

THE TALK OF THE TOWN



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HERE TO THERE DEPT. A DOG'S LIFE



As the canine accompanying the married rock duo of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent, who call themselves Shovels & Rope, Townes van Zandt has seen many things on the road, but one thing he may never have experienced is a vibrant shade of blue. That's what the new Tribeca Dog Run, in Hudson River Park, promises his species. Dogs see a limited part of the color spectrum, and the blue-beige painted pavement of the dog run is designed to appear especially vivid to a dog. On a recent Friday morning, following Shovels & Rope's joyous show at Webster Hall, T.V.Z. headed there with his owners to have his visual cortex blown.

Hearst, who is blond and chatty, and Trent, who is dark-haired and quietly intense, made their way down the West Side Highway, explaining the origin of the band. Ten years ago, when they met and got together as a couple, they were playing in other groups, and although they lived together in Charleston, they were always in different places. After get-

ting hitched, in 2009, they decided to make an act out of their marriage, and now they're never apart. (Townes and the band are about the same age.) They spend two hundred days a year on the road, travelling in an R.V. with their two-man crew and Townes, an exuberant fifty-pounder who may be a Carolina Plott hound. Their 2012 album, "O' Be Joyful" (Dual-tone), which they wrote together, features a clutch of first-rate tunes, from raucous anthems to dark story songs that are reminiscent of their dog's namesake's, in which shovels and rope are implements for grim deeds. Live, they are spunky, like a modern-day Cash and Carter, and their stripped-down instrumentation—"There's only so much you can do with four arms and four legs and two mouths," Hearst said as they walked along—lends them a vaudevillian charm. Given the success of their label mates the Lumineers, it would be no great surprise if the band caught a case of the Mumfords and blew up.

"We've had to develop certain communication tricks," Hearst said of performing as a married couple. "Like, we try not to give each other notes on the show till ten minutes after. Last night, the thing that bummed me out was, during the 'Johnny 99' cover"—a Springsteen tune—"my microphone was just melting in front of me."

Trent: "It was a gooseneck stand that started sagging."

Hearst: "I should have tightened it before, but I skipped that step and it cost me. But rather than have a tantrum about it—which I did last night, but not a terrible one—I tried to take ten minutes to cool myself off."

Crossing the highway, Townes caught sight of the Hudson and started to bark—a happy chortle with some high Carolina lonesome mixed in, a sound you might hear on his masters' records. "Townes, you don't want nuttin' to do with that river," drawled Hearst, who grew up in Jackson, Mississippi.

There were two other dogs and their owners waiting outside the dog run, which was temporarily closed for cleaning. One of the owners was a bald-headed guy from New Jersey, with whatever misfortunes had brought him to a dog run in the middle of a workday weighing heavily on his shoulders, accompanied by his aged half Rhodesian ridgeback, Abby,

who seemed equally burdened with woe. The others were a woman and two young kids, with a brand-new puppy named Roscoe, who had a husky's pale-blue eyes and was going on his very first walk. The kids weren't sure how to handle their new charge, but Townes knew just what to do: he mounted Roscoe for some vigorous humping, while the children looked on, horrified. Jersey guy smiled for the first time.



Shovels & Rope

"That's O.K.!" Hearst said, letting Townes go at it. "It's embarrassing to humans, because we don't hump each other, but that's how they figure out who's the boss." Not long afterward, Roscoe was led away, shaken.

Townes saw a swale of new lawn, one of many features of the recently refurbished stretch of park, and strained at the leash.

"I think Townes needs to go to the rest room," Hearst said. She noticed the "No Dogs" signs. "What, they don't let dogs on the grass here? What're they going to do, arrest us?"

Jersey guy looked almost happy.

"I love down-to-earth people!" he declared. "You're probably the first people I've talked to in six months!"

Finally, the dog run reopened and Townes bounded in, not noticeably dazzled by the blue. But Abby seemed transformed; like her owner, she'd caught some of Shovels & Rope's spirit. She ran after her new friend. Jersey guy couldn't believe it. "First time she's done that in years!"

—John Seabrook