

A Conversation with Guy Clark by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 12/02)

One is not inclined to speak carelessly about West Texan Guy Clark, since his songs and his records are carefully chosen. He's been recording since the 70s and has eight records to his name. None have been huge sellers, but some of his well-built songs have been, like "Heartbroke" (Ricky Skaggs), "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train," and "L.A. Freeway" (Jerry Jeff Walker). If you've come aboard to read the interview, then it's probably all well known to you.

Whether it is or is not, read on and into what seemed to me a rather reluctant but nevertheless interesting conversation. I don't know Guy personally, though he lives in town. I take him to be a reclusive man when he's not on tour. He builds classical and flamenco guitars in his basement workshop, which is where most of his songwriting also goes on.

Clark writes and plays with deep and talented people who are also good friends. He records with greats like Darrell Scott, Verlon Thompson, and Kenny Malone. Cowriter Shawn Camp and acoustic icon Tim O'Brien also do guest spots on the new record, *The Dark*, to great effect. (See our interviews with Tim O'Brien and Darrell Scott in the archives.)

More has been written about songwriters from TX than from any other place on earth. When people write about them, Guy Clark is always at or around the very top of the list, in the company of Townes and Steve Earle. He is looked to by writers and fans alike for his precise economy, his colorful cast of characters, and well told stories.

We talked briefly on the phone recently, our conversation follows in its entirety.

GUY CLARK: Hello.

PUREMUSIC: Hi, Guy. Frank Goodman here from Puremusic.com.

GC: Yeah.

PM: Got a second for me?

GC: Yes, I do.

PM: How are things—life at large, and music in particular?

GC: Oh, pretty good. I just caught the first cold I've had in five or six years.

PM: You know, it's inevitable, with the change of seasons, that's when I get mine too.

GC: Well, I've been up in Santa Fe and Boulder, Colorado, and I hadn't been sick in years, and somehow caught something.

PM: You taking anything?

GC: Oh, yeah, just a little goofy. I just got in late last night from the road.

PM: Sorry to barely give you any space.

GC: Oh, no, that's all right. I had planned it. I knew you were calling. I just was apologizing for maybe being a little goofy.

PM: Yeah, got it. But in general, is health pretty good, aside from—

GC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, all is well.

PM: Do you do anything special in terms of diet or exercise or any of that?

GC: [laughs] Not much.

PM: [laughs] I hadn't caught you at the gym, but I thought I'd ask.

GC: No. [laughs] No, I get pretty much all the exercise I need walking down airport concourses carrying bags.

PM: [laughs] So, next question. And any way I try to form a question about it, it seems impertinent to me, but there's been quite a bit said and written about the Texas songwriter scene. I wonder if I could solicit your view on it. Perhaps any aspect or personality may have been overdone, underdone, or forgotten shamelessly. Is there anything about that Texas songwriter thing you'd say today?

GC: You know, I know people talk about it all the time.

PM: They do.

GC: And there's something to it. I mean, it's obviously there, or it wouldn't get as much press as it gets, or as much discussion. Oh, there's some sort of story telling tradition in Texas, I think, always has been, coupled with music, and probably sort of an attitude that you can do anything that you want to do. There aren't any rules, as far as anything—and that applies especially to writing songs, whatever gets the point across. So you're just kind of brought up to feel—in any field, if you say you can do it, do it. There it is.

PM: There is a thing, certainly, a phenomenon, from your generation from Texas. Is there a crop afoot now that draws from that tradition? If so, I'm not sure I'm aware of it.

GC: A crop? You mean of writers?

PM: Yeah.

GC: I'm sure there is. I mean, there's a lot of good young writers coming out of there.

PM: Any that are friends, their music you're particularly aware of?

GC: Well, there's the Robison Brothers, Charlie and Bruce—

PM: Yeah, that's true.

GC: —those guys, and Pat Green. And Jerry Jeff's son, Django, is writing songs.

PM: Really? I'm going to have to chase his music down. I don't know anything about him.

GC: Yeah, he's good.

PM: But there are plenty.

GC: Oh, believe me, there's a bunch. [laughs]

PM: I like *The Dark* a lot. I think it's a great record.

GC: Oh, well, thanks.

PM: Simple, honest production, and great. It's the same guys, more or less, from *Cold Dog Soup*, right?

GC: Yeah, even fewer. [laughs]

PM: [laughs] And that's the way I like it.

GC: I do too. I'm not a big fan of layered productions.

PM: Or a big to-do in general.

GC: Right.

