

**T BONE
BURNETT**

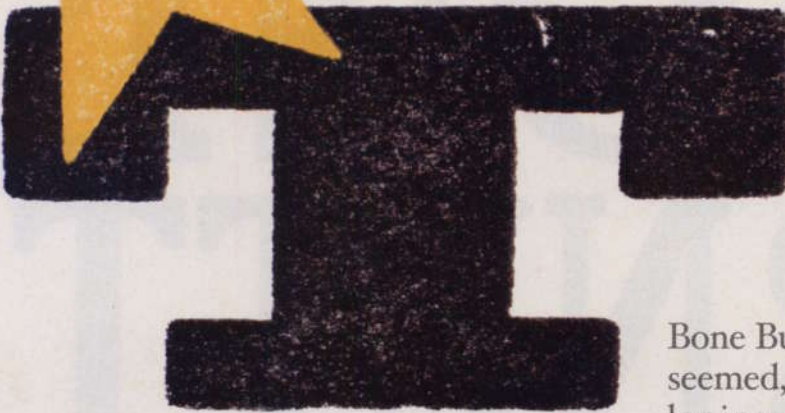
THE

INSIDER

COMES OUT TO PLAY

★ BY JOE RHODES ★

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANK W. OCKENFELS 3



*Honesty is the most subversive of all disguises.
I said good-bye a long time ago.
You must not have heard me.
We didn't build this place to last forever.
What a Town. What a Great Town.*

—T BONE BURNETT,
"HOLLYWOOD MECCA OF THE MOVIES,"
FROM *THE TRUE FALSE IDENTITY*

Bone Burnett was always more fragile than he seemed, even 30 years ago when he was the galloping wild man of Bob Dylan's mid-1970s

Rolling Thunder Revue, the merry prankster with the aviator goggles and the lasso with which he'd occasionally rope Roger McGuinn onstage. It was Dylan's show, of course, but T Bone, a half foot taller than anyone else in the band, jerky and frantic like a marionette whose strings weren't connected quite right, was hard to ignore. ★★ ★ Everyone expected him to become a star. His circle of advocates and admirers, a who's who of singers, songwriters, and big thinkers—not just Dylan but Kris Kristofferson, Warren Zevon, Sam Shepard, Pete Townshend, and later on, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits, and Bono—were smitten with his songwriting prowess and off-kilter charm. He was the human equivalent of that semisecret backroom club where only hipsters in the know hang out. Six feet five, with impossibly long arms, a shock of straw-colored hair that, to this day, swings down over his right eyebrow, and a penchant for dark glasses and darker clothes, he looked like a frontier preacher and sang like a man possessed. People noticed him, even if they weren't always sure who he was.

