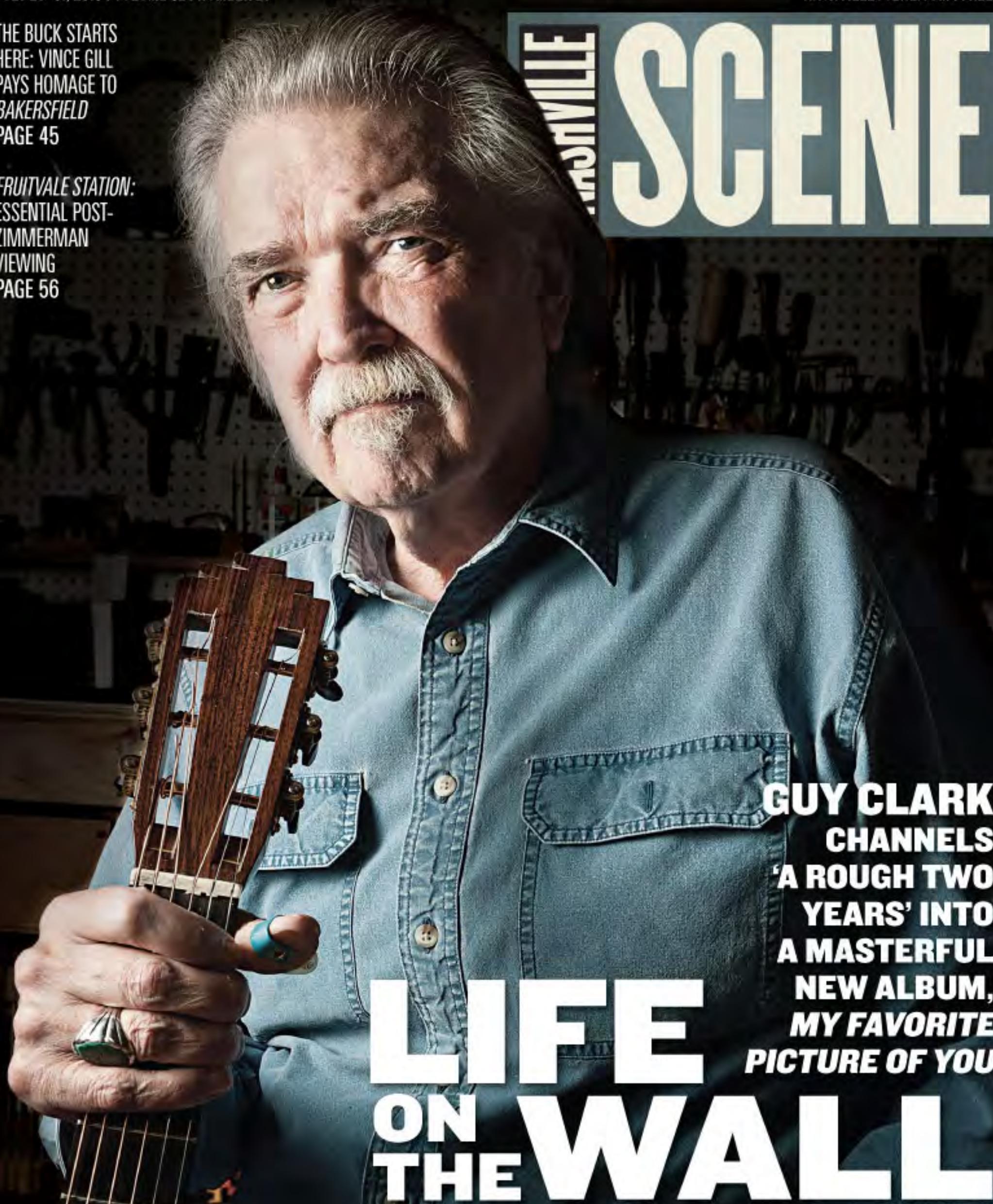


THE BUCK STARTS  
HERE: VINCE GILL  
PAYS HOMAGE TO  
BAKERSFIELD  
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FRUITVALE STATION:  
ESSENTIAL POST-  
ZIMMERMAN  
VIEWING  
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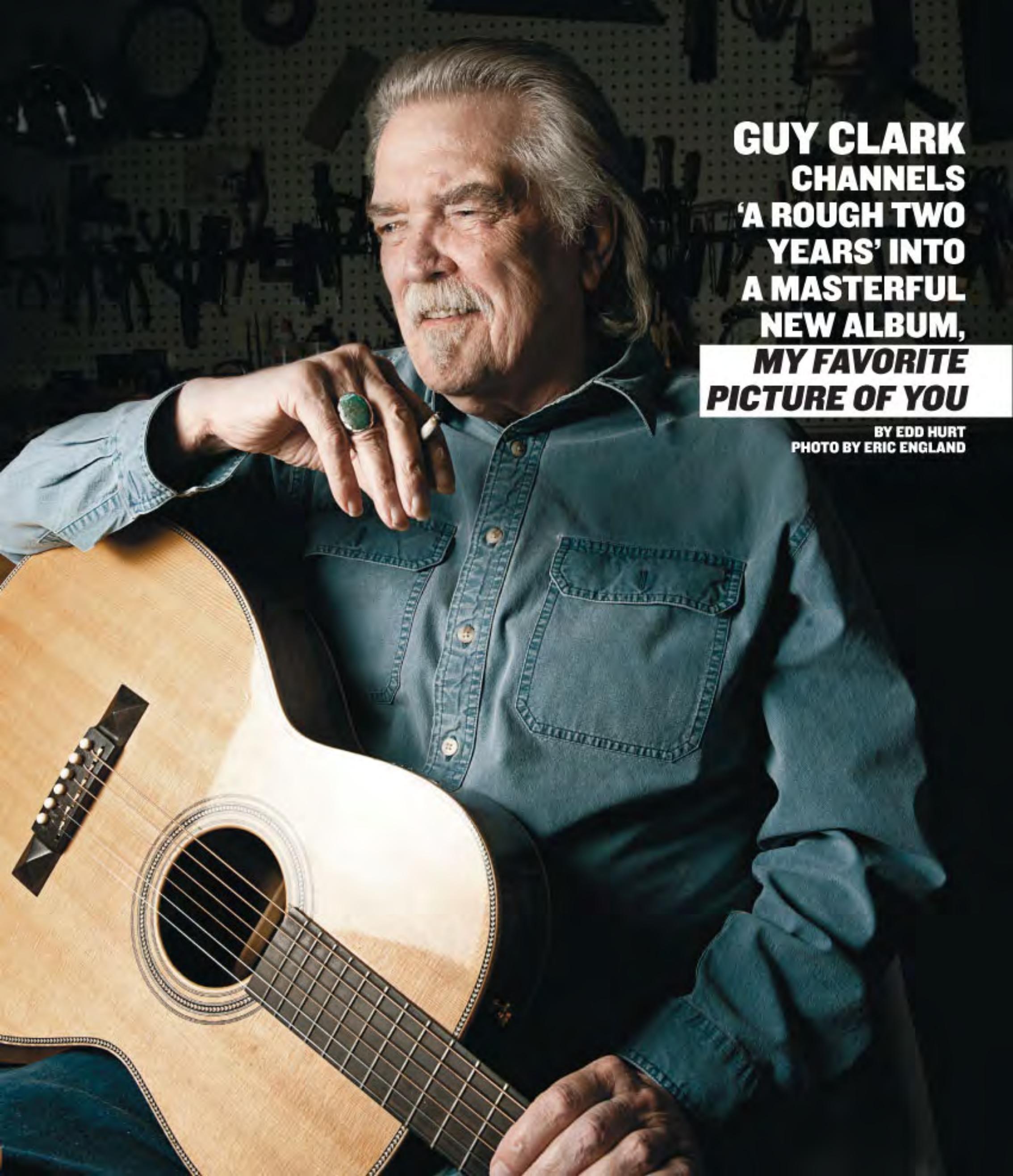
# NASHVILLE SCENE



**GUY CLARK  
CHANNELS  
'A ROUGH TWO  
YEARS' INTO  
A MASTERFUL  
NEW ALBUM,  
MY FAVORITE  
PICTURE OF YOU**

# LIFE ON THE WALL

BY EDD HURT



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PHOTO BY ERIC ENGLAND

# LIFE ON THE WALL

The man I am interviewing sits facing the calm summer afternoon that shines outside his window, and I have just forced the conversation into an unexpected moment of asperity. You'd think I would have known better than to parrot a Nashville songwriters' cliché to Guy Clark, who has been answering my questions with good humor and better grace. With his deadpan comic timing, Clark reminds me of a laconic character from a Howard Hawks movie about cooled-out professionals, and I'm already a little in awe of him, since Clark is one of the world's greatest songwriters — definitely a professional, but subtler than that appellation may imply.

