

## On his latest, Guy Clark invokes his muse, and she's not talking

By Edd Hurt

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*Somedays the Song Writes You*  
By Guy Clark (Dualtone)  
Playing Wednesday, 23rd at the Belcourt

You could argue all day about the exact nature of Guy Clark's muse, but it's safe to say he has one and it performs its duties in a self-reliant, tight-lipped manner. One of the most laconic of songwriters, Clark examines the very idea of inspiration throughout his new full-length *Somedays the Song Writes You*. Clark is a self-conscious creator whose narratives invite the kind of scrutiny normally reserved for poetry on the page, so there are moments when his music feels secondary to his words. Being a Texan and a self-reliant artist, he writes for himself without losing a speck of the universal appeal to which all songwriters aspire.

Clark cut *Somedays the Song Writes You* over a few days in Nashville with a crack band, and he says he likes to record his songs in real time. "Over the years I've tried to get closer to actually recording the music being played as it goes down," he says. "You know, not piecing it all together after the fact. It's music being played live. I like doing the songs all the way through, which means that you have to prepare."

Longtime Clark collaborator Verlon Thompson adds guitar to *Somedays*, while bassist Bryn Davies doubles as harmony vocalist on several songs. Shawn Camp's mandolin and fiddle color the spare, beautiful performances, and if Kenny Malone's drums don't exactly rock and roll, they anchor each song perfectly. Like Clark's narratives, the music seems uninflected at first. This is an illusion perfectly in keeping with the mood of *Somedays*, although Clark seems to disavow any high-toned notions of thematic unity.

"I never think about my records having a theme," he says. "I'm just looking for 10 good songs. I know people like that: They've got 20 songs and they're tryin' to figure out which ones go together. But if I get 10, I'm in the studio. And there are no extras."

Clark collaborated with a number of writers on the 11 songs that compose *Somedays*. Thompson gets a credit on "The Guitar," a tale of a supernatural if not haunted instrument that hangs in "a pawn shop in an older part of town" waiting for someone to take it home. Jedd Hughes pitches in on "Hollywood," an altogether unsentimental look at stardom and its discontents. Clark says he enjoys collaboration, although it doesn't always produce results.

"When you're kind of on the same page it's fun," he says. "'Course, sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. John Prine and I sat and looked at each other for two days and didn't get a fuckin' thing." Judging from a song such as "Eamon"—a moving tale of the sea written with Rodney Crowell—Clark knows how to get the most out of his co-writers. The songs on *Somedays* are of a piece, yet each carries its own distinctive idiom.

Whether or not *Somedays* is a concept record about the rigors of songwriting, a composition such as "Hemingway's Guitar" seems to suggest that sources of inspiration can be both beneficial and toxic. "You know it's tough out there / A good muse is hard to find," Clark sings. "There's more to life than whiskey / There's more to words than rhyme." Meanwhile, Clark and Patrick Davis' "Wrong Side of the Tracks" places its narrator in a part of town celebrated for its ability to inspire slumming songwriters, but the song doesn't appear to include a moral.

As usual, Clark discounts an elaborate reading of "Wrong Side." ("I'm just painting a little picture," he says.) Still, it's a complex song. Homeless men appear alongside privileged characters who ride in limousines. "Think you're smart but you don't know Jack," the homeless man laughs. A less intelligent writer might have played the song for pathos in the country-music manner. As Clark is quick to note, he's not exactly a conventional Nashville tunesmith.

"I'm not a country-music writer, but this is where the marketplace is," he says. "I figured out early that those were not the kind of songs I wanted to write, but Nashville was fertile ground. And it beats the hell out of tryin' to live in L.A. or New York. You have to make a living at it or you wind up hating it. Makes you bitter and disillusioned."

Clark rounds out *Somedays* with Townes Van Zandt's "If I Needed You," which features characters named Loop and Lil. "Loop and Lil were parakeets of his," Clark says. "He'd carry these parakeets around inside his sport coat, onto airplanes and shit." Those parakeets might have made for a pair of unlikely muses, but any songwriter worth his salt knows how important that kind of portable inspiration can be to a man trying to make his ideas take wing and fly.

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