

Fall 2013

## Review of *I'll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt* by Brian T. Atkinson

Chuck Vollan

South Dakota State University, [charles.vollan@sdstate.edu](mailto:charles.vollan@sdstate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Vollan, Chuck, "Review of *I'll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt* by Brian T. Atkinson" (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2558.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2558>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*I'll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt.* By Brian T. Atkinson. Forewords by "Cowboy" Jack Clement and Harold F. Eggers Jr. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. xix + 250 pp. Photographs, notes, discography, index. \$24.95.

Texas's Townes Van Zandt was a musician's musician whose fame grew after his 1996 death. Brian T. Atkinson, contributor to the *Austin American-Statesman*, *Texas Music*, *Lone Star*, *American Songwriter*, and *No Depression*, has woven together a collection of interviews from Van Zandt's contemporaries and friends, as well as his musical heirs—singer-songwriters who grew up too late to have known the troubled author of "Pancho and Lefty," "Tecumseh Valley," and "Lungs" but who admired his dark, poetic lyrics.

By interviewing such a wide range of singers and songwriters, Atkinson sought to put Van Zandt into the context of the evolving left wing of country music, from outlaw (Kris Kristofferson, Billy Joe Shaver) and progressive country (best friend Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell) to Americana (Michael Timmons, Dave Alvin). While most of the performers and stories are rooted in the southern Great Plains, Atkinson shows how this very regional music ultimately influenced musicians from around the world, such as David Broza (Israel) and Kasey Chambers (Australia). As Lucinda Williams notes in her interview, however, the Texas singer-songwriter cohort was "some-

thing of a boy's club," and Atkinson includes just five interviews with female artists, only two of whom knew Van Zandt (Lucinda Williams and Bianca DeLeon).

A short introduction precedes each interview, placing it in personal (first-, second-, and third-hand connections with Van Zandt) and musical context. The forty-one interviews are brief, ranging from Guy Clark's seven pages to Jewel's two paragraphs, most around two pages in length. The absence of friends and musical interpreters like Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle—or even Earle's son, Justin Townes Earle—is puzzling. Interviewees often repeat the same secondhand stories or discuss the same songs, and the result is greater breadth than depth, but the introductions are well written and the interviews interesting, sometimes poignant, often humorous.

Atkinson shows how Van Zandt's contemporaries saw him and felt his influence, as well as the way his unusually literate lyrics influenced new generations of musicians. Readers will gain a sense of Townes Van Zandt's legend as a gifted, troubled, often intoxicated artist who could have been more famous if less self-destructive and the way that legend grew and spread out of the southern Great Plains. Readers desiring a traditional biography will look to John Kruth's *To Live's to Fly* (2007) and Robert Earl Hardy's *A Deeper Blue* (2008), both of which comprehensively examine the singer's personal life. Those whose interest lies in understanding his musical influence will find *I'll Be There in the Morning* a satisfying read.

CHUCK VOLLAN

Department of History and Political Science  
South Dakota State University