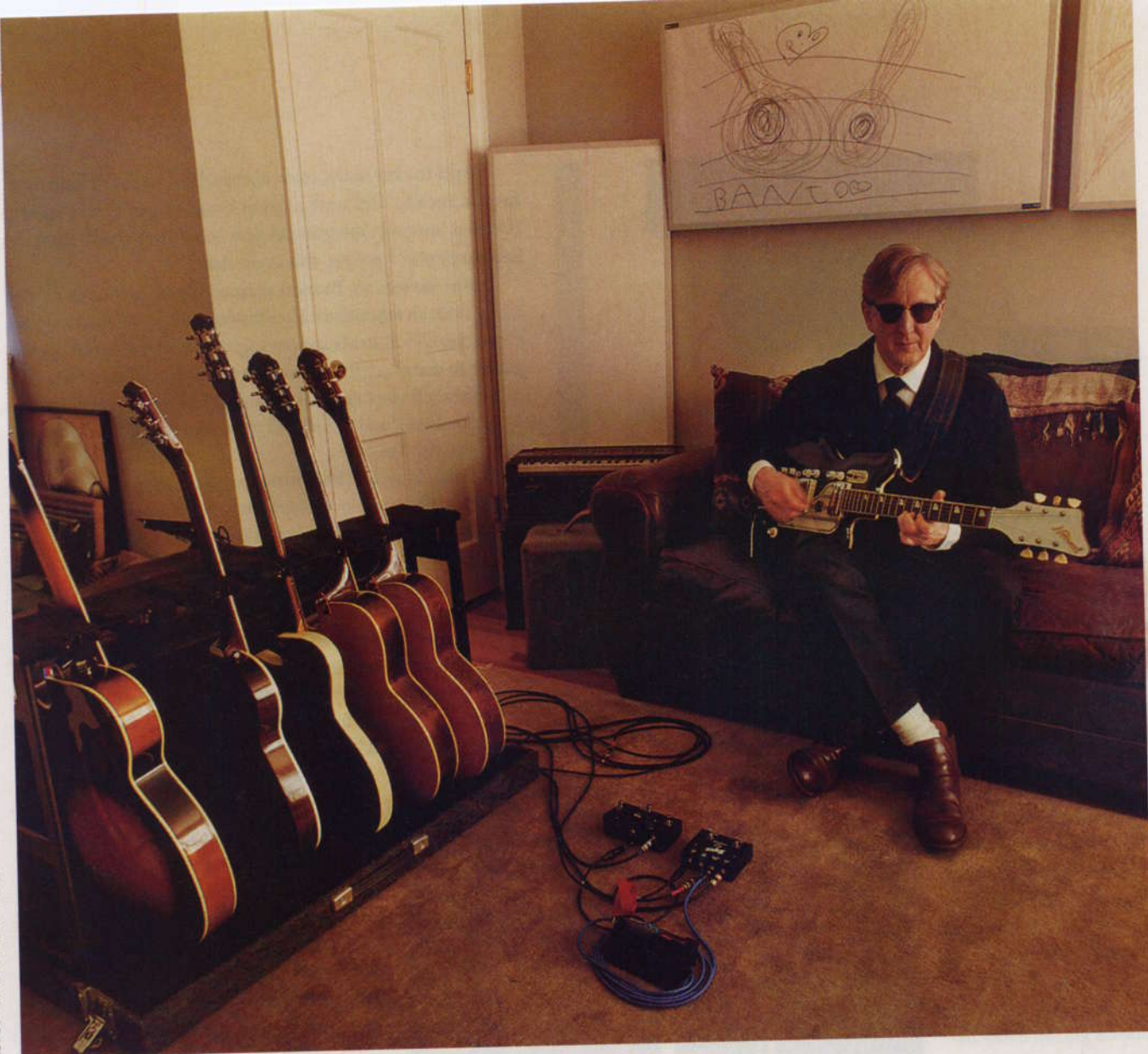
"He has a peculiar quality of craziness about him," Shepard wrote of Burnett in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, his chronicle of that traveling musical circus. "He's the only one on the tour I'm not sure has relative control over his violent dark side. He's not scary. He's just crazy." Those were the days when Burnett was capable of trashing a restaurant just to see what kind of reaction he'd get with his version of "action painting," which basically consisted of smearing the walls with foul mixtures of whatever was within flinging distance, including but not limited to cream cheese, urine, and beer.

"I wanted to know how far I could go, that's for sure," Burnett says, owning up to the excesses of his past even as he acknowledges that many of them were just for show. "I was never really all that crazy," he says, half whispering, as if admitting a long-held secret. "But I would behave metaphorically at times."

He is wiser and considerably calmer now, his hair thinner, his body wider—more like an A-frame and less like a beanpole. His face is still remarkably unweathered, except around the eyes, where the years have left their mark. That may explain why he has retained his proclivity for sunglasses. On a Friday

night in late April he is sitting in the kitchen of the rented two-story house in Brentwood that has been his home and his studio since 1998, wearing a buttoned-up cardigan, looking tired. It is getting close to midnight, and he is drinking tea that smells like a campfire and fixing a pepperoni sandwich, even though he knows it's way too late for a 58-year-old man who's about to go on a lengthy road trip to be eating things like that.

In just a few weeks Burnett will embark on his first full-blown tour (including a June 20 performance at the Wilshire Ebell Theater) since 1986. He had lost interest in his own songs for a while and based on his record sales, assumed the public had, too. Instead, he had shifted his attention to other people's sounds, becoming one of the most sought-after producers in town, crafting breakthrough albums for Los Lobos, Tony Bennett, the Wallflowers, Cassandra Wilson, Gillian Welch, Ralph Stanley, Roy Orbison, his former wife Sam Phillips, and his old friend Costello. He was the driving musical force behind the multiplatinum *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, putting himself in the forefront of a resurgence of roots music in America and in the process, winning a 2002 Grammy as Pro-



ducer of the Year.