So here I am, calling Guy Clark's new song "El Coyote" — one of the 11 mostly co-written songs that comprise his new album *My Favorite Picture of You* — a "good example of his craft," as if I know what that means. Uttering the word previously, I had noticed a tiny wince pass across Clark's noble face. As a songwriter, Clark has no peer, and any new Clark collection is another reminder of his pre-eminent position in a city where there is no shortage of great, ambitious writers. Clark's way of writing profoundly changed Nashville, but he's an artist for the world. Like any student of songwriting, I know this, but sometimes you get sloppy.

“Well, I just want to interject this,” Clark says. “You’ve used that word twice, and I find that word a little offensive when it’s applied to songwriting. I really think it’s poetry and it’s art. I let it get stuck on me when one of those small record companies that puts out all the — what’s their name?”

I fumble around in my memory, and finally I get it: “Rounder.”

“Right, Rounder had bought some masters of my three Warner Bros. albums and wanted to put it out, and I said, ‘That’s fine, put it out, whatever you wanna do,’” Clark explains in his Texas-to-Tennessee half-drawl. “And the cover came out with *Craftsman* as the title of the album. And it rubbed me wrong right then. My life was crazy, and everything was goin’ on, and I said, ‘Yeah, shit, I don’t care,’ and the more it stuck, the more I grew offended by applying that to the art and

tells me.

It is impossible to think of Clark’s work without the work ethic that informs it. For one thing, only a man with serious resolve could have made it through his past few years.

**I**n Guy Clark’s songs, poetry never precludes psychological penetration. But his work has achieved poetic density over his 40-year career as singer, songwriter, painter, teacher, performer and guitar maker.

Clark has brought his sure touch to bear on everything he’s essayed, and it’s his ability to create the illusion of equanimity amidst turmoil that comes through in *My Favorite Picture of You*.

Clark describes the mid-’90s period that saw the release of *Craftsman* as a turbulent time. More demanding, though, have been

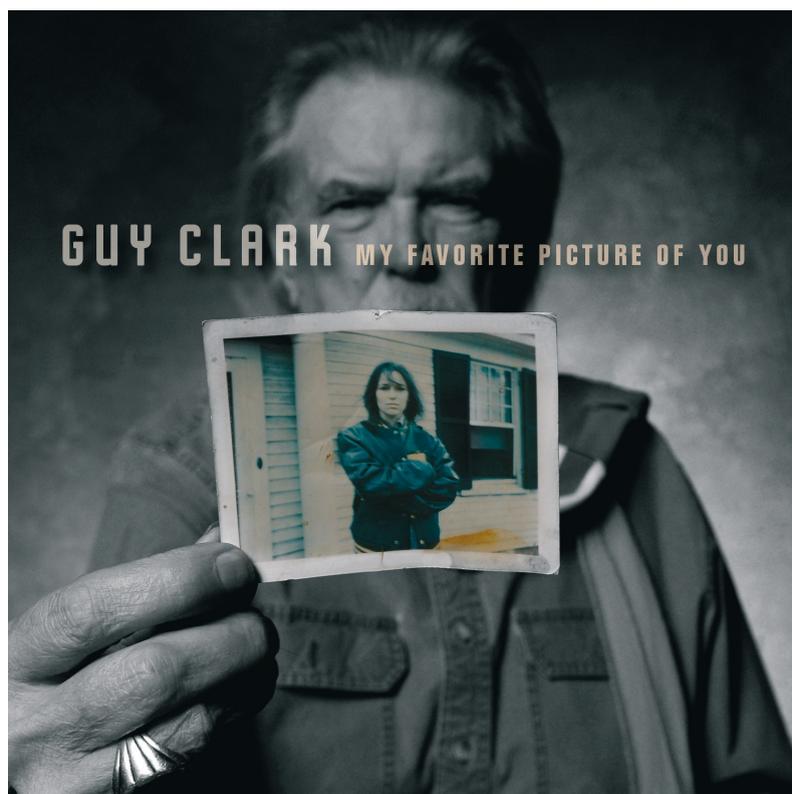
Harris and was herself a talented songwriter. (Her composer credits include “I’ll Be Your San Antone Rose,” a 1975 hit for country singer Dotts, and “Easy From Now On,” written with Carlene Carter and recorded by Emmylou Harris and later Miranda Lambert.) You can see her grinning with Clark on the back of his 1976 *Texas Cookin’* album, where she looks like a woman who knows her own mind, and your mind too.