PM: We think artists are uniquely revealed when they speak about their associates. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to discuss your current pared-down crew. Maybe we could begin with Verlon.

GC: Oh, Verlon is just absolutely marvelous. He plays with me on the road, and has for the last several years. I've known him for about 15 or 20 years. And I play so much better and so much cleaner when he's playing with me, because he's so good. You kind of have to step up to play with Verlon. And also it makes me play less, which is always good. And he's just the sweetest guy in the world. I couldn't speak too highly of him. And as a writer and singer himself, I mean, he ought to be a star.

PM: Yeah. And should have been for years and years.

GC: Uh-huh.

PM: He's just a really amazing musician.

GC: Oh, yeah.

PM: Is he cutting his own records these days?

GC: Actually, he's getting ready to or is in the middle of making a new one, that he does on his own label, and sells at gigs and over the internet. He's got website. It's verlonthompson.com, I believe.

PM: I'll be sure to check it out.

GC: It's really nice.

PM: Yeah, I think whenever I'm in the key of D I think of Verlon Thompson.

GC: [laughs]

PM: [laughs] There was a day that you'd think about James Taylor. But I don't know, Verlon just took that key of D from him, for me.

GC: Yeah, that's great. [laughs]

PM: How about the amazing Darrell Scott?

GC: Well, Darrell is a stunning musician. I mean, he plays anything. The only thing I've never heard him play is a fiddle, and I bet he could.

PM: Oh, yeah, I think he can, yeah.

GC: You know, he's got mine. [laughs]

PM: He does?

GC: Well, I had a fiddle that I really can't play, so I loaned it to Darrell. But yeah, he's from another planet.

PM: Boy, he's having a run. Holy jeez! [Darrell's getting a lot of big cuts at the moment.]

GC: Yeah, he's doing quite well, and I'm really happy for him.

PM: It's nice to see the good guys score big covers, when they're just really writing songs and they're true to them.

GC: Uh-huh.

PM: When you've had number ones, you obviously—well, you didn't seem to be writing for The Row, you were just writing.

GC: Right, right.

PM: That's the way it's supposed to be done.

GC: I would think so.

PM: So what's Darrell like, in particular, to record with?

GC: Oh, he's marvelous. I mean, he's very creative in the studio. He's totally supportive of anything you want to do. And he's got wonderful ideas, production ideas. He really knows his way around the studio. I don't particularly. As much as I've been in them, I really don't care for them. But Darrell is really good in the studio. I mean, he has a real working knowledge of how the process works, and what sounds good coming back over tape, and how the stuff works together.

PM: He's a string guy, but he's also gearhead.

GC: Oh, yeah.

PM: How about Shawn Camp? Has he been in your circle long?

GC: I've known Shawn for several years. And he's just an amazing talent. He's a great writer, a

marvelous, marvelous guitar player, and plays really good fiddle.

PM: And he's a really cool person.

GC: Oh yeah.

PM: Is he married with kids now?

GC: No, no. He's single. He's got a girlfriend, I think, but he's not married.

PM: What was Chris Latham's part in the dynamic of the whole *Dark* experience?

GC: Chris is the engineer down at the studio where we do these things. And he's just such an integral part and he has such a marvelous ear. Also it turns out, we didn't know, but he's a pretty good fiddle player. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, you got a good track there.

GC: Yeah. Well, we were talking about getting viola in to do a couple of string things, on "The Dark" and "Homeless." So Chris came in one day with this five-string fiddle, with a low C or B or whatever it is on the low end. And he said, "Well, let me just go out there and put this down, and you can kind of listen to it and see if you want to hire a viola player." And he just went out there and nailed these parts. [laughs]

PM: [laughs]

GC: And we're just going, "Chris, [laughs] why didn't you tell anybody?"

PM: [laughs] This town!

GC: It was really amazing. I mean, he'd never mentioned that he played in the symphony, like serious violin playing, not fiddle playing. And he just blew us away.

PM: Are you working on or making any guitars these days?

GC: Yeah. Can you hold one second?

PM: Certainly.

GC: I'm sorry to do this to you, but I've got to take this call.

PM: That's all right.

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GC: Sorry. I've been out of town so long, and people are calling.

PM: Everybody wants a piece of you.

GC: Yeah. A friend of mine just died, so...

PM: Oh, Mickey Newberry.

GC: Yeah. I got a call about that.

PM: I was just talking to Jeff Trager, he said that he'd talked to him last week, and that Mickey had just written a verse for "Sweet Memories." Mickey said, "But I can't sing it to you, man." He said, "I can't sing and I can't play the guitar." It just sounded so damn sad.

