

Last Train to Clarksville

1/10/2003

The air was thick with character and characters. It was both the real world and one fabricated to show a deeper truth. That is the way of craft honed to the edge of art, of stories and songs built from scratch by steady hands and wry sensibility. It is very much the way of Guy Clark.

But not to worry. Although tended toward the higher common denominators, this is not art that hangs on walls. As demonstrated over this past weekend from the stage of the Egyptian Theater, you also get a lot of mud, blood, and beer when you enter upon Clark's west Texas landscape.

He takes you on a lyrical cattle drive made up of old gunfighters and drifters and drillers and poets and winos who work on freighters and in bars, on farms, and on cars. There are Indian cowboys and old men with beer guts and dominos. Collectively, they are diamonds in the rough on their way to meet their maker.

The protagonists go about their business on buckin' broncs, big ol' D-10 Caterpillars, '51 Chevrolets, fast rollin' streamliners, and cheap hotel elevators. They are desperados waiting for a train and tote gunny sacks full of trouble. They are sidekicks drinkin' beer and playing Moon and Forty-two. They know that old friends shine like diamonds.

There is ol' one-eyed John and Alice from Dallas and old mad Jack and Banjo Bill. And who could forget that hill country honky-tonkin, backslidin', barrel ridin' Rita Ballou or the girl who found a thumb and stuck it in the breeze.

They kick tires round pick-up trucks, drink beer and just cut up. They smoke and joke out behind the shed and cuss a blue streak till the girls turn red. They remember the smell of the black powder smoke and the stand in the street at the turn of a joke. There is poetry in their spit and ethos to their pathos and they are, truly, pieces of work.

They live pretty high on the food chain. There's this one guy who cooks armadillo that tastes so sweet he calls it pie and, of course, a woman who makes "pan dulce" so good it gets you high. Their enchiladas are greasy and their steaks chicken fried. And, in case it ever comes up in polite conversation, it sho' do make a man feel happy to see white gravy on the side.

These folk like things that work. There's nothing quite like an old pair of boots and an old blue shirt. They like drinking whiskey and like being straight and like voodoo spinners and like live bait. They honor Coronado and the Comanches and the blues and bootleggers and oilfield crews.

And if they can just get off of that LA freeway without getting killed or caught, they'd be down that road in a cloud of smoke headin' for some land that they ain't bought. They pick Picasso's cubist mandolin and grow home grown tomatoes. They toss smokin' little fastballs and drink Mad Dog Margaritas in the Chili Parlour Bar. I'm not sure when they find time for chores.

The list of cameos in Clark's tales is impressive. William Butler Yeats, Tom Waits, Billy the Kid, Townes Van Zandt, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Larry Mahan, Pretty Boy Floyd, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Charlie Goodnight, and Jesus Christ, show up unannounced to make obscure points. Now there's a pride of lions to draw to.

Angst always has a seat at the table but, then again, so does hillbilly haiku. At the Broken Heart Ranch you can always get work as a "cowfool." Hired hands sing the bunkhouse blues from sundown to sun up. Buzzards grin. Cowpokes come and go talking of Michaelangelo. I just threw that in. They do, however, breakfast on cold dog soup and rainbow pie.

Clark builds boats to keep dreams afloat. His characters tread water in plots of their own device. They ride mad dog cyclones. Hitting the lottery is getting a dime for every bad time. They tip the waitress with "baby, don't let 'em blow smoke up your dress."

They are sweet birds of youth and jacks-of-all-trades. They pack Indian head pennies and Randall knives. They are "former ex-bullriders" (don't you love that?) and have trucks "broke down in the whole front yard." They know that "there ain't no money in poetry and that's what sets the poet free."

This bunch, if nothing else, is tried and true, forever, for certain, for always. They crunch numbers in their own way. They count having heard Doc Watson play the Columbus Stockade Blues as one of their assets. Well it's a nickel for the fiddler. It's a nickel for his tune. It's a nickel for the tambourine kind of afternoon.

As often as not, they have Black Diamond Strings on their catalog guitars—better to work their way through the Fort Worth Blues. Guy Clark can sho-nuff write and sing the blues. He knows his way around the neighborhoods of bittersweet and melancholy.

He figures what's the use of dying if you don't die trying. "Some of her dancin' days are over, some of her dancin' days are done, but she's still got a couple of two-steps she ain't shown no-one."

In his world even houses get the blues. In the dark where you can hear your own heartbeat or the heart of the one next to you, "the house settles down after holding itself up all day." What a gift. It was the last train to Clarksville—till next time--and those in the know came out of the woodwork to partake of the vision and see themselves in song.