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Review of *To Live's to Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*. By John Kruth *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt* By Robert Earl Hardy

Chuck Vollan

South Dakota State University, charles.vollan@sdstate.edu

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To Live's to Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt. By John Kruth. New York: Da Capo Press, 2007. viii + 326 pp. Photographs, bibliography, discography, index. \$26.00 cloth, \$17.50 paper.

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. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95.

Fingers walk the darkness down
—Townes Van Zandt

Townes Van Zandt was a founding member of the modern Texas singer-songwriter tradition and influenced or played with everyone from Bob Dylan to Norah Jones. His spare, evocative lyrics, coupled with his beautiful, articulate guitar playing, developed a particularly loyal and eclectic fan base. His songs have been covered most famously by Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Emmylou Harris, but also by a host of great and lesser-known performers. He was a major influence on the “Outlaw” Country movement.

Van Zandt wrestled with inner demons. His eccentricities, mental illness, and the resulting heavy substance abuse, combined with often poorly produced studio albums, ensured that his fame was never as great as his talent. His influence and his legend continued to grow after his death on January 1, 1997, forty-four years to the day after the death of his hero Hank Williams.

Ten years passed before a biography of Van Zandt appeared. Musician, writer, poet and professor of music at Manhattan College and the College of Mount St. Vincent, John Kruth published *To Live's to Fly* in 2007. In addition to a biography of jazz musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk, he has also written for the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*.

In 2008 the University of North Texas Press published Robert Earl Hardy's *A Deeper Blue* (the first in the North Texas Lives of Musicians Series). Robert Earl Hardy is also a musician and writer, although with a less extensive bibliography than Kruth.

Although both books cover much the same ground, they do so in a very different fashion. Kruth's work relies heavily on interviews with Van Zandt's last wife, Jeanene, a controversial figure seen by Van Zandt's friends as either a gold digger or the person who held him together in his last years. Her influence runs through the book. Kruth failed to get an interview with Susanna Clark (said to be Van Zandt's soulmate, with whom he conversed every morning) or, effectively, with her husband, Guy Clark, said to be Van Zandt's best friend. One chapter details a hostile meeting with Clark, who chose not to contribute to the book. This chapter highlights a problem with *To Live's to Fly*, the author's on-again-off-again injection of himself into the narrative.

Both books work to ground the story in the Southern Plains, but particularly in Texas. Each describes Townes's connection to Isaac Van Zandt, a political figure in the Texas Republic and the ambassador to the United States at the time of annexation. Texas is virtually a character in both, with Van Zandt moving in and out of the state in search of happiness and a living. Van Zandt's Texas connection is greater in *A Deeper Blue*, in part because Hardy's account more closely follows Van Zandt's many travels, also resulting in a more coherent and chronological narrative. Likewise, *A Deeper Blue* is more successful in showing the ways Van Zandt was influenced by the Texas music scene and how he influenced it, particularly in Austin.

Like Kruth, Hardy relies on published articles and interviews, as well as personal interviews. Unlike Kruth, he footnotes the book to allow readers to know the sources of his material. Hardy was able to interview many of Van Zandt's family members and both his ex-wives Fran Petters Lohr and Cindy Van Zandt Lindgram, as well as his final girlfriend, Claudia Winterer. Hardy's introduction notes that he interviewed over forty of Van Zandt's friends and family, including Jeanene Van Zandt, but did not cite the interview directly because she "insisted on a level of control over my manuscript to which I could not agree." It is clear that Kruth agreed to such involvement, and Jeanene served as his

primary source about Van Zandt's life, even for events she did not personally witness. The result is that Hardy's *A Deeper Blue* is the more even and balanced of the two works.

Hardy's approach offers greater insights into the murky and troubled mind of the singer. The central question in Townes Van Zandt's life was why a man who had a relatively happy upbringing, a close family and friends, and enormous talent would be so self-destructive. Hardy examined medical records and probed friends and relatives to explain Van Zandt's behavior, determining that he was bipolar. The lack of an explanation, outside of vague speculation that he was mentally unstable, haunts *To Live's to Fly*.

Townes Van Zandt was a man who left people with a great many stories and anecdotes. *To Live's to Fly* would best be described as an impressionistic collection of stories from people who would know, saying that Townes was brilliant, crazy, or both, but it ultimately fails to tie them all together in a way that really explained *why* the man lived as he did. The sequence of events is unclear, the author moving back and forth in time and often failing to attribute quotes or explain the significance of the person being quoted.

Both books explain Van Zandt's creative process, some songs arising from careful craftsmanship, others coming out of dreams and drunken, drugged stupors. Both make an effort to discuss his time in studios, his performances, and the meanings of his songs. Both, written by musicians, provide valuable insights into Van Zandt's music.

To Live's to Fly provides the reader with a somewhat disconnected, but always interesting collection of quotations about the singer-songwriter. Those searching for a comprehensive, coherent biography relying on interviews that asked deeper questions, however, will want to turn to the more coherent and specific, *A Deeper Blue*.

CHUCK VOLLAN

Department of History and Political Science
South Dakota State University