's prolific song writing and music career were shaped, an overview of his life may be helpful. John Townes Van Zandt was born on March 7, 1944 in Fort Worth, Texas. (Hall) He was born to Dorothy Townes and Harris William Van Zandt into an upper-middle class family whose Texas roots went back to before 1840. Townes ancestors had

moved to Texas in the late 1830s and cemented their legacy in Texas history. Van Zandt's great-great grandfather, Isaac Van Zandt, was a pioneer who helped establish the town of Marshall and procure a college for the town. Isaac was among those who drafted the Texas Constitution that was accepted by the United States for annexation to the union. Van Zandt's great-great grandfather was a lawyer, great grandfather was a doctor, and father was a lawyer. His mother's grandfather helped found the University of Texas Law School, her father served as dean of the law school until his death, and her uncle was a prominent lawyer in Houston. Thus, when John Townes Van Zandt was born, he was brought into an accomplished family with a history of education and politics. (Hardy)

The Van Zandts resided in Fort Worth for much of young Townes' childhood until they moved to Midland in 1952. During his young life, Van Zandt was an energetic child, whose friends and family said was always "getting into" something. His wild streak as a child often turned into slight rebellion, though he was never a "bad" child. His sister Donna once told their family maid and nanny in Fort Worth, Frances, "Frances, I want to get married, or be an actress, and change my name... I know Townes is going to be a gangster." Townes was also known as a "free spirit" who loved practical jokes and had a mischievous sense of humor. After a short stint in Midland, Harris Van Zandt received a job offer in Billings, Montana, and the family immediately moved again. While in Billings, Townes entered the formative years of his life, starting middle school at Lincoln Junior High. However, perhaps a more life-altering event happened for Van Zandt while in Billings. During the fall of 1956, Elvis Presley made his first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show. The performance

electrified a young Townes, who asked for a guitar for Christmas three months later.(Hardy) His father's only stipulation for the gift was that he learn to play the song "Fraulein."(Hall) Van Zandt received the guitar for Christmas, and had learned to play it by New Year's Day. He played the song for his father, and it became his passion. Townes' musical influences, even as a young child, formed his tastes for the rest of his life. "My musical influences were Elvis, Ricky Nelson, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and the Everly Brothers," Van Zandt recalled. "It started off with country, then Elvis and those guys." Other influences included Lightnin' Hopkins and Hank Williams.(Hardy)

In 1958, Van Zandt's family moved again, this time to Boulder, Colorado, a favorite place of the family. Van Zandt started at Boulder High School that fall and continued to show the conflicting personality traits that saturated his character: a unbound sensitivity and a streak of rebellion. As his sister Donna said, "Townes felt things more than the rest of us did. It was deeper, somehow. You and I would hear about a starving person and go about our lives, but it would just break his heart." However, during the middle of the 1958-1959 school year Harris Van Zandt received another job in Barrington, Illinois, and the family moved once again. It was at the high school in Barrington that Van Zandt's first public performance took place at a talent show, and he received his first taste of glory, as he was an instant hit with his peers. After his sophomore year of high school in Illinois, a young Van Zandt yearned for stability and asked if he could attend Shattuck Military Academy, a boarding school, in order to ensure that he would stay put for his junior and senior year of high school. Although there is some suspicion about whether the reason for

this was on Townes' request or because he was in some sort of trouble, he did attend Shattuck Military Academy in the fall of 1960. (Hardy)

While at Shattuck, Van Zandt excelled in athletics and did fairly well in school. He was popular with his classmates and was even well liked by much of the faculty, despite the fact that he continued to show a rebellious streak. Although he never got into any serious trouble, it was well known that Van Zandt would often get high off of sniffing glue, and would do other rebellious acts such as growing out his hair past the allowed length. (Hardy)

Van Zandt was also known as a hedonist, indulging in whatever would make him feel good and would help him be a part of the counter culture. He would often gamble with other students in his room, and do anything to get right up to the rules line, but not quite cross it. Also during this time at Shattuck, Van Zandt's love for music continued to grow. He would have long conversations about music with his friends. They would discuss artists such as Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, and Joan Baez. Van Zandt continued to strive in music as well, playing occasional talent shows and always practicing the guitar. Although he was a good athlete, he was never quite taken with athletics the way he was so intently focused on music. After graduation at Shattuck, Townes Van Zandt's life began to really take shape in college at the University of Colorado in Boulder.(Hardy)

After his first month of classes, Van Zandt quietly withdrew from the university and left for Shattuck without telling his parents. He told the officials at Shattuck that he was simply uncomfortable at college and wasn't feeling settled.

They agreed to give him some work duties at the school; however, two weeks later he was back at his parent's home in Houston. Although they allowed him to stay through the school break, they convinced him to return for the spring semester. He later told a doctor that this period of time was the first time in his life that he had started to feel symptoms of depression. Once he returned to the University of Colorado in the spring, he hit the ground running. Academics were not high on Van Zandt's priority list, and he would spend days at a time in his apartment, locked away drinking and playing guitar. According to his roommate, Bob Myrick, he was nearly always drunk and throwing large parties at their apartment every weekend. One particularly troubling incident was when Van Zandt became so drunk that he allowed himself to fall off of his apartment's fourth story balcony. Although he walked away without a scratch, Van Zandt claims that he fell "just [to] see what it felt like all the way up to where you lost control and you were falling." (Hardy)

During his sophomore year in Boulder, Townes began seeing Fran Petters of Houston who would eventually become his wife. During this time, there were many happy moments in the relationship. However, Petters and Van Zandt's other friends recall that his demons were starting to show., "Townes was kind of a dark fellow," Myrick writes. "That's the way he looked at life. He knew it was that way. We knew that there was a sacred side of Townes, the inside of Townes that he seldom revealed. He was able to see life the way it was." Petters remembers that during this time, Van Zandt began to struggle with the idea of doing what his family expected him to do versus what he really wanted to do. (Hardy)

It was also during this time in life that Van Zandt showed the first signs of a bi-polar disorder, with occasional bouts of a deep, dark depression. Van Zandt would seclude himself from society and drink his life away. Following the periods of depression he would exude confidence and party wildly. During the middle of the semester, Van Zandt had a friend forge a letter from his parents to the university, allowing him to drop out of school. After a two-week trip to Oklahoma, he returned to Boulder. A doctor in Colorado alerted his parents of his absence, and due to their knowledge of his mood swings and drinking habits, they made an impromptu trip to Boulder. Realizing that he was suffering from some sort of mental disorder, the Van Zandts took their son back home to Houston, and placed him in the Titus Harris Clinic for psychiatric evaluation and treatment. (Hardy)

Van Zandt was hospitalized in March 1964 and underwent much psychiatric evaluation. During this evaluation, he scored a tremendous 134 on his IQ test, but was noted as having "Schizophrenic reaction, Schizo-affective type depression." Dr. Grace Jameson oversaw his treatment, and has stated that he was not schizophrenic, but was labeled with those types of symptoms due to a lack of knowledge on mental disorders at the time. "Now we would call it 'bipolar with psychotic features,'" Jameson writes. In order to treat Van Zandt's mental state, he underwent shock therapy. Years later, Townes made a friend named Chito who had also undergone the same treatment. They found that their experiences were similar and they had the same reactions to the treatment. Chito said that the treatment "made me really, really sick...And [Townes] said it made him really, really sick too. And this is something he told me too, but it's pretty much run of the mill for everybody: You

can't remember your name. And that's the most important thing in the world to you." Finally, on June 19, 1964, Van Zandt was discharged from the hospital and went home with his parents to Houston. (Hardy)

After leaving the hospital, Van Zandt could not remember much of his childhood experiences. Some believe this was from the shock therapy, while Jameson insists that it was more likely to be from his alcoholism or a purposeful suppression to gain sympathy from his family. Also following his hospital stay, Townes attempted to lead a normal life and do what his parents wanted for him. According to Hardy, Van Zandt enrolled in the University of Houston's pre-law program in the spring of 1965. Then in the summer of 1965, he married his girlfriend from Colorado, Fran Petters. Their marriage was fairly normal, although Petters recalls times when Van Zandt would seclude himself for days at a time. His appetite for music continually grew, and he even started to play live shows in order to make extra money. It was at the Jester Lounge in Houston that Van Zandt began to play regularly, a folk club that was open to many burgeoning artists, Jerry Jeff Walker and Guy Clark. (Hardy) Clark and Van Zandt became best friends, with Van Zandt serving as the best man in Clark's wedding. Van Zandt would also go on to live with Clark and his wife, Susanna, intermittently throughout the 1970's. (Atkinson). He began to seriously commit to songwriting at this time and wrote many of the hits that he would later become known for, such as "Waitin' Around to Die" and "Turnstiled, Junkpiled." (Hardy) Van Zandt's performances were always contrasts of serious material and humor. He would interplay dark, brooding themes, and then

counteract them with a lighthearted song, as noted in a performance review in the New York Times from 1990. (Pareles)

