

# BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO GUY CLARK

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*Guy Clark with producer Rodney Crowell and band working on the Better Days album in 1983.*

## LIVING ONE WORD TO THE NEXT, ONE LINE AT A TIME, THERE IS MORE TO LIFE THAN WHISKEY, THERE'S MORE TO WORDS THAN RHYME

Guy Clark and Susanna Talley eased into Nashville on a rainy November night in 1971. Guy had driven his rusted junker of a '63 Volkswagen bus from Houston to Los Angeles back to Houston and now to Tennessee. It was loaded with everything they owned: a few clothes and dishes, a guitar, Susanna's paintings, and all the tools and parts needed to fix the damn thing if it broke down in the desert.

For once there was a little money in Guy's wallet. He had just signed his first publishing deal as a songwriter. The beat up leather also held a scrap from a burger sack with a partial lyric that read: "If I could just get off of this L.A. Freeway without getting killed or caught."

Guy often says that Nashville in the '70s was like Paris in the '20s. And if that is the case, Guy and Susanna were the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald of Nashville. The Clarks would come to shape the folk and singer-songwriter scene in Music City much like the Fitzgeralds fashioned the jazz age.

By the time Guy and Susanna arrived in Tennessee, Willie Nelson had moved back to Austin and banded the hippies and rednecks together with his rowdy mix of country and rock n' roll. Kris Kristofferson's star skyrocketed in Hollywood. Earlier that year Janis Joplin's hit of Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee" and Sammi Smith's version of "Help Me Make It Through The Night" were at the top of

the *Billboard* Hot 100 Chart.

Kristofferson graced the cover of *Look Magazine's* country music special with the headline: *Kris Kristofferson, First Superstar of the New Country Music*. Only a year before, in the fall of 1970, a stoned Kristofferson stumbled on his way to the stage to accept the Country Music Association Song of the Year award for "Sunday Morning Coming Down."

There was a new Music City brewing underground. Outlaw songwriters were bubbling up into the mainstream and Guy was about to become a lion in this modern breed of Nashville Cat.

Pack up all your dishes/Make note of all good wishes  
Say goodbye to the landlord for me/That sumbitch has always bored me  
Throw out them L.A. papers/And that moldy box of vanilla wafers  
Adios to all this concrete/Gonna get me some dirt road back street  
If I could just get off of this L.A. freeway  
Without getting killed or caught  
I'd be down the road in a cloud of smoke to some land I ain't bought.



(Photo at right — Jack Prigg holds infant  
Guy Clark outside the Clark Hotel in  
Monahans, Texas, 1942)

## THE REAL DESPERADO

When Guy's dad, Ellis, joined the Army during WWII, Guy and his mother Frances lived at the Clark Hotel with Guy's paternal grandmother, Rossie, and her wildcatter boyfriend, Jack Prigg.

"Jack was a great painter of pictures and teller of stories; but, of course, you never know whether to believe him or not. He thought it was the funniest thing in the world to tell somebody a big one and they'd believe it," Frances Clark said. "From the time I got Guy home from the hospital Jack would come in to see him everyday. Here's this little scrap lying in his crib looking around and Jack leaning over petting him, grabbing his toes. 'Well, hello, little Jack.' The first time Guy went out with Jack, Ellis's mother and I came back to the hotel and Jack and Guy were gone. She was about to have a fit. When they finally came back, she was just raising hell with Jack. 'Where have you been with the baby?' Jack said, 'Well, I wanted him to see the drilling rig.' What he wanted to do was to take Guy out there and show him off to the crew. Jack Prigg was the nearest thing to a grandfather my children ever had. Jack took it upon himself to take Guy for haircuts and all that kind of stuff. He took him to the barbershop and the cowboy movies and the wading pool."

