

**LIVES
OF THE
POETS**
(WITH GUITARS)

THIRTEEN OUTSIDERS
WHO CHANGED MODERN MUSIC

**RAY
ROBERTSON**

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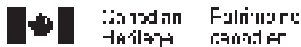
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A.F. Moritz
Poet, Teacher, Friend

*And to everyone who listened—and listens—
Just one more . . .*

“Is everything just sex and music?”
“No.”
“You’re awfully down.”
“I need more sex and music.”
—Barry Hannah, *Ray*

Brings me words that are not the strength of strings.
—Gene Clark, “Strength of Strings”

INTRODUCTION

The last sentence of Barry Hannah's delightfully riotous first novel, *Geronimo Rex*: "That *was* it. Good, good heavens. We're in the wrong field. Music!" Like many writers, I don't play an instrument, I can't sing, and I've never attempted to write a song, but none of that's ever stopped me from occasionally feeling as if what I do—the stringing together of words in the hope of delighting and inciting—is a middling impersonation of what musicians, *real* artists, are capable of. Musician envy: easy to acquire, even easier to understand.

"Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life" declared the novelist Berthold Auerbach, and who hasn't experienced the rejuvenating uplift of music at the end of the day, at the end of a relationship, when one feels quite simply at the end of the line? More than a convenient coping device, however—a pragmatic panacea for a too-stressful life—music can remind us that existence is about more than merely surviving; at its best, it offers us the chance for the sort of transcendence of the suffocatingly mundane that poets and theologians like to go on and on about but that musicians actually deliver. From Philip Larkin's poem "For

Sidney Bechet,” an ode to the American jazz musician of the title: “On me your voice falls as they say love should/Like an enormous yes.” Offering humanity its necessary dosage of Enormous Yesness: who wouldn’t want that job?

Except that it’s not mine — just as it isn’t most people’s — so one does the next best thing: listens, listens, and sometimes, if one is lucky, falls in love with a particular musician’s entire body of work, coming to know their soul as expressed through the singular personality of their music as well as — or perhaps even better than — one’s own. And like any love that’s more than ephemeral infatuation, this love changes, deepens, becomes more complex over time. My youthful idolatry of Gram Parsons has ripened into middle-aged awe at his musical accomplishments mixed with occasional exasperation at his personal behaviour. When we become deeply immersed in an artist’s work, we inevitably want to know as much as possible about his or her life. T.S. Eliot and a load of other over-orderly intellectuals would disagree, but an artist is inseparable from his or her life. More than that: because our favourite musicians are as close to real-life magicians as most of us will ever know (now you see your humdrum little world; hum along to my song and *abracadabra!* now you don’t), it’s understandable that we would want to know more about the source of that uncommon magic. In the process, we often become as fascinated by the life story as we are by the art that sprang from it. Occasionally we’re as inspired by the life as much as by the art itself. Plato’s dialogues are intellectually stimulating; his account of Socrates’ last days in *The Apology* is wholly stirring.

I’ve certainly been inspired by both. It was the dazzling babble of Little Richard’s lyrics and not Mallarme’s poetry that provided me with an early lesson in the wonderfully malleable nature of words and what they can be pushed

and prodded into communicating. It was Gram Parsons' voice, not Shakespeare's plays, that convinced me life is essentially tragic. But I also learned from Ronnie Lane that making the art you want to make—that you need to make—more than compensates for the alternating opposition and indifference you'll likely encounter for living life on your own terms. I learned from Townes Van Zandt and Gene Clark that what can fire your imagination can also extinguish it. And like any other itchy writer, it's not enough to simply experience these truths—one wants to convey in words what it is that makes for a musically-transformed, more-alive human being, to sing a hymn in praise of a particular existence transformed by a lucky lifetime blessed with enormous Yeses.

In one form or another, this desire has always been there in my novels—what nature is to Jim Harrison's books, I remember one day realizing, music is to mine—but there's also always been a desire to one day drop the fictional veil and directly espouse and explore, at length, the lives of some of the musicians who have so deeply enriched my own life. Which is what *Lives of the Poets (with Guitars)* is about. I decided when I was twenty-six years old that I wanted to write novels instead of pursuing philosophy because it seemed to me as if literature was the more subtle tool for examining the maddening, miraculous ambiguity of existence. In the following twelve essays I employ much the same narrative approach as I do in my day job, telling a life story while also investigating the works of art that often gave that life its guiding purpose.

