

SXSW Review: Justin Townes Earle at Antone's

John T. Davis

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There is an old proverb, something to the effect of “As the twig is bent, so is the tree inclined.” Thus it is that Justin Townes Earle seems to be recapitulating his father’s musical pilgrimage in fast-forward. Steve Earle started his mainstream career as a sort of slick-backed punkabilly, but wound up working with the elders of bluegrass and country music in an ongoing effort to purify his music into a sort of eau-du-roots.

Similarly, Justin Townes (his middle name a tip of the hat to Townes Van Zandt — which, in the circles Justin travels in, is sort of like being named Bob Dylan, Jr.) has distilled his music to the point where a crowded blues joint like Antone’s felt like an add-on to the younger Earle’s back porch.

Clad in a casual shirt and mesh-topped gimme cap, the lantern-jawed Earle looked as though he’d just climbed down out of the cab of a Peterbilt parked outside on Fifth St. His sole onstage companion, banjo player/harp maestro/mandolinist/comic sidekick Cory Younts, made a similar sartorial impression.

Together, the pair made the most out of minimalism, blending elements of skiffle, blues, bluegrass, alt-country and even Dixieland in original tunes such as “They Killed John Henry,” “Glad I’m Leaving,” “Poor Fool,” the double-clutching “I Don’t Know” and the skeletal “Someday You’ll Be Forgiven.”

Most memorable, perhaps, was the nakedly autobiographical “My Mama’s Eyes.” “I was raised by my mama,” Earle said proudly. “Who was six-foot two and whipped my (butt) when I done wrong. She knocked my dad out once.”

Whereupon, he proceeded to sing, “I am my father’s son...But when I see my reflection in the mirror, I say to myself—I have my mama’s eyes.”

It was one of those moments when the proverbial pin dead-solid dropped.