



Guy Clark: Scenes from a songwriting legend

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Clark, who has a new album out, speaks candidly about the music business and his craft.

NASHVILLE -- Master songwriter Guy Clark released *My Favorite Picture of You*, his first studio album in four years, on July 23.

Clark is a Nashville Songwriters Hall of Famer who has been in Nashville since 1971. He and his wife, songwriter and painter Susanna Clark, who died in 2012, were at the center of a Nashville songwriters' scene that included Mickey Newbury, Townes Van Zandt, Rodney Crowell, Billy Joe Shaver and other greats.

Guy Clark is also 71 and a cancer survivor who has thrived in Nashville, not by writing hit songs, but by writing remarkable ones.

His *Desperados Waiting for a Train*, *L.A. Freeway*, *Randall Knife* and *Dublin Blues* are considered among the most eloquent and emotionally compelling songs ever written in Nashville.

Here are some highlights of a recent talk:

Coming to Nashville

"Well, I've been sick and laid up, and my sinuses are driving me crazy. Susanna always said that's the way they got the country sound: singing through their noses, with Nashville allergies. I've had a sinus operation, but it didn't take on me. I'm carrying a heart defibrillator around now.

"Mickey Newbury was the reason I came here. Same for Townes. We wound up in Nashville because of Newbury. I was in Los Angeles, and I got a publishing deal, and the publisher said, 'Where do you want to live?' Susanna and I decided on Nashville because we knew Newbury. When we first got here, we stayed on Mickey's houseboat for, like, three weeks.

"Mickey was a giant help to me. I'd be in the middle of figuring out what to do about song contracts or record contracts. He'd just hand me his Elektra Records contracts and say, 'Here's what mine says.' Being pretty smart, and a lawyer's son, I got the hang of it right quick. The first thing I did was rewrite Mickey's contract in my own handwriting and send it to RCA. They offered me a job instead of a record deal.

"We lived for a while on Chapel Avenue in East Nashville. It was a weird little place. Solid concrete block. It was like a little jail cell or something. Townes stayed with Susanna and me there a lot. He wrote *If I Needed You* in that house. One afternoon, I was (annoyed) at Townes and Susanna over something, and I went off into the front room, picked up a big, 10-penny driving nail and nailed myself in there. Well, that was all fine until I had to pee. Then I couldn't get out. The hammer was big enough to drive that nail, but too small to pull it out. ... It took me all day to get out of there, but I wrote three songs that day: *L.A. Freeway*, *Let Him Roll* and a goofy one I never recorded called *I Can't Make This Flat Pick Work*."

The making of *Desperados*

"I'd get obsessed with stuff. I'd work for days and days, usually making no progress. I couldn't quit until I finally got it right.

Desperados Waiting for a Train was like that. I finished that in an old log cabin we had on Old Hickory Lake. I think I'd always known that was going to be a song. It's about Jack Prigg, a dapper old guy who was so important in my life. My grandmother's boyfriend, you could say. I'd stay with them in Monahans, West Texas. When I was 15 or 16, I had started playing guitar. Jack was big buddies with the guy that owned the pawn shop, and we'd borrow a guitar from him. We'd sit around the kitchen in my grandmother's hotel, and he'd get these big tears and say, 'Can you play the *Red River Valley*? That was his favorite."

The Waltzing Fool

"Lyle Lovett is a real intelligent, well-educated gentleman. He knocked me out the first time I heard him. A friend of mine left Lyle's tape in my office, and one afternoon I listened and then I just could not put it down. There was enough material on that tape for two albums, and it was all good. After that, everybody that walked into my office had to listen to Lyle's tape. It was, 'Yeah, I've got a hit song for you, but, first, listen to this!' One day I was walking across the street, and (record executive) Tony Brown was sitting outside of a restaurant in the courtyard. I said, 'Tony, I've got something you've got to hear. Wait right here.' I went back to my office, got a copy of that tape for Tony, and the next thing I knew, Lyle had a record deal.

"My favorite song on Lyle's tape was *The Waltzing Fool*. I liked the rest of them, too, but 'The Waltzing Fool' just stuck in my head. There was something so charming and so Texas and so elegant in the writing of that song. Last year, ASCAP was giving Lyle a big award, and he asked if I would do a song of his at the awards. This was when I was in the middle of recording this album, *My Favorite Picture of You*. I worked up *The Waltzing Fool*, did it at the awards, and then the next morning we went into the studio and recorded it."

Putting his foot down

"When I got my first record deal, with RCA, I made a whole record with the producer they assigned to me, and by the end of it I said, 'Man, if you put this record out, I will change my name.'

I will not be associated.' Rodney (Crowell) heard what was happening, heard the record and said, 'Guy, this ain't you. Let me help you, and we'll get another budget, go into the studio with Neil Wilburn and beg, borrow and steal pickers and studio time until we get something you can live with.

"This was not an easy decision to make. I had no power, other than to put my foot down and scream, which was what I did. ...Rodney and I and Neil Wilburn stole the master tapes out of the vault at RCA, went to some studio, remixed and overdubbed some things and cut some things and recorded some new things, and there it was: *Old No. 1*. When we were done, you really couldn't argue with it. They were great songs. Playboy magazine reviewed mine in the same issue as Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger*. My review was better than his. Willie recovered."

Through sickness

"It was really nice to get this new record done. I was really sick when I was doing it, the whole time. I was barely making it into the studio, and thinking I might have to re-record all those vocals. But it wound up that the vocals have a certain character to them, a gravity that I really like. I've always been trying to get to that, and I guess I never was sick enough to get it."

Like yesterday

"I didn't want to be a publisher. ... Didn't want to have my own record company. I just wanted to write songs and play them for folks. That's what I do, and what I did. Anytime you tried to spread that out, it seemed to me you were in some deep (trouble). That's just common sense.

"People come up and say, 'What was it like back then?' Well, how would I know? I was (messed) up. I don't remember. Things change, and you've got to be true to yourself. You've got to do the work. But when someone asks what that was like ... it was like yesterday."