As my slightly tweaked title suggests, the biographical/critical prefaces to the selected works of what were then viewed as the greatest English poets that Dr. Johnson agreed to undertake in 1777 at the urging of three British booksellers—what we know today as his *Lives of the*

Poets—has been my loose model. (Johnson himself wasn't exactly a musical aficionado: "Of all noises," he said, "I think music is the least disagreeable." To a friend who praised a violinist because of the complexity of his performance, "Difficult do you call it, Sir? I wish it were impossible.") One of Johnson's biographers, the novelist John Wain, remarked that "*Lives of the Poets* is a work of memory, judgment and love, not a work of research." So is *Lives of the Poets (with Guitars)*. I've listened to everything each of my subjects has created (oftentimes incessantly) and read everything of interest that's been written about them (and when there hasn't been sufficiently illuminating material available, I've sought out and interviewed some of the people important to his or her story), but, as Johnson said, "If it rained knowledge I would hold out my hand. But I would not give myself the trouble to go in quest for it." Some truths are too important to embalm in facts.

Dr. Johnson was instructed by his employers who to write about in his *Lives of the Poets*; I've chosen my illustrious subjects. In this, I've made no effort to be exhaustive, inclusive, or representative. "Wide sympathies have their penalty," George Orwell warned, the worst being superficiality of understanding and feeling in exchange for appearing to be up to date in your enthusiasms. The thirteen poets with guitars gathered here do tend to fit a certain profile—their respective styles are grounded in American roots music (blues, country, raw rock and roll); most of them were underappreciated in their lifetimes (and frequently still), not only for their superlative songs and playing but also for their genre-obliterating iconoclasm; their life stories are as compelling as the best fiction and are infused, as all lives are, with enduring moral quandaries—but it's an entirely personal list. There *are* such things as good and bad art, but once one has made that

necessary distinction, there's also something called taste. *Lives of the Poets (with Guitars)* is a taste of my taste.

As for the appended parentheses in my title, poetry isn't merely the vertical assemblage of words. It's not even exclusively manifest in words — or, if it is, not necessarily in purely representational terms. Dylan Thomas, of whom Gene Clark and Townes Van Zandt were both admirers, often used words as a painter employs colour: rhythm, sound, and strategic word placement conveying a poem's "meaning" as much as or more than any limp linguistic literalism. Most of the greatest popular music uses lyrics much as Thomas used words in his poems: to meld with the music and create something more than the mere sum of its lyrical/musical parts. (The poet Conrad Aiken on the best of Thomas' verse: "if at times his meanings are so nearly pure *affect* as to be practically nonsense, it doesn't matter: the thing is alive and beautiful, it hums, sings, whizzes, and in short it's poetry.") Karl Shapiro defined poetry simply as "greater or lesser heat," and that seems as satisfactory a definition as one is likely to get. And what could be hotter than the aural assault of Johnny Ramone's guitar, Little Richard's larynx-ripping voice, Gene Clark's brooding melodies?

"My purpose," Dr. Johnson wrote in the preface to *Lives of the Poets*, "was only to have allotted to every Poet an Advertisement, like those which we find in the French Miscellanies, containing a few dates and a general character" combined with "the honest intention of giving pleasure." Me, too. And my advertising, or — let's be honest at the outset — my proselytizing, is more that of an avid, if critical enthusiast than that of a detached historian. "For it is your hot love for your art," the novelist Ford Madox Ford advised, "not your dry delvings in the dry bones of ana and philologies that will enable you to convey to others your strong passion."

Hot love. What a great title for a song.



GENE CLARK

*He was naturally learned: he needed not the spectacles
of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.*

—John Dryden

Gene Clark was not an intellectual, and I mean that in the best possible way. Meaning, he didn't believe that having NPR on in the background while he drank his morning coffee made him any less bewildered about the shaky state of the world than the guy trying to tune in to last night's baseball scores on his car radio while en route to eight hours of minimum-wage servitude. Meaning, he didn't let it drop to reporters that, Oh, yes, he'd read Rimbaud (in translation, of course), late nineteenth-century French Symbolist poetry just one of the endlessly arcane literary influences detectable in his musical oeuvre if one just digs deeply enough. Gene Clark, if he could be bothered to read at all, stuck to comic books and the Bible. And whether with the Byrds, Dillard & Clark, or on his own, no one wrote grievous minor-key masterpiece melodies married to Rorschach-test tell-tale lyrics that even come close.

