

# The 9513

## Guy Clark Continues To Hone His Craft

Sam Gazdziak | September 15th, 2009

The title track to Guy Clark's new album, *Somedays The Song Writes You*, is a rumination on songwriting and how a song can force its way into being. Considering Clark's reputation as one of the most respected songwriters around, any of his thoughts on the craft of songwriting should be taken seriously.

That particular song, he says, came from a writing session with Jon Randall and Gary Nicholson.

"We were sitting and talking, and somehow that popped out of somebody's mouth," he explains. "I don't really remember the exact sequence of events, but we got it written in one day."

Clark wrote his first song when he was about 27 years old, when he was starting his musical career as a folk singer playing traditional songs and Bob Dylan covers. Now 67, he admits that songwriting hasn't gotten any easier. Still, as the author of classics like "Desperados Waiting For a Train," "Dublin Blues" and "The Randall Knife," the effort has led to a body of work that any songwriter would envy. "I try to write about stuff I know about, stuff that happened to me or someone I know. Inspiration just comes out of nowhere... that's the hard one to get," he says.

Clark's recording process involves nothing more than collecting 10 or 12 songs that he likes and feels like singing, and then he goes into the studio. That lack of a timetable helps to explain why *Song...* is only the 13th album of original material in his career and the first one since 2006.

The record is, as Clark's albums tend to be, simple and tasteful arrangements behind Clark's vocals—the musicians in this case include Clark's longtime collaborator Verlon Thompson on guitar and Shawn Camp on fiddle and mandolin. The arrangements complement the lyrics perfectly, and while Clark's voice does sound a little more age-worn than earlier records, it's still warm and inviting.

"I don't really like records that are just overdone to death, layered and all that stuff. Everything on this record is played live, especially my vocals," he explains. "If I don't get the vocal performance, I'll do it again. So it's not all chopped up and put together."

Clark says that the hardest part of the recording process is learning all the songs. Once he's got that part down, he teaches them to the rest of the band but doesn't get too caught up in arranging the songs.

"I don't tell anyone what to play. It's none of my business," he says. "They're good. That's why I hired them, so they'll go in and know what to play."

## Co-writing contributions

Except for the one Townes Van Zandt cover, Clark co-wrote the rest of the album with a variety of co-writers, from old friends like Verlon Thompson and Rodney Crowell to newcomers Jedd Hughes and Ashley Monroe.

“I wrote by myself for years and years, and I guess I just kind of got stuck. I found I really enjoyed co-writing with someone else, just wrangling words back and forth,” he explains. “When you co-write, you actually have to say the words out loud, instead of just mumbling it to yourself. When you commit it to the air, you can tell right off whether it’s any good or not.”

Clark acknowledges that there is a feeling-out process when working with someone for the first time, but the experience paid off well for this album. Clark, Hughes and Monroe wrote “The Coat” and “One Way Ticket Down,” and he wrote “Wrong Side of the Tracks” with Patrick Davis, who’s penned tunes for Darius Rucker and Jason Michael Carroll.

“Jedd is just a brilliant guitar player, and Ashley’s really bright and quick, and sings wonderfully,” he says of his new co-writers. The experience of writing with someone new doesn’t always work out, he admits with a laugh. “John Prine and I once sat here for two days and looked at each other. We didn’t come up with a damn thing. So you never can tell.”

Clark considers Crowell his go-to writer if he ever gets stuck on something. In this instance, their song on the album, “Eamon,” came about when Crowell needed some help.

“He met some merchant seaman in Scotland, I think, and talked to him and got all inspired about the idea of being a sailor,” Clark recalls. “He called me up and said, ‘I’ve got something that I want you to see if you can help me write.’ He had the first two verses and kind of an idea for the chorus, so we just sat down and did it.”

One of the standout tracks, a supernatural-tinged recitation called “The Guitar,” came about as the result of a classroom exercise. Thompson and Clark went to Jorma Kaekonen’s Fur Piece Ranch in southeastern Ohio. Kaekonen runs a guitar camp there, and Clark and Thompson were invited to teach a songwriting class in 2002.

“My approach to that has always been, ‘Well, let’s write a song,’” Clark says. “I’m not going to give a bunch of examples of shit; let’s just write a song. We picked a title and basically, Verlon and I wrote it for the class, and anyone could say whatever they wanted. I never thought about it again, and neither did Verlon.”

Clark came across the lyrics again years later and asked Thompson if he could remember the melody. “Verlon just picked up the guitar and played the chord progression, I started speaking the lyrics, and there it was. Nice surprise.”

The Van Zandt cover, “If I Needed You,” was actually written while Van Zandt was living with Clark and his wife, Susanna.

“He woke up one morning and said, ‘Man, I dreamed a song,’” Clark recalls. Van Zandt woke up in the middle of the night, wrote down the song and went back to sleep. The next morning, he

picked up a guitar and played it, and there was the song that eventually became a Top 5 hit for Don Williams and Emmylou Harris in 1981.

## **All the comforts of home**

Clark writes most of his songs at his Nashville home. He used to have an office on Music Row, but he says he prefers his workshop, where his guitars and tape recorder are all set up. It makes for a welcome destination for his songwriting friends, as well.

“This is so comfortable, and I think people enjoy coming here as opposed to sitting in some office here on Music Row,” he says. “I just write here, and anyone who wants to come over is welcome.”

The images included in the booklet that accompanies *Somedays The Song Writes You* features Clark in his workshop, along with one of his first guitars, an old Martin D18 that was laying around when photographer Jim McGuire came to visit. One of the other pictures has a bandsaw in the background, a part of one of Clark’s other passions: guitar making.

“It’s just something I’ve always done. The first guitar I had, I took it apart and tried to make it better,” Clark says. While he has a couple modern pieces of equipment in his shop, like the bandsaw and a drill press, he says most of his work utilizes 19th century technology—hand planes and chisels and such.

“Growing up in West Texas, the first things you get are a pocket knife and a whetstone, and the bottom of an old fruit box, and you make your own toys,” he explains. “It’s something that’s always come real natural to me, working with wood.”

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