



## The Austin Chronicle Music Anthology

Edited by Austin Powell and Doug Freeman, foreword by Daniel Johnston, introduction by Louis Black (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011). \$45.00 cloth, \$29.95 paperback. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-72270-5 cloth, 978-0-292-72318-4 paperback.

For over 30 years, *The Austin Chronicle* has delivered progressive perspectives and alternative journalistic visions to the Austin community. Founded in 1981 by publisher Nick Barbaro and editor Louis Black, the *Chronicle* promotes, analyzes, critiques, and defines all things Austin—film, art, literature, theater, food, politics, and, of course, music. Not only has *The Austin Chronicle* been the premiere publication documenting the vibrant musical scene that gave rise to the “Live Music Capital of the World,” the *Chronicle* itself has become a significant aspect of the musical culture with its promotion of Austin music to an international audience.

Celebrating the relationship between the *Chronicle* and the Austin music community, the University of Texas Press published *The Austin Chronicle Music Anthology* in 2011. This volume of over 200 articles and reviews, strengthened by scores of iconic photographs, was edited by respected veteran music journalists Austin Powell and Doug Freeman. Despite stylistic changes in the *Chronicle* throughout the decades, the articles reveal a seamless consistency that exhibits the expertise of the *Chronicle* staff. Black, whose weekly editorials set the intelligent tone that characterizes *The Chronicle*, introduces the anthology with his observation that “the Austin scene has never been about only one kind of music or style but rather the full past of music honored with cross-breeding and constant reinvention into innovative explorations.”

Many critics have portrayed Austin music, and often the *Chronicle* as well, as a community of self-absorbed elitists who have hyped an image that has become a catchy Chamber of Commerce slogan and promotion. Those critics are wrong. However, they are correct in that there is a community—a community of singers, songwriters, clubs, promoters, journalists, and devoted fans. This community emerged in the 1960s and grew to maturity during the 1970s and 1980s. Now there are three generations of participants in the evolution of Austin music. For 30 years, *The Chronicle* has served as their journalistic voice.

Talented and passionate writers have been the trademark success of the *Chronicle*. No one exemplifies that more than veteran journalist Margaret Moser. Moser writes the first of three introductory essays that cover the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s. By the 1980s, it was evident that Austin music had matured and evolved beyond the so-called “progressive country” era, which was so closely associated with the Armadillo World Headquarters, Soap Creek Saloon, Willie Nelson’s Fourth of July Picnics, and other venues. Blues-rock and alternative sounds were emanating from the various incarnations of Antone’s Nightclub and scores of other locations. Moser was there to experience it all, and her voice is as trusted and respected today as it was 30 years ago. In addition to her introduction to the 1980s, the “best of Moser” is included in all three sections with articles ranging from the Doug Sahm experience at Soap Creek Saloon to profiles of such diverse artists as The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Joe Ely, and the Skunks.

Three of Austin’s premiere journalists of the 1980s—Jeff Whittington, Michael Corcoran, and John T. Davis—have several contributions in the 1980s section. Whittington, the original music editor of the *Chronicle*, was the father of *The Austin Chronicle* Music Poll and the Austin Music Awards. Corcoran, always with his pulse on the Austin creative community through a long career at the *Austin American-Statesman*, is at his best tapping into the emotion and passion of the artist. Examples in this volume include profiles of Joe “King” Carrasco, Dino Lee, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Davis has been a premier journalist in Austin since the mid-1970s and has no equal in bridging the cultural gap between the so-called “progressive country” period of the 1970s and the emerging blues scene. His Austin Music Award previews are a valuable addition in this volume.

Raoul Hernandez introduces the 1990s with a reminder of that timeframe, the “death of Stevie Ray Vaughan on August 27, 1990, and Doug Sahm’s on November 18, 1999.” Hernandez has served as *The Chronicle* music editor since 1994, and his tenure has been notable in its commitment to that powerful reality, the diversity of Austin music. Highlights of the 1990s section include Lee Nichols’s features that range from Don Walser to the Dixie Chicks to Jerry Jeff Walker. There are three of Ken Lieck’s weekly must-read “Dancing About Architecture” columns. The 1970s-era Austin resident Chet Flippo, later of *Rolling Stone* magazine fame, gives his take on the “cosmic cowboy” phenomenon and an invaluable review of the albums that defined that era. Appropriately, the last essay on the 1990s is Joe Nick Patoski’s portrayal of a night at Soap Creek Saloon with the Texas Tornado himself, Doug Sahm.

The final section on the 2000s is introduced by Christopher Gray, *Chronicle* columnist from 2003 until 2007, and includes several of his own profiles and reviews. Despite more freelance writers and more attention to South by Southwest, the *Chronicle* remains respectful of the traditions and roots of Austin music throughout the 2000s. Notable articles include profiles of Patty Griffin and Jimmy LaFave by renowned music critic Dave Marsh. Audra Schroeder and Belinda Acosta add their voices to the recent collection, and Moser’s interview with Clifford Antone relives “those magic moments” with one of the spiritual fathers of the Austin sound.