In 1966, the Van Zandt family was shaken by the sudden death of Townes' father, Harris. While Townes never talked about the death of his father, he went into a depressive episode shortly thereafter. (Hardy) This loss caused him to give up on school altogether and pursue music full time. (Hall)

A year later, Van Zandt and his wife had bought an RV in an attempt to tour the country and make his musical career work. Petters quit her job to accompany him, but after several months grew tired of the traveling regime. She returned to work to support their family, while Van Zandt continued to make an effort at touring. During this time, financial strain and Van Zandt's dishonesty about his lifestyle to his wife became a strain on their relationship. Petters said, "He didn't want me to be a part of his 'bad' life. I was like the 'good' side, and then he had this dark side that came out other places." (Hardy)

In 1968, Van Zandt met Mickey Newbury, who became his manager, and he was signed to Hall-Clement with a publishing contract. (Hardy) He released his first album in that same year. (DeCurtis) By Christmas time, *For the Sake of The Song* was hitting the shelves. Shortly after this first album was recorded, Van Zandt signed with Kevin Eggers as his manager and a small record label in New York known as Poppy Records. The album was released by Poppy Records, yet never had the commercial success Van Zandt would have liked. He continued to play many live shows in order to try to make a living, due to the lack of success from album sales.

However, Van Zandt and his wife had been separated since the beginning of 1968. They reunited during the middle of the year, and that summer found out that they were due to have their first child. J.T. Van Zandt was born in April 1969, and J.T.'s arrival gained a few months of a peaceful relationship between Van Zandt and his wife. (Hardy)

Yet, things could not stay genuine for long, and several months after the baby's birth, Van Zandt began using heroin, even while continuing his excessive drinking. It was at this point that Van Zandt and his wife decided to separate for good. Once Fran Van Zandt realized that her husband was using drugs in the house with an infant child, she left. By mid-1969, Townes and his wife were permanently separated. (Hardy)

As for Van Zandt, he was finally ready to begin recording his second album, *Our Mother the Mountain*. His relationship with Fran was the not the last time that he would attempt to have a family. However, his pattern of excessive drinking and substance abuse paired with a wandering spirit did not allow any of his relationships to gain any substance or traction. (Hardy)

In 1970, Van Zandt's divorce was finalized, which ushered in a period of extreme abuse of substance and people. A friend of Van Zandt's, Bianca, notes, "After he broke up with his wife, it was a steady downhill." Another friend remembers more vivid details of his behavior during this time, "When he was drinking, he'd needle people mercilessly. He would just go after somebody, and he'd smell blood, and he wouldn't let up, some times until the poor guy—or, yes, the poor girl - was in

tears.” Van Zandt began to work on his next album, which was to be recorded in Nashville. (Hardy)

By 1971, Van Zandt had released four albums, but was still full of internal struggles. He felt responsible for the murder of a friend, Leslie Jo Richards. (Hardy) While recording in Los Angeles, Richards had volunteered to go back to the condo to pick something up for Van Zandt. She attempted to hitchhike to the studio, and was murdered by her driver. Van Zandt felt extreme grief and responsibility for the situation, and returned to Texas. (Saviano)

However, his son J.T. was almost three years old at this point, and Van Zandt had failed to establish a relationship with him. On one particular occasion, Van Zandt had scheduled an afternoon time to come to his ex-wife’s house to spend time with his son. Van Zandt never made it there that day, as he was rushed to the hospital from a heroin overdose. Although he survived the incident, Van Zandt struggled to ever establish a healthy relationship with his son J.T. Fran recalls Van Zandt’s tendencies to fly off the handle, such as the time he overdosed. (Hardy)

“Living was painful to Townes. There was too much suffering in the world. Townes just didn’t know how to live in this world. I personally always believed that he had a chemical imbalance, that if we could have ever found the right diet or the right pill or the right something he could have been okay. It would come on so suddenly, it was like there would just be neurons flying off balance that would drive him to some other place. Because when he was good, he was just incredible. He was one of the kindest, gentlest, smartest, most compassionate people you could ever know...But I couldn’t understand why he was so dependent on it. It was more than alcoholism. It was something else. It was like something just couldn’t fire right in his body.” (Hardy)

Over these next few years, Van Zandt continued to record albums and play hundreds of live shows. He began to rotate among Nashville, Houston, and Austin.

Sleeping on people's couches and in motels, he would move on to the next city. During the summer of 1973, he met Cindy Sue Morgan while on a horseback ride in Colorado. The two struck up a relationship and became inseparable over the next several years. Morgan was only 15 at the start of their relationship, while Van Zandt was 29; however, Van Zandt did not become aware of her age until several months into their relationship. Despite the large age gap between them, the two stayed together, including a stint of serious heroin abuse while living in Clarksville, Texas. Morgan recalls taking care of Van Zandt often during this time, despite the fact that she was 14 years younger. In 1976, John Lomax became Van Zandt's manager, and he and Morgan moved to Nashville. (Hardy)

In 1976, Harold Eggers became Van Zandt's road manager and care taker and would have this responsibility for the rest of Van Zandt's life. He not only made sure that he made it to shows, but also attempted to keep him as healthy as his substance abuse habits would allow. Lomax devised several campaign movements to help revive Van Zandt's dwindling career. He recorded two new albums and began to achieve some popularity. In 1978, Van Zandt and Morgan were married. His son, J.T., visited his father and step-mother at their home in Franklin, Tennessee, but cut the trip short due to Townes confrontational and aggressive ways. He openly drank heavily and used drugs while his nine-year-old son visited, and played mind games with him by pestering him with questions that a nine-year-old could not answer. J.T. left the visit early, and they had a strained relationship for much of his life. J.T.'s mother Fran states that he always had a sense of loss without his father in his life,

and really did not establish much of a relationship with his father until he moved back to Texas in 1980.

Cindy remembers this time in the Nashville area as more of the same for Van Zandt's lifestyle. There was even a time where Van Zandt had Morgan chain him to a tree so that he could not get any alcohol or drugs. However, as soon as she unchained him, he went straight back to his vices. By the end of 1979, Morgan and Van Zandt were estranged, and by 1980, Van Zandt had a new girlfriend, Jeanene Munsell. In 1982, the couple found out that Munsell was pregnant with Van Zandt's second child. However, Van Zandt was still married and managed to track down his current wife, Cindy Morgan. He and Morgan were finally divorced in February 1983 and he married Munsell just several weeks later. William Van Zandt was born just 10 days after their wedding. Also in 1983, Van Zandt's song, "Pancho and Lefty" was recorded and released by Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, and thus marked the most successful song of Van Zandt's career. Later that year, he checked himself into a rehab facility, though to no avail. He continued his alcoholic habits, nevertheless. After his mother passed away at the end of 1983, Van Zandt dove back into touring and substance abuse. This began a cycle of failed stays at rehab facilities that would take place throughout the remainder of his life. By 1991, Jeanene was pregnant with their second child, a girl named Katie Belle. Although she had tried to keep up with Van Zandt's touring and take care of him, with two children she could not stay on the road. Eventually Van Zandt's continual touring and alcohol abuse took its toll on their relationship. Gambling and drinking had taken precedence in Van Zandt's life once again, and in 1994 the couple divorced. Despite their divorce, the couple

remained fairly close, and Jeneane was an executor of his will when he passed away in 1997. (Hardy)

During the few years before his death, he had become closer with his son J.T. who had started to go out on the road with him. Van Zandt began to experience moderate success throughout the United States and Europe in the early 1990s, but his alcoholism and personal life were simply never quite wrangled. He passed away on New Years Day 1997, after leaving the hospital against his doctor's recommendations following surgery on a hip fracture. (Hardy) Surprisingly enough, he passed away on the same day as one of his heroes, Hank Williams, Sr. Following his death, Van Zandt had two funerals, one in Dido, Texas, and the other in Nashville. (Hall)

Townes Van Zandt's legacy is somewhat of legend in American music. He has even drawn comparisons to Hank Williams from people such as Mickey Newbury who said, "Townes is somebody who looks a little like Hank Williams – even writes like Hank Williams probably would have written. But, I tell you, I think Townes is better." (DeCurtis) He lived a complicated life filled with intense relationships, drug abuse, mental health issues, and wanderlust. He was a troubadour by every sense of the word,. Much of his writing can seem like the musings of a mad man when listened to without an understanding of his background and life. In the following chapter, an analysis of his songwriting will be reviewed, and his views on what it means to live and die will be explored.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Lyrical Overview and Analysis

Songwriting was Townes van Zandt's platform and his measure of self-expression. Through his music, he poured out his soul and released his deepest thoughts. In order to gain an understanding of Van Zandt's spiritual life and views on life and death, an analysis of his songwriting must be conducted.