GC: Yeah, yeah. So anyway...

PM: Yeah. What's to be said about that? What about—oh, right, I asked you if you were working on or making any guitars?

GC: Oh, yeah. I have everything set up. I've got seven finished, built, since I started this little room a couple three years ago. But lately, I just haven't had the time to actually do any building. I've been on the road so much and doing this record and all the attendant bullshit that goes with it.

PM: You do a hell of a lot of gigging, don't you?

GC: Oh, yeah. I play all the time.

PM: You do, like, more than a hundred dates a year?

GC: No, I don't think so, probably about eighty. But by the time you get there and you get home, it winds up being a lot of time out. So I'm getting the itch to build, I know that. [laughs] I keep looking at my stacks of wood and what I can do with it.

PM: Where did you learn that, Guy?

GC: It's just something I've always done. In South Texas, the first guitar you get is a Mexican guitar. And the first one I got, the first thing I did was take it apart.

PM: From Parracho, right? [a legendary Mexican town where the majority of the whole population is involved in the making of guitars]

GC: Yeah, exactly. And it's just something that's always come very naturally to me. And I built about, I don't know, six, seven, eight guitars in Texas in the late 60s.

PM: Steel strings or gut strings?

GC: All gut strings. That's just the first kind of guitar I played, it was a nylon string guitar. And to me, it's the purest form of guitar making, and I just enjoy doing it.

PM: So the seven down in the shop are all gut strings, then?

GC: Oh, yeah. They're all flamenco negroes, which is a flamenco guitar with rosewood back and sides.

PM: So what will happen to those? Will you sell them to friends or shops?

GC: Oh, no. Right now I'm still experimenting and learning. I mean, it's really something that you've got to devote your life to if you want to get good at it. And I'm just—I kind of do it as therapy. But a couple of them are pretty good guitars. And I'm not selling any of them. I don't know what the outcome will be. I put a couple away for my grandkids, like that. So I don't know,

who knows? Maybe I'll start building guitars for a living.

PM: I hope I get to play one sometime.

What about the spiritual side of life? Any special inclinations in that domain?

GC: Oh, just try to do the best work you can.

PM: Yeah.

GC: Sit up straight and be responsible.

PM: [laughs] There's got to be—well, I've seen eighty, but there's probably more like a hundred covers of your songs, right?

GC: I would guess. I really have no idea.

PM: That's got to be a mighty gratifying validation of your work.

GC: Well, of course. I mean, that's a large part of what I do. What I set out to do was write songs that people would do. I do them, of course, but they're out there for anyone to do.

PM: Is that the lion's share of the income, or is it gigging and writing half and half?

GC: Well, it used to be, but not any more. I haven't had any songs recorded in a while.

PM: Why, I can't imagine.

GC: Well, I don't know. Things change. And I guess I'm a little lazy at pursuing it. I have a publishing company that's supposed to be doing it.

PM: But they never do.

GC: Well, I would rather not speak to that. [laughs]

PM: Many good songwriters tell me they've gotten most of their own cuts.

GC: That's usually the way it works. But anyway, I love playing and I love singing, and the writing. There's kind of a symbiotic relationship between the writing and the playing. I have no reason to sit home and write songs all day without going out and playing for the folks. And I have no reason to go play for the folks unless I'm writing new songs—

PM: Absolutely.

GC: —so they can sort of feed off one another. And I just try to do the best I can.

PM: You do damn well. It's ironic that what many of us think is real or traditional country is now one of the faces of alternative country.

GC: Yeah, really. [laughs]

PM: Do you think, in the natural ebb and flow of things, that the more traditional sound will return to the airwaves in time, or is it done?

GC: I have no idea. Things change all the time, and they'll probably never be the same again. It's just the natural evolution of the human condition. Things change, and whatever it is is what it is. I mean, you try to start second guessing that, you either get rich or die broke. [laughs]

PM: I guess you could just sit with a cup of coffee in the morning and write a song, and the rest is just bullshit.

GC: Yeah.

PM: So I'm really looking forward to seeing you with Mary Gauthier at the Belcourt on October 23rd.

GC: Yeah, she's great.

PM: So you're acquainted with her stuff?

GC: Yeah, we've played a lot of gigs together. She's really wonderful.

PM: Well, I won't go on and on. Thanks for taking the time to visit with me today.

GC: You're so welcome. Thanks for calling.

PM: Yeah. And I look forward to meeting you in person sometime.

GC: All right, man.

PM: Okay, Guy. Take care.

GC: Thanks. Bye.

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