

MUSE TO THE OUTLAW MOVEMENT

Susanna Clark was a songwriter and painter whose artwork famously appears on album covers. But perhaps her greatest gift to the Outlaw movement was inspiring her husband, Guy Clark, and their best friend, Townes Van Zandt, who were two of the era's most important song poets.

She was the “muse to two of our greatest songwriters,” music historian Brian T. Atkinson wrote.

Born Susanna Talley on March 11, 1939, in Atlanta, Texas, she was the sixth of nine children; the family moved to Oklahoma City as her father's business became more successful. In 1969, Talley was teaching art at a private school when she became friends with Clark and Van Zandt, who were visiting Oklahoma City to perform at a local club. Clark and Talley soon fell in love, and she moved to Houston to be near Clark.

As Clark's day job took him away from songwriting, Talley decided they should move to Los Angeles, where he could spend more time working on his music. A year later, in 1971, they moved to Nashville. Van Zandt was never far behind, and he often stayed with the couple for long stretches. In 1972, he attended the couple's wedding, performed by a county judge.

The Clark home quickly became a magnet for the city's growing community of musical rebels. Van Zandt was almost always present. “Guy, Susanna, and Townes leaned on each other and believed in each other,” wrote Tamara Saviano, Guy Clark's biographer. “Guy wrote songs. Townes wrote songs. Susanna painted and composed poetry.”



Susanna Clark was also learning the craft of songwriting, and she eventually tried it herself. One of her songs, “Easy from Now On,” has been recorded by co-writer Carlene Carter, Emmylou Harris, and Miranda Lambert. “Come from the Heart,” a #1 song for Kathy Mattea in 1989, has some of country's most famous lyrics: “You've got to sing like you don't need the money / Love like you'll never get hurt / You've got to dance like nobody's watching / It's gotta come from the heart if you want it to work.”

Susanna Clark also left a lasting mark with her paintings, which appear on the covers of albums by Harris, Willie Nelson, and her husband.

After Van Zandt died at age fifty-two in 1997, Susanna Clark sunk into a deep depression and she gradually lost her health. She died in her sleep at age seventy-three on June 25, 2012, at her home. Guy Clark died four years later.

SOURCES

Austin Chronicle; *Lone Star Music Magazine*; *Nashville Scene*; *The New Yorker*; *Texas Monthly*; *The Whole Damn Story* by Sam Sweet, from *Heartworn Highways 40th Anniversary Edition Box Set* (as quoted in *Oxford American*); *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark* by Tamara Saviano

LISTEN

“Heavenly Houseboat Blues”
(co-written with Townes Van Zandt, recorded by Townes Van Zandt)