#### *For the Sake of the Song*

*For the Sake of the Song*, Van Zandt's first album starts out with the somber title track. The lyrics tell the story of a man who woefully and regretfully loves a woman whom he knows is to his detriment. By the end of the song, he realizes that he must leave her, but worries about the cost that leaving will bring him and the toll that it could take on her. The lyrics in second verse are particularly telling:

“Oh, nothin's what it seems,  
Maybe she'll start someday to realize  
If she abandons her dreams,  
Then all the words she can say are only lies  
Why can't she see that to gain  
Is only to lose?  
All that she offers me are her chains  
And I got to refuse”  
*(For the Sake of the Song, 1968)*

Although the verse appears cryptic on the surface, it speaks of abandoning futile dreams. It may be that Van Zandt's advice for the woman he loves is to abandon dreams because if we gain accomplishments in reality we lose touch with

what is really important to us because we become blinded by ambition. This thought process seems to be a depressed way to view life. It evokes an attitude of futility and seems to aim at the pointlessness of ambition. The chorus states, “Maybe she just has to sing for the sake of song, and who do I think that I am to decide that she’s wrong?” This suggests that the woman needs to do her duty just for the sake of doing it, not for any actual purpose. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

The next song on the album, “Tecumseh Valley” is another harrowing tale. It tells the story of a kind and gentle woman who finds herself living a hard life. Although she commits herself to working hard, by the end of the song, she is found dead. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

“They found her down beneath the stairs  
That led to Gypsy Sally’s  
In her hand when she died  
Was a note that cried  
‘Fare thee well  
Tecumseh valley.’”  
(*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

The song seems to indicate that despite trying to live a good life, and being a woman whom “sunshine walked beside her,” death caught up to her. Van Zandt points out a bleak fact of life: Fortune does not always favor the good. In this song, the woman’s life trends toward sadness throughout. There is an inevitable loneliness that the woman seems headed for, and which she is unable to avoid. Although we do not know the cause of her death, the song ends in the place that the story seemed to be heading all along. This could be an indication of how Van Zandt viewed his life, trending inexorably towards sadness and loneliness. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

One of Van Zandt's most quintessential songs, "Waiting 'Round to Die," is also on this album. This song, perhaps more than any other, gives an insight into Van Zandt's soul. The song is Van Zandt's re-telling of living a life unsure of his own purpose. Because of this uncertainty, he talks about misadventures in life, claiming that although they may be wrong, they are "...easier than just waitin' around to die." The first verse starts out in a melancholy voice. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

"Sometimes I don't know where  
This dirty road is taking me.  
Sometimes I don't even know the reason why.  
But I guess I keep a-gamblin',  
Lots of booze and lots of ramblin'  
Well, it's easier than just a-waitin' around to die."  
(*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

Throughout the rest of the song, he tells several stories of travel and misadventure. From moving to Tennessee to leave his abusive father, hopping on a train in Tuscaloosa, and being put in prison in Muskogee for robbery, Van Zandt ends each verse with the pensive phrase, "just waitin' around to die." However, the phrase slightly changes after the song's character emerges from prison in the final verse. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

"Well, now I'm out of prison,  
I got me a friend at last.  
Well, he don't drink or steal or cheat or lie  
His name's codeine  
He's the nicest thing I've seen.  
Yeah, together we're gonna wait around and die.  
Yeah, together we're gonna wait around and die."  
(*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

In the final verse, Van Zandt accepts the lifestyle that has overtaken him. Throughout the entire song, he has tried to outrun the sadness and desperation that he knows is coming for him. He tries to keep himself busy and involved in meaningless activity in order to avoid a meaningless death. However, by the end of the song, Van Zandt seems to realize that his attempts are futile and that he should simply abuse substances and wait around to die. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

“Sad Cinderella,” the seventh track on the album shows that Van Zandt does not put much stock in material things. The song is written as a challenge to a woman who has spent a lot of time gathering material treasures. The challenge that Van Zandt points out is that material things never last, and then she will be left with nothing. The opening verse asks the woman what she will turn to once her jewelry has been stolen and her weak servants have grown strong. The chorus of the song is only two lines, but it carries a strong message. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

“When all your bright scarlet turns slowly to blue  
Will you stop and decide that it’s over?”  
 (“For the Sake of the Song”, 1968)

Through this song, it is clear that Van Zandt did not think life was to be wasted on gaining material possessions. Although in previous songs we have seen him talk against chasing ambition, “Sad Cinderella” is much more pointed in that it gives us Van Zandt’s apparent belief that there *must* be more to life, even if he himself is not sure what it is.. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

In Van Zandt’s, “The Velvet Voices,” he talks about playing his violin loudly for the world to hear, so that a majestic choir of “velvet voices” can join in on the

glorious music. Once again, this song hints at the idea that the earth and life is trending towards sadness in the first verse. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

“I’ll play upon my violin  
Until the mountains ring  
Of lonely laughter blindly thrown  
Across an endless arc of strings.  
And the skies are sad.  
They’re dancin’ to a silent symphony  
And the velvet voices all shall join  
The singing.”  
(*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

Despite the fact that this song’s lyrical tone is not particularly melancholy overall, it does display an expectation of impending sadness that is familiar to Van Zandt’s music. In comparing this song to previous ones from the record, not only does Van Zandt talk about an element of sadness in the human condition, but believes that even nature contains a penchant towards sadness. Although Van Zandt probably does not mean that nature has a literal sadness, there is an idea in the lyric that the whole earth is lonely . (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

“All Your Young Servants” apparently revisits the same worldview as “Sad Cinderella.” The song scorns a rich person who has gathered many treasures throughout his life. The narrator of the song claims that all of the rich person’s belongings are slowly turning to dust and that in the end they are worth nothing at all. The heart of the song lies in the chorus.

“Your castle is dingy and dirty and dismal.  
Your carpets are faded, your walls are all grey.  
There’s dust on your silver and cracks in your crystal  
And all your young servants have drifted away.”  
(*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

Van Zandt suggests that material possessions can cause us to lose track of the importance of people and relationships. Once again, it is clear that Van Zandt does not think that life is to be merely collecting assets, though he does not explicitly offer any other alternatives. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

In the final song of the album, "Sixteen Summers, Fifteen Falls," Van Zandt resumes his story-telling ways. The song tells of a love affair with a young woman who was beautiful inside and out. Van Zandt talks about her having "fairest skin with eyes of blue" and says, "her spirit was as bright as the soft sunshine." However, by the end of the song, the girl's fears overcome her and she commits suicide. In the song, Van Zandt blames himself for never noticing her fears and the pain that she tried to hide. It is almost as if he feels he could or should have done something to stop her from bringing this fate upon herself. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

In spite of the fact that this song is simply Van Zandt practicing his craft of being a master storyteller, he focuses on a sadness and pain that is apparently inevitable and inescapable. Rather than the pain be attacking him, it manifests itself in the life of a young girl who simply cannot find a way to fight off her fears. This song follows the theme of many of Van Zandt's songs in that there is a deep pain that cannot be defeated by the song's characters. (*For the Sake of the Song*, 1968)

#### *Our Mother The Mountain*

The second song off of Van Zandt's sophomore album, *Our Mother the Mountain*, contains much of the same type of lyrical imagery as the first album. "Kathleen" is the story of a man who fights deep pain, and longs to go and see "sweet

Kathleen,” who seems to be a nickname for death. The first verse starts off with a somber omen: (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

“It’s plain to see, the sun won’t shine today.  
But I ain’t in the mood for sunshine anyway.  
Maybe I’ll go insane.  
I got to stop the pain  
Or maybe I’ll go down to see Kathleen.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