**I'd play the Red River Valley  
And he'd sit in the kitchen and cry  
Run his fingers through seventy  
years of livin'  
And wonder, "Lord, has every well  
I've drilled run dry?  
We were friends  
Me and this old man  
Like Desperados waiting for a train  
Like Desperados waiting for a train  
He's a drifter and a driller of oil  
wells  
An old school man of the world  
He let me drive his car  
When he's too drunk to  
And he'd wink and give me money  
for the girls**



## HIGHWAY 80 CROSS THE TEXAS SAND, MAKES A LITTLE STOP CALLED MONAHANS

Guy Charles Clark was born in Monahans, Texas on November 6, 1941. Although bleak and monochromatic, there is still something irresistible about Monahans. It still feels like the old West here, and one can easily recognize how the town and its characters, including Guy's own family, so profoundly influenced the narratives of songs including "Desperados Waiting For A Train," "New Cut Road," Texas 1947," "Rita Ballou," "Lone Star Hotel," and "Crystelle."

"Texas has always had that distinct valor," Guy says. "You know, it's where Davy Crockett and Sam Houston went from Tennessee. People from all over the south hammered signs on their doors that said G.T.T., Gone to Texas. Whenever someone would go bust or had enough of where they were living, they'd put a sign on the door and head to Texas. Romantic notions about Texas have been going on since Coronado and the seven cities of gold. It's hardscrabble land but it has that independent spirit about it. In first grade, all school kids in Texas get a comic book that's covered like a Texas flag with drawings and cartoons of the history of Texas and you'd carry that book with you everywhere."

Cloaked behind a pretty face, warm demeanor and a prosthetic leg, Rossie Clark was a tough broad. By the time she was 30 years old in 1926, she had endured a brutal childhood leg amputation on the family's kitchen table, demoralizing poverty during the great depression, and a taxing life as a single mother in the hot West Texas dust bowl.

During prohibition, Rossie hid her illicit whiskey outside the back of Clark's Lunch in a rusty water meter box buried in the sand. Legend has it that the hard-nosed local sheriff, Irby Dyer, had a soft spot for Rossie. Dyer had a dependable reputation for busting bootleggers and bank robbers but most of the time he kept his deputies away from Rossie and turned a blind eye to her undercover liquor business.

Although, there was that time Rossie served pitchers of gin and whiskey at a local dance. Dyer and his deputies raided the party. As Rossie was pouring the liquor down the sink with running water, Dyer attempted to put the plug in the sink to keep the evidence while Rossie fought him off. They both ended up drenched in whiskey and water. In the end, there was no proof for the beleaguered sheriff. \*\*\*

# THE SOUTH COAST OF TEXAS IS A THIN SLICE OF LIFE

It's easy to see why Ellis Clark picked Rockport as the place to raise his young family after he finished law school. The sleepy fishing village on the south coast of Texas is a far cry from the heat and dust of West Texas. The first time Ellis came to Rockport, he spotted a dog lying on a road that split around a windswept oak tree. He said to his family: "A town where they build roads around the trees and a dog can safely lie on the street is the place I want to live."

The Clark family settled into the routine of small town life on the Texas coast. The post-WWII 1950s was a time of American prosperity and "Leave It To Beaver" wholesomeness. Guy was a clean-cut, all American boy from a solid, middle-class family. Ellis and Frances Clark ascended to positions of influence in the community.

Ellis joined the Lions Club and cooked for the annual July fourth Lions Barbecue party. He gave law advice to the local fisherman in exchange for the day's catch and advised local government on town matters. Frances hosted extravagant parties, loved doing it and invited everyone. She cared deeply about appearances, craved attention and longed for respect and admiration. To Frances, raising enlightened and accomplished children with good manners was paramount. She immersed herself in arts and culture and encouraged the children to do the same.

*The Rockport Pilot* reported the comings and goings of the family. The Clarks hosted a New Year's Day in 1957 party for 150 guests to show off their new home at 305 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Fulton. The same year, Guy read poetry for the Invitational Speech Tournament and won a prize at the science fair for his hydrogen generator. He joined the Explorer's club and the Boy Scout Troup 49.

