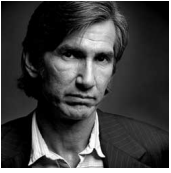


All Roads Lead to Townes - PANCHO AND LEFTY

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 12 October 2012 09:12



ALL ROADS LEAD TO TOWNES - "Pancho and Lefty"
Townes Van Zandt
1972 record THE LATE GREAT TOWNES VAN ZANDT

PANCHO AND LEFTY - By
From the

Living on the road my friend,
Is gonna keep you free and clean
Now you wear your skin like iron,
Your breath as hard as kerosene.
You weren't your mama's only boy,
But her favorite one it seems
She began to cry when you said goodbye,
And sank into your dreams.

Pancho was a bandit boy,
His horse was fast as polished steel
He wore his gun outside his pants
For all the honest world to feel.
Pancho met his match you know
On the deserts down in Mexico
Nobody heard his dying words,
Ah but that's the way it goes.

All the Federales say
They could have had him any day
They only let him slip away
Out of kindness, I suppose.

Lefty, he can't sing the blues
All night long like he used to.
The dust that Pancho bit down south

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Ended up in Lefty's mouth
The day they laid poor Pancho low,
Lefty split for Ohio
Where he got the bread to go,
There ain't nobody knows

The poets tell how Pancho fell,
And Lefty's living in cheap hotels
The desert's quiet, Cleveland's cold,
And so the story ends we're told
Pancho needs your prayers it's true,
But save a few for Lefty too
He only did what he had to do,
And now he's growing old

Living on the road was Townes' choice ... not his mama's. He came from an upper middle class family. His father was an attorney. His ancestors settled Van Zandt County right next door. He tried a conventional life. He even made it to law school for a year, but the muse and Townes' amazing gifts were just too strong. He didn't become famous until after his death on Jan. 1, 1997.

Townes was pretty evasive when it came to the source of his songs. Upon first pass, most people think this song was about Pacho Villa, but Townes pretty much dismissed that notion when some reporter asked him about the lyrics.

The debate has raged since 1977 when Emmylou Harris had a hit with her cover. Pancho was the bandit. Lefty turned him in, got his seven pieces of silver, and spent the rest of his life in cheap hotels.

Of course, most of the world is most familiar with the version Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard made famous in 1983. Story goes, Willie and Merle were working on a record. About two o'clock

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one morning during the sessions, Willie's sister, Bobbie, gave Willie a demo tape of Townes doing the song. He listened to it, woke Merle up and they recorded it right then and there. Merle still says he has no clue what the song is about.

Townes plays a grey federale and a guitar picker in Willie and Merle's video. To me, the video takes away most of the mystery of the story, laying it all out in a nice, neat format. I'd rather the lyrics remain unexplained.

My favorite version of the song is on the "Live At The Old Quarter" - Disc 1 (recorded 1973 - released 1977). The original Old Quarter was located next to the county jail and in the 1970s, it was home to a lot of up and coming Texas songwriters. The small room held 60 guests, but when Townes was there, the number swelled to 100.

Artists like Townes, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, Rodney Crowell and Willis Alan Ramsey cut their teeth there. The building's gone, but Wrecks Bell, one of the former owners, has opened a small room in Galveston and calls it The Old Quarter.

Each year, on New Years' Day, Wrecks hosts a wake for Townes. Anyone can sign up to perform. The only rule is that all music must be Townes. The year I went, singers from as far away as West Virginia stepped up to the small stage, took a swig from the rot gut vodka and Orange Crush and opened up their hearts and let Townes' tunes fly.

On the record, it's just Townes and the guitar and room that was obviously enchanted by the story they heard. After his last lick, Townes says, "Thanks a lot. I've never heard it so quiet in here."

Click [here](#) to watch Willie and Merle's video.

Click [here](#) to watch Townes perform the song live on TNN's American Music Shop in 1993. Years of substance abuse have taken a toll on his good looks and voice, but his genius shines.

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Next week - IF I NEEDED YOU, which was a hit for Doc Watson

This is the first in a series of blogs inspired by Darrell Scott, the very talented singer/songwriter and Nashville musician who wisely said once during an interview several years ago when we were talking about Townes Van Zandt - "All roads lead to Townes." Thank you, Darrell, for the lovely idea.