

# American Songwriter

## GUY CLARK: The Songs Still Ring True

By Holly Gleason on September 11th, 2009

“Sometimes, you get too close to it,” cautions iconic singer/songwriter Guy Clark in a voice rumbling at the very bottom like far-off thunder. “I’m aware of that—and full of self-doubt. Sometimes I’ll listen, and go, “Damn, Guy, what are you doing?”

“You wanna do better work. As you go, your standards get higher. It doesn’t get easier.”

With standards almost as exacting as the craftsmanship he uses to build beautiful handmade guitars, there’s no danger of Guy Clark delivering an alright record. With *Somedays The Song Writes You*, the man in full delivers 11 songs that consider doubt, ravage, love and the way people who’ve lived enough to know move through the world.

Whether it’s the O. Henry-esque “The Guitar”—written in a class Clark and longtime guitarist/compadre Verlon Thompson taught at Jorma Kaukonen’s Fur Peace Ranch, the oxymoronic allure of “All She Wants Is You,” the jadedly fabulous “Hollywood” or acceptance in the storm “Maybe We Can Paint Over It,” Clark balances clear-eyed observation with an insight that grounds people in very concrete ways.

“Verlon and Shawn [Camp] were playing guitars and we were making up words,” the Monahans, Texas-born Clark says of the latter, “and it just got to be too easy to write, because it was something I knew: getting f\*\*\*ed up and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

No boast. Just the statement-of-fact reality that defines Clark’s work.

“I’m not on fire like when I was 30,” continues the man who rolls his own cigarettes.

“I’m tired. I’m old. So much of what I do is personal experience. There’s a bit of poetic license, but it’s always something that happened to me—or somebody I know. It just makes a better song if there’s some ring of truth to it.

“I try to write so the listener gets involved; ‘Yeah, that happened to me. I know exactly how that feels.’ Sometimes, you accommodate them with room to get inside it, leave holes to allow for it. That truth... they pick up on it.”

Certainly, it’s proved by Clark’s classic father/son passage “The Randall Knife.”

“The other participant—the reader or listener—you want them involved, and it’s often through the same circumstances. There’s not a more specific song than ‘The Randall Knife,’ but I can’t tell you how many times people come up, saying, ‘Man, here’s my father’s knife’... They pull it out of their pocket with the tip broken off. Or for Vince [Gill], it was his father’s 7-iron, but the emotion was the same.”

Deep emotional currents. Still water running deep. Clark puts a premium on dignity, and his songs ripple with a stoicism that makes those truths hit harder. On the stark “Hemingway’s Whiskey,” he confesses, “You know it’s tough out there, the good news is hard to find/Living one word to the next, one line at a time/ There’s more to life than whiskey, there’s more to life than rhyme/Sometimes nothing works, sometimes nothing shines...”

Not that the reticent artist, whose songs have been embraced by Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Vince Gill, Jimmy Buffett, Rodney Crowell, Alan Jackson and Ricky Skaggs, complains. He’ll tell stories about kangaroo court deacon elections at the Presbyterian Church he went to in Rockport, Texas, decry politics with a curt “it’s tacky and distasteful,” and shakes his head about the waste of modern recording sessions—“When I have 10 or 12 songs, I go in. I like the moment that’s created when it’s a recording of you playing the song, the immediacy of it.”

Somedays was recorded over three days. The band being Thompson, Camp, bassist Bryn Davies and drummer Kenny Malone, along with Clark also playing guitar. There’s a dusky earthiness, conjured with warmth and the steady hand of an old gunfighter.

“With good players, it’s not the notes they play, but the holes they leave,” Clark maintains. Then there’s the last step: go out and play it on the road, see if it holds up. Most of the songs are played long before they’re recorded...”

A black-and-white photograph of Townes Van Zandt hangs above Clark’s workroom table. His best friend takes it all in, and that permeating presence marks Clark’s version of Van Zandt’s “If I Needed You” with the fidelity that defines friendship. Clark tells of Van Zandt citing his 3rd grade science teacher’s confession the sun was burning out as the justification for the lanky songwriter’s rogue ways.

But there’s also truth to spontaneous revelation.

“Sometimes you don’t know which way the song’s gonna go,” Clark admits. “I look at ‘Some Days’ or ‘The Coat,’ which just kinda happened. I didn’t know which way they were gonna go, but as you turn the corner, there... it... is.”

Pausing, Clark weighs the things that matter. He is a man who rued “L.A. Freeways,” celebrated “Homegrown Tomatoes,” and measured time’s impact on “Desparados Waiting For A Train.” While he believes how it is, he strives for better.

“I’ve always had a Pollyanna sense that people are pretty good and it’ll all work out, but I keep getting disappointed by the human race. It’s why I always like a little ray of hope in my songs.”

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