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The Write Stuff: Guy Clark, 'Somedays the Song Writes You'

NOBODY AGES QUITE so gracefully as a country singer. He may not get the sales or airplay of the younger-hat acts, but the creases and cracks in his voice add gravity to the regret and heartache in his songs, lending his work an authority that perhaps eluded his younger self.

The country lifers are staying busy besides: **Willie Nelson** has already released two new albums this year and who knows how many reissues, and **Kris Kristofferson**'s umpteenth record is hitting shelves later this month. You may not remember **Larry Jon Wilson**, but he just released his first album in nearly 30 years, which was performed and recorded largely off the cuff. Industry vet **Tanya Tucker** scored respectable sales covering some of the very songs she helped to make unfashionable when she was a Nashville starlet.

On "Somedays the Song Writes You" (Dualtone), his 12th album in 35 years, 67-year-old **Guy Clark** wears the wounds and wisdom of his experiences proudly, singing and picking eleven modest songs about age, music, women, whiskey and the wrong side of the tracks.

Clark is a country veteran who hung out with Nelson, Kristofferson, **Townes Van Zandt** and a teenage **Steve Earle** during the fabled heyday of Nashville in the 1970s. He never achieved their level of success, but fashioned a respectable career as a performer and songwriter, penning tracks for **Johnny Cash**, **Ricky Skaggs**, **Vince Gill**, and **Brad Paisley**. If that wasn't enough, he's a trained luthier and makes many of the instruments he plays.

"Somedays the Song Writes You" places his weathered voice in a comfortably acoustic setting, which highlights its sandpapery textures and casual phrasing. There's a spring in the cadence of "If I Needed You," a Van Zandt cover with a heartbreaking melody and swirling fiddle contrails courtesy of **Shawn Camp**. "Eamon" is a sea shanty sung as a hymn to a fearless sailor, and "Maybe I Can Paint Over That" is a witty ode to mistakes and hard-won contentment.

Only "Hollywood" doesn't quite work, thanks to a too-far-off-the-map subject and a threadbare complaint, but it's so well executed, with its loping guitar licks and mandolin trills, that it's easy to overlook its shortcomings and enjoy the performance.

Ultimately, "Somedays the Song Writes You" is the kind of record that only an old-timer could make. Well, a younger act could try, but only a survivor like Clark could sell it. Most songs consider the power of music over its creator. Or, as he sings on the title track: "Somedays you write the song, somedays the song writes you."

On "The Guitar," which is both a meditation on the instrument and a chance to show off his considerable picking prowess, Clark relates a story about discovering a connection with a beat-up guitar at a pawn shop: "The guitar almost played itself, there was nothing I could do / It was gettin' hard to tell just who was playin' who." For Clark, the ability to let the music flow through you is a lesson that only comes with so many years and songs under the bridge.

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