

## T-Bone's home, rare and well done

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Burnett finds his Southern roots during Great High Mountain Tour

*There are those who play for money, babe, and there are those who play for fame... yet there are still some who only play for the love of the game.*

**- T-Bone Burnett  
from "The Kill Switch"**

Henry "T-Bone" Burnett's homecomings have been a matter of routine since he set out to find a place within the bigger leagues of his chosen profession some 30 years ago. Talent seeks its truer level, and often times, that level is far from the place of one's upbringing.

Burnett found the niche - oh, brother, did he *ever* find it! - but his ties to Fort Worth have kept him returning routinely, whether as a performing artist on tour or as a West Side neighborhood kid intent upon staying connected with the folks back home.

His visit June 14-15 will find Burnett striking a higher local profile than usual, lending his artistry to the Children's Education Program allied with Bass Performance Hall. As one of Hollywood's pre-eminent authorities on Southern music in general and Bluegrass-style music in particular, Burnett has built the June 14 Bass performance around artists involved with two of his more prominent movie-scoring assignments of recent years. A luncheon June 15 at McNair Rehearsal Studio will feature remarks from Burnett and Dr. John Fierabend, presented by the Texas Music Project and the Chamber of Commerce.

Which movies? Well, if you have to ask, then you've probably missed out on something worthwhile. Burnett's *Great High Mountain Tour 2004* draws specifically from the music that he had selected for the soundtracks of Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) and Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2004).

"I call it my own personal Hadacol Tour," Burnett says, alluding nostalgically to a long-ago series of Southern concerts produced by the manufacturer of a patent medicine known as Hadacol. Hank Williams was a featured performer on the Hadacol shows. So was Bob Hope. A little something for practically all tastes, with a decidedly down-home flavor.

"The [Bass] program features a great many of my favorite artists -

artists whose music has been crucial to the movie soundtracks that I've helped to put together, and artists whose music feels a whole lot like coming home," Burnett said.

His announced lineup includes Alison Krauss, featured with Union Station & Jerry Douglas; the great banjoist Ralph Stanley; the Cox Family; the Nashville Bluegrass Band; the Whites; and Norman & Nancy Blake. Dan Tyminski, indelibly associated with the *O Brother* version of a traditional song called "Man of Constant Sorrow," is a featured artist.

Now, devotees of string-band music and Deep Southern harmonizing will recognize those names without further introduction. The likely selections will include "Man of Constant Sorrow" and the Whites' version of a Carter Family standard called "Keep on the Sunny Side." Then, there is the Blakes' version of "You Are My Sunshine," as well as Krauss' interpretation of "The Scarlet Tide," an Oscar-bait composition by Burnett and Elvis Costello, from *Cold Mountain*. The finale will feature "I'm Going Home" and "Idumea," songs from the Sacred Harp vocalizing tradition as heard in *Cold Mountain*.

Going back home, coming back home, leaving home with fond regrets - these are recurring themes in Southern music. The quest for home figures, in turn, in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Cold Mountain*. Both films, for that matter, owe their inspiration to one of the great homecoming stories in world literature, Homer's *The Odyssey*. *O Brother* transforms Ulysses into actor George Clooney and sends him on a journey of comic desperation through the Depression-era Southland. *Cold Mountain* finds its Ulysses in an AWOL soldier (played by Jude Law) of the 19th Century.

The *O Brother* assignment was something a homecoming for Burnett.

"*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* occupies a deep place in my heart," he said. "I believe I'd been in training to do that film since I was about two years old - that's about how far back the love of that music goes for me."

More often, Burnett's visits to Fort Worth are of the low-profile variety. His mother, Hazel Burnett, anchors the homestead as devotedly as she had done when Henry was a child.

"Hazel has spoken often to me about how we should do something with T-Bone and his music," says Paul S. Beard, Bass Hall's managing director. "It seems we've just been waiting for the right time to come around."