Written with Gordie Sampson, “My Favorite Picture of You” is about love that burns hot — Susanna’s angry gaze contrasts with the “winter squall” Clark and Sampson introduce into their narrative. With a spare arrangement featuring Bryn Davies’ cello, the song develops like a Polaroid. The music and words match perfectly, in songwriting so evocative and exact that it captures a moment, and a love, for the ages in just the

corners of modern American life with equal precision. “El Coyote” is an account of a border crossing effected by means of cash and a smuggler’s semi. “Rain in Durango” takes an amused look at a modern-day hippie who travels very lightly around the festival circuit. Written with Camp, it employs a Newgrass style appropriate to the song’s subject matter.

“I’ve gone to festivals all my life, and you see these little hippie chicks out there noodle-dancin’ in the mosh pit, snakin’ around, probably eating mushrooms,” says Camp, who brings finesse and creative insanity to *My Favorite Picture of You*. He’s been working with Clark for 20 years, even though their first meeting was inauspicious.

“I used to work at this vegetarian restaurant in Nashville, and I was like a host there,” Camp recalls, laughing. “I seated Guy at his table one day, and it was like, ‘Man, Guy



## IT'S CLARK'S ABILITY TO CREATE THE ILLUSION OF EQUANIMITY AMIDST TURMOIL THAT COMES THROUGH IN MY FAVORITE PICTURE OF YOU.

the poetry of writing songs. At least, my approach.”

The moment passes, and I explain that my use of the word “craft” was misguided — what I meant was “technique.” But the point sticks, and if there’s one thing that should stay with any listener who sits down with a great Clark song such as “Dublin Blues” or “Broken Hearted People,” it’s the way that his words and music avoid overt displays of technique.

In the bright early-summer afternoon, as I bring up topics that range from irrelevant to weighty — songwriting, the influence of Texas bluesman Mance Lipscomb on his work, chord transposition — Clark seems willing to talk shop. He doesn’t really throw me when he bristles at “craft,” but it’s an essential point about his work, and I’m happy to be corrected. He is unquestionably an artist, yet one who discusses his art in concrete, unpretentious terms of tools and work. The artist has the vision, while the craftsman gets the job done: maybe so. But Clark’s most enduring music uses language in a double role: His words are pigmentation and points in a narrative, and that’s craftsmanship in the service of an artistic vision, just as he

the past five years. After breaking his leg in 2008, the songwriter got back on his feet to play a series of live performances with a group featuring his longtime collaborator and friend Verlon Thompson. Since 2011, Clark has had knee replacements and an arterial bypass. As he says, “It’s been a rough two years — I’m startin’ to get tired of this shit.”

But Clark’s biggest loss was the death last year of his wife, Susanna, to whom he had been married 40 years. The influence of Susanna Clark is everywhere in Clark’s world. Hanging in the house is her painting of a blue shirt — the one featured on the cover of his 1975 debut, *Old No. 1*.

In fact, it’s a photograph of Susanna that gives *My Favorite Picture of You* its title. As Clark explains, Susanna was angry at him and their friend Townes Van Zandt that day — no telling what antics they were perpetrating. He expands on the story of that frozen moment, and the “Polaroid shot someone took on the spot,” in *My Favorite Picture*’s title track.

“She never had to do anything but be an artist,” he says of Susanna, who painted album covers for Willie Nelson and Emmylou

single word “click.”