When Sputnik orbited the earth on October 4, 1957, Guy and his classmates watched from a pep rally in downtown Rockport. Right after his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Guy joined the Fulton Volunteer Fire Department. All the Clark kids participated in the Christmas pageant at church. Guy blossomed into a leader, was popular with his classmates, and strived to be the best in all that he pursued. As captain and center, Guy led the football team. He played guard in basketball, ran the 100-yard dash and threw discus in track and field. He presided over the junior class as president, acted in school plays, and took piano lessons from Tilly Fry. Guy illustrated section pages for the yearbook with quoted passages from poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, George Wither and Walt Whitman.

In the fall of 1958, Ellis took on a young law partner named Lola Bonner. At a party at the Clark home, Lola played Flamenco guitar and sang Mexican songs. Guy had never seen anything like it and he was hooked. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and made a profound impact on Guy's life. Guy learned his first chords on the guitar in the garage apartment that Lola rented from Dean Steele at 1109 North Broadway.

Lola took Guy to gatherings at George and Gloria Hill's beach house on Water Street where her friends would pass the guitar around and trade songs.

"I was just captivated by it," Guy says. "Hondo Crouch, the founder of Luckenbach, was there along with his sister. There were rich doctors and lawyers from the Hill Country and Houston. They were singing mostly old cowboy songs. It was far out. After that I went and bought a Mexican guitar and asked Lola to show me how to play it. I was hungry." \*\*\*



## BOATS TO BUILD

Working in Rob Roy Rice's shipyard left an indelible print on Guy's life as a songwriter and guitar builder. During World War II, the shipyard built mine sweepers and big wooden PT boats. It was set up with machinery from the 1930s—giant band saws, planers and industrial sized woodworking equipment. The 70-year-old Rice had been trying to sell the place since 1957, not wanting to make expensive repairs to the old equipment and wishing to get out of the business to retire. Good thing for Guy Clark that Rice was unable to sell as it gave Guy three summers to work for Rice, scrubbing the algae from the bottom of shrimp boats and helping the carpenters.

"It influenced me as much as anything I've been through in my life," Guy says. "I really got on with the carpenters. Boats are built square with the world and watching them build a 70-80 foot wooden shrimp boat out of the water was fascinating to me."

**I'm gonna build me a boat  
With these two hands  
It'll be a fair curve  
From a noble plan  
Let the chips fall where they will  
Cause I've got boats to build  
\*\*\***





## TOWNES VAN ZANDT

Peter Gardner, half of the New York folk duo The Gardners, with his ex-wife Isabelle, remarried, moved back to Texas, and hosted a folk radio show on KHOU, University of Houston's radio station. Once a week, Gardner recorded the show at the home he shared with his new wife. It became an important open mic night for folksingers.

Guy remembers meeting Townes Van Zandt for the first time at the Gardner's house. The friendship was immediate. Guy heard Van Zandt sing a couple of songs and knew that this was someone he wanted to be around.

"Townes was complicated," first wife Fran Lohr says. "When he was sober, you never met a kinder, more affectionate, more loving person. He wore his heart in his songs. He wrote 'I'll Be Here In The Morning' right after we found out Townes couldn't join the service because of his psychiatric treatments. Townes always needed something to hold on to. I always felt like his relationship with Guy was so strong because Guy was stronger than him."

"Townes was bound and determined to have the blues," Guy says. One of the first songs he wrote was 'Waitin' Around to Die.' I heard that and it was one of the main reasons I started writing. It was so literate, you know, and yet music. I can't be Townes, but I can write using the same approach, the same the care and respect Townes took with writing. You never get over the fact that you can't beat Townes, but you can aspire to the same quality of work in your own humbled and whispered way." \*\*\*

## ALL WE ARE IS WHAT WE'VE BEEN, I THINK ABOUT FANNIN STREET NOW AND AGAIN

The mid 1960s marked a period of upheaval in the country and Houston, Texas was no exception. The war babies appeared as architects of the counter culture, with new ideas and philosophies about civil rights and freedom. Some of them, including Guy Clark, struggled between the idealized version of America cultivated by parents and the new reality of the fight for civil rights and rebellious attitude about the war in Vietnam. The Montrose district in Houston was a center for the burgeoning counter culture movement and folksingers came together at the scene.

