

Guy Clark's workshop is a magical place, crammed with wood and tools, photographs of friends and heroes like Townes Van Zandt, and a very versatile workbench. With a swivel of his chair and a pivot of the mind, Clark can switch from working with his hands and his left brain on a guitar to working with his heart and right brain on a song.

Just recently, Clark finished another album of songs and another guitar, and it will come as no surprise to those who know his work that both are carefully built things of resonant beauty. The guitar, the tenth of Clark's recently revived instrument building passion, is modeled after a favorite Martin steel-string. The CD, by fitting coincidence, is the tenth studio album released by one of the most respected songwriters in the world, the man who gave us "L.A. Freeway," "Desperados Waiting For a Train," and "The Randall Knife," among many others. Guy Clark albums, like Guy Clark guitars, do not emerge every day, and they are always worth the wait.

As with his previous recordings, Clark approached the album that would become *Workbench Songs* with a clutch of songs he deemed ready for exposure, not a master plan or a concept. "I guess the common thread that runs through them is me – the way they come out. And that's it. There's no subliminal connection between them," he says.

If there has been any departure or new theme emerging from Clark's oeuvre in recent years, it's been his relatively recent enthusiasm for co-writing. *Workbench Songs* features tracks written with old friends like Rodney Crowell, Steve Nelson, Verlon Thompson, Gary Nicholson, Lee Roy Parnell, and Darrell Scott.

"I used to write by myself all the time. And I still like doing it," Clark says. "But I find one thing that comes out of co-writing is you have to say the words out loud in the air. It has to become aural. You can sit here all day and mumble lyrics to yourself and think, 'Oh man that's great.' But the minute you say them out loud and hear them on your eardrums it's like 'Oh...' It cuts out a lot of bullshit of just sitting there fooling yourself for two or three days."

Few writers are as deliberate about their words as Clark, the very personification of the Texas songwriting tradition. Born in the small western town of Monahans, Clark began his music career in Houston folk clubs, where he met lifelong friends and colleagues like Townes Van Zandt. A stint in California ended in the disillusion so famously captured in "L.A. Freeway," and in 1971, Guy and wife Susanna settled in Nashville. When his first album, "Old No. 1" appeared in 1975, Clark's stature was solidified on the strength of songs like "That Old Time Feeling" and "Texas, 1947."

Clark became better known for his songs than his LPs, and over the years he watched as some of American music's most respected artists covered his songs, including Ricky Skaggs ("Heartbroke"), Johnny Cash ("Let Him Roll"), Jerry Jeff Walker ("Like A Coat From The Cold"), Bobby Bare ("New Cut Road"), and Rodney Crowell ("She's Crazy for Leaving"). These interpretive tributes more than made up for superstardom Clark never really craved anyway.

Now *Workbench Songs* adds to the catalog with compositions that mingle astute observation of the human condition with wry Texas wisdom. "Out In The Parking Lot," co-written with Darrell Scott, has become a crowd favorite in recent years. Clark released it once before on his live *Keepers* album of 1997, but in retrospect he says it was then "too new to commit to tape." The current version vividly captures a scene outside a bar in Anytown, USA that nearly anyone will recognize.

The album's lead off track "Walkin' Man" was a demo recording that earned its way onto the finished album with an unmatched vibe. It's homage to searchers, pilgrims

and leaders like Gandhi and Woody Guthrie that urges anybody who will listen to walk the walk themselves. That flows seamlessly into "Magdelene," which Clark calls "just a little impressionist painting" co-written with friend Ray Stephenson. The track about a man pleading with a woman to run away to Mexico with him floats on the airy background vocals of Morgan Hayes.

"Funny Bone" shouldn't have worked. Stephenson came over one day with an idea to write a song about a rodeo clown. Clark's first reaction was, "Well, that's been written -- several times," he recalls with a skeptical twinkle in his eye. "And he just kept pushing me with it and I kept going. I didn't realize how good a song it was until he'd gone and a week or two went by."

With longtime sideman Verlon Thompson, Clark co-wrote "Tornado Time," a semi-comic picture of nature's wrath and "Analog Girl," a brisk little commentary on trying to keep it real in a digital world. He and Thompson close the album with a spontaneous home recording of the traditional "Diamond Joe" set only to guitar and mandolin.

And there's more: a rollicking ode to intoxication called "Worry Be Gone," co-penned with Gary Nicholson and Lee Roy Parnell, the exquisite Townes Van Zandt song "No Lonesome Tune," and a collaboration with BR549 leader Chuck Mead that paints a picture of Mexicans visiting Graceland in "Cinco de Mayo in Memphis."

The sound, it goes without saying, lays back, seducing a listener with integrity and timing rather than bombast. That's thanks to the sensitive rhythm section of Bryn Bright on bass and studio vet Eddie Bayers on drums. The guitars and mandolins are in the capable hands of Shawn Camp, Jamie Hartford and Verlon Thompson. With elements like those pickers and these songs, it would have been pretty hard for things to go wrong. And sure enough, Workbench Songs holds together with precise angles, tight joints, and strong bracing – very much like a hand-made guitar.