



Guy Clark **“Workbench Songs”** Dualtone Records

Subjectively the lyrics to Clark’s **“Workbench Songs”** span the spectrum from being spot on droll, to ones filled with heart-worn, misty-eyed pathos. All are engaging, [as always] attention has been paid to even the smallest detail, and, naturally, they’re superbly executed. When Rounder/Philo was granted the opportunity to reissue Clark’s trio of late nineteen seventies/early eighties Warner Bros. recordings, the collection title **“Craftsman”** was not chosen idly or at random. A sequence in James Szalapski’s excellent documentary **“Heartworn Highways”** [1975] showed Clark at work in that beloved personal space ‘his workshop.’ Three decades passed but some things didn’t radically change. The **“Workbench Songs”** liner booklet, like its predecessor **“The Dark”** [2002], is graced by photograph after photograph of that ‘beloved space.’ Guy Clark is as fine a worker of wood, metal, bone and wire, as he is magician with word and melody.

Once was a time that Guy Clark was the sole name attached to his songs, but his co-write headcount in the last decade has outweighed the solo approach. Steve Nelson, Ray Stephenson, Verlon Thompson, Rodney Crowell, Gary Nicholson, Lee Roy Parnell and Darrell Scott, are all veterans in that role and contribute to this collection, while former Hot Band alumni, Hank DeVito, joins Guy and Rodney on the amusing “Expose.” The only new collaborator is Chuck Mead [leader of BR549] on “Cinco De Mayo In Memphis,” while the final track “Diamond Joe” is something of a departure for Guy, as it’s the first occasion that he’s covered a trad. arr. number.

If there’s such a thing as a Guy Clark signature sound then you’ll instantly recognise some of the chords he employs on “Walkin’ Man” [and on other cuts here]. As for the lyric to “Walkin’ Man,” there’s initial mention of *“A hundred years ago”* someone retracing the trail of tears. Later it eulogises the lives of Woody Guthrie, Gandhi and Chuck Berry – men who stood up straight, demolished obstacles and lived life their way. Pursuit of the future, albeit in this instance the ‘road and the far horizon,’ finds the narrator – a desperado - in “Magdalene” yearning to be gone, but he doesn’t want to go alone, and the repeated *“Move with me Magdalene”* pretty much says it all for the contents of this tune. What the foregoing comment doesn’t reveal is the hook laden fluidity of the melody – God, on the break, those acoustic guitars sound like a choir of angels, and that short Tex/Mex melodic diversion dead-on inspiration. As for the words and lines the almost resigned *“If you came with me it would be like a dream”* and the fantasy *“Let’s go down to San Miguel, Let’s go be somebody else tonight,”* add colour, light and simply amount to stuff that works. Over n’ over n’ over. It’s years, decades practically, since Clark last enjoyed major chart success, albeit, with a cover of one of his songs. At this stage in the game I doubt if that forms any sort of priority in his life or thinking, but this song just screams to be commercially taken to the masses. “Magdalene” features the voice of Morgan Hayes – she’s new in music town – and I’m sure we’re gonna hear more from her. Co-producer Chris Latham pays some spirited violin on “Tornado Time In Texas,” a song that’s destined to join the pantheon of Clark classics like “Homegrown Tomatoes.” The lyric to “Tornado Time In Texas” is similarly skewed, and contains such timeless, delivered with a wink, couplets as *“Well the sky was blacker than a funeral suit, Hotter than a depot stove, Hide in the cellar here comes Amarillo, Blowin’ up the road”* and *“Now when pigs fly, no I mean really fly.”* It certainly struck the collective ‘funny bone’ of this year’s Kerrville audience, confirming that it possessed the goods.

"Funny Bone" is the sad tale of a "pretty good" rodeo clown who won, then lost love. There was a time when "He could make her smile from ear to ear," but "When that new young bull rider came on the circuit, Oh in about, eight seconds flat she was gone." As Guy's acoustic guitar draws the melody to a close, with the singular, laid back intonation of "Ouch," he totally nails the clown's anguish. Western swing paced, you'll gather the gist of the aforementioned "Exposé" from the kick-off lines "Now when you write your expose, I wish you'd leave me out, I'd just as soon you didn't use my name." "Out In The Parkin' Lot" previously appeared on Clark's in-concert set "**Keepers**" [1997], and employing clever wordplay, leavened with finely observed mirth, it encapsulates familiar day-to-day occurrences in 'the lot.' Setting the scene with the devil may care "Sittin' on the fender of someone else's truck, Drinkin' Old Crow whiskey and hot 7-UP," the narrator observes "Now there's a couple of cowpokes puttin' up their dukes, There's wasn't much to it after both of 'em puked" then "Oops, there's a couple who could not wait to get home, They're probably in love so let's leave 'em alone." If the song is up to scratch, even though it's a cover, Clark isn't averse to cutting it. With "No Lonesome Tune" he once again visits the song catalogue of his 'best man' Townes Van Zandt. Supported only by acoustic stringed instruments and a harmonica, Guy's low-key delivery is consummate and classy. Flawless, flawless.

Once upon a time Guy regaled us with "Baby Took A Limo To Memphis" [+], but on this go-round, he's all fired up about "Cinco De Mayo In Memphis." As you might figure from the title, some folks from south of the border' have hit town – "deckhands from the towboats" and "Southern belles and señoritas" – toggled up in blue suede shoes, they're hell bent on a high ol' time in the bars on Beale Street "Swingin' pool cues at piñatas," and taking the tourist trail around Graceland. "Analog Girl" is absolutely a song for these times. No one, not even Guy, could have written it back in '75. Even a decade ago the lyric would have sounded spacey. With such spot-on observational rib ticklers as "Well she ain't got no cell phone, You got to call her when she's home, All of her clocks have got hands" and "Now she gets online out in the backyard, Hangin' up her ol' blue jeans," in the humour stakes this portrait of a 'set in her ways, good ol' girl' is easily the equal of "Tornado Time In Texas." The penultimate "Worry B Gone" is a wink, wink tribute to the weed that you puff and puff and puff, and somehow all your worries just drift away into space just like the smoke you exhale. Verlon Thompson, Guy's friend, long-time sideman, co-writer and co-producer shares the vocal on "Diamond Joe," which Clark dedicates at the outset to "Hey Ramblin' Jack here's a big old sweep of the cowboy hat to you from me and Verlon." It's a cowboy song that Elliott has cut more than once in his career.

In closing, and in relation to "**Workbench Songs**" as an entity, let me paraphrase the words of another musical Texan - "And The Hits Just Keep On Comin'".....long may you continue to create and cut them Guy. Darn, just can't get "Magdalene" out of my head.....

Note.

[+] – The song appeared on "**Dublin Blues**" [1995].

Folkwax Score 10 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 06/06 & 07/06.