

All Roads Lead to Townes - LUNGS

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Sunday, 28 October 2012 11:59



ALL ROAD LEAD TO TOWNES - "Lungs"

Recorded in 1973. Released on "Live at the Old Quarter" - 1977

It has been said Townes wrote this song while recovering from pneumonia. Makes sense. Lyle Lovett also says Townes felt the song should be "screamed, not sung."

LUNGS

Well, won't you lend your lungs to me?

Mine are collapsing
Plant my feet and bitterly breathe
Up the time that's passing.
Breath I'll take and breath I'll give
Pray the day ain't poison
Stand among the ones that live
In lonely indecision.

Fingers walk the darkness down
Mind is on the midnight
Gather up the gold you've found
You fool, it's only moonlight.
If you try to take it home
Your hands will turn to butter
You better leave this dream alone
Try to find another.

Salvation sat and crossed herself
Called the devil partner
Wisdom burned upon a shelf
Who'll kill the raging cancer

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Seal the river at its mouth
Take the water prisoner
Fill the sky with screams and cries
Bathe in fiery answers

Jesus was an only son
And love his only concept
Strangers cry in foreign tongues
And dirty up the doorstep
And I for one, and you for two
Ain't got the time for outside
Just keep your injured looks to you
We'll tell the world we tried

Steve Earle included a hard-driving cover of it on his 2009 tribute CD, TOWNES, which won Best Contemporary Folk Album at the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards. I was lucky to see Earle perform this live while touring behind the CD, and I can tell you, it was as if he had walked up to the microphone, strapped on his guitar and opened a vein for the audience.

Earle says, "If this song doesn't scare you to death, then you are more than likely over medicated."

Earle, who fought his own demons and even served time in prison before getting sober, took time during that show to share some Townes' stories.

At one time, the two artists were both heavy heroin users. Earle came home one day to find Townes in his driveway.

"He asked if I was using," Earle said. "I told him I was."

Then, Townes asked him if he was using clean needles.

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"I told him I was."

Earle got straight for a while after that encounter.

"You know things are pretty bad when you get a temperance lecture from Townes Van Zandt," Earle explained.

Check out the last verse. Read it. Click on the links provided below and listen to the artist and his colleagues who chose to cover it. Townes' poetry may not make sense on first pass. Maybe it doesn't really crystallize until after 100 listenings, but when it does, you'd better be sitting down. Otherwise it knock the wind out of you. Yes, I know. Silly pun. But it works. Townes takes my breath away.

After his death, Townes' friends gathered at Austin City Limits for a tribute show. I can't find a place to purchase a DVD of the evening, but several clips are up on YouTube. I've added the one of Lyle and Steve. Bravo.

Click [here](#) for a clip of Lyle Lovett and Steve Earle at the Townes tribute show at Austin City Limits.

Click [here](#) to listen to the tune from "Live At The Old Quarter."

Here's a clip of [Steve Earle](#) doing the song at Austin City Limits, with a brief introduction.

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For a kindler, gentler cover of the songs, check this [audio](#) from the Cowboy Junkies. Townes toured with the young band and even wrote a song for them, "Cowboy Junkies Lament."

Next week - RAKE

This is the third in a series of blogs inspired by Darrell Scott, the talented singer/songwriter and Nashville musician who wisely said once during an interview several years ago, "All roads lead to Townes." Thank you, Darrell, for the lovely idea.