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*

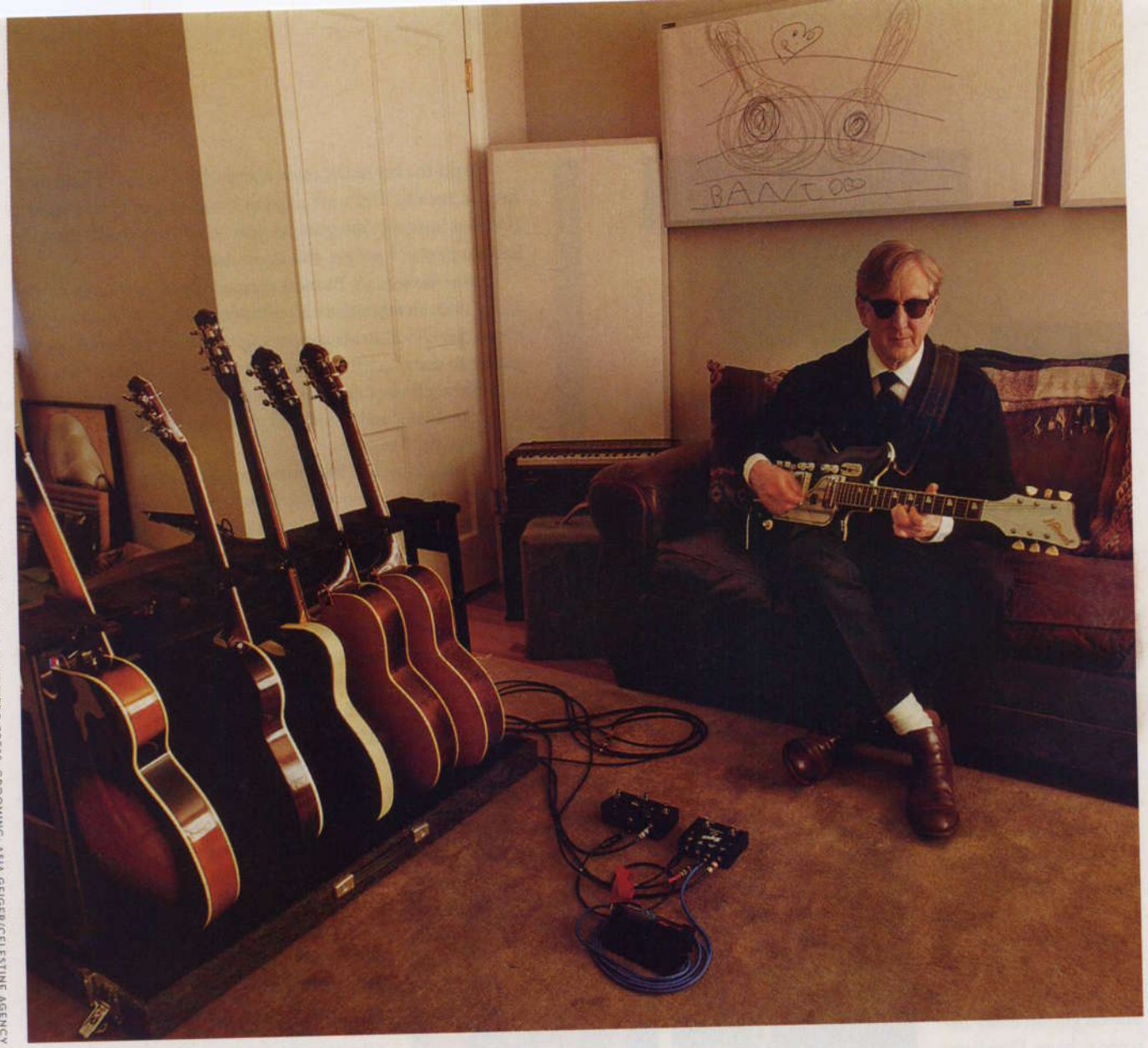
Bone Burnett was always more fragile than he seemed, even 30 years ago when he was the galloping wild man of Bob Dylan's mid-1970s Rolling Thunder Revue, the merry prankster with the aviator goggles and the lasso with which he'd occasionally rope Roger McGuinn onstage. It was Dylan's show, of course, 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-



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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 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.