Clark has always been a minimalist with a canny sense of what stuff works where. *My Favorite Picture* was written and recorded with a variety of virtuoso instrumentalists and accomplished tunesmiths, including Shawn Camp, Jedd Hughes and Ray Stephenson. The collaborations introduce a new level of complexity to his music, but Clark is such an astute self-editor that it’s never obtrusive. For example, a song written with Camp, “Cornmeal Waltz,” sports a chromatic melody that mirrors the tension lurking beneath Clark’s painterly lyrics.

“I was talkin’ to Guy about when I was a kid, I used to work in these VFW and American Legion Halls in Benton, Ark.,” remembers Camp, an Arkansas-born multi-instrumentalist who is also a fine performer and a superb post-rockabilly singer in his own right. “I was tellin’ him about this old man who used to come in there right before the dance every Friday night, and he had him a two-and-a-half pound bag of cornmeal that he’d scatter around on that old dance floor.”

While the title song may be the centerpiece of Clark’s new record, he examines various

Clark, he wants red beans and rice.’” Signed to a major label in 1992, Camp began writing with Clark, and he’s contributed songs and licks to recent Clark albums such as 2006’s *Workbench Songs* and the 2009 *Somedays the Song Writes You*.

The list of songwriters influenced by Clark comprises such country and Americana performers as Camp, Thompson, Hughes, Rodney Crowell, Lyle Lovett (whose “Waltzing Fool” Clark covers on the new record), Steve Earle and Hayes Carll. I hear Clark in the work of Old 97’s songwriter Rhett Miller, while former Go-Betweens singer and songwriter Robert Forster namechecks Clark and Van Zandt at the end of his 1991 song, “Dear Black Dream.”

Clark has been honored with this year’s Academy of Country Music’s Poet Award, and he’s been inducted into the Nashville Songwriters’ Hall of Fame. Nominated for a slew of Grammys himself, he’s the subject of the 2011 Grammy-nominated full-length, *This One’s for Him: A Tribute to Guy Clark*. Yet for all the praise heaped upon his head, Clark is a master who lauds his followers.

“A lot of these young guys who

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come over here and write with me are just monster guitar players,” Clark says. “Gordie [Sampson] is a young writer here in town, from Halifax, Nova Scotia, a really good guitar player and singer and writer. So we’ll sit and write something and they’ll play and sing it, and I’ll record a work tape of it and then I have to go back and learn it. I would never think of that shit.”

As *My Favorite Picture of You* demonstrates, Clark is an intelligent collaborator. But the method — the gently nudged narrative that reveals its point of view as it introduces details and moves in controlled cadences — remains his. “My songwriting is pretty much what it is, and usually, if I’ve been co-writing with someone and someone leaves, I heavily edit those songs to suit my sensibilities,” he says. “They’re my songs by the time they get on the record.”

On his most recent work, Clark works within severe stylistic parameters — the performances are mostly drumless and almost all acoustic. But there’s nothing constrained about his new music, though it clearly passes the rigorous tests Clark gives himself. Oklahoma-born songwriter and guitarist Verlon Thompson is another long-time Clark associate who has learned from Clark’s example, having played with him on stage and produced him in the studio.

“He doesn’t approach the studio a lot differently than his live show,” Thompson says. “He goes in, he sits down, he performs the song, and everyone plays along until he’s happy with his performance. He’s been pretty consistent about not trying to add too much to the songs, you know. If it doesn’t really lend something, it doesn’t end up on the record.”

For Rodney Crowell, the Texas-born songwriter who hung out with Clark in Nashville in the ’70s, as Van Zandt and Clark helped reinvent Nashville songwriting along literary lines that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, Clark synthesizes folk and country.

“Lookin’ for that definition of what makes a Guy Clark song, you gotta start with that folk tradition,” Crowell says. “It’s where the clarity of your language is very important. At the same time, reality had been shattered by Dylan’s apocalyptic imagery. Artists are constantly reassembling, and I think Guy just reassembled all the images that were floating in a very concise, literary way.”

As Crowell says, Clark came from the folk tradition, but he was also a singer-songwriter. If part of what makes Nashville songwriting unique is its ability to ride the folk-country-pop cusp, Clark and company had one foot uneasily in pop and the other foot stuck in a bucket marked Tradition. The pull of country music and the old ways — the old-time feeling he parsed in one of his greatest ’70s songs — was strong, and it led him to mastermind his revolution in song-obsessed Music City, where determining the difference between craft and art has always been difficult.

