

Remembering singer-songwriter Gene Clark, co-founder of the Byrds: 30 years later

Cordell Gascoigne
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2021 marks 30 years since the passing of folk-rock pioneer and co-founder of the Byrds (formed in 1964), Gene Clark. Clark was a key figure in the brief, but influential early period of the Byrds, who played a significant role in the expansive and electrified “pop” turn of folk music in the mid-1960s. He also had an intriguing solo career in its own right, before his life was tragically cut short.

Harold Eugene Clark was born in the small, working-class town of Tipton, Missouri, November 17, 1944, the third of 13 children. In 1949, the Clark family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, living much of the time in abject poverty.

However, in 1954, Clark’s parents saved enough money to purchase a television, through which the young Clark would be introduced to Elvis Presley. Besotted by Presley, Clark developed a deep interest in the music. His father subsequently introduced him to Hank Williams and taught him to play the mandolin, harmonica and guitar. He began writing songs as early as nine years old—his first song being, “Big Chief Hole in Pants.”

During Clark’s school years he would join various bands with schoolmates, play his guitar and sing for fellow students and form his own folk trio called the Rum Runners, inspired by the popular Kingston Trio. However, his trio would be short-lived.

Clark would go on to play in many aspiring folk groups in the early 1960s, including most prominently Michael Crowley’s the Surf Riders and later the New Christy Minstrels led by Randy Sparks. Clark played and worked as a backing-vocalist for two albums with the New Christy Minstrels, before leaving the band in early 1964, disillusioned with the musical approach.

Like many musicians of the time, a major turning point came in 1964 when Clark came across the Beatles’ songs “She Loves You” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” on a jukebox while in Canada. Clark found his calling, saying, “I knew, I knew, that this was the future, this was where music was going and ... I wanted to be a part of it.”

Clark moved to Los Angeles where he met fellow folk musician and Beatles-convert Jim (later Roger) McGuinn at the Troubadour Club. In early 1964, McGuinn and Clark worked together as a Peter and Gordon-type duo, but began to assemble a band—once David Crosby was recruited—known as the Jet Set. Soon after, Chris Hillman and Michael Clarke would join the trio on bass guitar and drums, respectively.

Initially playing under the name the Beefeaters, the young musicians released two singles, “Please Let Me Love You” and

“Don’t Be Long” in October 1964. One month later, the band’s manager, Jim Dickson, got the band an audition with Columbia Records, where they signed as the Byrds and would soon be billed as “America’s Beatles.”

The Byrds became, in fact, a key element in the early flourishing of the “folk-rock” sound. They essentially bridged the electrifying pop studio sound of the Beatles with, literally at times, the lyrics and “edge” of Bob Dylan and other folk musicians. McGuinn’s “jangly” 12-string guitar melodies, coupled with Clark and Crosby’s expansive harmonizing, had very little precedent in popular music to that point. The band’s impact would help shape the direction of “folk rock” for at least the next decade.

Clark played a leading part on the band’s two 1965 albums, *Mr. Tambourine Man* and *Turn! Turn! Turn!* with his superlative compositions and emotionally alluring voice. Clark wrote or co-wrote many of the Byrds’ best-known originals from their first three albums, including “I’ll Feel a Whole Lot Better,” “Set You Free This Time” and “Eight Miles High.” At a time when the Vietnam War was raging, with antiwar and civil rights protests erupting across the US, Clark focused on intimate matters. His lyrics placed emphasis on personal reflection, reconciliation and relationships. He was also capable of writing moving songs about heartache, such as the band’s “Here Without You,” set to its signature “cascading” sound.

Much of the Byrds’ success came from their many inventive covers of Dylan tracks, largely attributable to McGuinn’s revolutionary approach to the Rickenbacker guitar and the rich tenor harmonies of McGuinn, Clark and Crosby. The Byrds’ debut album features four Dylan covers, “Mr. Tambourine Man,” “Spanish Harlem Incident,” “All I Really Want to Do” and “Chimes of Freedom,” while their second features two, “Lay Down Your Weary Tune” and “The Times They Are a-Changin’.”