PRIVATE LIFE: "I like to keep some smoke between me and the rest of the world," says Burnett. "Applause has always made me uncomfortable"

"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?'"

PHOTOGRAPH BY **FRANK W. OCKENFELS 3**

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 SMEAL/BEIMAGES; CARLEY MARGOLIS/FILMMAGIC.COM; CARLO ALLEGRI/GETTY IMAGES

After Janis Joplin's death that year, Albert Grossman, manager for Joplin and Dylan, briefly considered having Burnett replace her as lead singer of the Full Tilt Boogie Band.

Burnett was a member of the much-hyped, critically beloved, and ultimately commercially unsuccessful Alpha Band, which Clive Davis signed to Arista in 1976 and then cursed with the untenable expectation that the group would be "the next Beatles." It was not. There were solo albums, some of which sold respectably but most of which went unheard by all but Burnett's most devoted fans. Within weeks of being named 1983's Songwriter of the Year by the *Rolling Stone* critics' poll, he was dropped by Warner Bros. Records, his label at the time. He was still revered, still sought out by his more celebrated peers, but the idea that he would become a household name had faded.

"It's a great thing when you get over the fact that you're never going to be a member of Menudo and realize that what you loved about music originally is a vocational sense rather than a career opportunity," says Costello, clearly pleased at the new wave of attention Burnett has attracted. "T Bone's lived like a king his entire life. I think it's good that, on occasion, the accolades that befit his royal standing come to him."

The truth of it is that Burnett was too provocative to be a mainstream success, too hard to package or pigeonhole, too iconoclastic for radio or MTV. He would put out a country love song, pure and gentle like "River of Love," and then follow up with apocalyptic fables and screeching guitars as raw and confrontational as anything the Clash could have dreamed up. His lyrics went from "I wish you could have seen her dance" to "There is no escape except to go completely mad. / If it doesn't kill you right at first, it makes you wish it had."

That he was an unabashed, outspoken Christian probably didn't help. Secular audiences were suspicious of him, blaming him for Dylan's conversion to Christianity (both men deny this). The Christian-music universe rejected him as a heretic who was unwilling to toe the fundamentalist line. He railed against what he considered to be the sanctimonious hypocrisy of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and made references to Lao-tzu and Buddha as often as he did to Christ. He didn't fit in anyone's box.

"Faith has given me tremendous sustenance," Burnett says, "and it's part of who I am. Once you're in a place where you can clearly see that every breath you take is a step of faith, then it feels right to be grateful. And so I've just decided—on one hand I've decided and on the other hand I believe it's been completely decided for me—that I'll be grateful to the God of my fathers.

"But one of the things I love about living in Los Angeles is that all gods are worshiped here. I'm perfectly comfortable with that. There are those fundamentalist thinkers who are afoot in the world today who believe if you don't believe in the God they believe in, in the way they believe in that God, then you deserve death. That's the thing I find upsetting."

AS A PRODUCER, BURNETT'S GREATEST ASSET IS HIS ABILITY to bring diverse groups of musicians together, to know what he wants from them and to let them think it is their idea. He has had a particular appreciation for acoustic, organic sound, and for tricks of the trade he's absorbed along the way. "I watched him walk around the studio with his hands out like a blind man," Bruton says. "And he was going, 'Okay, put a mic here. Put a mic there, because that's where the air is moving.' He picked that up from some old engineer at the radio station in Fort Worth."

On one of Burnett's first visits to a movie set, in New York in the early '70s, actor Lyle Talbot pointed out how the slightest tilt of a light could determine the way someone's face looked onscreen. "And a record producer is trying to do the same thing," Burnett says. "Put the performer in their best light."

Burnett got mutual friend Waits to introduce him to the Coen brothers, after he saw *Raising Arizona* in 1987 and sensed that he and the filmmakers might share a skewed view of the world. When the Coens outlined their idea of building a film around Depression-era music, with a story line based vaguely on Homer's *Odyssey*, Burnett suggested that "Man of Constant Sorrow" would be the perfect central theme. It was also Burnett who predicted that the all-star compilation soundtrack, including the Ralph Stanley vocal of "O Death" that had scared the shit out of him and Bruton so many years before, would be a gigantic hit. He did not predict it would win the Grammy for Album of the Year, but that doesn't mean he was surprised. "I thought we had this wonderful music, played by some of the absolute finest musicians in the world, being exposed to people by a cool movie with George Clooney in it. How is that not going to appeal to people?"

