

**T BONE  
BURNETT**

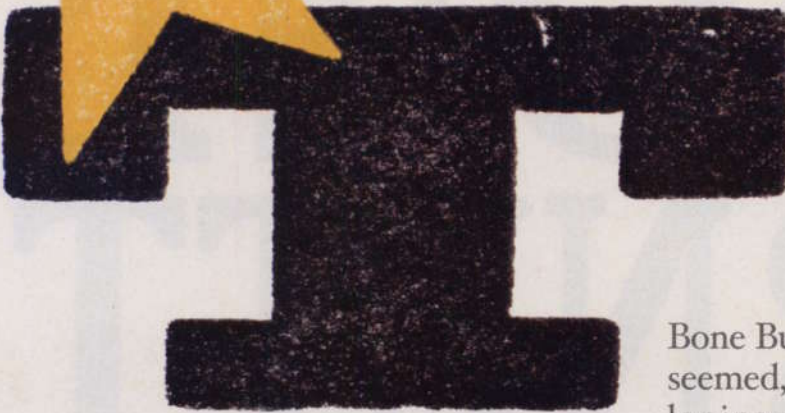
**THE**

**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-