**T**he Nashville songwriters’ scene that James Szalapski’s 1981 film *Heartworn Highways* documents features Clark in 1975 and early 1976, after the release of *Old No. 1*. The sequences with Steve Young, Clark and Van Zandt catch them as they attempt to deal with the reality of Southern heritage. Young’s rueful song about those old

Alabama highways is illustrated by prosaic highway footage, while Clark sings “L.A. Freeway,” a song about falling asleep in a car and remembering how his friend “Skinny” Dennis Sanchez once performed the old songs in the old, comforting way. In fact, *Heartworn Highways* is dedicated to Sanchez, who died in March 1975.

*Heartworn Highways* catches Nashville songwriting as it evolves from genre production into a malleable, hybrid form. For these songwriters, the sticking point was the impossibility of returning to the past and its ways. Nashville sold genial mirages, but Clark and the other songwriters sometimes skirted sentimentality in the classic folkie manner as they turned folk-country-pop into elegies for the irretrievable past. Clark’s genius was to give this romantic quest the bones to walk, ridding it of flab without losing the dramatic backdrop that seethes in his songs.

Clark had come to Nashville in November 1971, just as he had turned 30. Born on Nov. 6, 1941 in Monahans, Texas, Clark grew up in a literature-loving household. “We never had a record player around the house, but we were encouraged in the arts from day one,” he says. “My mother was kind of theatrical — she would always be puttin’ on little readings and plays. After dinner, we’d sit around and read poetry out of a book.”

Clark’s father’s law partner — a woman named Lola Bonner — was among the group of doctors and lawyers whom the young Clark heard playing folk music, and these informal song sessions inspired Clark to become a performer. The family had moved from Monahans in West Texas to Rockport, not far from the Gulf Coast. Clark’s father had returned from World War II and had decided to go to law school in Houston.

“He got a law degree and passed the bar with the highest grade in the state,” Clark says of his father. “He was one of those brilliant guys, and he practiced law in Houston for six months, and then, I remember, we drove all around Texas and he really liked the hill country, but he couldn’t find the right situation.”

Clark’s father settled in Rockport, where he took over the practice of a lawyer who was ready to retire. At this stage, the family moved back and forth between Monahans and Rockport. As Clark remembers, “We spent the winters on the Gulf Coast and the summers in Monahans, and I mean, it was hot. Out there, it’s flat, but in the distance there’s always a mountainscape, and it’s high and dry.”

After graduating from high school, Clark went to college in Kingsville at Texas A&I, where he played basketball and majored in physics. “It was way too ambitious,” he says. “I couldn’t do well academically and play basketball and feed my growing guitar habit.”

Clark began playing Texas folk clubs, performing a standard folkie repertoire circa 1960. “We liked ‘Tom Dooley’ and Woody Guthrie,” Clark says. “I don’t even think Bob Dylan was in our repertoire at the time. We learned ‘Black Land Farmer’ — what a great song. And Jack Clement’s ‘Miller’s Cave.’”

He wasn’t writing songs during this period, he says, and he continued to hone his skills in clubs in Houston, where he had moved to attend the University of Houston. He had already met Van Zandt around 1964 (“I think he had written two or three songs,

but we just became great friends”), gotten married and divorced, and had worked as an art director for a television station before he moved to San Francisco late in the decade. Returning to Houston, he got an art-director job with the local CBS affiliate.

“I did it really well, but what finally got to me was the fact that TV waits on no man,” says Clark. “The pace is incessant, and if you don’t have your shit ready, TV keeps tickin’.”

Having already met the Oklahoma-born Susanna Talley, Clark decided to go to Los Angeles to pursue his songwriting career. “If I didn’t do something about it, it was gonna be too late,” he says. “Susanna said, ‘Man, why don’t you get the fuck out of here and go do what you wanna do?’ I had 100 percent support, and she was painting.”

