

Chicago Tribune
TURN IT UP

Guy Clark, 'My Favorite Picture of You' album review

3.5 stars (out of 4)

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Guy Clark has written a few dozen of the best songs of the last half-century, as many of the artists who have covered his work – from Johnny Cash to Kenny Chesney – would likely say. He’s saved a few good ones for himself on “My Favorite Picture of You” (Dualtone), his first album in four years and one of the best of his storied career.

Clark was a friend, mentor and spiritual foundation for a gaggle of Texas songwriters, including Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle and Rodney Crowell, and his sparse but poetic style is best served with a minimum of fuss. The new album’s small-combo acoustic settings – melding two-steps and Tex-Mex, Spanish guitar and honky-tonk fiddles -- suit the songwriter’s weathered vocals. With ebb-and-surge guitars doing the driving, the characters in “Death of Sis Draper” meet their fate in a narrative that plays like a four-minute movie: “Some folks to to heaven, some folks go to hell/Sis Draper went to Arkansas/That’s all there is to tell.” “Cornmeal Waltz” turns a dancefloor and “I’ll Show Me” a saloon into swirling slices of rural life that cut across generations and eras.

Another key part of Clark’s skill set: the ability to find the human stories inside broad political issues on “Heroes” and “El Coyote.” He shapes words so evocatively that he doesn’t need to oversell anything to make his point. Understatement rules, and so does a sense of mortality. Clark is 71, and he’s outlived friends and loved ones, who flicker through these songs. It’s difficult not to feel the spirit of Van Zandt in the unflinching “The High Price of Inspiration.” Most poignant of all is the title song, in which Clark turns a faded decades-old snapshot of his late wife, Susanna, into a tender farewell.

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