By 1964, 22-year-old Guy Clark was trying to figure out where he belonged and what he wanted to do. Bob Dylan released his third studio album that year, *The Times They Are a Changin'*, and the title track could have been Guy's theme song. To Guy, Dylan was a descendent of the beat poets he loved. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* was one of Guy's favorite books and Bob Dylan was putting that kind of poetry to music.

Dick Clark and *American Bandstand* moved from Philadelphia to the ABC Television Center in Los Angeles. Season seven included performances by the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, Fabian, Little Richard, Johnny Rivers, Dusty Springfield, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, and tributes to the Beatles and Elvis Presley. But it was the short lived ABC variety show *Hootenanny*, hosted by Jack Linkletter and featuring performances by The Journeymen, The Limelitters, the Chad Mitchell Trio, Judy Collins, and Johnny Cash that was a reflection of, and influence on, what was happening in Guy's Houston circle.

Traditionally, the Houston Folklore Society, lead by folk historian

John Avery Lomax, Jr., hosted open hootenannies once a month. By the mid sixties there was a push to do more. They added a "hoot" to one of the bi-monthly Tuesday meetings at Linkwood Park Community House in addition to regular hoots on Sundays, which were often in partnership with the Jewish Community Center. Along with the skinny young white kids, bluesmen Mance Lipscomb and Lightnin' Sam Hopkins often played the Sunday hoots. The Houston Folklore Society proudly declared the word "hootenanny" was coined by Texas Jim Lewis, a 1930s era entertainer, and said that Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger learned the term from Lewis.

"John Lomax was always at Herman Park and we'd sit around in the summertime, just twenty or thirty people in circles singing songs," Guy says. "He didn't play any instrument, he would just stand up there and sing a cappella. Or he had one little act where he would do a prison work song and bring a fucking log with him and an ax and sing while he was chopping wood. It really far out, because all I knew about blues was Josh White and traditional black folk songs. He turned me on to Leadbelly and Lightnin' Hopkins, extremely primitive, extremely subtle stuff. And it certainly made a difference in my life to have it presented to me that way, that's one of the most fortunate things you can imagine, that formative part of learning about whether Josh White really played the blues or if Lightnin' Hopkins really played the blues." \*\*\*

# THERE AIN'T NO MONEY IN POETRY THAT'S WHAT SETS THE POET FREE I'VE HAD ALL THE FREEDOM I CAN STAND

Only a few blocks separated Sunbury Dunbar's Music Row offices from the storied Columbia Studios down the street, where Bob Dylan had recorded his *Blonde on Blonde* and *Nashville Skyline* albums. Now, Guy Clark was here, working as a professional songwriter at 1204 16th Avenue South. He was paid an advance of \$75 a week to write songs that Sunbury Dunbar would pitch to singers to record. It may not be much of a living yet, but it was a start.

The counter culture generation continued to change popular culture, and country and folk music was no exception. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, who'd had a huge hit with Jerry Jeff Walker's "Mr. Bojangles," bridged the generation gap with *Will The Circle Be Unbroken*, a lively three-album set recorded with paragons of country music. The Byrds' celebrated *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* album showcased an expressive blend of folk and country. Gram Parsons joined the Flying Burrito Brothers for two cosmic folk records before stepping out solo. Carole King and James Taylor each rolled out luscious folk pop albums *Tapestry* and *Sweet Baby James*. Townes Van Zandt had released four albums of his own exotic compositions since he and Guy had met in Houston. Although a name for the genre didn't exist yet, what would come to be known as Americana music simmered on the back burner waiting for the Countrypolitan sounds of Tammy Wynette, Ray Price, Charley Pride and Lynn Anderson to fizzle out.

