

# The Plain Dealer

## Guy Clark still writing Texas-style country in a way to make his friend Townes Van Zandt proud

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[Guy Clark](#) should have his own bin at the record store. Twenty-one albums since his career-launching "Old No. 1" back in 1975 have borne the West Texan's name and distinctive drawl.

How good was that one? The background vocalists were Steve Earle, Emmylou Harris, Sammi Smith and Rodney Crowell. Mickey Raphael, who plays harp for Willie Nelson, was blowing the harmonica.

Guy Clark's 21st album, "Somedays the Song Writes You," hits stores on Tuesday, Sept. 22.

If you wanted to put together an all-star album of Texas musicians from that era, that might be it, especially because Clark was heavily influenced by the man he calls his best friend, Townes Van Zandt. Van Zandt is arguably the best songwriter to come out of the Lone Star State.

But his pal isn't that far behind him, judging from "Somedays the Song Writes You," Clark's new CD, due out on Sept. 22 on Dualtone. It's an album which, as Clark CD's usually do, includes at least one Van Zandt tune. In this case, that is "If I Needed You," written by Van Zandt and Katie Tie Bell.

In a call to his Nashville home this week, Clark discussed his career, his music, his friend and his newest album.

First off, don't confuse this with the slick stuff you get from today's Music City artists. "I think it's a little more creative writing," he said. "You're not writing for radio; you're writing for yourself."

It's hard to figure a place on Music Row for a lyric like, "*Searchin' for a melody / To sing my soul to sleep / Reachin' for some harmony / down inside of me.*"

It's a Texas style of country, really. Not the in-your-face style of Toby Keith or the steel-drum Pabulum of Kenny Chesney. Even for a man who's built a career out of words, somedays the words to describe it come; somedays, they don't.

"It's like fiddle playing," he said. "There's two categories. Fiddling in Texas is a different style of fiddling."

Of course, just because it comes from Texas doesn't mean it's good, sacrilegious as that sounds.

"There are lots of yay-hoos like there are everywhere else. I don't listen to mainstream country." But he was gracious in his criticism, "There are good songs out there, and good writers."

Perhaps, but few of them could craft a song like "The Guitar." The second cut on the "Some Days" disc tells the story of a man and a guitar who find each other in a pawn shop. But like the best country songs, there's a twist. Giving it away wouldn't be fair, but it's safe to say that the two are destined for each other, like fingers for a hand.

And in a way, it's not surprising that a Clark song would put a guitar in such a reverential role. The album cover for "Some Days" features Clark with a guitar he built himself, and the inside art is of an old Martin E18 acoustic guitar. It was Clark's first real guitar, bought in 1963 and played until the sound hole and pick guard are about as worn as Willie Nelson's guitar, Trigger (coincidentally, also a Martin).

Clark said he tried to go electric for a while back in the 1970s and '80s because the electronics at the time just weren't good enough to get the quality amplification he wanted on his acoustic. "I didn't like it," he said, simply. So he's back to his specialty, just a pair of acoustic guitars, an upright bass and maybe a bit of percussion. And, of course, that voice.

It's not opera pure. It's more like life in perfect hard-scrabble pitch. That's the kind of thing you need for a song like "Hemingway's Whiskey," with lyrics like *"Hemingway's Whiskey / Warm & smooth & mean / Even when it burns / It'll always finish clean. / He didn't like it watered down / He took it straight up & neat/ If it was bad enough for him / It's bad enough for me. / Hemingway's Whiskey."*

Clark, who will turn 68 in November, isn't touring as much as he once did. Right now, he's got about 50 dates on his calendar. Until a couple of years ago, when he broke his leg in "a stupid household accident" - missing the last step in a flight of stairs - he was doing 80 to 85 shows a year.

There are no Cleveland dates on his calendar . . . yet. But don't despair. He doesn't have to keep gigging, but he wants to.

"I enjoy playing the songs for the folks," he said.