The last verse hints that “Kathleen” is actually death and she resides at the bottom of the ocean. The wordplay suggests that Van Zandt has become unable to defeat his demons and finally must go to “Kathleen.” (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

“The stars hang high above, the oceans roar.  
The moon is come to lead me to her door.  
There’s crystal across the sand  
And the waves, they take my hand.  
And soon I’m gonna see my sweet Kathleen.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

Van Zandt seems to embrace death in this song, not only as an inevitable means to an end, but also as a friend. He seems to have the idea that death is something that is not to be feared, but rather embraced. He seems further to suggest that death comes to us all, and rather than struggle against it when it is our time, we should take it by the hand and enter knowing that death is a comfort against the harshness of this world. (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

Another song on the album, “Like A Summer Thursday,” suggests that pain is a large part of Van Zandt’s life. Like many of his songs, “Like A Summer Thursday”

talks about a beautiful woman whom Van Zandt wishes could wash away his torments. (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

“If only she  
Could feel my pain.  
But feelin’ is a burden  
She can’t sustain  
So like a summer Thursday  
I cry for rain  
To come and turn  
The ground to green again.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

This song is similar to others in that it talks about pain and a burden that Van Zandt wishes the presence of a woman could wash away. However, one difference between this song and many of Van Zandt’s others is that it has an element of hope that appears. In many of his songs, there is an element of inevitable doom or sadness that nothing can quench. Yet in this song, he wishes that the ground would turn green again, showing that he believes things could be reversed. The pain and burden is not everlasting, that there is a way that it could turn back to joy. (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

“Snake Mountain Blues” is a unique song in which Van Zandt laments a girlfriend who is unfaithful to him and does not give him the attention he desires. Van Zandt is caught in a conundrum in the song because he realizes that he loves her more than she loves him. However, even in this otherwise standard “she-done-him-wrong” song, the element of death, ever-present in Van Zandt’s music is readily available. (*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

“Snake mountain blues  
They got me down low.  
I could die in the morning  
But no one would know  
When my woman come around  
My body she’d find.  
Go down to Dundee  
Have her a time.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

The narrator realizes that death would not bring much attention from his partner, since she would not mourn his death for long. However, in the fourth verse, Van Zandt alludes to an afterlife and the possibility of seeing his deceased loved ones.

“Oh my daddy, lord, he rides  
On a long holy train.  
First winds of winter,  
I’ll see him again.  
And it’s farewell to this  
Yellow headed misery I’ve known.  
Snake Mountain’s calling  
Calling me home.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

Van Zandt finally realizes that although death would be no relief from the pain of his lost love, it would at least mean a chance to see his father again in the next life. Van Zandt’s narrator’s preoccupation with death seems to shift because he appears to embrace the thought of being with his father on the “long holy train.”  
(*Our Mother the Mountain*, 1969)

#### *Townes Van Zandt*

The third and self-titled album, *Townes Van Zandt*, featured several songs from his previous two albums, along with a few new tunes as well. One such song is

“Columbine.” The perspective offered on “Columbine” is different from many of Van Zandt’s earlier works in that he is telling the listener to take chances and live life to the fullest. The first and final verses repeat each other and offer this advice. (Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

“Tossin’ hair a-ravin’  
Eyes of flashin’ blue  
All the livin’ that you’re savin’  
Won’t buy you dreams for you.”  
(*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

The song offers a different look on life than we have seen from Van Zandt thus far. Normally, caution is thrown to the wind as an escape from pain or sadness, yet here Van Zandt seems to think that a daring attitude is necessary in order to achieve one’s dreams. Yet the familiar element that pain or failure awaits us all in life is still present in “Columbine.” The fourth verse testifies to the successes of the listener beginning to come falling down. (*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

“Watch the petals start to fly  
And then come falling down.  
Hear the wind begin to cry  
As she sees some touch the ground.”  
(*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

This verse appears to say that although success may come to someone in life, eventually some of those successes will turn to failures. The petals represent the dreams that the person throws to the wind and begins to chase, yet the wind is the life circumstances that inevitably blow some of them to the ground. It seems that Van Zandt has a slightly more hopeful outlook on life in this song than others, yet cannot seem to shake the idea that all is never as right as it may seem. (Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

“Fare Thee Well, Miss Carousel” is a convoluted song filled with mystique and grandeur. Although the song could have several interpretations, there is still an element of sadness and hopelessness. The first four lines of the first verse illustrate this. (Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

“The drunken clown’s still hanging round.  
But it’s plain the laughter’s all died down.  
The tears you tried so hard to hide  
Are flowin’.”  
(Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

In this verse, Van Zandt reminds us of previous tactics in his other songs where merriment invariably turns to sadness. Clearly the element that brought happiness, the clown, is still in place. However, that happiness is no longer found in that element and sadness has replaced joy. This would seem to reflect much of his other writing and perhaps an outlook on life in which many of the things in life that make us happy, such as success in the workforce or a relationship, can also be the thing that bring us sadness at a later stage. Van Zandt seems to reiterate this point at the end of the song in the last verse. (Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

“The castle walls has grown so tall,  
Seem there ain’t no hope at all,  
To reach the top even though you stop  
For breathin’.  
But I ain’t gonna try to make you cry  
The tear drops couldn’t find your eye  
It’s all been swell, Miss Carousel,  
But the time has come for leavin’.”  
(Townes Van Zandt, 1969)

Throughout the song, “Miss Carousel,” seems to be a metaphor for life. Van Zandt seems to liken life to a carousel that we are all riding on, in which we are

subject to the many twists and experiences that it throws our way. By the end of the song, he seems to believe that “Miss Carousel” has gotten the best of him, and that there is no hope left or anywhere else to go, but to “leave” the “carousel.” This seems to align with other songs that he has written which takes a defeated approach to death. It seems to not view death as an enemy but rather as a way of escape from the harshness of life. (*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

Although the final song on the album, “None But the Rain,” is simply talking about the ending of a relationship, it is still illustrative of the way Van Zandt thought about life. In the first verse, Van Zandt tells his lover that their time is simply done. He seems resigned to the fact that they have been together, and now they must part, as it were just part of life’s cycle. He seems to not be trying to woo her or fight for their relationship to remain intact. Instead Van Zandt seems to accept that this is the way life and love go, one day together the next apart. (*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

“We had our day but now it’s over.  
We had our song but now it’s sung.  
We had our stroll through summer’s clover.  
But summer’s gone now, our walkin’s done.”  
(*Townes Van Zandt, 1969*)

### *Delta Momma Blues*

In the first song on the album *Delta Momma Blues*, Van Zandt focuses on death once again in a storytelling mode. The song title, “FFV,” talks about a boy dying in a automobile crash. As the boy is dying, Van Zandt sings that his last words are “near my God to thee.” Although this could be interpreted multiple ways, it seems that the boy can “see the light and can feel himself drawing closer to God. This

line becomes contrasted with an earlier line in the song in which the doctor trying to save the little boy's life says that he will live if it is God's will. Despite the fact that this is not necessarily indicative of Van Zandt's belief system, it may suggest that he did believe there was some sort of afterlife or something beyond dying. It is interesting that Van Zandt interjected a belief into a song in which God has a hand in the life and death of people. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

Another song on the album, "Tower Song" is sung as a warning in which Van Zandt is telling his lover that the emotional walls she has built up have come between their relationship. Although written as a sort of sad love song, Van Zandt's lyrical approach still holds to the concept of inevitable sorrow or loss. The first verse immediately devolves into the melancholy. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

"So close and yet so far away  
And all the things I'd hoped to say  
Will have to unsaid today,  
Perhaps until tomorrow.  
Your fear has built a wall between  
Our lives and all what lovin' means  
Will have to go unfelt it seems  
And that leaves only sorrow."  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

The last line of the verse seems to be emblematic for much of Van Zandt's philosophy. It seems to suggest that the emotion that humans turn to most often is sorrow. He appears to think that his life revolves around love, but when love is tampered with or blocked, sorrow is the only emotion that can remain. The chorus of the song suggests that a person's emotional walls and the life that they have built must eventually fall. In this case, he gives this heed to his lover. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“You built your tower strong and tall.  
Can’t you see it’s got to fall some day?”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

