

Oct. 15, 1989-----

Texas singer-songwriter **Guy Clark** tiptoes through his past like a cat burglar in a china shop. His songs are clear snifters of where he has been, toasting the debutantes, drifters and drillers he met along the Texas Gulf Coast.

Clark's songs have been covered by Jerry Jeff Walker ("Desperados Waiting for a Train,"), Rodney Crowell ("She's Crazy for Leavin' "), Ricky Skaggs ("Heartbroke") and Johnny Cash, who had a country hit with **Clark**'s "Texas - 1947."

A textbook example of **Clark**'s detailed country imagery is "Texas - 1947" (from his 1975 "Old No. 1" LP). In the song, he recalls being 6 years old and waiting for steamliners at the train station in his native Monahans, Texas. In his gruff 'n' rough baritone, **Clark** sings:

"And us kids put our ears to the rails to hear 'em pop/So we already knowed it when he finally said "train time./And you'd of thought that Jesus Christ hisself was a-rollin' down the line....

. . . Cause things got real quiet and mama jerked me back/But not before I'd got the chance to lay a nickel on the track.

You can almost feel the train a-comin'.

"That kind of detail comes real easy to me," **Clark** said in a recent interview during a stopover in Chicago. "The particular scene in that song is something I've never forgotten - the big rush of excitement through this little west Texas town, being gathered up and taken down to the

depot. My best friend's dad worked at the depot and we hung out there all the time. It was a big deal. It's funny. After I wrote that song, I asked my parents about it, and they didn't remember it at all. I like drawing on those things. I'll sit in a room by myself, stare out the window and go into this Alpha state. I'm just daydreaming about incidents like that."

As a younger daydreamer, **Clark** was drawn to the cultural influences of west Texas, wide-open land where it takes 10 acres to run one calf. He heard country music, rhythm and blues (his first 45 was Little Willie John's "Fever" backed with "All Around the World"), Cajun music and the European polka influences of the Germans and Czechs who settled in Texas. However, **Clark** didn't pick up his first guitar until he was 16, when his father's law partner introduced him to Mexican mariachi music.

Clark spent more of his pre-teen time working with his hands, developing interests in carpentry and painting, avocations he still pursues today. The cover of his latest album, "Old Friends" is a brooding self-portrait, and during the mid-1960s **Clark** worked as a television art director for the CBS affiliate in Houston. In the 1970s, he worked in a dobro factory in Long Beach, Calif.

"The first thing you got when you were a kid in West Texas was a pocketknife," **Clark** recalled. "You'd learn how to whittle and make toys or whatever. It's always been a source of enjoyment for me. Then, when I was a kid in high school, I worked in the shipyards in South Texas with the last **guys** who built shrimp boats out of wood. And that was an inspiration as far as learning how to do things right."

Clark later learned that the same qualities necessary for shipbuilding applied to songwriting as well. Craftsmanship became a shared discipline between carpentry, painting and songwriting.

"I made sure I didn't have any loose ends or dangling participles," he said. "I kind of approach writing songs, painting or working on my house as, if you're going to do

something, do it right. Then you won't have to do it twice. But drawing and painting are more natural for me than songwriting, and that's probably what I should be doing.

"Writing is a real cerebral experience. Painting is real hand-to-eye coordination. One kind of frees up the other. Sometimes I set up a situation to write in where I'm sitting at the desk writing and looking out the window and I have another table where I'm building a model airplane."

Clark then nodded to a small table in his hotel room. He said, "I just turn around and do this," and pretended to begin work on a model airplane. "It frees your head from that deal (songwriting) and then you can go back to it. Painting does that, too. It's a totally different discipline, but it still involves craftsmanship."

The discipline carries through in **Clark**'s persona. Sentences are constructed of economy and integrity, while his piercing blue eyes and long black and silver hair accent a texture of Texas individualism.

What you see is what you get, and because of that, **Clark** has learned to leave room for creative interpretation in art and in song.

"It's what you leave out that allows people's imagination to work," he said. "I'm a lot better at it in painting than I am in writing. Sometimes I tend to write too much detail. If you give 'em just enough to see it in their own head and their own way, it gets 'em involved in it. It's the same with painting. A lot of times, what you don't say is the key to it and it's also certainly true with great guitar players.

How important is the art of storytelling to a songwriter?

"That's something I never thought about," **Clark** said. "I don't have a plot laid out for my songs. They evolve as you go along. Sometimes they'll take really strange turns that surprise me, and I kind of like that. I've been trying to write this song about my grandmother, who came from

Kentucky in a covered wagon to the Indian territory in Texas when she was 12 years old. Before she died, she saw men walk on the moon on television. I thought that was a pretty far out life-span. I had been trying to write it, and finally one day I hit this hot streak. By the time I got through, I realized the song was about her older brother, who stayed behind in Kentucky. I had to go with that. I have yet to write the other song."

At age 47, **Clark** is beginning to enjoy recognition. Singer-songwriters Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith and Michelle Shocked (she has called him "God **Clark**") have been championing **Clark** since their commercial breakthroughs, and the success of Rodney Crowell also has raised **Clark's** profile.

Clark has known Crowell since 1972, when they both arrived in Nashville and began hanging out a beer 'n' burger joint called Bishop's Pub. Last fall Crowell said **Clark** and Townes Van Zandt were the most influential writers for him when he was younger. He said, "I was fortunate in having always been around songs, as well as getting around some real craftsmen at a real impressionable period."

Clark had flown into Chicago after appearing in Crowell's upcoming music video, which was shot in New Mexico. Crowell's album will include a song called "I Guess We've Been Together for Too Long" that **Clark** and Crowell co-wrote five years ago.

This success accompanies **Clark's** minimalist "Old Friends" record, which was released earlier this year. It is **Clark's** first album since 1983, and the project reveals more emotional editing and streamlined production than his previous works. It was recorded on a mere eight tracks in the basement of his SBK Songs publishing company on Music Row in Nashville.

"I started out as a folk singer," he said. "That's the school I come from. I made those other five records in Nashville with big production and somebody else producing

the records. To be honest, I don't like any of those records. The songs are fine, but as far as the presentation of them and my performance, I can't listen to them.

"I always wanted to make a record that I was responsible for, rather than letting someone else do it and being pissed off about it later. I wanted something very simple and very acoustic without drums. That's how I started playing music and how I envisioned a record of mine would sound. To do that, I had to do it myself." That's how they've always done it along the Texas Gulf Coast, and that's something **Guy Clark** never forgets.