Townes Van Zandt blew into Nashville the second week of January in 1972. He had been in New York until Guy called to

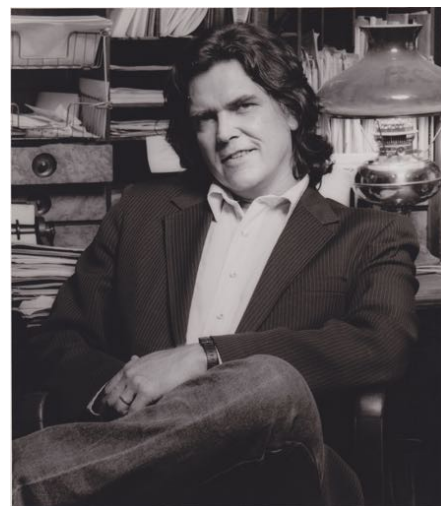
announce that he and Susanna were tying the knot and they wanted Townes to be the best man. On January 14, 30-year-old Guy Clark and 33-year-old Susanna Talley returned to Mickey Newberry's houseboat with Townes in tow. Susan Newbury baked a cake. Guy carried the weed, Townes brought vodka. Mickey piloted the boat out of Old Hickory Lake eastward up the Cumberland River to Sumner County. The five friends left the boat and caught a taxi to the county courthouse where Judge J.C. McMahan married Guy and Susanna.

Guy, Susanna and Townes retreated to the cheap little rental house at 1307 Chapel Avenue in East Nashville. Together they had found an old mattress dumped behind a nearby grocery store and dragged it home. Townes tossed his sleeping bag on top of the mattress next to Susanna's easel in the second bedroom. An omen of what was to come, the threesome spent the wedding night together and Townes lived with Guy and Susanna for eight months.

In the spring of 1972, Jerry Jeff Walker breezed through and stopped to visit Guy, Susanna and Townes. Guy played Jerry Jeff a couple of new songs, "L.A. Freeway" and "That Old Time Feeling." Walker recorded both songs for his self-titled Decca release.

Meanwhile, Rodney Crowell left his home in Houston and moved to Nashville. He found a job bussing tables at the TGI Fridays restaurant on Elliston Place and moved to an old house with a wrap around porch on Acklen Avenue in Hillsboro Village, an artistic and bohemian neighborhood on the south side of Vanderbilt University.

Crowell's roommates were fellow Texan Richard Dobson and Skinny Dennis Sanchez, the six-foot-seven, 125-pound Mexican upright bass player



## GUY CLARK DISCOGRAPHY

1975 *Old No. 1* (RCA)  
1976 *Texas Cookin'* (RCA)  
1978 *Guy Clark* (Warner Bros.)  
1981 *South Coast of Texas* (Warner Bros.)  
1983 *Better Days* (Warner Bros.)  
1989 *Old Friends* (Sugar Hill)  
1992 *Boats to Build* (Asylum)  
1995 *Dublin Blues* (Asylum)  
1997 *Keepers* (Sugar Hill) Live album  
1999 *Cold Dog Soup* (Sugar Hill)  
2002 *The Dark* (Sugar Hill)  
2006 *Workbench Songs* (Dualtone)  
2009 *(Somedays the Song Writes You)* (Dualtone)  
2011 *Songs & Stories* (Dualtone) Live album  
2013 *My Favorite Picture of You* (Dualtone)

## SONG HIGHLIGHTS

"Boats to Build"  
"The Cape"  
"Desperados Waiting for a Train"  
"Dublin Blues"  
"Homegrown Tomatoes"  
"L.A. Freeway"  
"My Favorite Picture of You"  
"Randall Knife"  
"Rita Ballou"  
"She Ain't Goin' Nowhere"  
"Stuff That Works"  
"Texas 1947"  
"Texas Cookin'"