HAVING LOST INTEREST IN HIS OWN SONGS FOR A WHILE, BURNETT BECAME ONE OF THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER RECORD PRODUCERS IN TOWN AND THE GUY TO WHOM FILMMAKERS TURNED WHEN THEY WANTED AUTHENTIC PERIOD MUSIC.

Shepard, who has collaborated with Burnett on songs and soundtracks for his films and plays, says, "The thing that struck me about T Bone, and right from the get-go, was that he was always seeking out the most raw and authentic aspect of the music. He was not interested in any of the » CONTINUED ON PAGE 200

station. Sitrick so thoroughly refuted the charges promulgated by Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton that Riverside County was a "racist community" that Beverly Hills, after its officers were accused of targeting African American motorists for "driving while black," brought him on board as well.

For all of Sitrick's audacity in championing difficult and at times dubious sorts, his enormous fees received almost as much attention. The bill for his work on the Orange County bankruptcy case was $450,776, while the tab for his efforts for Riverside County came to $227,750. Both governments protested, although in each instance the publicist countered that he saved them millions. In 1998, Dr. Steven M. Hoefflin, Michael Jackson's plastic surgeon, sued Sitrick for overcharging him. The physician had engaged the publicist to combat allegations that he'd molested patients while they were under anesthesia. The two settled their differences, but Sitrick's reputation as an expensive commodity was fixed. "My hourly rate is high, but it makes sense for both us and the client," he says. "The client knows exactly what he's paying for. A lot of firms do what I call 'buffet PR.' They charge you $10,000 a month for as much as you can eat. The agency does as little as possible, and the client wants as much as possible."

By far Sitrick's most lucrative client was one of his most troubled, the much-reviled telecommunications giant Global Crossing. During the mid-1990s, the publicist had represented Gary Winnick, the company's chairman, in a fight with the Reverend Sun Myung Moon over control of the Nostalgia Network. Winnick then hired him in 1998 to handle the press on Global Crossing's initial public offering, enabling Sitrick to invest in the company on the ground floor. At the height of the dot-com bubble, as investors bet on Global Crossing's ability to provide high-speed Internet access to a seemingly unquenchable market, the value of those shares increased by huge multiples, but when the bubble burst, it declined from $64 to $1. Sitrick handled the company's Chapter 11 filing. Despite the publicist's efforts, Winnick—who earned $700 million while his stockholders lost billions—became a symbol of the era's wretched excess. No amount of public relations could improve his image. Still, Sitrick and Winnick remain close. While the publicist rode half of his shares down, he sold the other half before the stock tanked. "Mike," says a friend, "made a shitload of money on Global Crossing."

Which is how it goes for members of Los Angeles's centurion class, those fixers and promoters who are outrageously rewarded for representing the seriously guilty and the truly wealthy. Until recently Sitrick could not have become part of this group, as most of its members are lawyers and financial advisers. But as the media have assumed center stage, America's courts and boardrooms are no longer the only meaningful arenas. Now the playing field has spread into a far more subjective realm, where the rules are uncertain, the referees ineffectual, and whirl is king. Those who can handle today's press, shepherding clients through the valleys of death and delivering them to better and sometimes even favorable coverage, are the most valued warriors of all.

Sitrick will not discuss his personal wealth—"I'm pretty secretive," he says. "I come from the school that the amount of money you have is nobody's business"—but it's there for all to see, testimony to his work for everyone from the archdiocese to the Getty, Rush Limbaugh to Ron Burkle. By fighting their fights in the media, he has moved, if not into their league, then at least into their neighborhood. In 1995, Sitrick built a 10,000-square-foot Hawaiian-plantation-style mansion with nine bathrooms in a gated community in Pacific Palisades. With the Global Crossing money he built a 6,500-square-foot weekend home on Malibu's Broad Beach. The house is next door to that of William Morris Agency president Jim Wiatt (a client) and down the road from that of Michael Ovitz (also a client, the former agent having recently hired the publicist to represent him in the Pellicano case). For a while Sitrick drove a red Ferrari 355. A silver-and-blue Shelby Series One and a silver-and-black Porsche 911 followed. At one point there was a Dodge Viper. Now Sitrick drives something with more gravitas—a 1971 Mercedes 280 SE 3.5 convertible with a beige exterior and a brown leather interior. Fewer than a thousand of this model were imported to the United States, making the car both a rarity and an emblem.

