

Being T-Bone Burnett

Monday, 17 April 2006

By Donald L. Hughes

Joseph Henry Burnett is not a Rock Superstar whose name is on everyone's lips, but he's been having a large but quiet impact on popular culture. What are his claims to fame? He's a singer and song writer who toured with Bob Dylan's legendary Rolling Thunder Revue in the mid-1970's and later produced groups like Counting Crows, The Wallflowers, BoDeans, Los Lobos, Bruce Cockburn and others.

More recently, he produced the music for films like "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and the Johnny Cash biography, "Walk the Line."

T-Bone Burnett is a Christian, and he doesn't hide that fact. He doesn't have to because he's not a raging fundamentalist, but rather a thoughtful evangelical who is keenly aware there no false lines between the sacred and the secular. He is as happy quoting the lines from one of his songs as he is quoting from the works of G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis or Thomas Merton.

After the tour with Dylan, he teamed up with Rolling Thunder alumni Steven Soles and David Mansfield to form the Alpha Band, and had other collaborations with the B-52s, Ry Cooder, Bono of U2 and Elvis Costello.

Burnett produced Roy Orbison's two-record album, "In Dreams: The Greatest Hits," which was released in 1987. Later, he was the musical director and a guitarist for Orbison's HBO television special, "Roy Orbison and Friends, A Black and White Night," a classic concert that is still replayed on cable stations.

Burnett is married to Sam Phillips, who used to be known in the Christian music world as Leslie Phillips. He produces her albums as well.

His own albums include "Truth Decay" (1980) and "The Tooth of Crime" (1997), the soundtrack for a Sam Shepard play. Perhaps his most critically acclaimed solo album was "The Criminal Under My Own Hat" (1992). He released "The True False Identity," early in 2006, and "Twenty Twenty - The Essential T Bone Burnett," a 40-song career-spanning retrospective, was released May 16, 2006 on DMZ/Legacy Recordings.

One of Burnett's most well-known gigs was doing the music for the Coen Brothers film, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" The film has become a kind of classic, but the soundtrack received acclaim in it's own right. Burnett was first a musical understudy to Carter Burwell on the Coen Brothers film, "The Big Lebowski" and they exchanged roles on "O Brother." In

this film Burnett blends 1930s and 40s country and gospel music into the plot almost as if it were a character itself.

His most recent efforts in movie music have also received acclaim. He has been the executive music producer for such films as "Walk the Line," "The Ladykillers," "Cold Mountain," and "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood."

He writes and arranges some of the songs in these movies too.

Burnett was raised in a Christian home, according to a Radix magazine interview, but formally became a follower of Jesus as an 11 year-old at a Christian sports camp. An invitation to receive Jesus was given, and he responded because, as he said, "Naturally I wanted to be saved." He felt this act was an expression that came out of an intense religious need he had in his life at the time, a need which he has experienced several times since. Burnett said, "At different times in my life I met God from a different point of view."

Burnett is concerned about individual spirituality and thinks religious institutions, like those of the religious right, have let Jesus down. He told Radix magazine, "I think it's too late for institutions. Christ was saying that every moment touches eternity, every moment we live in. Now is the acceptable time of salvation. That's because here, this moment, right now, is an eternal moment. And you can touch it. Institutions are irrelevant at this point. As soon as you come up with another institution, it's sucked into the same vortex, manipulated in another way, turned into just what it's always been."

He said, "For the last 20 years I have been endeavoring to truly be in the world but not of the world. But I'm horribly of the world and I screw up," according to Radix magazine. He added, "We are Christians because we are redeemed. People like myself, Bruce Cockburn, Bono and Bob Dylan have tried to bring love and perspective and Christ to people who can't hear Jerry Falwell."

Burnett shares his faith wherever he goes. He reportedly had a strong influence on Bob Dylan's conversion in the mid-70s. Today, Burnett is reluctant to speak for Dylan about the status of his faith, except to say the man is following the path. According to journalist Mark Feldbush, Burnett said, "I've made it a policy not to talk about Bob Dylan. But I will say this, his career has been about Bob Dylan's search for God."

T-Bone Burnett is aware of his own path as well. He wants to put spirituality in the forefront, not the institutional aspects of the faith. He wants Christian faith to have an impact on our culture. He wants to offer the gospel in understandable terms through his music. As Burnett says, "You can sing about the Light, or you can sing about what you see because of the Light. I prefer the latter."