

visited here in October:

"What I do is closer to what Guy does. It's a form of journalism almost — short story songs. There's nobody better at it than Guy Clark, so I drew very heavily from his writing style, the conversational aspects. He's real good at writing people talking.

"Townes, especially his best stuff, is more along the lines of pure poetry. I'm very fond of saying Townes Van Zandt is the best songwriter in the world, and I still think no-one has ever touched Townes at his best. I think poetry and imagery are a purer form of writing than narrative. Most of

what I do is narrative.

"I'm best at songs like 'Guitar Town' and 'Copperhead Road,' but the songs I'm proudest of are 'Fearless Heart' and 'My Old Friend The Blues.' They come harder and take a long time to write. Townes went through a period of about 10 years when he just

lived in that zone. He cranked out some incredible stuff, he got down to the deepest darkest corners of himself and managed to get it all out on paper somehow. I still don't know how he did it. To me it's still one of the most fascinating bodies of work."

But one of the tragedies of the Nashville system is that the best songs don't get covered by the best singers. George Jones and, it seems Randy Travis, are just two great singers who have squandered their voices singing lousy material.

"There's no doubt about that. George Jones to me was always a shame. You've got to understand how Billy Sherrill works [Sherrill is the foremost Nashville producer, who has "guided" the careers of Jones and Tammy Wynette. He also produced Elvis Costello's *Almost Blue* — under duress]. It's been hard for George to make a good album because Billy Sherrill is not a producer of albums. He'll have one song — usually something he's co-written — that he's prepared, and already decided will be a single. He'd stay there for three days if he had to, to get it right. And for everything else, he won't even go into the studio. He'd have speakers up in his office, and the engineer would cut the rest on his own. That's the way things were done in Nashville for years — buddies cutting buddies' songs.

"Those are the things I fought so hard against. So artists can make albums that are worth buying. Not a piece of plastic with two singles and a bunch of filler, and wonder why people don't want to spend their hard earned money on your record."

But even Randy Travis is falling into that trap...

"It's inevitable if you work within that system. I think George Strait is an even bigger waste. The way he makes records, the business dictates — but he doesn't have to do it that way. Country albums don't sell that much, so an artist very rarely gets rich from selling records. So what they make money from is doing shows. It

goes back to the old mentality of keeping them on the road for 200 nights a year.

"So they can't be very involved in preparing to record an album. The way George Strait makes records is, [producer] Jimmy Bowen chooses the material and screens the songs. George has approval but it's all done over the telephone. He's there when they cut the basic tracks and the final vocals, then he goes out on the road. So he's not very involved. Reba McEntire records this way, most of these acts. Because they have to go out there and work so much."

When Earle took the summer off to write songs, Nashville rumours thought something was wrong — summer being the most lucrative period to tour. "We've always approached it more the way rock acts do, which is to take a lot of time. I think Nashville's beginning to realise that when you get into record stores, you are competing with Bruce Springsteen. We have to consistently produce LPs of substance, so people can put it on the turntable or in the car and listen to the whole thing. If you make them wear the fast forward out on their cassette players, then you're not going to sell many records.

"There are a lot of political reasons why it happens that way here in town. The publishers here are very powerful, and a sort of good ole boy system existed here of everyone recording everyone's songs, and a huge amount of money is made in publishing. There are 2,400 country radio stations in the U.S., so you can make a lot of money and never sell a record if you have publishing."

At one point, says Earle, every head of a record label in Nashville owned a publishing company on the side — so the songs they owned were recorded. "That has changed quite a bit because people started to blow the whistle on 'em. That started the mentality of touring so heavily, and that this is a singles and songs town rather than an album town. We're going through growing pains

right now. We've got to make LPs here or we won't survive."

Earle is no stranger to discussing politics. Songs such as 'And The Rains Came Down' (about the plight of the U.S. farmer) and, on the new album, 'Snake Oil' (about the Reagan years) are bitter tales of economic injustice. What was his response to the election of George Bush to the presidency?

"That's a sore spot," he says. "Bush scares me. I'm a little bit in shock. I didn't think it could be botched bad enough for George Bush to get elected. I spend a lot of time being mad at people, but right now I'm mad at Dukakis, because I think he dropped the ball. They screwed it up."

"I think George Bush is dangerous. You're not dealing with Ronald Reagan, who was a figurehead with other people in control of the situation. Which was always scary, because we didn't have a clear picture of who they were."

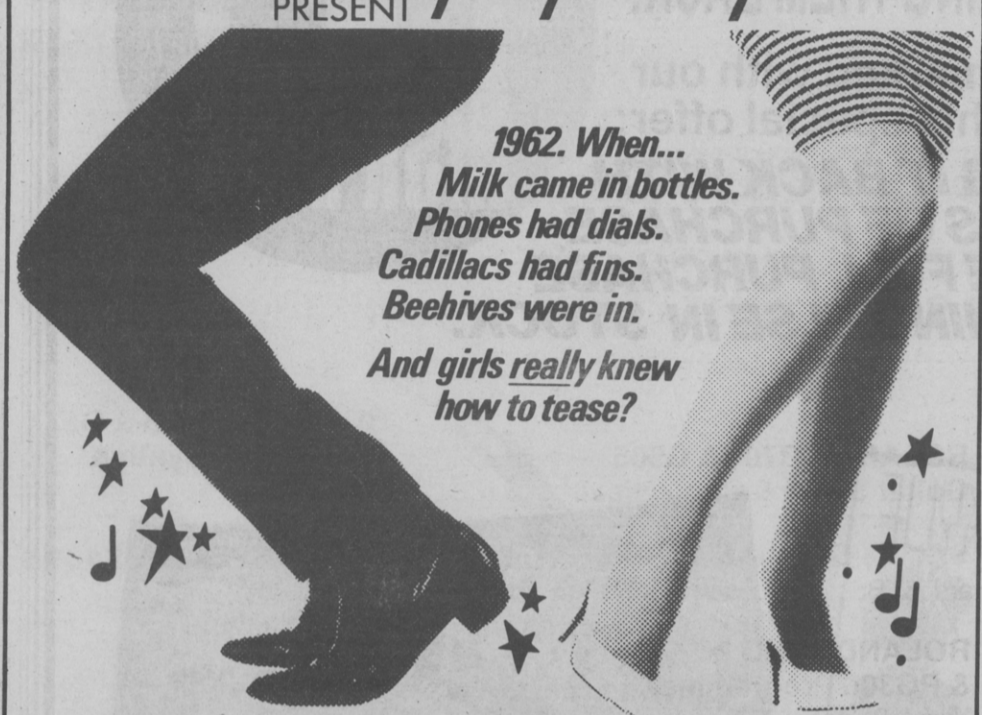
[Slowly] "George Bush used to be the director of the CIA. He's determined to prove that he's not a wimp, because he's been called that publicly, and he scares me to death."

When *RIU* spoke to Earle, he was about to leave for England to start a nine-month world tour that will eventually come to New Zealand. Then he'll return to Nashville, where his two sons live, and he likes to "hunt and fish and mess around with cars" — and "nickle and dime" his way to the next record. A distraction, though, is the novel he's writing at the behest of his girlfriend to "exorcise some demons."

"It started as a short story called 'Wheeler Country' about a guy hitchhiking in West Texas in the late 70s. He gets picked up by police for hiking on the interstate. He pays his fine and works around town to get some cash, and ends up staying for 10 years. The story finishes with him back on the highway, trying to remember how hitch-hiking goes and where 10 years went."

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