

## MUSE TO THE OUTLAW MOVEMENT

Susanna Clark was an accomplished songwriter and painter whose artwork famously adorns album covers. But perhaps her greatest contribution to the Outlaw movement was the creative force field she generated for her husband, Guy Clark, and their best friend, Townes Van Zandt, both legendary song poets.

“Susanna Clark was a candle,” music historian Brian T. Atkinson wrote in a tribute to Clark after her death in 2012. “Many gravitated toward her flame.” She was the “muse to two of our greatest songwriters,” Atkinson continued, “and the seamstress that held together Nashville’s songwriting community throughout the 1970s and beyond.”

Born Susanna Talley on March 11, 1939, in Atlanta, Texas, she was the sixth of nine children; her father was a successful entrepreneur who moved the family to Oklahoma City as his business ventures prospered. The city was also home to her mother’s family, a wealthy oil dynasty, and Susanna and her siblings became members of high society. In 1969, she was teaching art at a private school founded by her mother’s family when she became friends with Clark and Van Zandt, who were visiting Oklahoma City to perform at a local coffeehouse. Clark and Talley soon were in love, and she moved to Clark’s home base of Houston.

As Clark’s day job took him away from songwriting, Talley insisted they move to Los Angeles, where he could spend more time working on his music. A year later, in 1971, the couple relocated permanently to Nashville. Van Zandt was never far behind; he crashed on their couch for eight memorable months soon after their move. In 1972, he witnessed the couple’s wedding before a county judge.

The Clark home quickly became a magnet for the city’s growing community of musical rebels. “They owned this town as songwriters, and everyone looked up to them,” artist Rosanne Cash recalled. “They had a café society at their house. People would go out there and sit around the table and carve their names into the table, and talk about songs, and play each other new songs.”

Van Zandt was a near-constant presence. “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 absorbing the craft of songwriting from the masters, and she eventually tried her own hand. In 1975, Dotsy took Clark’s song, “I’ll Be Your San Antone Rose,” to the Top Fifteen. Another hit, “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, contains some of country’s most-quoted 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’s artwork also left a lasting mark: Her painting of the Pleiades constellation graces Willie Nelson’s legendary 1978 album, *Stardust*. More Clark paintings are featured on the album covers of her husband’s landmark *Old No. 1* and Emmylou Harris’s *Quarter Moon in a Ten Cent Town*.

After Van Zandt died at age fifty-two in 1997, Susanna Clark sunk into a deep depression and her health deteriorated. In her final years, she was bedridden with spinal disease and lung cancer. 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)