

A Guy and his guitar

By: Tom Lanham
Special to The Examiner
October 1, 2009



Right and left brain: Guy Clark — who plays at the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival on Saturday — takes breaks from songwriting by handcrafting guitars. (Courtesy photo)

SAN FRANCISCO — Songwriting isn't easy — especially when you've been at it for three decades and 22 albums, like Texas troubadour Guy Clark.

With every passing year, many more tunes are copyrighted and many more melodic possibilities are nipped in the bud.

“So the job gets harder and harder,” Clark says. “And not so much with writers in general, just within myself. I've written a lot of songs and it seems like you'd run out of material. But every once in a while, something interesting pops up, something that seems like it might be worth saving.”

Hence the title of his latest Dualtone release, “Somedays the Song Writes You,” which he'll be touting Saturday at the ninth Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival in Golden Gate Park. The free event, which boasts dozens of acts, runs Friday through Sunday.

Clark, 68, has developed a unique creative solution for times when he finds himself at a loss for words.

“Writing is a very cerebral endeavor, just sitting there, looking out a window, trying to conjure up something using your imagination,” he says. “So when I get stuck, I just get up and walk over to my work bench and do this real hand-eye-coordination thing with wood. And I love working with wood.”

Clark doesn't advertise or even sell his work, but he's quite a skilled luthier, handcrafting

acoustic guitars that he gives to good folk-scene friends like Rodney Crowell, who received a Clark classic for his birthday last year.

It's an exacting art. Clark employs rosewood for each instrument's back and sides, and mahogany for the neck. "And I use a really nice old piece of spruce for the top," he says.

Once the woodwork is finished, Clark's musical muse usually reappears. "So it's kind of a right-brain/left-brain thing, they sort of feed off one another, I find," he says.

But Clark doesn't make things easy on himself. The hickory-smoked crooner still composes old-school style with graph paper and pencil, and he tracked all of "Somedays" live with zero vocal overdubs.

"Technology will eat you up if you aren't careful," Clark says.

He maintains that there's discipline involved when the song starts "writing you." Clark says, "Those little flashes of inspiration? You have to write them down. So at the end of the day, you wind up with a stack of bar napkins and the next day you can get up and make sense of it all."

IF YOU GO

Guy Clark and Verlon Thompson

Where: Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival Rooster Stage, Speedway Meadow, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco

When: 12:05 p.m. Saturday

Tickets: Free

Contact: www.hardlystrictlybluegrass.com

Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival

Banjo Stage acts

Friday

4:15 p.m.: John Prine

5:45 p.m.: Lyle Lovett & His Large Band

Saturday

2:40 p.m.: Steve Martin with the Steep Canyon Rangers

4:05 p.m.: Ricky Skaggs & Kentucky Thunder

5:25 p.m.: Gillian Welch

6:45 p.m.: Steve Earle & the Bluegrass Dukes

Sunday

2:45 p.m.: Earl Scruggs

4 p.m.: Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys

5:20 p.m.: The Del McCoury Band

6:45 p.m.: Emmylou Harris