## GUY CLARK GRAMMY NOMINATIONS

1985 Best Country Song –  
“Desperados Waiting for a Train”

1989 Best Contemporary Folk  
Album – *Old Friends*

1997 Best Contemporary Folk  
Album – *Keepers*

2006 Best Contemporary  
Folk/Americana Album – *Workbench  
Songs*

2007 Album of the Year – (as guest  
artist) *These Days* – Vince Gill

2010 Best Contemporary  
Folk/Americana Album – *Somedays  
The Song Writes You*

2013 Best Folk Album – *My Favorite  
Picture of You* (WIN)

who had played with Guy in a string band in Los Angeles and followed Guy to Nashville. Word got around that the house on Acklen was an all-night hang. After the bars closed, the porch became the stage and the Crowell/Dobson/Sanchez house was the place to be for late night picking parties.

“The hierarchy of that scene that I felt so lucky to have fallen in, it was...Mickey Newbury had a place on the lake, a houseboat on the lake. You rarely saw Newbury, but when you did, it was like a visit from the king,” Crowell says. “And then there was Townes, who was this satellite, who revolved around Guy and Susanna. Townes was a version of the Wandering Troubadour or the Ramblin’ Jack character. When Townes came into town he would generally be kicking heroin. Word would get around that Townes is coming into town and then we’d all gather around at Amy Martin’s carriage house in Hillsboro Village. The first day or so, we’d all wait downstairs while Townes was upstairs at Amy’s place. We’d all be out sitting around a picnic table with guitars in hand waiting for Townes to come down – waiting for him to get over the Jones and junk. That was just ‘a movable feast,’ to quote Hemingway. These characters orbited Guy. Guy was the moon, and then Guy was the sun and Susanna was the moon, and rest of these artists, in some form of development, would orbit around Guy. People just followed Guy around. He invited me to hang and pay attention and sometimes would tell me ‘Just shut up and learn.’”

In his first RCA Records press biography Guy Clark is described as “a songwriter’s songwriter in the country-flavored Austin-Nashville bag.”

The convoluted sentence proves that even back in the mid seventies, the Nashville music business did not know what to do with Guy.

RCA’s A&R producer Mike Lipskin signed Guy to the label with the condition that Lipskin would produce the album, using Memphis musicians instead of the more traditional Nashville country approach.

In August, 1974, Lipskin took Guy into RCA’s famous Studio A to record his first album. For the tracking sessions, Lipskin hired the Memphis Boys, a group of studio musicians put together by producer Chips Moman at his American Studios in Memphis. The band included Bobby Emmons on organ, Bobby Wood on piano, Mike Leech on Bass, Reggie Young on guitar. Collectively, the musicians were part of the inner circle on important sessions: Multiple albums with Elvis Presley; Dusty Springfield’s *Dusty In Memphis*, Dionne Warwick’s self-titled album, and other influential works out of Memphis. For drums, Lipskin brought in Jerry Carrigan, part of the famed Muscle Shoals rhythm section.

Although Lipskin and RCA label chief Chet Atkins liked the album and wanted to release it, Guy hated it and threatened to change his name and leave town if they put the album out.

With the budget blown and nothing to show for it, Guy was in a pickle. He turned to his friend, audio engineer Neil Wilburn. Wilburn had been a staff audio engineer at Columbia’s famous Quonset Hut, where he controlled the sound on important albums including Leonard Cohen’s *Songs From A Room* and *Songs of Love and Hate*; Dylan’s *Nashville Skyline*; Johnny Cash *At San Quentin*; and the Byrds *Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde* among others.

Guy and Wilburn took over RCA Studio B, cobbled together demos and work tapes, and called in favors from friends to make the album we now know as *Old No. 1*.

It became an instant classic, and set Guy Clark on a path to become one of the most legendary songwriters of our generation.  
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