



Guy Clark Returns With Some of His Finest Work Ever

My Favorite Picture of You Underscores a Lifetime of Excellence

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To say that [Guy Clark](#) is a no-nonsense person is an understatement.

Many who come into contact with him detect a gruff demeanor, but any awe or possible intimidation they feel most likely stems from the power of the songs he's written, including "Desperados Waiting for a Train," "L.A. Freeway," "The Randall Knife," "Texas 1947," "Like a Coat From the Cold" and "The Last Gunfighter Ballad."

He's even enjoyed success in mainstream country, writing "Heartbroke" (a No. 1 for [Ricky Skaggs](#) in 1982) and co-writing "She's Crazy for Leavin'" (No. 1 for [Rodney Crowell](#) in 1988).

Clark is a songwriter, but by today's standards, he's much more than that. He's a true artist who continues to impress his peers while attracting and influencing younger songwriters. At age 71, he still seems uncomfortable receiving praise, but he's learned how to deal with it.

The title song of his new album *My Favorite Picture of You* was inspired by a decades old snapshot of Susanna, his wife and greatest supporter, glaring into the camera in anger. The photo, which appears on the album cover, was taken after she walked out of a house where she found him and songwriter [Townes Van Zandt](#), as Clark has described it,

"just drunk on our asses, jerks. And she'd had enough. She walked out that front door."

Clark's wife died in June 2012. A few months later, his performance of "My Favorite Picture of You" proved to be one of the most emotionally moving moments at the Americana Honors and Awards show at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium.

During a recent interview with **CMT**, Clark talked briefly about his wilder days before delving into a conversation about his latest music, his constant feeling that he's losing his creative spark and his love of building guitars.

CMT.com: "My Favorite Picture of You" is about the encounter where Susanna was fed up with finding you drunk with Townes. That didn't happen very often, did it?

Clark: Nah. (laughs) Just once.

There are a lot of stories about you and Townes hanging out together. How wild was it? Have these stories been exaggerated?

Oh, I'm *sure* they have.

When I saw the title of "Cornmeal Waltz," the album's first track, I wasn't sure what to expect. I grew up in Texas and Louisiana, but the imagery of those local dance halls was something I hadn't thought about in years.

Oh, yeah. That'll always be part of Texas, you know. It's like a family thing. Everybody goes out there. It's not just young kids going to dance. It's all ages going out there and whoopin' it up.

Those weren't just a place to dance and listen to music. They were a gathering place for the entire community.

Yeah, that's exactly what it was. It still is, to a certain, extent around the Hill Country, especially. That tradition just carries on because there's so much of the Czech and German people there. They just won't let it go.

"Hell Bent on a Heartache" includes the line, "I should know better but I guess I don't." How has life affected you as far as coming to terms with realizing there are things you should know about but still can't control?

The sooner you learn you can't control it, the better off you are. You've just gotta let it go and try to come out on top, I guess. I don't know. It's always a crapshoot.

You've said "El Coyote" and "Heroes" weren't intended as political songs, but the topics about illegal immigration and the plight of military veterans do offer sharp social commentary about the realities some people face today.

"El Coyote" is based on true stuff. I read a couple of newspaper articles or maybe saw it on the news. One of those guys had a big truck. On the other side of the border, he loaded up with ... the workers, charging \$1,100 apiece -- guaranteed to get you across

the border. They'd save up all the money they could their whole lives, give this guy \$1,100 apiece to get them across the border -- guaranteed, no problems. So they got across the border, and he opened the back of the truck and turned them all in to the border patrol for \$1,100 apiece. That's just cold, man.

What about "Heroes"?

It's the same way. There are more young kids coming back from the Middle East who kill themselves than ever has been in any war the United States has been in. That includes Vietnam, World War II, anything. Anytime the American army has been anywhere, there are more kids coming back and killing themselves in whatever you want to call it -- a war or a conflict. It's just mind blowing to me. It's like, "How can they let that happen? What the hell is going on?" It just breaks my heart.

Your voice sounds very strong on the new album.

I felt just like I did today -- rough and ragged. Chris Latham, the engineer, has some sort of potion. I felt sure I was going to have to go back in and re-sing every one.

Your new songs on the album are among the best you've ever written. Has your approach to writing changed through the years?

Yeah, I just try to do the best I can, you know. Throwing stuff away. Just doing it half-assed. Sometimes I have more luck at it than not. ... Just stick with it till you get something that sounds right -- that *is* right.

Younger songwriters are drawn to you. One of them said you gave them the best advice about writing when you told him, "You have to be willing to show your ass." Does that advice sound familiar?

Yeah, it does. I guess you kind of have to ... what am I trying to say? Well, that pretty much says it. Don't try to be careful. Go ahead and do you best and let it fall wherever it falls. I mean, you just have to go for it.

It seems like most songwriters go through a really productive period where they're coming up with great songs and then sometimes lose their creative spark. Have you ever felt like that was happening to you?

Oh, yeah. Every day. Every day.

How do you overcome it?

Whiskey, drugs, more sleep. (laughs)

What's an average day in your life like these days?

I've been kind of under the weather, actually. I've had both knees replaced and had another surgery on my leg. God, I can't remember it all.

Are you still building guitars?

Part of the knee problem is that I haven't been able to stand at my work bench for a couple of years because of the surgeries. You know, just getting old. I haven't packed up all my stuff yet, so I'll probably build some more.

How many have you built?

I started about 10 years ago, and I've only built 14.

Have you kept them or given them to friends.

Both. I don't sell them. I don't want to sell them and be in the guitar-building business. It's horrible. You can't make a living doing that.

Even if you're charging \$3,000 or \$4,000 for a guitar, it almost amounts to minimum wage.

Oh, yeah. You have to charge about \$10,000 for a guitar. I've given some away to friends, but I've got most of them.

Other than the knee surgery, how's your health otherwise?

Terrible. (laughs) It finally caught up with me. Oh, I've got some irregular heartbeat shit going on, so I'm having to be careful -- quit smoking, quit drinking coffee.

Cutting out coffee is probably worse than not drinking Jack Daniel's.

Boy, no shit. I quit drinking five or six years ago. I haven't been drinking whiskey for a long time.

As you've aged and gone through health problems, does "Desperados Waiting for a Train" have a different meaning to you?

Oh, I never thought about that. I guess it does. Well, I don't know. Probably not.

One of the great things about the songs you've written is that you always leave room for listeners to put themselves into the situation and interpret things in their own way.

That's kind of what I try to do -- to allow people to put themselves into it. That way, they can connect with the song. It's what I'm trying to do, anyway.