"The only other person I know who has one," says Sitrick, "is Robert Shapiro," O.J. Simpson's lawyer. "It's silver." LA

T Bone Burnett

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 91 » superficial stuff, the flurries, the things around the edges. T Bone goes for the throat."

Burnett's songs, laced with vestiges of the blues, hillbilly music, and the sophisticated pop he's listened to all his life—Cole Porter channeled through Howlin' Wolf—have always been filled with dark humor and sweeping social commentary, audacious swirls of lyrical imagery that are sometimes angry, sometimes sweet, sometimes too clever for their own good. They are accusations. They are confessions. They are sermons. They are jokes.

"Cowboy with no cattle, warrior with no war. / They don't make impostors like John Wayne anymore," he writes in "Fear Country," from the new album, which is as scaldingly anti-Bush and considerably more clever than anything in the new records from Neil Young or Paul Simon. "When you're out for revenge, dig two graves," he sings in "Every Time I Feel the Shift." "When you run from the truth, it comes in waves."

ALTHOUGH HE HAS frequently returned to Fort Worth, often for months at a time, Burnett has lived in Los Angeles for most of the last 35 years, bouncing from friends' couches in Echo Park and Hollywood, to apartments in Santa Monica, to the house in Brentwood. His living quarters are upstairs, his working space below. His recording studio is in the living room. A massive 24-track mixing console, surrounded by digital and analog gadgetry, is jammed in among the cluttered bookshelves, a fireplace, and throw rugs. Large abstract paintings by Larry Poons, another Burnett confidant, dominate the walls. Heavy maroon curtains can be drawn over the parlor windows, to keep in the sound and keep out the distractions of the world. It is a comfortable, intimate place.

This is where Phoenix and Witherspoon did much of their recording for *Walk the Line*, where Cassandra Wilson worked out most of her vocals for *Thunderbird*, where most of the songs on *The True False Identity* came to life. Some of the sound baffling is decorated and signed by Burnett's eight-year-old daughter, Simone. Her mother is singer-songwriter Sam Phillips, whose career was nurtured by

Burnett and whose eclectic pop albums are considered to be some of his best production work. The couple were divorced in 2004 after a 15-year marriage.

L.A. and Hollywood, for better and for worse, have gotten to feel like home. "I love Los Angeles, even though in some ways I still feel like I barely know it," Burnett says. "Hollywood I felt like I knew before I even got here. Hollywood to me was Ricky Nelson and Tina Louise. It was Frank and Dino and *77 Sunset Strip*. The whole thing was a groove. How could there have been a better place than that?" It was a place that kept turning up in his music. *Statue Makers of Hollywood* was the Alpha Band's third album. Burnett wrote a song called "Hefner and Disney," about a place "somewhere between Never Neverland and Wonderland. / In a land called Never Wonderland." He drew on this place for endless metaphors about shallow promises and shattered dreams, false idols and empty suits, murder weapons "subtle as a whisper in the dark."

"It's the end of the road, the end of the western migration stacking up against the Pacific Ocean," he says, trying to explain why it was inevitable that he would settle here, inevitable that he would stay. The turmoil, he says, is part of the irresistible charm. "Change still feels possible out here."

What looms in the short term is a return to the vagabond life of a singer on the road. Stops in 15 cities have been confirmed, but Burnett hopes—*expects* would be too strong a word—there will be more. He can see himself doing 150 shows a year, in all manner of venues, not unlike Dylan's never-ending tour. He can see himself doing music for every movie the Coen brothers make. His only commitment at the moment is to finish a soundtrack for director Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe*, which is built around Beatles lyrics and is due for release next year.

