

Guy Clark - A songwriter's sojourn

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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There's always room for good songs.



– *Guy Clark*

Interviewing Guy Clark is not an easy gig. The native Texan is shy, soft-spoken and reticent to talk about himself.

But talk he must – at least after the release of a new record.

“Somedays The Song Writes You,” Clark’s 22nd CD, hit music stores in September, so he’s been doing telephone interviews from his Nashville home.

When asked to name a favorite from the new album, Clark picks two – “I’m partial to ‘The Guitar’ and ‘Hemingway’s Whiskey,’” he said.

“The Guitar” was an almost-forgotten tune he and long-time friend and performing partner Verlon Thompson wrote while teaching others to do what they do.

“Verlon and I were teaching a songwriting class at a guitar camp,” explained Clark, who grew up on the Texas Gulf Coast. “There were about nine students in the class. I said, ‘Let’s write a song.’ That’s the way I teach.”

After the class, Clark said he put the song away in his bag and didn’t think of it again until someone e-mailed Thompson, asking about it.

“I asked Verlon if he remembered the chords,” Clark said. “Then, I read the lyrics. Verlon read them. We said, ‘This is really good.’ Verlon picked up a guitar and spoke it. It was so powerful.”

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Of “Hemingway’s Whiskey,” Clark says, “Of course, I am a Hemingway fan. Like Hemingway, I’m still trying to learn what to leave out.”

Whiskey comes up again in “All She Wants Is You,” a tune co-written with Patrick Davis.

*She’s sneaky like Tennessee whiskey.
She always takes me by surprise.
She feels safe – she feels risky.
She’s got the devil in her angel eyes.*

In addition to Davis, Gary Nicholson, Jon Randall, Joe Leathers, Ray Stephenson, Patrick Davis, Jedd Hughes, Ashley Monroe and Rodney Crowell shared their songwriting talents with Clark for the new record.

One of the most haunting songs on the CD is “Eamon,” the story of a salty seaman, written with Rodney Crowell.

“He came over here one day with the first two verses of that song,” Clark explained. “They were just perfect, but he was stuck. He wanted to know if I would help him write it, and that’s what came out.”

Crowell had been on an airplane, seated next to old merchant seaman who had traveled the world over.

“The seaman started telling these stories,” Clark explained. “Rodney got fascinated with that lifestyle.”

Eamon went to sea for life

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*The day he turned 14
On a merchant cargo steamer
Bound for Kwajalein
By way of Cartagena
He wound up in Istanbul
19 times around the horn
Would make a Dutchman drool.*

The CD also takes a long, hard look at La-La Land in the song “Hollywood.”

“Jedd Hughes, who wrote that song with me, plays guitar for Keith Urban,” Clark said. “He had just spent some time out there and said, ‘Man, there’s nothing like it.’”

Of course, one of Clark’s most famous songs, “L.A. Freeway,” was written when Clark lived in Southern California, trying to make a living playing country music.

The song was a 1972 hit for another Texan, Jerry Jeff Walker.

One of the most autobiographical songs on the CD is “Maybe I Can Paint Over That,” written with Thompson and Shawn Camp.

It’s a song about bad choices, good times and how the truth always comes out.

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*I've got some ink beneath my skin.
Good idea at the time.
I won't be doin' that again -
Not with any arm of mine.*

*Maybe I can paint over that.
It'll probably bleed through.
Maybe I can paint over that.
But I can't hide it from you.*

"That song just happened one afternoon," Clark said. "I didn't even see it coming. That's when it feels great. You don't have to work so hard."

Since Townes Van Zandt's death in 1997, Clark has always included one of his friend's songs on his CDs, with the choice being "If I Needed You" this time around.

Clark and his wife, Susanna, were long-time friends with Van Zandt.

In a 2008 News-Telegram interview, Clark explained his relationship with the tragic troubador.

"We were best friends for about 35 years," he said. "His use of the language was special. He did quality work. He played and sang really well, too. And he was the funniest guy I've ever known."

Several times in his life, Van Zandt's battles with substance abuse left him without a place to live and Van Zandt landed at the Clarks' house.

"He [Van Zandt] was living with Susanna and me in 1972," Clark said. "He got up one morning and came in to have some coffee and picked up a guitar and laid a piece of paper on his leg and sang that song."

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When Clark asked Van Zandt where he got the song, his friend answered, "I dreamed it last night. I dreamed the whole song, woke up, wrote it down and went back to sleep."

In his spare time, Clark builds guitars.

"My summer job when I was a kid was working in a shipyard on big wooden shrimp boats," he said. "I've always enjoyed working with wood."

Clark's songs have been covered by a who's who list of musicians, including Johnny Cash, Vince Gill, Ricky Skaggs, Alan Jackson, Lyle Lovett, Asleep at the Wheel, Nanci Griffith and Jimmy Buffett.

During a 1989 appearance with Clark, Lyle Lovett said, "The first time I ever heard Guy Clark, I actually hoped one day I would be Guy Clark. I was really nervous the first time I met him. He and Townes [Van Zandt] were like the popes of folk music. They really set the standard. Hanging out in the bars after a show, a lot of stories would start out with 'Like Guy always said ...'"



At 68, Clark says he's flattered by all the attention the new CD is getting, and he enjoyed collaborating with other artists.

"It was great working with these songwriters," he said. "There's always room for good songs."

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*This is the third 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.*

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* For more information on Guy Clark visit: www.guyclark.com