Van Zandt also, for once, uses a few clichéd terms in order to break through to his lover and alert her of her pride. He speaks to ideals such as destiny and eternity, ideas that are not always present in Van Zandt’s writing or apparent worldview. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“Of faith and love and destiny  
As distant as eternity,  
Truth and understanding.  
The wind blows cold outside your door.  
It whispers words I’ve tried before.  
But you don’t hear me anymore  
Your pride’s just too demanding.”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

This verse is interesting because it provides words that aren’t often available in Van Zandt’s writing, such as “faith” and “destiny.” However, it seems that Van Zandt thinks that pride eventually always gets in the way of those things. The lyrics suggest that pride is what stops all of these entities from working together, and pride seems to lead to the sorrow that Van Zandt writes about in the first verse. He suggests that pride has no place in life, if one is to find true love or if one is to experience true faith. In this case, pride actually keeps his lover from finding those things, which ultimately keeps him from finding those things as well. This eventuality forces him to deal with all that is left, which is sorrow. Sorrow, Van Zandt speculates will ultimately find his lover as well. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

In the song, “Rake,” Van Zandt revisits this idea of pride forcing something that was once of value or something that brought peace to turn into something that

is harmful and destructive. He uses a clever metaphor of the moon and nighttime to show how pride and foolishness can lead to happiness, yet can turn into the sorrow that he so often sings of. The first verse sets up the metaphor. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“I used to wake and run with the moon  
I lived like a rake and a young man.  
I covered my lovers with flowers and wounds  
My laughter the devil would frighten.  
The sun she would come and beat me back down,  
But every cruel day had its nightfall  
I’d welcome the stars with wine and guitars  
Full of fire and forgetful.”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

At this point in the song, Van Zandt is showing that the nighttime is something that covers him up and protects him. The moon and the stars seem to shine for him so that he may live his life the way he pleases. He takes great pleasure in the nighttime for it seems to be an escape from the day. Yet, by the end of the song, there is no escape from the sorrow that he has brought upon himself, and even the nighttime that he once loved scorns him. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“I was takin’ my pride in the pleasures I’d known  
I laughed and thought I’d be forgiven  
But my laughter turned ‘round eyes blazing and  
Said my friend, we’re holdin’ a wedding  
I buried my face but it spoke once again  
The night to the day we’re a bindin’  
And now the dark air is like fire on my skin  
And even the moonlight is blinding.”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

It is interesting how Van Zandt juxtaposes the day and night and then brings them both together to torment himself, in order to fully show the effects that pride can have on his soul. Once again, Van Zandt seems to cry out that once he feels the

weakness that his pride has brought on, only sorrow remains. The song does not offer any hope that he will one day rise above the moonlight or regain the gayety that he once found in the night. The song ends on a somber note, in which it appears that, for Van Zandt, all hope is lost. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

In “Come Tomorrow,” Van Zandt relies once again on the word “sorrow.” It is clear by this time that Van Zandt sees sorrow as not only a part of life, but also an essential, perhaps predominant, part of life. It seems that Van Zandt interweaves sorrow into all of his songs and stories, showing that sorrow comes from many different areas of life. In this particular song, it comes from loneliness when he realizes his love will be leaving him. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“Could it be the season’s changin’  
The winds of winter rearranging  
All the leaves like fallin’ queens of sorrow  
Could be like freezing rain a-fallin’  
Could be sad September callin’  
Or maybe it’s knowin’ she’ll be gone  
Come tomorrow”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

Van Zandt also returns to the idea that heartache often falls upon people with no warning, almost as if it was inevitable. His lyrics suggest that the sorrow he speaks of is unstoppable and that there is no way of avoiding it. He also indicates that there is no going back to true happiness once the sadness reaches a certain point. (*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

“Well, it’s strange how many tortured mornings  
Fell upon us with no warning  
Lookin’ for a smile to beg and borrow  
It’s over now, there is no returning.”  
(*Delta Momma Blues*, 1971)

The final verse of the song “Nothin’” is indicative of Van Zandt’s usage of the word sorrow and shows the importance that he places on it in his idea of what it means to live and be human. (*Delta Momma Blues, 1971*)

“Sorrow and solitude  
These are the precious things  
And the only words  
That are worth rememberin’”  
(*Delta Momma Blues, 1971*)

The overall message of the song is Van Zandt lecturing on the belief that in this world, nothing is what we come in with, and in the end, nothing is all we have. He talks about how the world can crush you down into nothing, and however much knowledge we may have, it is nothing compared to how much knowledge is available in the universe. Van Zandt places inordinate importance on sorrow and solitude. Although these themes are persistent throughout his music, “Nothin’” seems to point directly at the heart of Van Zandt’s message—that life can often be boiled down to moments of sorrow and loneliness. (*Delta Momma Blues, 1971*)

### *High, Low and In Between*

On *High, Low and In Between*, Van Zandt offer a different twist on his typical music by having several overt gospel songs. Songs such as “Two Hands” and “When He Offers His Hand,” provide clear Christian imagery regarding salvation and following the ways of Jesus. Van Zandt praises God on both tracks as being a guide and Jesus as someone to turn to in times of trouble. Although most spiritual aspects of his songs come from imagery about sorrow or the afterlife, “Two Hands,” and

“When He Offers His Hand,” are surprisingly clear and joyous in their message.  
(*High, Low and In Between*, 1972)

Perhaps the most celebrated song on the album, “To Live is to Fly,” has become one of the standards of Van Zandt’s body of work.. The song also provides insight into how Van Zandt viewed the ebb and flow of life. Unlike many of Van Zandt’s songs, “To Live is to Fly” not only focuses on the down parts of life, but also focuses on the happiness and joy that life can bring. (*High, Low and In Between*, 1972)

“Days up and down they come  
Like rain on a conga drum  
Forget most, remember some  
But don’t turn none away.  
Everything is not enough  
And nothin’ is too much to bear  
Where you been is good and gone  
All you keep is the getting there  
To live is to fly  
Low and high  
So shake the dust off of your wings  
And the sleep out of your eyes”  
(*High, Low and In Between*, 1972)

In this song, Van Zandt seems to view life as a journey and not as a means to get to an end. He suggests that life is a collective of many moments, not simply of one moment of sorrow or joy. Both elements are present and life and they each work together to paint a picture, rather than work against each other to create a specific outcome, good or bad. This song seems to go against many of the ideologies that Van Zandt espouses in much of his other writing, but it actually works well with his more somber side. This song does not contradict his melancholy writings, but

rather shows another side of those songs. “To Live is To Fly” serves as an equalizer to Van Zandt’s philosophy regarding dealing with sorrow. Many of his songs attack the soul by pointing out that sorrow is inevitable. “To Live is To Fly” finally points out that that same sorrow that he speaks of is only a byproduct of life. Along with that sorrow can come great delight. Although in many of Van Zandt’s songs sadness wins the battle, “To Live is To Fly” simply presents the idea that it is up to the individual to help resolve the conflict between joy and pain and deal with the highs and the lows. (*High, Low and In Between*, 1972)

*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*

On the track “Don’t Let the Sunshine Fool Ya” off of his album, *The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, Van Zandt warns against both becoming too high off of joy and the perils of not to let your guard down. Through imagery involving nature, Van Zandt seems to think that it is foolish to become so zealous in life as to let your guard down against the sadness that life can bring. (*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, 1972)

“Don’t let the sunshine fool ya’  
Don’t let the bluebirds fool ya’  
Don’t let the women do ya’  
Put your hand in mine.”  
(*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, 1972)

One of Townes Van Zandt’s most well-known songs, “Pancho and Lefty,” was recorded on *The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*. The song apparently tells of two outlaws hardened by the world they lived in and who turned to life as criminals. However, by the end of the song, the melancholy that pervades Van Zandt’s songs seeps into the story. Pancho finally succumbs to their outlaw lifestyle and is killed in

action, while Lefty is forced to live a life hidden away in solitude in order to avoid a similar fate. (*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, 1972)

Although the lyrics can be open to interpretation like many songs, it seems to trend towards the same message as many of Van Zandt's other lyrics. "Pancho and Lefty" tells the story of two friends, both of whom feel free and strong, and who eventually buckle to the pain that was inevitably set for them. At the beginning of the song, the men are unstoppable outlaws, but by the end one lies in a shallow grave, while the other is forced to flee and live a life of loneliness. Van Zandt paints a beautiful picture of friendship, while also portraying how sorrow can creep into all relationships and aspects of life. (*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, 1972)

Another of Van Zandt's well-known songs from the album, "If I Needed You," is a beautiful ballad that shows the depths of Van Zandt's compassion. However, it should not go unnoticed that in the very first verse, Van Zandt talks about pain.

