

Music legend fills Westport with heart and soul of Texas

Guy Clark gives bar the feeling of a porch on a summer night.

By TIMOTHY FINN
Staff Writer

Texas is known for its tall tales and its brazen, nitty-gritty storytellers — people born with the gift for colorful, down-home gab (Ross Perot, Molly Ivins). Texas has produced its fair share of expressive songwriters, too: Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith, Joe Ely, Townes Van Zandt. None is both more legendary and unrenowned than Guy Clark.

For more than 20 years, Clark has been composing the sorts of songs that define the follies, whimsies, wickedness and beauty of humankind. His lyrics are wrought with confession, weakness, humor and extraordinary detail: They are gritty, black-and-white portraits of the heart and soul.

REVIEW

For more than 90 minutes Thursday night at the Drum Room, Clark and his son Travis (on a fretless, five-string acoustic bass) played nothing but requests from an enthusiastic crowd of about 100 persons, making a Westport bar feel like someone's front porch on a warm summer night.

The highlights were many: "L.A. Freeway," which included an aside about a former landlord who hacked down a bountiful grapefruit tree because it was damaging his patio; "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train"; the masterful "Randal Knife" — a eulogy for his father; "Ramblin' Jack and Mahan," a drunken-buddy song that contained one of the best lines of the night: "Got these lines in my face/ Trying to straighten out the wrinkles in my life"; and the elegiac "Old Friends."

Clark's legend and influence is vast and diverse. His work has been covered or coveted by everyone from Emmylou Harris, Johnny Cash and Lyle Lovett to U2 and Michelle Shocked. It's no wonder: He continually and effortlessly turns phrases such as "You really feel abandoned/ But you want to be alone"; or "Here's to you, south Texas, you old rodeo queen/ How I miss your beer joints and shuffle board machines." He plays his music like he's proud of it. And he should be.

The lowest moment of the night was the performance of another legendary Texan, Townes Van Zandt, the opening act. When he bothered to remember his lyrics, he couldn't hit the notes. And he played guitar like a beginner, missing strings and chords repeatedly. The audience surely redeemed a few days in purgatory for being so polite and encouraging. He was an embarrassing mess.