

The two sides of T-Bone

By Cort Fernald
Of the Emerald

Most people only take notice of the Superstar level of popular music — the MTV "Boy" Stings and the Duran Bowie Bowies. But, if you look closely, there's a number of levels of popular performers, from lowly local garage bands to successful and creative recording artists, who are making excellent music.

T-Bone Burnett, while a giant step beyond a garage band, is one of those successful and creative recording artists who hasn't reached the glitter and become today's haircut.

The EMU Cultural Forum will be presenting Burnett in what's billed as an intimate solo performance in the EMU Ballroom, Friday, May 11 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$5 for students, \$6 for the general public. Portland's Billy Rancher, also performing solo, will open the show.

Burnett, a native of Fort Worth, Texas, has played with the likes of Doug Sahm (Sir Douglas Quintet), Delbert McClinton and the legendary Stardust Cowboy. However, it was as a member of Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue, that Burnett came to widespread attention.

Burnett's solo recording career began in 1980 and the release of "Truth Decay." His 1982 effort "Trap Door" garnered the album of the year award from *Village Voice* and *Time*. Burnett's latest LP "Proof Through the Night" is receiving extensive airplay on the alternative radio stations. The attention is deserved — Burnett has an amazing corp of studio musicians on the LP, including Ry Cooder, Mick Ronson and Pete Townshend.

Not only has Burnett's recordings gained critical acclaim, so has his producing.



Burnett has produced Leo Kottke's recent LP "Time Step" and Los Lobos Grammy-winning EP "And a Time to Dance."

The *Emerald* interviewed Burnett in Los Angeles as he rested from a cross-country tour as Elvis Costello's support act. Burnett was eager to talk about many things, from how he writes a song to working with Costello and Townshend.

Emerald: How are you playing these solo performances — as solo acoustic or solo electric guitar?

T-Bone Burnett: I've got three dates up North and I think I'm going to do them straight... solo acoustic. Elvis Costello and I just did a tour together like that. We actually did a set at the end of the show together as The Coward Brothers. Henry and Howard Coward.

Emerald: How long have you known Costello?

Burnett: We just met. We've been mutual fans for some time.

Emerald: Your material is very thought-provoking. The cut I like the best on your latest LP is "The Sixties."

Burnett: That's been a real controversial one.

Emerald: How come?

Burnett: I think a song like that is supposed to be controversial.

Emerald: There's talk that it's about the Kennedys, Robert Kennedy's son.

Burnett: That's some of what set it off (the writing of the song), when Robert Kennedy's son got arrested again for heroin. The whole situation where all the hope of the 1960s is embodied in all the trouble the (Kennedy) family has had in the 1980s... I mean that song is really about the 1980s.

Emerald: The residue of the 1960s going into the 1980s. We can't escape the past.

Burnett: No, you can't. It's interesting what part of a movement gets incorporated into the society. There were so many good things about the 1960s. We've just kept the superficial parts of the 1960s.

Emerald: The fashions and not the ideas.

Burnett: Exactly.

Emerald: There used to be concern for the individual and the society as a whole, but everyone became "me" oriented in the 1970s.

Burnett: Yeah, very complacent.

Emerald: So are you trying to shake up the complacency?

Burnett: I'm just trying to put my point of view out. I'm not quite sure what affect a singer can have.

Emerald: Popular music has become the literature for the 1980s.

Burnett: Yeah, I think it is that way. I think there is something you can do. I'm not quite sure what. I think it's dangerous to begin to think you can actually persuade people. I think it's an area one has to be careful of. My primary concern is to make good music and make it so there is something in it that can provoke thought.

Emerald: You've recorded with a number of heavyweights — like Ry Cooder, Ronson and Townshend. What's your association with Townshend?

Burnett: We met a few years ago. I think he's another guy who's concerned about the same things we've been talking about. He's a really wonderful guy. In fact the whole area of show business I'm in, I find the people very thoughtful and (hesitates) loving.

Emerald: You're not in the glitter part of show business.

Burnett: Yeah, Elvis and I were talking on the road and I was saying that I was going to put together a new band called The Stereotypes. It seems such an obvious name, I can't believe no one has used it yet. I was saying how odd it is with the stereotypical rock'n'roll star — *If your hair is right, and your jeans are tight, it's going to be alright* — the sex and drugs and rock'n'roll and stuff. Everyone that I know doesn't do all that, doesn't take drugs. Elvis said, 'If you were in a heavy metal band you might not be saying that.'

Emerald: You're in a more creative area.

Burnett: Yeah, I'm in an end of the business where people are thinking about things. They're (heavy metal bands) great and funny, but they're not really thinking so much about life and what not.

Emerald: I've got to ask you this... how did you get the name T-Bone? Is it a nickname or did your mother name you that?

Burnett: It's a nickname I got from the



Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. records

neighborhood kids, when I was five. It just sort of came about. I've been trying to ditch it.

Emerald: You shouldn't, it's a classic. It works well with Burnett. Burnett's an old rock'n'roll name.

Burnett: Yeah, Chester Burnett, Johnny Burnett, Dorsey Burnett.

Emerald: You're not related?

Burnett: (laughs) No, we're just good friends, as they say in Hollywood. We probably are, they come from Tennessee and my family comes from Tennessee. Probably related back a few generations.

Emerald: You were talking about stereotypic rock'n'rollers a moment ago — you're a Christian and sometimes when rock'n'rollers become Christian they put their Christianity heavily into their music. This tends to alienate some of their audience. You're subtle about your Christianity — is that a conscious effort?

Burnett: Not so much. Hopefully these songs are inspired, art is supposed to be inspired. I look at it more like I'm given these songs and my job is to do them justice. I'm not terribly conscious of it while I'm writing.

Emerald: How do you write a song?

Burnett: I just wrote a song called "What the Missile Sees." I was in Chicago, in a hotel, and when channel 7 went off the air one of the cable networks came through on that channel only it wasn't decoded so the picture kept flashing back and forth between positive and negative and the sound was all garbled. There was a James Bond movie on. The last one with Sean Connery. It was real interesting to watch because it was so surreal. One of the early shots was of two cruise missiles about ten feet over the ground tracking some target. The point of view kept reversing to what the missile was actually seeing as it goes across the countryside. And I thought, 'that's a great idea for a song, because the missile can see anything.' It was seeing kids in a playground, a woman hanging out her wash, and two men having a fight. I mean that to me is an inspiration, because it puts every situation right on the razor's edge. You can say the missile sees two people making love. You can say the missile sees two people shooting each other.

Emerald: Good juxtaposition.

Burnett: It just puts people right on the edge of: 'OK, this is the last thing your doing.'

Emerald: Have you ever had any weird occurrences while on tour?

Burnett: (laughs) Every night, I think, is a really strange event. My shows aren't real serious. I try to make it enjoyable.

Emerald: Thanks for the interview T-Bone.

Burnett: Sure, man. Adios.

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