"If I needed you  
Would you come to me  
Would you come to me,  
And ease my pain?  
If you needed me  
I would come to you  
I'd swim the seas  
For to ease your pain."  
(*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*, 1972)

The way Van Zandt introduces this pain is interesting because he approaches it both from his viewpoint and the viewpoint of his lover. He indirectly indicates that both he and his love have pain in their lives. He does not simply focus on his pain, but acknowledges that she has pain as well. It is important because it ties into

earlier messages from previous songs. “If I Needed You,” seems to be a recognition of the pain that Van Zandt so often sings about, and a recognition that everyone feels sadness. (*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt, 1972*)

Another interesting aspect to this song is that rather than reveal what pain he is talking about, Van Zandt leaves it ambiguous. As a listener, one can insert any pain when identifying with the song. Van Zandt asserts that everyone feels pain, thus specifying the cause of the pain is unnecessary. Although this could seem trivial, it is important because it follows Van Zandt’s message that sorrow is an inevitable, essential part of life. (*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt, 1972*)

In “Heavenly Houseboat Blues,” Van Zandt once again looks towards the afterlife. He seems to regard death not as something to be afraid of, but rather as something to prepare and anticipate:

“I’m building a houseboat in heaven  
To sail those deep and holy seas  
I’m building a houseboat in heaven  
And it’s welcome aboard you sweet peace.”  
(*The Late Great Townes Van Zandt, 1972*)

#### *Flyin’ Shoes*

On Van Zandt’s *Flyin’ Shoes* album from 1978, the song “Rex’s Blues” speaks once again of loneliness. Once again, Van Zandt talks about how time has a way of leaving people lonely, almost as if it is unavoidable to escape loneliness forever. (*Flyin’ Shoes, 1978*)

“Ride the blue wind high and free  
She’ll lead you down through misery  
Leave you low, come time to go  
Alone and low as low can be”  
(*Flyin’ Shoes*, 1978)

Van Zandt also appears to be focusing on death once again in the chorus. He suggests that at the time of our death, we enter alone. Although we may not be alone physically, we die alone within ourselves. Van Zandt seems to be reminding the listener that when it comes time to die, no one can go with you. This is his way of showing that time eventually makes everyone lonely, even if it is not until his or her deathbed. (*Flyin’ Shoes*, 1978)

In the song “Brother Flower,” Van Zandt speaks to a flower about his problems, asking the flower how it remains so beautiful and life-giving despite being blown around by the wind and stamped by the snow. He asks the flower how he endures such challenges. However, in the final two verses it becomes apparent that Van Zandt is once again lonely, and is talking to the flower as a means of trying to understand how to cope with loneliness. (*Flyin’ Shoes*, 1978)

“I had love and now it’s gone  
I have arms to hold another  
Never to hold her again  
I have life to give a lover  
You have life to give the wind  
Brother flower, when the snow flies  
And you lay your beauty down  
Brother flower, are you sleepin’  
There upon the cold, cold ground  
Brother flower, please awaken  
Show the sky your face of blue  
Let me know I ain’t forsaken  
Seems like all I have is you”  
(*Flyin’ Shoes*, 1978)

The final verse is particularly interesting because he even likens sadness to nature through talking about the flower being covered and smashed by the snow. The lyric reveals that Van Zandt even thinks of nature as experiencing loneliness. Van Zandt seems to see the world as trending towards sadness, and that all of nature, humans and other organic life seem to experience loneliness. (*Flyin' Shoes*, 1978)

The idea that nature becomes lonely is apparent on the next song as well, "Snake Song."

"You can't hold me  
I'm too slippery  
I do no sleepin'  
I get lonely  
You can touch me  
If you want to  
I got poison  
I just might bite you.  
(*Flyin' Shoes*, 1978)

Although on the surface this is a fairly simple song about the personality and habits of a snake, it still helps to confirm the mindset of Van Zandt when thinking about loneliness and sorrow. Even in a somewhat light-hearted verse about a snake, Van Zandt still finds it important to speak of the solitary nature of life. (*Flyin' Shoes*, 1978)

The title track, "Flyin' Shoes," finds Van Zandt once again fighting sorrow and contemplating the timing of death. The first verse uses the analogy of rain to talk about sorrow, while his "flyin' shoes," are a metaphor for him departing from this life. (*Flyin' Shoes*, 1978)

“Days full of rain  
Sky’s comin’ down again  
I get so tired  
Of these same old blues  
Same old song  
Baby, it won’t be long  
‘fore I be tyin’ on  
My flyin’ shoes  
Flyin shoes  
Till I be tyin’ on  
My flyin’ shoes”  
(*Flyin’ Shoes*,1978)

*At My Window*

In the first song on *At My Window*, Van Zandt addresses the idea of time, as he often does in his songwriting. Van Zandt declares how time waits for no one, and does not stop in “Snowin’ On Raton.” Yet he does not seem to view this inevitability as a curse, but more of a blessing. Although he likens it to not being able to “hold a lover that is gone,” Van Zandt seems to think that time is a necessary tool. He is resigned to the fact that time is an unavoidable entity, even if it sometimes brings pain. (*At My Window*, 1987)

Another song on the album, “At My Window”, Van Zandt talks about life, death, and time in a much less subtle way. The first three verses reflect on being resigned to time and death, and allowing dreams to get in the way of living a joy-filled life. (*At My Window*, 1987)

“At my window  
Watching the sun go  
Hoping the stars know  
It’s time to shine  
Daydreams  
Aloft on dark wings  
Soft as the sun streams  
At days decline

Living is laughing  
Dying is nothing at all  
Baby and I are laying here  
Watching the evening fall  
Time flows  
Through brave beginnings  
And she leaves her endings  
Beneath our feet  
Walk lightly  
Upon their faces.”  
(*At My Window*, 1987)

Van Zandt appears to suggest through this lyric that joy is found in living, while nothing is found in death. He seems to say this not to make death meaningless, but rather to show that death is nothing to fear. Once again, Van Zandt recognizes that time is connected to both life and death, and that the three are combined in a way that creates beauty and pain. However, in this song he chooses to acknowledge the beauty, because he knows that the sorrow comes whether it is acknowledged or not. (*At My Window*, 1987)

### *No Deeper Blue*

*No Deeper Blue* begins with a song that remains true to Van Zandt’s typical songwriting about sorrow and being a traveling troubadour. The song, “A Song For,” finds Van Zandt weary of his travels, and speaking of sorrow. He sings of traveling the world and seeing all of the beauty and wonder that it has to offer, yet sorrow has still found him. (*No Deeper Blue*, 1994)

“Ribbons of love  
Please keep my true sane  
Until I reach home on the morrow  
Never never to wander again  
I’m weak and I’m weary of sorrow  
London to Dublin  
Australia to Perth

I gazed at your sky  
I tasted you earth  
Sung out my heart  
For what it was worth  
Never again shall I ramble"  
(*No Deeper Blue*, 1994)

One interesting aspect to this song is that Van Zandt's lyrics suggest that sorrow still comes even after a full life. He writes that he has been to many places, chased his dreams, and explored what the world and life have to offer. And yet, sorrow still found him. This lyric further suggests that even after 10 studio albums, Van Zandt still believes that sorrow strikes everyone at some point, regardless of their circumstances. (*No Deeper Blue*, 1994)

In conclusion, Van Zandt's it appears songwriting suggests three things about what it means to live and die. For one, to live is to experience sorrow. The world is trending towards sorrow, and oftentimes life builds up only to fall to those sorrowful moments. In many instances, the characters in Van Zandt's songs start out happy or strong, yet by the end they are beat down or transformed by loss, such as in "Pancho and Lefty."

Second, sorrow is not always a bad thing or an unnecessary thing. Sorrow is important because it can remind us of what is important and it can help us to appreciate what is good. In much of Van Zandt's writing, he does not seem to have contempt for loneliness or sorrow, but rather seems to explore why he is sorrowful or how to channel the pain.

The third theme I believe is inherent in Van Zandt's lyrics is that death is not something to be feared, but rather to be expected and embraced at the right time.