He was born Harold Eugene Clark in 1944 in Tipton, Missouri, the third of thirteen children, not quite a farm boy—his father graduated from fighting Hitler to working for the Swope Park, Missouri golf course—but certainly a country boy, the Clark family chopping the firewood that heated their home (a converted trolley barn) and milking the cows that gave them their milk and butter. Typically, the song most redolent of Gene’s semi-rural childhood, “Something’s Wrong,” isn’t a sentimental looking back, but an anguished update on a life bereft of the simple somatic joys of youth. Speaking of his primary source of inspiration, another poet Gene Clark probably never heard of, Philip Larkin, said, “Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.” Gene wouldn’t have read the *Observer* interview where Larkin said this, but he would have known exactly what the prickly British poet was talking about.

He learned to play guitar from his father, and before he turned teenager could pull off respectable recreations of Hank Williams, Elvis, and the Everly Brothers, a pretty fair representation of what the best of his mature music has to offer: country soul, rock and roll desperation, superior melodicism. He joined the usual rock band—Joe Meyers and the Sharks—before forming the usual folk group, the sort of Kingston Trio knock-off that all ambitious early-60s greasers eventually gravitated toward (Dylan only being different in having the superior taste to choose Woody Guthrie and not the Limelites as his musical model). Spotted performing in Kansas City by a member of the New Christy Minstrels, he joined the ten-member troupe and lent his voice to the group’s successful emasculation of popular folk songs, learning, if nothing else, to hate traveling to eighteen cities in nineteen days and how giving people what they want is how you gain a steady paycheck

but lose whatever integrity you ever had. Being a suit-and-tied singing puppet did take him to Winnipeg in February 1964, however. He would have heard the Beatles and had his life changed sooner or later anyway, but that was where he heard them first.

A couple of weeks later, while on tour in Virginia, he fed coin after coin into a coffee shop jukebox trying to figure out how “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “She Loves You” could sound so fresh and so alive and so joyful. He quit the Minstrels the next day and decided to move to Los Angeles and do what the Beatles did. He got lucky, as most unusually ambitious people tend to get. Jim McGuinn, another dropout from the wholesome folk factory, had noticed what Gene noticed—how the Beatles were playing fifties American rock and roll and R&B with an energy and elation that hadn’t been heard since Elvis started doing what the Colonel told him to and Little Richard found the Lord, but through the harmony-bending folksy filter of British skiffle—and was playing a Beatles tune on his twelve-string acoustic on a slow night at the Troubadour when Gene asked if he could sit down and play with him. Later, when David Crosby, hanging out at the same club (never underestimate the value of determined idleness) added his soaring high-harmony tenor to the rich lead-vocal blend of the other two, they knew they had something. Something rock, something folk, something new.

“Mr. Tambourine Man”—a rough Dylan 1965 demo that the Byrds’ co-manager Jim Dickson convinced them to cover—is the song that gave them their first hit and, in combining brains with a beat plus McGuinn’s celestially chiming twelve-string electric Rickenbacker, helped give birth to the thing called “folk-rock.” But it’s Gene’s originals that remain the most impressive items on the first

two albums. Impressive because there's something compellingly different about them even now, fifty years later. This, in spite of the fact that all but a few are harmonically saturated in the sweetly sad minor-chord sounds of melancholy and self-doubt, Top-Forty gloom tunes. Not that anyone who ever acquired a unique way of doing anything ever achieved it by consciously setting out to be unique. As David Crosby noted, Gene "didn't know the rules about music so he ignored them blithely and that made for very good writing. He used chord formations and ways of doing things that other people just hadn't done because they were used to doing it by the common rules. He had no idea what they were so he just did what felt good."

But even as the Byrds soared in popularity and Gene Clark the songwriter took flight right alongside (songs like "Set You Free This Time" and "She Don't Care About Time" showing the lyric-liberating influence of Dylan, resulting in words almost as interesting as his melodies), Gene Clark the man was experiencing more earthbound troubles. Because he had more songs on the first album than anyone else and was therefore making exponentially more royalty money than the others, McGuinn and Crosby, the other two songwriters, began to blockade his new compositions in favour of their own generally inferior material, an understandably frustrating situation for someone for whom it wasn't unusual to write a half dozen new songs a week. Additionally, after already eroding his confidence as a rhythm guitar player to the point that Gene relinquished the instrument for a tambourine, Crosby, the archetypal entitled child of the Los Angeles well-off (every time naughty young David was expelled from private school his father, an Academy Award-winning cinematographer, would simply write a check and enroll him in another), began to openly mock Gene, on stage and off,

for not being—you know—*groovy* enough. That Gene, a six-foot-two country boy who looked less like a rock and roll star than a college linebacker, didn't simply punch the butterball brat in the face is testament to Gene's well-mannered upbringing. As with the New Christy Minstrels, he was also weary of living on airplanes and in hotels, with the added aggravation of having to elude screaming pubescent girls and teen-beat reporters wanting to know what his favourite colour was.

