

Verlon Thompson on the life of a songwriter - 'It's about the soul and spirit.'

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When he looks back on his long career as a songwriter, Verlon Thompson will probably have fond memories of 2010.



“Somedays the Song Writes You,” a CD Thompson produced for Guy Clark, his long-time friend, musical collaborator and touring partner, received a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Folk Album.

In June, Dierks Bentley, Miranda Lambert and Jamey Johnson covered Thompson’s “Bad Angel” on Bentley’s critically acclaimed CD, “Up on the Ridge.”

“Bad Angel” was nominated for Musical Event of the Year by the Country Music Association. The tune was recently nominated for a Grammy.

The song has a Texas connection. It was written on a 1929 National Resonator guitar given to him after a benefit he did in Austin around 1991.

“I immediately fell in love with it,” Thompson said during an interview from the Nashville home he shares with his wife, award-winning news anchor Demetria Kalodimos. “I started experimenting with open tuning using the old slide to play it. ‘Bad Angel’ was one of the first songs I wrote using that guitar. I don’t really remember what inspired me aside from the guitar itself. It was an exercise in trying to find some words that would go along with the sound of the guitar.”

Thompson is happy with Bentley’s cover.

“Dierks did a great job with that song,” said Thompson, who is in high demand as a studio

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musician. "He was really brave in cutting a mostly bluegrass record. The people who come out to see that show just sit there with their mouths open. They can't believe it."

Thompson was referring to Bentley's most recent tour, featuring some blazing bluegrass pickers, including the Punch Brothers and Del McCrary.

"They're playing somewhere up there in the cloud, and it's real joyous to see," said Thompson, who once earned \$150 a week as a songwriter. "They're on another plane."

Thompson, who Clark calls one of the best guitar players in the world, knows something about playing outside the boundaries.

Last fall, he had the opportunity to play "The Ballad of Stringbean and Estelle" in an other worldly setting.

The song tells the story of the 1973 murder of David "Stringbean" Akeman, a beloved Grand Ole Opry performer, and his wife, Estelle. The couple was killed during a robbery at their humble cabin north of Nashville.



Thompson and Clark had been talking about doing a song based on the tragedy for years.

"The story has all the ingredients of a classic bluegrass murder ballad," explained Thompson. "We didn't write the song because we didn't want to be disrespectful. Everyone loved Stringbean so much. We wanted it to be a serious and truthful song."

Then one day bluegrass mandolin player Sam Bush was at Clark's house. He told Clark and Thompson the story of cleaning out his father's house and finding "a perfectly preserved front

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page of the Nashville Banner” where they were auctioning off Stringbean’s iconic overalls. Bush wondered out loud why his father had saved the photo.

“Guy and I looked at each other and said, ‘Uh, oh. This might be the chance,” Thompson said. “We did some research right there on the spot to make sure the facts were right. We started messing around with the song. It just sort of fell out.”

Thompson played the song at Nashville’s Station Inn, and then something magical happened.

“One day I got a call from friends of a woman who had purchased the cabin where Stringbean and Estelle lived there in Ridgetop, Tenn., and were murdered,” Thompson said. “The lady had remodeled it but had left the living room exactly as it had been the night of the murder, including the bullet holes in the floor.”

One fall evening after the remodeling project was finished, the cabin’s new owner invited a lot of Nashville’s best pickers to the place to honor Stringbean.

“Everybody from Earl Scruggs to Stringbean’s son was there,” said Thompson. “I stood on the front door of the cabin with my feet on the bullet holes in that floor and sang that song. There was a full moon coming up and a huge fire built out in the front yard. It was one of the most chilling things. People were crying. It was a magic night.”

When he finished playing, Thompson knew “we did the right thing writing the song.”

The International Bluegrass Music Association agreed, nominating “The Ballad of Stringbean and Estelle” as Song of the Year.

“To have the bluegrass world embrace it with that nomination was the ultimate stamp of approval,” said the Binger, Okla., native. “They could have said, ‘Hey you used the loss of a wonderful person for your song.’”

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Although it hasn't been nominated for awards, another song Thompson wrote with Clark is creating a lot of buzz with musicians.

Several years ago, Clark and Thompson were at a songwriting clinic, trying to find common ground among the students.



"It was obvious," Thompson said. "We all had guitars in our laps, so the song was going to be about a guitar."

After the clinic, Clark and Thompson put the lyrics away.

"Then one day, I got an e-mail from one of the guys in the class," Thompson recalled. "He wanted the music to the lyrics. I told him I didn't remember and asked him to send me the lyrics."

When he got the long-forgotten lyrics, Thompson sat down and started to play. He liked what he heard, so he headed over to Clark's house.

"I said to Guy, 'Remember this song?'" Thompson said. "'Listen to this.'"

Clark immediately replied, "I'm cutting that."

Clark included the song on his next CD and it's an integral part of the set list for live shows.

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Thompson's heard from musicians all over the country who want to know exactly how to pick the tune.

"People are trying to learn it note for note and dissecting it," Thompson said. "It's not about doing it note for note. It's about the song and what it's saying and about the spirit and soul of it. Get that first. Then strum it your way."

Thompson is working on a new CD which it is hoped will include "Joe Walker's Mare," a song about a horse – but also about loyalty, dedication and honor – he says came to him in a "hotel room in San Antonio on a rainy day off."

Even with the recent accolades and time in the spotlight, Thompson has no plans to abandon the road, as he loves touring and reaching out to his audiences.

"The time I spend with Guy in these small rooms, these listening venues like Linden, that's what I want to do," he explained. "I want to sit with the people and connect with them. You make a record and you go out and play it for the folks and then you start the whole thing over. That's how you do it. It's called the life of a songwriter."

Here are clips of Thompson performing "The Guitar" at his home in Nashville; playing "Joe Walker's Mare" and a clip of Thompson and Shawn Camp doing "The Ballad of Stringbean and Estelle."

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*This is the twelfth part in "A Songwriter's Sojourn,"
a series featuring songwriters from Texas –
or with close ties to Texas –
who stayed true to their craft, lived up to their gifts
and left their mark on the world of music.*