For those seeking a scholarly history or a thematic survey of the last 30 years of Austin music, this anthology is not for you. For those seeking an entertaining and informative experience in the community of Austin music, you will find the best of music journalism.

Larry Willoughby

## I’ll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt

By Brian T. Atkinson, forewords by “Cowboy” Jack Clements and Harold F. Eggers, Jr. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011; John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music, sponsored by the Center for Texas Music History, Texas State University). \$24.95 cloth. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1-60344-526-9.

In the HBO New Orleans-based television series *Treme*, real-life singer-songwriter Steve Earle plays the character Harley, a respected street musician. In a scene from season two, Harley pushes an up-and-coming violinist, Annie, to articulate what qualities a song must have to be “great.” They’re discussing John Hiatt’s “Feels Like Rain,” which Annie believes speaks through the metaphor of weather and love to the struggles of enduring life in New Orleans in its dark, post-Katrina years.

Older and wiser in the ways of both New Orleans and songwriting, Harley gives Annie a brief but illustrative history lesson: “Hiatt wrote that song twenty years ago, darlin’, when you still had training wheels on your bike and nobody had ever heard the name Katrina ... *That’s* what makes it a great song.” What distinguishes the great from the good, following this line of thought, is a song’s ability to transcend time and place, evoke shared experience or emotion, and to speak life’s themes in a common language. Or, as Chip Taylor says beautifully and simply in Brian Atkinson’s book, *I’ll Be Here in the Morning*, “In the best kind of music, I don’t care if I don’t know the specific names or the specific places. If it’s told from a true heart, I’ll be there, and I’ll know those people and I’ll get that feeling.”

Reading Atkinson’s compilation of musings on the legacy of Texas singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt is a little like eavesdropping on Harley and Annie as they walk the New Orleans streets, or standing in a room full of musicians come to pay tribute to one of their fallen. From mainstays of Texas music, such as Guy Clark and Kris Kristofferson, to newer, genre-straddling artists, such as Scott Avett and Grace Potter, the musicians interviewed here reveal deeply personal stories of the singular impact of Townes Van Zandt’s music and fashion a colorful and complex portrait of the man himself.

Van Zandt’s struggles with addiction and the physical and emotional tolls it exacted are as much a part of his image as the songs. Those who knew him still bear the scars of watching someone they loved and respected self-destruct. Ray Wy-

lie Hubbard evokes palpable discomfort in describing nights when it was “just magical to watch him perform...and then there were the nights when you got this feeling in your stomach and would just think, ‘Okay, Townes, that’s enough.’” Texas musician Darden Smith’s mother, upon witnessing a drunken and disappointing performance of Van Zandt’s, told her son, “[I]f that’s who you’re looking up to, I’ve made some terrible mistakes.”

Fortunately, the people speaking from the pages of *I’ll Be Here in the Morning* are overwhelmingly balanced in their recollections of a man who, as filmmaker Graham Leader puts it, was “just a mass of contradictions.” They bear witness to Van Zandt’s dedication to the rootless life of a touring musician while watching him undermine opportunities for greater commercial success. They hold him up as a giant among songwriters who remained genuine and approachable despite cult-figure status, living almost more comfortably in the margins than in the spotlight. They recount with fondness and pain his oft-overlooked sense of humor and that he delighted in jokes and was a sharp-witted trickster whose songs tapped like no one else’s the vein of vulnerability and longing.

If Van Zandt’s songs came to him the way the holy spirit speaks to saints, then these remembrances are a kind gospel—and indeed, the reverential tone with which some voices here speak is befitting religious mystery. Van Zandt wrote unflinchingly about the human condition, and he did so in a way that illuminated the beauty that could live on the underbelly of ugliness and tragedy. Butch Hancock explains it here another way: “Poetry jumps between concepts, one line right up against another ... If the tone is right, then the jump does extraordinary things for your empathy with the work.” The gift of Van Zandt’s poetry is in great part acceptance, without judgment, of darkness and light together. It allows grace to live alongside poverty and broken spirits.

Hancock may be one of the most memorable voices that Atkinson records, and his description of the transformative power of art stands as perhaps the most apt summary of the influence of Townes Van Zandt: “The rare mark of any kind of art” is that “it pulls you in and sends you out with more than you came in with—and more than you suspected was there.” Overwhelmingly, these are fellow practitioners of art who see and embrace the paradoxes of their missing troubadour. *I’ll Be Here in the Morning* is a bittersweet tribute to songs that bear the timelessness and truths that, as Harley reminds Annie, make the good songs great, and a testament to the fact that the songwriting legacy of Townes Van Zandt is alive and well.

Emily Spiegelman

