

Desperado waits for his big break

Guy Clark plays life his own way

By Bruce Nixon
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GUY CLARK is that peculiar creature only Nashville seems to produce. An extremely charismatic performer who also writes remarkable songs, Clark has conducted a tentative solo career, becoming one of country music's pre-eminent songwriters along the way.

Anywhere else, he'd be a star. As it is, he's back on the road again, playing clubs and awaiting, in another few weeks, the release of his first new record in, oh, four or five years. Maybe this one will make the difference.

"Well, I sure hope so," Clark said during a recent interview. Although he seems to have accepted the situation, at least for the moment, the chuckle that accompanied the remark clearly was intended to be taken as philosophical commentary.

"That would be marvelous, because I think the audience is there. I really do, although I've never tailored what I do to get airplay or sales. It doesn't appeal to me to do that, even though I don't really have an artistic chip on my shoulder about it. The quality of work is enough to strive for, believe me."

Clark, who will appear with his old friend Townes Van Zandt at the Palms Saturday night, has been one of Nashville's hippest writers for years — Ricky Skaggs, Emmylou Harris, various members of the Cash family and others have used Clark's tunes, turning such songs as "Heartbroke," "She's Crazy for Leavin'," "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train" and "L.A. Freeway" into country standards. But, Clark says, he doesn't tailor his songs for them, either — he just takes his tunes out on the road and lets other performers pick and chose from among them as they please.

"I see myself as a singer-songwriter," he said, "even if nobody else does. As far as I'm concerned, the two things are symbiotic, and I don't try to separate 'em. Basically, I write to play for the folks, but

there's nothing for the folks if I'm not writing. That's the whole process right there. When I get through with something, I go play it on the road for two weeks and see how good it really is."

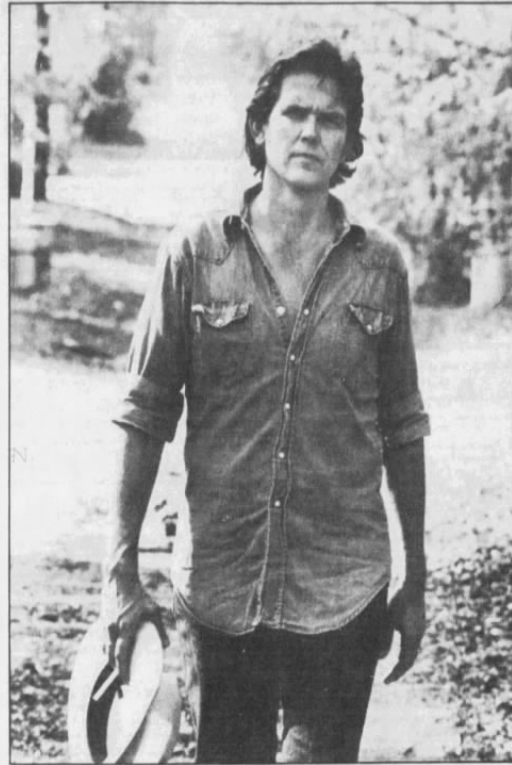
ALTHOUGH CLARK was often associated with the progressive country scene in Texas during the mid-'70s, his emergence seems concurrent to it and not really dependent upon it. He did grow up in West Texas — it provides the background, inspiration and imaginative landscape for much of his music — and played in Austin, but he never actually lived there. He went to Los Angeles early on, and, quickly disenchanted with the country-rock scene there, had moved to Nashville by the time Waylon and Willie had become hot property.

And now, with another decade gone by, Clark's clearly closer to other folk-based Texas songwriters — Van Zandt, Mickey Newbury, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Gilmore — than he is to the glitzy careers of progressive country's biggest stars.

The Texas songwriters share a certain approach, even though Clark's tunes may be among the most accessible to a wide variety of performers. To one degree or another, they all possess a special quality of lyricism, a poetic feel for the underside of life. They look out on the world with great compassion, and give meaning and dignity to the misused, the forgotten and the overlooked, and to the small feelings and the fragile moments.

A lot of the Texas songwriters share a deep sense of community, and it probably comes from growing up in place where post-War prosperity arrived slowly, and where old traditions of narrative country music and Western Swing held fast against the rising tide of rock 'n' roll and pop music.

"There's a real independence of spirit in the live-and-let-live attitude you see down there," he said. "People respect each other's space, and each other's opinions. I get



Singer/songwriter Guy Clark, whose country songs became hits for Emmylou Harris and Ricky Skaggs, will perform with Townes Van Zandt at the Palms Playhouse Saturday night.

asked about this a lot, and I'm not really sure what it is, although I know it's there. Texas has been a wellspring for songwriters, but I'm probably too close to it to really understand it all."

IN ANY case, the new record sounds like a return to the sources of Clark's music. After label-hopping a number of times during the past decade, Clark's now with Sugar Hill, the country label that launched Ricky Skaggs, and the album will be distributed in the British Isles by Mother, U2's label. Seems that band members have been Clark fans for a while.

"It's been a long time since the last one," Clark said, "but I kind of

had to sit back and regroup about what I wanted to do. The album's real acoustic, very laid back, a real songwriter's album.

"I've never made records that I was entirely responsible for — I'd just go along with whatever the record company wanted — and they weren't bad records, just not exactly the way I would have thought 'em through and done 'em. This time, I produced it myself, and I learned a lot. It's very spare and very simple, but I decided I had to do it, and it has a nice living room feel that I really like."

GUY CLARK and Townes Van Zandt perform at 8 p.m. Saturday night at the Palms in Davis. Tickets are \$8.50. For information: 756-9901.