Burnett's membership in the loose-knit gang of musicians known as the Fort Worth Guitar Army requires the occasional appearance, as well, just to keep one's figurative dues paid up. But Burnett never

approaches those gatherings as some visiting dignitary. Music is a powerful equalizer, especially in a town that has spawned such diversified musical careers as those of Western swing's Bob Wills, *avant-garde* jazz's Ornette Coleman, blues-rock's Delbert McClinton and Ray Sharpe, and country gospel's Chuck Wagon Gang.

To say nothing of T-Bone Burnett.

"I've never really considered myself as having a career," Burnett will argue. "I've taken whatever paths have seemed the most interesting at any given time, and I've always considered myself fortunate to have been able to find situations that have allowed me to indulge my interests."

One path that has been little-traveled during recent years - sidelined largely by Burnett's accomplishments as a producer of other artists' music - has been his recording career as a singer-songwriter and bandleader.

"Lately," he says, "I've become interested in getting back to recording my stuff again. I've been writing a lot of material, and I expect I'll start putting it out next year - put together an itinerant bunch of musicians to jog around the country and play, get some new original recordings out where people can deal with 'em."

Burnett also is paying renewed attention to his groundbreaking recordings of the 1980s, with overdue re-issues appearing ever-likelier. Such introspective albums as *Truth Decay* and *Trap Door* may have been a generation ahead of their time, in any event, given the introspective depth of their songwriting. Somebody once likened T-Bone Burnett's music to Kurt Vonnegut's novels, owing to a shared concern with the human condition and an antic sense of humor and indignation, and dogged if the impression doesn't hold up.

"Starting in January, around then," Burnett says, "I'm looking at alternating a package of re-releases with some of the new recordings. I've got a couple or three ready to go, and I've become really eager to get back into that area."

Burnett, 56, says he left his hometown only gradually, "beginning, probably, around the late 1960s - that's when I had started trying to strike out for someplace new."

An early turning point came in 1975, when Burnett's cordial acquaintance with Bob Dylan led to an invitation to join the all-star Rolling Thunder Revue. Rolling Thunder, in turn, pointed toward a collaborative ensemble called the Alpha Band, which led to the solo debut with *Truth Decay* in 1980.

In the generation's span since then, Burnett has produced such artists as Los Lobos, Elvis Costello, Marshall Crenshaw, the BoDeans, Bruce Cockburn, Tonio K, the Counting Crows, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Gillian Welch, and the Wallflowers. Burnett's increasing

tendency toward spare instrumentation is heard to particularly striking effect on a collection called *Fan Dance*, by his wife, Sam Phillips.

“When you're from Texas, y'know, you can't ever really leave,” Burnett says. “The place stays with you, within you. And the things I'd learned as a child in Fort Worth - well, they're the things that have stayed with me and colored and affected all the work I'm doing, even today.”

One such influence is that Burnett declines to divide musical forms according to category.

“When I was a kid, the great radio stations, there - KFJZ, or maybe KXOL - would just play *music*,” he said, suggesting an inspiration for some of his more nearly modern-style work in scoring motion pictures. “There was no artificial separation according to whether a song was rock, or country, or blues - just music. Here's the Beatles, then something by Peggy Lee. Then, a Hank Williams favorite, and then something from Little Tommy Tucker, four songs in a row, no categories.

“And y'know, that's what I had tried to re-create when I was selecting the music for that movie called *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, a couple or three years ago. The story takes place in the South, over a period of maybe 30 years. And it just occurred to me that maybe the best way to reflect its story in music would be to try and re-capture that sense of how radio used to sound, before everything became so compartmentalized.”

Burnett radiates a palpable sense of wonder at having parlayed a love of music into a body of lasting work, whether or not he defines it as a career. Even his professional moniker, T-Bone, dates from a childhood spent relishing the sounds of a community rich in music.

“It's just one of those neighborhood nicknames,” he says, “something that attached itself to me when I was, oh, five or six years old.

“It's hardly as though I had consciously appropriated T-Bone Walker's name,” Burnett adds, referring to the great Texas guitarist of a generation earlier, who occasionally called Fort Worth home. “Anyhow, I came by the name honestly enough - however I might have come by it.”

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