Beyond that, he is open to whatever comes his way, willing to step out of the shadows if that's what it takes.

"I am interested in getting away from the world of ideas and more into the world where science and religion and art are all the same thing," he says. "I'm interested in what all those things say about life, about something outside of you and inside of you at the same time. Getting to that place between heaven and earth where, you know, it's neither one." LA

Life (& Death)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85 » in 1915, a $30 burial.

Big John Gregg, a six-foot-three horseman and cattle rancher, took control from his father in 1928 and launched a long era of expansion. He eventually turned the cemetery into a nonprofit—a status challenged but upheld—while the mortuary was spun off into a separately run, for-profit entity. A block-letter sign, ROSE HILLS, was erected on a hilltop, less than half as tall as the 45-foot Hollywood sign, but at a similar altitude and lit up at night by blazing pink neon.

The memorial park's purchase in 1996 by the Loewen Group of Burnaby, Canada, turned it back into a profit-seeking venture, although Rose Hills Company otherwise operates with autonomy. Loewen was locked in an acquisition war with rival funeral giant Service Corporation International and paid $240 million for Rose Hills, while gobbling up smaller cemeteries and funeral homes. Loewen became overextended, filed for bankruptcy in 1999, and sold off much of its holdings as part of a reorganization. Since reemerging as Alderwoods Group, the corporation has remained the second-largest publicly traded funeral operator on the continent, behind SCI, and has stabilized, with annual sales exceeding $700 million, according to analyst Robert M. Willoughby of Banc of America Securities.

In April the two behemoths announced a tentative $856 million deal in which SCI plans to acquire Alderwoods by the end of the year. If it receives necessary approvals, the takeover will create a parent company with 490 cemeteries and 1,712 funeral homes and annual revenues of $2.5 billion.

DARK-HAIRED, 31-YEAR-OLD ISIS Huckins smiles when she remembers her decision to become an embalmer, and the reaction of her husband, Ken, then her fiancé. "He was a little turned off," she says. "He's fine with it now. It took a few months."

The job was a chance for a career, and she thought it would be interesting and important to people. Now she specializes in cosmetics, making sure the dead look good. Her tools include a curling iron, a blow-dryer, and cream-based makeup that she carries in a case resembling an oversize tackle box. Dressing and grooming a body can take from 30 minutes to three or four hours.

"I enjoy doing the hair, and making sure the mouth looks right," says Huckins, who received her training in the Cypress College mortuary program. "Families pay attention to that."

Borrowed photos guide her work. After the body is strapped to a lift and deposited in the casket, she tends to the final adjustment to the clothing. Often loved ones ask her to place personal possessions in the coffin: golf clubs, fishing poles, books, booze. "If it fits," she says, "we'll do it."

Huckins's job is just one of many performed in an elaborate dance of people and paperwork that families rarely see.

"They come to us on the worst day of their lives and say, 'Please help,'" says Gregg Williamson, the executive vice president in charge of marketing and sales. "They have no idea that 11 different departments are going to get involved, that they're going to get over 30 different employees involved."

Typically, the time between death and burial is two to four days. Strictly observant Jews and Muslims often want their dead buried faster—within 24 hours. Pressures mount if doctors are slow in signing death certificates. Rose Hills employs a team of four "D.C. runners" to keep funerals on schedule. (Burials and cremations cannot occur without signed certificates.)

"I've chased doctors to airports, to the gym, to their homes—anywhere they happen to be," says Mariana Arellano-Renteria, who started four years ago as a "long-haul" runner. She drives to Victorville and Sun City, racking up a thousand miles a week to track down her sometimes elusive prey. One doctor was heading for a flight when she rang his cell and got him to exit the freeway. He signed on the hood of his Mercedes. "I'm a bulldog," Arellano-Renteria says. "Ninety-five percent of the time I get the signature."

For 75 years Rose Hills logged all burials on paper—mostly index cards of different sizes, all in duplicate. The whole mess, 1.4 million cards, had to be hand punched into computers. Now the system knows where each body is, which plots are sold, which aren't, which graves have markers, and which need repair.

It can take up to 15 men to fill a grave, starting with a framer, who uses a map, a tape measure, and spray paint to mark a precise outline of the burial easement. Men op-