

POETIC STORYTELLER

Though he recorded more than a dozen studio albums, Guy Clark is best known as a gifted songwriter, beloved by the country artists who sang his work. During the Outlaw era, his poetic storytelling served as a model for other rebel songwriters.

He was “a master of the deftly sprinkled detail, the tall tale that turns out to be true, and the casual story that conceals a world of heartbreak and joy,” writes music critic Edd Hurt.

“It’s not brain surgery,” Clark said of songwriting. “It’s heart surgery.”

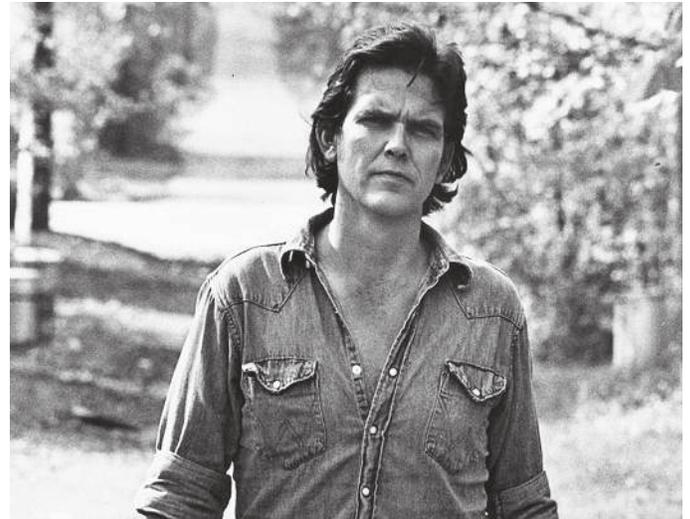
Born on November 6, 1941, in the west Texas town of Monahans, Clark spent much of his childhood at his grandmother’s thirteen-room hotel, and its colorful guests eventually inhabited his lyrics. After college, Clark completed a Peace Corps stint in Puerto Rico. By the mid-1960s, he settled in Houston, where he opened a guitar repair shop and began performing folk music in clubs. It was here that he formed lifelong friendships with Mickey Newbury, K.T. Oslin, Townes Van Zandt, and Jerry Jeff Walker, who would all go on to their own celebrated country music careers.

After living briefly in California, where he worked in a guitar factory, Clark and his soon-to-be wife, Susanna, moved to Nashville in 1971 to join an emerging generation of country singer-songwriters whose music was steeped in rich narratives and everyday wisdom. Together, the Clarks created a home that was a magnet to this new music community; Van Zandt, especially, had a unique bond with the couple.

In 1975, Clark released his debut album, *Old No. 1*, and it included what is regarded as one of his masterpieces, “Desperados Waiting for a Train,” inspired by an old man he met at his grandmother’s hotel.

“Most of the really good songs are dead true,” Clark said. “You couldn’t make up ‘Desperados Waiting for a Train,’ or any of that stuff. . . . Every time I’ve tried to make stuff up, it just kind of falls flat. So the majority of my work is something that happened to me, I saw happen to someone else, or a friend of mine told me happened.”

Though Clark’s recordings failed to make a splash on country radio, his music found huge audiences through the major artists who recorded it, including Johnny Cash,



Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Ricky Skaggs, Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell, George Strait, Vince Gill, Alan Jackson, Brad Paisley, and Kenny Chesney.

“I think he may be the greatest storyteller of all, for me,” Gill said of Clark. “He paints the coolest pictures of all.”

Over the years, Clark continued to record and perform in clubs and small theaters around the country. At home in Nashville, he spent long hours building guitars in his basement workshop, where he also eventually began inviting a younger generation to join him in songwriting sessions.

“I learn so much from these guys,” he said of his young collaborators. “I’ll go, ‘Wow, how did you think of that?’ Or, ‘Let me learn it.’”

In 2004, he was elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame; the next year, he received a lifetime achievement award for songwriting from the Americana Music Association. In 2011, a group of Clark’s famous friends and admirers recorded a 30-song tribute album, *This One’s for Him*, which was nominated for a Grammy. Clark’s own studio albums were nominated twice for Grammys; *My Favorite Picture of You* won in 2014 for best folk album.

He died in 2016 in Nashville, at age seventy-four, after a lengthy battle with cancer.

Three years before, singer John Hiatt predicted his friend’s musical immortality. “Guy is the kind of writer who is too strong to fade out,” Hiatt said. “His songs will remain long after he does. They get in your heart and mind, and they become part of you.”

SOURCES

American Songwriter,
Austin American-Statesman,
The New York Times, *The Tennessean*

LISTEN

“Shade of All Greens”