

Master writer Guy Clark keeps learning with 'Somedays the Song Writes You'

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Guy Clark, master songwriter, suggests graph paper.

“It feels good to write like this,” said Clark, sitting in a workshop filled with cassette tapes, pencils, acoustic guitars and other items that don’t necessitate keypads, wireless signals or other modern totems. “It’s just the tactile part of it, I guess. I write in long-hand, on graph paper. It kind of keeps you in a straight line.”

The “straight line” part may be argued: Neither Clark nor his late, great, wild-eyed songwriting buddy Townes Van Zandt did much in the way of sticking to the middle or avoiding guardrails. But at age 67, Clark is still putting pencil to paper, strumming guitars he crafts by hand, and writing songs. Every time he does that, people listen and approve, and every little while someone like Lyle Lovett calls him a hero of American song. Once, Michelle Shocked called him “God Clark.” Every now and then, someone asks him to show them how it’s done.

“I’ve taught some songwriting classes,” he said. “My approach to that has always been to not list things you do or don’t do... Just write a song in front of them, and then everyone can see how it works. The question is, ‘How do you write a song?’ And so I say, ‘Well, watch this.’”

He taught a class once at Jorma Kaukonen’s Fur Peace Ranch up in Ohio, with longtime collaborator Verlon Thompson. The two friends wound up writing their “for example” song about a fellow who happens upon a pawn shop guitar, tries it out and finds it was quite literally made for him. “The Guitar” is a bit of magical realism, set to an Americana soundscape.

“Verlon and I wrote it right in front of these nine guys that were in our class,” Clark said. “The day we drove off, I put the lyrics in my bag and never looked at it again. I guess I was tired of it, and put it away. Four years later, somebody from the class e-mailed Verlon a copy of the lyrics. We read it and it was like, ‘(Expletive), this is really good.’ Verlon picked up a guitar, played a chord progression and started kind of talking the lyrics. And then, there it was. I may never do another of those classes. Not my cup of tea. But it did produce something really good.”

‘I like learning’

The son of a lawyer, Clark is more of a judge. He’s an arbiter, capable of judging his own work and the works of others as good, bad or indifferent. As such, he’s capable of taking a compliment: A visitor remarked that a particular guitar that Clark made is “magnificent,” and Clark responded, “Yeah, it is.” That’s his favorite guitar, though, the 10th one he crafted. Call the ninth one “magnificent” and he might well take a drag from his hand-rolled cigarette and disagree.

His discerning eye doesn't look away even from things he's already recorded. He figures a couple of the lyrics from his new *Somedays the Song Writes You* album could use some re-writing.

“Well, like Rodney Crowell called me and said, ‘I’ve got a song I want you to help me finish,’” he said. “He had the first two verses, which were just pristine. I think the story is that Rodney was in Scotland and ran into some crusty merchant marine sailor and Rodney got enthralled with the life this guy had led. And, see, I’ve always had this thing about Ulysses. After Ulysses got back from his voyages, he was burned out by the sea. He put an oar on his shoulder and walked straight inland. Somebody said, ‘Hey, what are you doing with that oar?’ He kept walking. Later on, somebody said, ‘Hey, that’s an oar, isn’t it?’ Kept walking. Finally, after he walked a long, long way, somebody said, ‘What’s that you got over your shoulder?’ Ulysses stuck it in the ground and said, ‘This is where I want to live.’”

Clark laughed then, until the laughter made him cough. And then he stopped coughing and finished the story.

“Rodney and I, we were trying to write about this sailor who gave up on the sea and walked inland. But I’m still a little confused by the song. I wish it were a little tidier, the transition of him giving up the sea and going inland to die. I just have some questions about it. So I’ll keep working.”

Clark’s first batch of recorded songs came out on an album called *Old No. 1*, a 1975 release that remains an object of affection and envy among songwriters.

“That album was received really well, right from the start,” Clark said. “I got this great review in *Playboy*, and Willie Nelson’s *Red Headed Stranger* got kind of panned in that same issue.”

Somedays the Song Writes You finds Clark collaborating with Thompson, Crowell and old friend Gary Nicholson, but also with young-buck tunesmiths Ashley Monroe, Patrick Davis and Jedd Hughes.

“See, I like learning stuff, and I learn a lot from people like that,” Clark said of the latter three. “With the young writers, I pretty much have my way with the lyrics, the final say, but even then there are things that come out of their mouths that wouldn’t have come out of my mind. I enjoy sitting at a table and wrangling with words. I find that inspiring, and I learn from these people.”

Songwriter Stephen Allen Davis has written songs recorded by Tammy Wynette, Joe Cocker, Frank Sinatra and Kenny Rogers, but until a recent day at Clark’s workshop he had not asked an on-the-record interview question. Observing until the end of the question-and-answer session, Davis wanted to make at least one inquiry of Clark, and he asked the sage about his “first real guitar.” Clark said it was a 1953 Martin D-18, and then he went and got that guitar out of a case in an adjoining room.

“I never thought it was that good of a guitar, and the neck is too thin,” Clark said, handing the instrument to Davis, who remarked that it was one of the best-sounding guitars he’d ever played.

Then Clark began talking of another guitar, perhaps in order to make a point about the benefits of banging the guardrails.

“I played this D-18 for years, but I started dabbling in some others. I had a cousin who worked at Martin, and she could get guitars at cost, and I ordered a Martin D-28. She sent it to me, and it didn’t sound good at all to me. One night, I left it in the back of a car, when it was 17 below in Nashville. The finish on the guitar shattered like safety glass. I took it out of the case, saw the damage, and strummed it, and it sounded like a million bucks all of a sudden.

“Oh, that loosened it right up,” he continued. “I still play that thing sometimes. It’s a great one. Not as good as that, though,” Clark said, nodding to his own No. 10.