Death should instead be welcomed as the end of a life filled with ups and downs. Many of Van Zandt's songs talk about time and death and the relationship that the two have. Van Zandt often shows how neither death nor time waits for anyone, yet that does not mean that they are malicious or inherent evil. Rather, death and time serve as a way to escape the sorrow that inevitably finds everyone. Thus, Van Zandt suggests that death is simply an aspect of humanity that is a necessary means of release from a tumultuous and often sorrowful world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Commentary on Van Zandt and His Writing

Although Van Zandt has posthumously earned a reputation as somewhat of a folkloric hero, he was known by many as a friend and fellow musician. His work influenced a host of different songwriters, several of which were his peers and contemporaries. In order to achieve a deeper look into Van Zandt as a songwriter, it is informative to gain a perspective of his life and work from other songwriters and noted writers that were impacted by his work.

Writers and artists that have offered – at various times - a deeper knowledge of his character and work include Guy Clark, Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell, and Steve Earle. These insights come from those who knew him best and studied his songs most carefully.

One of the more notable songwriters to comment on the music and life of Van Zandt was his best friend, Guy Clark. John Spong wrote on Van Zandt and Clark's relationship in a *Texas Monthly* article, saying that Clark and Van Zandt "were each other's most credible supporter and critic." Clark's admiration for Van Zandt went beyond just songwriting -- Van Zandt was the best man in Clark's wedding to his wife Susanna and lived with the couple off and on during the 1970s. (Spong)

In *Without Getting Killed or Caught*, a memoir of Guy Clark's life written by Tamara Saviano, Clark talks about Van Zandt as a songwriter, mentioning how

skilled he was at crafting lyrics and melody together. In the process, Clark emphasizes the sorrowful side of Van Zandt's writing saying, "Townes was bound and determined to have the blues." (Saviano) Clark talked about the inspiration that Van Zandt had on his career as well:

"One of the first songs he wrote was 'Waitin' Around to Die.' I heard that and "Don't You Take it Too Bad" and it was one of the main reasons I started writing...hearing those songs. It was so literate, you know, and yet music. Wow, what a concept!" (Saviano)

It is interesting that one of the first traits of Van Zandt that Clark mentions in his memoirs is about Van Zandt's sorrowful side. This directly connects to Van Zandt's views of sorrow as a necessary part of life and a sometimes-effective part of life that helps a person see their worldview from a different perspective. Clark's insight into Van Zandt helps to further solidify the idea that in Van Zandt's search for the meaning of life and death, sorrow and pain were always at the forefront of his thought process and in his writing.

Throughout his career, Clark kept the legacy of Van Zandt's songwriting alive, and included at least one of Van Zandt's songs on each of his albums. During Clark's career, he continuously recorded and performed Van Zandt's songs – but not all of them.. Clark said, "I do the songs I like of his, and I like a lot of them. Some songs I can't do because they're too dark, too scary, pretty dark stuff that I'm not in the mood to say or to sing." (Atkinson)

Although this approach to Van Zandt's songs shows Clark's reverence for the songwriter, it also shows the depth of darkness that Van Zandt writes from. This statement from Clark suggests that Van Zandt seemed to be able to tap into a realm of sorrow that could often be overbearing and cumbersome. Despite the fact that Clark is unwilling to perform some of these songs, he recognizes that Van Zandt had the ability to write them in a powerful way.

In an interview in the documentary *Be Here to Love Me*, Clark talks about the stylistic approach to songwriting that was so effective for Van Zandt. Clark mentions that while Van Zandt uses many different words, and his songs are full of twisting and turning phrases, it is the holes that are left in the songs that make them so emotionally potent. The "room" in a song that makes the listener ponder and think about the deeper meaning of the song is what makes for a great song, Clark says, and he claims that Van Zandt was so good at leaving those holes that it could seem "almost unconscious." (Brown)

As mentioned earlier, Clark was also deeply aware of the sorrow and pain that Van Zandt sang of and apparently lived. It seems that Clark approached that sorrow with a careful reverence, respectful of the thoughtfulness that it took to write songs in that tone, but cautious of the consumptive nature of such an approach to life.

Another of Van Zandt's accomplished friends is the talented singer and songwriter, Emmylou Harris. Harris remembers first seeing Van Zandt at a club in New York City when she was first starting her career. She remembers his writing

and playing, as many other songwriters do, in a way that appeared to her as somewhat mysterious and larger than life. “He had something about Hank Williams in him, a certain high lonesome sound in his voice,” Harris recalled in an interview. “But his lyrics had a poetry and evoked a kind of landscape...I hadn’t heard anything like it before.” Harris speaks in a certain reverence of Van Zandt’s writing that is common among songwriters when talking about his music. (Brown)

One of the songwriters who was a part of Van Zandt and Guy Clark’s Nashville friend group during the 1970s was Rodney Crowell. Crowell states that many of the song swaps that took place with Van Zandt and the other songwriters were particularly formative during his young career. “[Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark] instilled me with the right attitude, which is that the craft, the process, and the creativity of songwriting is far more important than the material rewards.” In a wide-ranging interview, Crowell talked about the song swap sessions as being productive for growth in songwriting, rather than just being a meaningless time of showing off, “The late-night song-swapping sessions were always about, ‘What are you working on?’ ‘Are you getting any better?’ Can we take the music away and have it stand as poetry?” Crowell recalled. Crowell’s comments show that Van Zandt and company took songwriting as seriously as they took living. It also reinforced the commitment to the craft of songwriting that helped forge Van Zandt’s career. The pensive lyrics and carefully laid out precepts that took over Van Zandt’s music were not there by accident, but were a part of a conscious effort to explore what a song could be and what a song could represent. (Atkinson)

The songwriter Steve Young, who garnered the praise of country music legend Waylon Jennings, also befriended Van Zandt during the 1970s while trying to start his career in Nashville. When talking about his relationship with Van Zandt, Young describes it as “contentious,” saying that they typically liked to debate and argue over various topics. Yet Young is quoted as saying that they were friends for the remainder of Van Zandt’s life, and he still admires his songwriting. “Nashville is one of the toughest towns for people who write real, quality, heartfelt songs,” Young has said, “and Townes was writing real life-and-death stuff.” Young’s quote testifies to the notion that Van Zandt focused on the meaning of life and death in his songwriting. I believe this is because Van Zandt wrote with substance, focusing on subjects of significance and material that offer up genuine insight into the human existence. (Atkinson)

Young also talks about the impact of Van Zandt’s writing using the song “Waitin’ Around to Die,” as an example. “I really like ‘Waitin’ Around to Die,’” Young notes, “though I used to think, ‘Man, I’m depressing, but that’s over the limit.’ As I’ve gotten older, I can see the wisdom and truth to it.”(Atkinson) As discussed in the previous chapter that while Van Zandt focuses on sorrow and sadness in his music, his lyrics seem to show them as a necessary and sometimes healthy part of life. Young echoes that sentiment in suggesting that there is wisdom in one of Van Zandt’s most melancholy tunes. This observation shows the impact that the depth of Van Zandt’s songs can have on people, forcing them to think about life’s realities in a new way that challenges them and inspires them, even if it is through a sad truth.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore, another country singer and songwriter who also has had an acting career, also added keen insight into the writing and career of Van Zandt. Gilmore has focused on the subject matter of Van Zandt's writing and how Van Zandt could stir emotions in his listeners. "In his songs, Townes is usually talking metaphorically about consciousness and the primal, universal battle of darkness and light," Gilmore is quoted as saying. "Townes was so articulate about it, he was so passionately feeling that he spent a whole lot of energy trying to escape the intensity of this feelings...He was a poet, and there's kind of a tradition of that, the depressed outsider...There was a mixture of darkness, light and slapstick going on. Townes could make us feel his pain, laugh and feel hopeful all at the same time."(Hardy)

Gilmore's comments focus, as have the words of other songwriters, on the sorrow that Van Zandt wrote about constantly, yet show that he knew how to juxtapose it with the "light" of life. Gilmore appears to think that Van Zandt's effectiveness as a songwriter came from being able to articulate his pain, and in comparing it to joy, could show the full range of his pain and sorrow. This allowed listeners to resonate with his music and feel the depth of human emotion hidden in his songs. Once again, sorrow seems to be the main subject of Van Zandt's work, according to Gilmore, yet the sorrow could lead to wisdom and joy eventually. In other words, the sorrow was inevitable, but it was not hopeless, just as Van Zandt revealed in his music on numerous occasions.

