



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

by Robert Earl Hardy (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008). x, 300 pp. (No. 1: North Texas Lives of Musicians Series).

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

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

*A Deeper Blue* is first and foremost a study of a gifted singer and songwriter. Hardy examines each of Van Zandt's best-known songs as they emerged during his career, exploring both music and lyrics with a musician's sensibility. Like most of us, Hardy wants to know where these songs came from and how they were written. His discussion of Van Zandt's best-known hit, "Pancho and Lefty," reflects the ambiguity and mystery surrounding his music and his psyche. Townes claimed to have written the song one afternoon in a motel room near Dallas, saying, "all of a sudden it was there, and I was beginning to write it down" (p.

124). Another friend, however, recalled that Van Zandt wrote the song in a hospital the previous year after a near-fatal drug overdose. Whatever its origins, "Pancho and Lefty"—in Hardy's analysis—embodies Van Zandt's own close relationship with his mother and his losing battle with the darker side of his persona, all cast in "a wistful fantasy of bandits and *federales*" (p. 126). We may never know for certain how each of Van Zandt's songs was created, but we learn that they followed no set formula or method. Whether written at a kitchen table, a hospital bed, or in the back of a tour bus, the music and words apparently gestated within Van Zandt until they were ready to emerge. As his creative offspring, the songs bear the unmistakable stamp of his personality—complex, sometimes ambiguous, tinged with melancholy, longing, or even despair, but leavened with humor and profound love. That was what made Van Zandt a great songwriter.

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

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

John Wheat

## Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound

by Alan Govenar. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. The John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music.) Pp. 599. Foreword, acknowledgements, prologue, photos, index. ISBN-13: 978-1-58544-605-6 cloth.

Alan Govenar, folklorist, photographer, and filmmaker, has been documenting African-American music in Texas (primarily blues) with oral histories, photographs, and field recordings for nearly three decades. Indeed, his *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound*, the second book in the new John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music published by Texas A&M University Press, is in many ways a culmination of his previously published work, which includes *Living Texas Blues* (1985), *Meeting the Blues* (1988), *The Early Years of Rhythm and Blues* (1991), *Juneteenth Texas* (coedited with Francis Abernethy and Patrick Mullen, 1996), and *Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged* (coauthored with Jay Brakefield, 1998). In 2004 Govenar also co-created with Akin Babatunde the musical, *Blind Lemon Blues*.

*Texas Blues* is divided into several sections, including region (East Texas and the Rio Grande Valley), topic ("Electrifying the Blues," "The Saxophone in Texas Blues," and "The Move to California," genre (Zydeco), and city (Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange, San Antonio and Corpus Christi, and Austin). Virtually all of the chapters begin with a brief introduction, summarizing the significance of the contributions of the musicians' oral histories that follow. (The introductions to the chapters on Dallas and Houston are especially extensive and informative.)

Govenar's impressively long list of interviewees is supplemented with those of Jay Brakefield, Allan Turner, John Minton, and Dick Shurman (among a few

others). Where he wanted to include significant contributors to Texas blues but did not have access to an interview, Govenar added his own brief, biographical summary. Examples of this include Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker, Bob Dunn, and Leadbelly.

While this book is a significant collection of primary source material about mostly African-American musicians and music making in Texas, it also acknowledges the contributions of such white and Latino artists as Delbert McClinton,

Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, Doyle Bramhall, Angela Strehli, Sunny Ozuna, and Freddie Fender, just to name a few.

In particular, the extensive and very informative interview with Sunny Ozuna, documenting his take on the connection between Texas-Mexican music and black R&B, soul, and pop influences, is a gem.

The over 400 photographs and illustrations, many of which were taken by the author, visually document a wide range of images, from contemporary settings of the artists at the time of the interview to their earlier days as represented in publicity photos, album covers, and live performances. In the end, this work is as much a photographic history of Texas

blues as an oral history.

The 25-page introduction to the book fittingly serves to introduce the opening chapter on East Texas musicians, which at first glance seems to be the only chapter missing an introduction. Among the front matter is a forward by Paul Oliver, along with Govenar's prologue, which documents his fieldwork from a 1987 meeting with Quince Cox, a cemetery



caretaker in Wortham, Texas, where Blind Lemon Jefferson is buried, to a 1999 trip to the city of Dakar, Senegal, and back to Texas in 2004 to record and photograph Clyde Langford of Centerville, Texas.

The back matter includes both a selected discography and selected bibliography, in addition to an index. Although one might quibble with an apparent exclusion of the interviewers' names, the index provides a helpful research guide. For example, while the topic was not addressed in detail, if you want to find out what musicians have to say about the Chitlin' Circuit, the index directs you to six isolated pages. What role did country and western music have on the blues? Look up "country and western" in the index, and you will find listed all of the musicians who mentioned this genre.

While *Texas Blues* is a significant compendium of primary source material and could appeal to both the general public and to scholars, the latter might take issue with the author's seemingly haphazard approach to citing secondary source material. I found the footnotes at the bottom of the page to be informative, but I was frustrated when direct quotations appeared in the text and were not cited. One example is on page 16, in which he mentions "Walter Prescott Webb's report

of his meeting with a young singer named Floyd Canada in a Beeville, Texas, pool hall in 1915." Govenar ends the paragraph with a direct quote from Webb but does not provide a footnote citation, nor is Webb listed in the bibliography. Govenar also fails to cite his source(s) for a biographical sketch of Charlie Christian. Unfortunately, there are other similar examples.

Less serious issues one might encounter with this publication are the book's size and some problems with the layout. The cloth-covered book is large, heavy, and cumbersome to hold and carry. A second paperback edition might solve that problem and would also provide an opportunity to reformat a couple of sections, in which one interview begins at the bottom of the page of the previous interview, and another instance in which the ending of one interview runs over into the beginning of another. (See pp. 77-79 and 338-364.)

Despite these limitations, which can easily be corrected in a second edition, *Texas Blues* is a welcome and significant contribution to the history of Texas blues, compiled by arguably one of the state's most authoritative researchers on the subject. Alan Govenar's interviews provide valuable insight into the lives of those Texas blues musicians who are familiar to us. Perhaps more importantly, his work offers a window into the experiences of the many lesser-known musicians who have spent their lives making music and contributing to the state's rich musical fabric.

Kevin Mooney