So he had his reasons for flying the Byrds' nest. But, as is often the case, external annoyances weren't nearly as menacing as the mayhem swelling inside. Gene hated to fly—more than once had gotten off a plane moments before it was supposed to take off, sweat-soaked and ashen and loudly adamant that it was going to crash—but his infamous fear of flying was only a symptom of either what some of his brothers and sisters identified, in hindsight, as a hereditary bi-polar disorder, or, at the very least, a propensity for depression and attendant anxiety attacks (which frequently manifested themselves as crippling stage fright). Self-medicating his unacknowledged condition with alcohol and drugs (remembered band publicist Derek Taylor: “as for Gene, he would do *anything*. He'd have a glass in one hand and a pill in another”) only exacerbated his moodiness and excessive introspection. There were also rumours of a go-go dancer and a disastrously bad acid trip. People who can't drink milk are called lactose intolerant; people who shouldn't dabble in consciousness-mining psychedelics are called Gene Clark.

Still, his first solo album, *Gene Clark with the Gosdin Brothers*, was recorded in 1967 and released the same week his ex-bandmates' new album, *Younger Than Yesterday*, appeared, guaranteeing diminished media attention for the new guy and a divided listenership. The baffling release

date (both the Byrds and Gene were on the same record label) wasn't the only curveball the industry threw at him, nor would it be the last. The Gosdin Brothers added fine harmonies to Gene's new batch of songs, but that was the extent of it; they never even set foot in the studio while the album was being recorded, and clearly didn't deserve equal billing. (They and Gene shared the same manager who thought he could boost two sagging careers with one album title.) Gene wanted to call his first album—his declaration of independence from the Byrds—*Harold Eugene Clark*. Columbia Records told him no, that his real name simply wasn't catchy enough.

If Gene hadn't entirely shed his Beatles influences by the time of his inaugural solo record ("Elevator Operator" is not only transparently Beatles; it's transparently bad Beatles), and the string-swamped "Echoes" is baroque rock without the rock, there was enough good material on *Gene Clark with the Gosdin Brothers* to announce a major, many-sided talent. "Tried So Hard" and "Keep on Pushin'" are right there at the advent of country-rock, "Is Yours is Mine" is poppy hippy without being hippy dippy, and "So You Say You Lost Your Baby" picks up lyrically where Gene left off with "Eight Miles High," his last Byrds song-writing credit, casually throwing out images and associations worthy of anything Dylan was coming up with at the time. But when Crosby's noxious personality finally got him booted out of the Byrds and it became apparent that *Gene Clark with the Gosdin Brothers* wasn't going to sell, Gene's management (also the Byrds management) convinced him to re-join the band, at least temporarily, just in time for an impending concert tour. Gene lasted three shows before breaking down in Minnesota and taking the train alone back to L.A. while the rest of the band flew on to New York. Byrds roadie Jimmy Seiter remembered the

next time he saw Gene, having been sent by management to pick him up at the train station after his long trip home:

When I got there and met him at the train, he just walked past me at a fast pace, and he didn't say a word, got in a yellow cab and split to the office. Now, Gene was always afraid of small closed spaces. He never took elevators. We had this old fashioned elevator in the office building and Gene never took it. But for some reason he did that day. When I arrived at the office the police are there and the Fire Department—someone is stuck in the lift. Gene is stuck in the lift for two-and-a-half hours. When they finally opened it he ran out, soaking with sweat, and split. I didn't see him for six or eight months after that. The inside of the elevator was totally scratched up where he'd tried to get out. You should have heard him screaming. Unbelievable. He was going crazy in that elevator. He screamed at the top of his lungs for almost an hour.

Despite the commercial failure of his debut album, Gene managed to secure a contract with the recently formed A&M label, likely because of his Byrds pedigree. Regardless of how he got it, he got it, and had just set to work on a trunk full of new songs that weren't sounding in the studio like he heard them in his head when he stumbled upon an old friend. Doug Dillard was exactly the right person for Gene Clark to run into at this moment in his life. A former member of the legendary bluegrass group the Dillards, Doug's Beachwood Canyon home was a nightly magnet for every progressive picker in town, and Gene soon joined in on the fun, the number one requirement if whatever you're doing is going to have any lasting value. Doug Dillard was a brilliant banjo player and a flesh-and-blood reminder of Gene's country music

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