Notwithstanding the tremendous success of “Mr. Tambourine Man,” which peaked at Number 1 on the singles charts in 1965 in the US, United Kingdom and Ireland, and Number 2 in Canada, Clark would abruptly leave the band in February 1966, prior to the release of “Eight Miles High,” featured on *Fifth Dimension* (1966), ostensibly over his fear of flying. Clark, who had witnessed a fatal airplane crash as a youth, experienced a panic attack on a plane bound for New York, resulting in his refusal to take the flight. In effect, Clark’s exit from the plane represented his departure from the Byrds, with McGuinn telling him, “If you can’t fly, you can’t be a Byrd [bird].”

Was his departure due to a dread of flying, a fear of success, contempt for celebrity life and the music business, or something else? In fact, Clark became the band's wealthiest member for his prolific songwriting, drawing increased resentment from his fellow bandmates. In a 2017 interview, McGuinn commented: "We thought we could soldier on with just the four of us ... but Gene was the chick magnet ... Many years later Jim Dickson ... told me a story of him and co-manager Eddie Tickner, taking Gene aside with the idea of going solo, making him another Elvis or something. So maybe there was more to it than fear of flying."

Departing at the peak of the band's success indicates on Clark's part, at the very least, an ambivalence or even an antipathy toward money and fame. In general, he seemed indifferent to commercial success, an indifference augmented by an unwillingness to promote his releases.

On "The True One," Clark writes about an inner war, brought about by his humble beginnings and success:

Changes come so quickly, easily it can seem bizarre
They say there's a price to pay for going out too far
You can buy a one-way ticket out there all alone
And you can sit and wonder why
It's so hard to get back home

The following year, Clark debuted his first solo album, *Gene Clark with the Gosdin Brothers* (1967). However, this would not enjoy commercial success, nor would his subsequent releases. While experiencing this downward trajectory in terms of "spotlight success," Clark did not express regret, at least publicly, about his departure from the Byrds. His "Echoes" offers something of an autobiographical picture:

On the streets you look again
At the places you have been
Or the moments that you thought
Where am I going
Though the walls are like the dead
They reflect the things you've said
And the echoes in your head continue showing

A year later, Clark and renowned banjo player Doug Dillard of The Dillards would form an iconic duo, Dillard & Clark. Its first album, *The Fantastic Expedition of Dillard & Clark*, was released in 1968 and the second, *Through the Morning, Through the Night*, in 1969.

Following the dissolution of Dillard & Clark, Clark resumed his solo career, releasing the pensive country albums *White Light* (1971) and *Roadmaster* (1973). His fourth album, *No Other* (1974), featuring legendary bassist and session musician Leland Sklar on its title track, would cement Clark's reputation as a masterful songwriter:

All alone you say
That you don't want no other
So the Lord is love and love is like no other
If the falling tide can turn and then recover
All alone we must be part of one another

Clark would go on to record three more albums: *Two Sides to Every Story* (1977), *Firebyrd* (1984)—reissued posthumously in 1995 as *This Byrd Has Flown*, featuring additional tracks—and *So Rebellious a Lover* (1987), with Carla Olson.

In a 2004 interview, Crosby said, "[H]e just wrote exactly what he felt, and I think he had a freedom about it that produced incredible music. ... Gene was never meant for that man [the Hollywood star system]. If Gene had instead gone to Nashville, he probably would have been a huge star because he was good-looking—a good-looking young guy. A good singer and a good writer and he had a charisma, you know? He was a great guy."

Clark's last live performance would be with original Byrds members following the band's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in January 1991. The Byrds, reunited in an underwhelming final performance, playing their most notable hits. Clark would pass only four months later.

Interviewed in 1991 just days after Clark's death, Hillman said, "We lost Gene the other day. It doesn't matter how or why. He's just gone. I think we lost Gene in 1967. ... At one time he was the power in the Byrds, not McGuinn, not Crosby—it was Gene who would bust through the stage curtain banging on a tambourine coming on like a young Prince Valiant."

Clark is attributed with founding baroque pop and fusing country with rock. Clark's insightful compositions reflected the moods he wanted to convey. His lyrics focused on betrayal, loss, self-reflection and life experiences. As Clark put it, "I can't contrive a song."

Gene "Tambourine Man" Clark was buried at St. Andrews Catholic cemetery in Tipton, Missouri, beneath an epitaph that reads "No Other."



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