Burnett became the guy to whom film producers and directors turned for authentic period music. He worked with Joel and Ethan Coen on *O Brother, The Big Lebowski*, and *The Ladykillers*, and assembled the Civil War-era music for *Cold Mountain* and the creole-zydeco gumbo of a soundtrack for *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, which was written and directed by his girlfriend, Callie Khouri. He not only produced the *Walk the Line* soundtrack but spent months teaching Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon how to emulate Johnny Cash and June Carter. He became the mastermind behind the curtain, leaving the applause to others, living on the outskirts of fame.

Ask him now why he moved away from his own music, and his answers vary. Sometimes he says it's because "I loved other people's ideas more than my own." Sometimes it's because the studio became a safe place to hide. "I like to keep some smoke between me and the rest of the world. Applause has always made me uncomfortable."

It still does. But partly because the success of *O Brother* has given him more confidence, Burnett is ready to give center

PRIVATE LIFE:

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stage another go. He's grateful, he says, for the attention that has accompanied the simultaneous release of *The True False Identity* and a 40-song collection of his earlier work, *Twenty Twenty: The Essential T Bone Burnett*, both on the DMZ/Columbia

label. For most of his life, admits Burnett, he was just too self-conscious to enjoy the spotlight, too sensitive for the rough-and-tumble of dealing with critics and profit-driven industry executives. It was easier not being seen.

"If you don't have an iron will, you can be broken," says Jakob Dylan, who knew Burnett as a family friend long before working with him in the studio. "And T Bone's heart at times may have been too big and too genuine to wrestle with the people you've got to wrestle with in order to be a success. But as a singer and a songwriter, he's undeniable. As great an asset as he is to other people—and he's one of the most successfully sidetracked people I've ever known—I listen to his songs and ask him, 'Why did you ever stop doing this?'"

T

JOSEPH HENRY BURNETT GREW UP IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS, gangly, awkward, and shy. His father was an executive for the Tandy Corporation; his upbringing was safe and secure. For a while he wanted to be golf great Ben Hogan, but that was just a phase. He has always been a voracious reader, drawn to Thurber, Perelman, and Joyce, and attracted to writers of every stripe, from George Bernard Shaw to Hank Williams.

When he was 14, he started hanging with Stephen Bruton. Still one of his closest friends and musical allies, Bruton has carved out a substantial career as a songwriter and guitarist, playing for years with Kristofferson and Bonnie Raitt. Back then he worked in his father's record store and had access to music that other kids in Fort Worth never got to hear. He and T Bone (a nickname from childhood) smoked cigarettes and played guitar. They listened to blues, British imports, jazz, and obscure mountain music, soaking up every exotic sound they could find.



"I'd get the key to the store, and we'd just play stuff for hours," Bruton recalls. "I'd start playing Dock Boggs or the Stanley Brothers and say, 'You want to hear something that'll scare the hell out of you? Listen to this in the dark.'"

Before he was 20, Burnett scraped together enough money, partly from an inheritance after his father died, to open a studio. He recorded local artists and put together deals with small labels to get them distributed. A demo for a half-crazed eccentric who called himself the Legendary Stardust Cowboy turned into the song "Paralyzed" and was picked up by Mercury Records, becoming a novelty hit in 1968.

"T Bone always had his eyes on the bigger picture," Bruton says. "When all of us were spending our money on guitars and amps, he goes out and buys a studio. He was going to Los Angeles and New York, trying to sell records. While we were all still trying to figure out how to get into the music business, he was already doing it. He knew what he wanted, and he didn't let anything stop him."

"Before we get too reverent about this," Bruton says, "it was always true that T Bone looked at this like a big chess game, and he knew how to play. He knows a lot more than he lets on."

Burnett had a gift for seeking out and befriending talented, influential people. Within days of his first visit to Los Angeles in the late '60s, he had hooked up with Taj Mahal, Delaney and Bonnie Bramlett, Van Dyke Parks, and drummer Jim Keltner, who has played with everyone from Steely Dan to George Harrison and who is a key part of Burnett's latest album and tour. Invited by Bruton to Woodstock, New York, in 1970, Burnett found himself playing with Bob Neuwirth, Paul Butterfield, and Rick Danko.

CONNECTED: (clockwise from bottom left) Burnett played in Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue, produced albums by Elvis Costello and Gillian Welch, and crafted soundtracks for Joel and Ethan Coen

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: KEN REGAN; © JIM SNEAL/BEIMAGES; CARLEY MARGOLIS/FILMMAGIC.COM; CARLO ALLEGRI/GETTY IMAGES