Songwriter and performer Joe Ely has said that he, too, has also been directly influenced by the songwriting of Van Zandt and, in an interview commented

extensively on the quality and dark features of his music. After receiving a record from Van Zandt as payment for giving him a ride from Lubbock to Houston, Ely committed himself to learning to play every song on the record, "Our Mother the Mountain." "Every song seemed like a dream," Ely is quoted as saying. "They were painted dark shades of blue." Ely comments on the mystique that surrounds Van Zandt's music, while astutely recognizing the dark qualities that make his music unique. According to Ely, the way that Van Zandt could make you feel his sorrow and make you find that sense of pain and melancholy seems to have been unmatched in contemporary music. It is a quality that Ely holds in high esteem. (Hall)

Singer songwriter and member of the band Cowboy Junkies, Michael Timmins, has also been a student of Van Zandt's work. Through doing covers of Van Zandt's work, Timmins said he has found a way to honor one of his heroes while introducing him to a new audience of fans. (Henderson) Timmins remarks on Van Zandt's writing with a tone of awe, suggesting a slight mysticism about Van Zandt's abilities. "It was like he had some connection with some very strange energy," Timmins has mused, "whatever you want to call it, you know his muse that wouldn't let him leave until she or it was finished with him...And I think, near the end there, he was almost waiting to go in a weird way. 'I've done my bit, I've had my say, now I've got to leave.' Again, in some of his darker moods, he would talk very cryptically about things like that." (Hardy) Timmins comments agree with those of other writers that Van Zandt could be fixated on the imminent arrival of despair or sorrow. Through his lyrics, Van Zandt seemed to not only expect sorrow, he

welcomed it, and that showed not only through his music but also through his conversations with others.

Scott Avett, of the popular group the Avett Brothers, also has found Van Zandt to be a large inspiration in his career, particularly as a songwriter. Avett said he has found that the abstractness of Van Zandt's writing appeals to him and has helped stretch his own writing abilities. Yet Avett also said he realizes that the abstractness is not separate from Van Zandt's sorrow, but rather that they are connected. "Townes' depth and despair came out in abstract wording that I relate to quite a bit," Avett is reported as saying. "Sometimes I hear a line and I think, I don't even know what that meant, but God, it makes so much sense. I'm in a very direct point of relation with that because I'm living that life and writing songs. I understand the despair that the occupation carries." That despair that is in Van Zandt's writing is what often resonates with fans, even though many writers struggle to capture such true emotion in such a profound manner. (Atkinson)

A member of the band The Flatlanders, Butch Hancock also provides insight into the writing of Van Zandt as a portal into an exploration of the meaning of life and death. "There is a deeper and wider and more all-encompassing part of our mind that sees the whole of existence as one big ball of wax," Hancock has said. "If a song is put together paying attention to that framework, you're going to have something that resonates...Townes's songs do that. They sound like a simple little love song at first and then all of a sudden – Zap! – he hits you with a line that makes you look death straight in the face." Hancock's remarks key in on the nature of Van Zandt's songs that many other writers have contemplated. Van Zandt's writing

seemed to be able to make listeners think about the whole spectrum of life, and embraced each part of that, including death and pain.

In a *New York Times* article by Jon Pareles, he talks about Van Zandt, Clark, and the at-the-time burgeoning singer songwriter Robert Earl Keen. When describing Van Zandt, he notes him as the “depressive” of the group and write about his songwriting approach. “His songs, like ‘If I Needed You,’ occasionally invoke romance, but more often they’re about saying goodbye to a woman and getting back on the road,” Pareles observes, “a life that’s bleak but somehow necessary...His lyrics are similarly etched, with an occasional glimmer of humor that doesn’t lighten his doomed, rambling-man persona.” Pareles suggests that which haunted Van Zandt and his writing is that the meaning of life and death involves an inevitable sorrow that cannot be doused or dampened. Rather, this existential despair is something that should be embraced and explored as a means to writing a good song and finding truth in the lyrics. (Pareles)

Van Zandt left behind a trail of sorrow in his music, so much so that from the seasoned writer to the casual listener everyone who hears his music contemplates on the sorrow and despair that he sang of, and wonders about how it connects to what it means to be human. (Pareles)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Conclusion

Townes Van Zandt's life was dedicated to his craft of songwriting, and ultimately revolved around being able to string words together in a way that was meaningful to him and others. Although he struggled with alcohol addiction, his life always seemed to center around his music and attempting to find the best way to write a song.

Through his battles with depression, addiction, broken relationships, and even a brief stint in a mental institution, it is no surprise that sorrow and pain were large aspects of Van Zandt's life. At every turn in his life, there was some sort of demon to overcome or wrong choices to face. However, this sorrow did not seem to surprise Van Zandt or keep him from fulfilling his purpose, which was to write the best songs that he could that would carry weight and meaning long after he was gone.

His work has inspired generations of songwriters and he has been heralded by his peers as one of the greatest songwriters of all time. From his friends such as Guy Clark and Steve Earle, to contemporaries such as Joe Ely and Ray Wylie Hubbard, Van Zandt has received praise and has been an influence in each of their careers. Although many of them cite him as being one of their main inspirations in songwriting, they also have all seemed to take note of the sorrowful nature of his music and the intensity with which he wrote.

Through his music, Van Zandt seems to comment frequently on what it means to live and die, yet his songs typically carry the same message about the meaning of those two ideas. Van Zandt's writing shows that he has a specific life view that seems to relate to sorrow. After examination of his work, three ideas can be taken away about what his songs have to say about the meaning of life and death.

The first takeaway from Van Zandt's music is that to live is to experience sorrow. He seems to write many of his characters as trending towards sorrow in his songs, unable to escape from pain that seems to await us all. The next idea about life and death present in Van Zandt's work is that sorrow is not only an inevitable thing, but is also a necessary thing. Sorrow can help us appreciate the good things that we have by giving us perspective on the pain that undoubtedly will find us. The third concept about life and death that is apparent in Van Zandt's music is that death is not something that should be feared, but should be regarded as the end of a life filled with chaos. Due to life's up and down nature that Van Zandt sings about, he seems to also view death as a means of release from the clamorous nature of life. In

Van Zandt's music, death is seen as just a part of what it means to be human and should be accepted as such rather than seen as an enemy.

Although Van Zandt's work is not seen as religious necessarily, the life and death message in his songs seems to evoke some scriptural comparison. Even though some have said that Van Zandt was a Christian, such as Billy Joe Shaver, he was not recognized as a Christian artist and his views on Christianity are not widely published other than his recordings of a few gospel songs. (Atkinson) However, the ideals about life and death that are present in his music seem to be reminiscent of the message in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4 says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:...A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." (ESV, Ecc. 3:1,4) Ecclesiastes 1:8 says, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." (ESV, Ecc. 1:8) Another verse from Ecclesiastes that could fit within the work of Van Zandt is Ecclesiastes 3:9-10 which says, "What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. (ESV, Ecc. 3:9-10)

These verses each seem to point out the very thing that Van Zandt explores so often in his music. Each points to the fact that eventually sorrows falls upon us all. The first set of verses shows that life is up and down, such as Van Zandt mentions in his song, "To Live is to Fly." Van Zandt sings, "Days up and down they come, like rain on a conga drum. Forget most, remember some. But don't turn none away." ("High,

Low and In Between”, 1972) The verse points out that even though there are good times, inevitably, sorrowful times and times filled with pain will happen as well. (ESV, Ecc. 3:1,4) The next verse also seems to echo the idea that sorrow finds all things and should be expected. It talks about how “all things are wearisome.” (ESV, Ecc. 1:8) The third verse is subtle in its approach, but it shows that even though life is full of hard work and effort, there is still this burden and sorrow that will find us. (ESV, Ecc. 3:9-10) This is similar to much of Van Zandt’s songs where the characters strive to make their lives better or to find happiness, yet they cannot seem to evade the pain that pursues them. Songs such as “Tecumseh Valley” show this type of trend, where a character works hard, yet is unable to get out of the shadow of sorrow that exists as part of the human condition. (“For the Sake of the Song”, 1968)

Townes Van Zandt’s legacy and music continues to live on as a testament to the friend that he was to many and the inspiration that he was to so many more. Although his life was filled with unruliness and addiction, he found a way to create art that stirs at listener’s souls and causes them to think about life and death in new and interesting ways. Sorrow seemed to be a constant theme in Van Zandt’s life, and that was reflected in his music. Van Zandt’s songs live on as a testimony to the role of sorrow in the life and death of every human.

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