Working at the Dopyera Brothers’ guitar factory in Long Beach, Clark hustled. “I would make an appointment, jump in the old VW bus, and drive through the smog into L.A. But all I had was a guitar — I didn’t have any tapes,” Clark says. “One day the publisher that I had been seeing called me and said, ‘Look, the president of the company is comin’ in tomorrow’ — this was RCA’s publishing company — ‘and why don’t you come down and play him some songs?’”

Clark passed the audition. He came with Susanna to Nashville in 1971. The only people he knew in town were Mickey Newbury and Townes Van Zandt. He and Susanna were married the following year, on Newbury’s houseboat, and Clark lived in East Nashville for a while before renting a log cabin on Old Hickory Lake.

The first Clark cuts were by Harold Lee, who did a talking blues about a con man titled “The Old Mother’s Locket Trick,” and by The Everly Brothers, who recorded “A Nickel for

Ballad of Laverne and Captain Flint” is like a Nashville-ized version of Manfred Mann’s Earth Band’s recasting of a Dylan song — only here it’s Clark himself and a band of local session players doing the reconfiguring.

As his career developed, Clark garnered renditions of his songs by such hitmakers as John Conlee, Ricky Skaggs and Kenny Chesney. Perhaps the greatest of all the country versions of his songs is Gary Stewart’s 1977 take on “Broken Hearted People,” in which Stewart’s tortured vibrato gives Clark’s barroom lament an edge of desperation missing in the original.

Clark’s recorded output is consistent, even though there are moments on such later records as *Dublin Blues* where the production becomes obtrusive. Still, *Dublin Blues* contains “Hangin’ Your Life on the Wall,” a song he wrote with Thompson about losing your grip on things. Listen to this, and other of Clark’s finest songs, and you may come away musing upon the precise relationship between seemingly uninflected music and seemingly straightforward words as you immerse yourself in the deep pool of his art. His knife cuts different ways on different days.

Clark’s recent records have their gentle, gnomic side. But the collaboration with Rodney Crowell that closes out *My Favorite Picture of You* is a portrait of a nasty human being who has delusions of artistry and grandeur, all fueled by alcohol and self-pity. Featuring a chromatic blues guitar lick, the song shows aspiring artists how not to be an artist. It’s very easy: Do nothing.

Crowell says “I’ll Show Me” is about “the audacity of vanity,” which sums it up nicely. The result, however, is Clark at his most compelling. As Crowell says, “Guy is a great song actor. He can write a wonderful song, but his delivery of it is very well-acted.”

Even so, for Clark, who will forever be associated with Texas and the Texan genius for self-invention, creating music hasn’t been about assuming a persona.

“It’s easy to invent yourself in Texas,” Clark says. “After the Civil War, there were all these signs on old log cabins that said, ‘Gone to Texas.’ I just tried to be what I was, and I don’t think I invented a persona any more than anyone else does. Certainly not as much as David Allan Coe.”

What about going back to Texas?

“I like Texas — if I ever break even, I’m goin’ back,” he says, a little ruefully. “At this point, I don’t have the energy to move back to Texas. I could do it. I don’t know if it’s money or energy. But if I ever break even, I’m moving back. I’m still in the red with publishers, and I don’t like that, the psychological thing of, I just want to earn every penny I get, and I’m workin’ on it, but I’m not there. That’s something I feel strongly about: I promise you you’re not gonna lose money on me, unless I die or something.”

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## FOR CLARK CREATING MUSIC HASN’T BEEN ABOUT ASSUMING A PERSONA.

the Fiddler” in 1972. The same year, Jerry Jeff Walker turned “L.A. Freeway” into a minor hit single.

But it was Clark’s *Old No. 1* that established him as a post-Outlaw Nashville songwriter. In the year of such singer-songwriter monuments as Joni Mitchell’s *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, Clark’s debut added the playing of Nashville studio players to his snapshots of Texas myth and reality. The artistry of *Old No. 1* sneaks up on you, from the built-in pause that Clark uses in “L.A. Freeway” — an objective correlative to the song’s push-and-pull narrative — to the way “Rita Ballou” works off Clark’s repetition of the word “fool” in different contexts. Meanwhile, “That Old Time Feeling” is chilling — a song for winter days with old cats and steam hissing from radiators.

Clark followed up *Old No. 1* with 1976’s *Texas Cookin’*, which may be his funkiest, easiest album. The clavinet-driven “The