

T Bone Burnett

The True False Identity

T Bone Burnett is an American original. A songwriter and performer steeped in our nation's deep musical heritage, T Bone has emerged from a self-imposed 14 year hiatus as a recording artist to release two highly-anticipated collections of music simultaneously: *The True False Identity*, his first album of new original songs since 1992, and *20/20: The Essential T Bone Burnett*, a 40-song retrospective spanning Burnett's entire career of music-making. T Bone says of his extended break, "After the last record (1992's *The Criminal Under My Own Hat*), I felt I could write some new songs and go around the track again, but I didn't feel that I would get anywhere. The road had become too difficult. Music had come completely apart for me. But more importantly, I didn't have anything I wanted to say. It all seemed pointless, so I decided to explore some of the other ideas that were coming my way. I needed freedom. I needed time to find another way into playing music again."

Closing one door clearly opened numerous others, as T Bone's time away from recording and performing paved the way for one of music's most multi-faceted and successful careers. His multitude of musical identities include: Grammy-winning producer, (the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, the Tony Bennett and k.d. lang album, *A Wonderful World*); Oscar-nominated songwriter ("The Scarlet Tide" from *Cold Mountain*); indie record label founder (DMZ Records); soundtrack composer/Executive Music Producer (*Walk The Line*, *The Big Lebowski*) and versatile studio wizard (Elvis Costello, Roy Orbison, Tony Bennett, k.d. lang, Alison Krauss, Counting Crows, the Wallflowers, Sam Phillips, Gillian Welch, and Ralph Stanley).

It is no coincidence that T Bone is releasing both a retrospective and a new album on the same day. In his revelatory liner notes for *20/20*, he has written, "This is the way I wanted to close the book on these songs from a dead man, and open the book on the new life I am beginning after forty years of wandering in the desert."

An enigmatic sentiment coming from a man whose solo work has always been filled with droll humor, sardonic wordplay and keen cultural observations. But, for T Bone Burnett, the past is prologue and *The True False Identity* is the fulfillment of an artistic vision that's been forming in the back of his brain for decades.

Pop music is traditionally a young person's medium, but with *The True False Identity*, T Bone Burnett has carved out a space in that pantheon of artists making their most vital and compelling works in the light of wisdom, experience, and seasoned perfection of craft.

"When I was young, I used to write all the time. My father asked me if I was going to be a writer, and I said I thought I probably was, and he said, 'Don't publish anything until you're fifty, because before then, you won't know what you're talking about.' I was never able to forget those words - even if I didn't know what he was talking about at the time - so there was always a part of me that was standing back from what I was doing. But I have to admit, he was right. Somewhere along the way I heard that everything we remember Sophocles for, he wrote between the ages of 50 and 70. That was an inspiring thought, to say the least. I couldn't have written these songs or made this record until now, without having seen the things I've seen and without having gone through the things I've gone through."

As T Bone explains, the aim of *The True False Identity* is to "erase the nonexistent line between comedy and tragedy. In the theater, you hear laughter and gasps at the same moment. Some people are amused by the same thing other people are appalled by." As Burnett observes, "The tragedy *and* the comedy is that reality has been devoured by Image Management. Today, you can *say* anything you want and you can *do* anything you want. Then, you can say you didn't say it or didn't do it and no one will remember or know the difference or believe anything other than what he or she wants to believe."

In his own perspective on social and political realities, T Bone cites the fact that "I hear it often said that fifty percent of the people are out of the mainstream. That is an absurd

joke that people say with dead seriousness. And I hear each fifty percent use the exact same words to describe the other. We live in an age of language pollution. Words like 'values' and 'freedom' have been used with great cynicism and stripped of their meaning."

The musical genesis of ***The True False Identity*** has its roots in the records T Bone and his musicians immersed themselves in while recording. Burnett acted as DJ for those sessions, spinning records and videos between takes. "We were listening to Bo Diddley, Howlin' Wolf, The Carter Family, and a lot of Haitian music," he says, "so the axis this music turns on is some kind of line drawn from New Orleans through Mississippi and Tennessee to Haiti."

A song like "Zombieland" ("Machines always do just what you tell them to do/As long as you do what they say/Machines gonna stomp/To that devil beat in Zombieland") with music throbbing slow and mad like some delirious new language is more than a mere critique of media-generated hypnosis. It's a peek through the gauze into the eye of reality. "It's not just the media," T Bone explains. "Modern religion has turned people's minds into thousands of conflicting ideas, it's politics, the implicit memory of our culture, conflicting pieces of information that are never resolved."

In "Palestine, Texas," T Bone constructs a nimble litany of internal rhymes based around the Rat Pack characters, rising and cascading into a waterfall of punch lines, the narrative through-lines driven home by the pounding sway of the song's central guitar-bass-drums riff.

According to T Bone, the songs that make up ***The True False Identity*** were conceived during a period of isolation. As he explains, "I went away for a month, the summer before last, to a tent in the woods and sat there every day and wrote about 200 pages of couplets and verses, all in longhand." Upon his return to Los Angeles, T Bone honed those pages into songs, then started planning the sessions and casting the musicians from a long list of amazing players he had worked with over the years. When this band entered the studio several months later, they were able to work through the arrangements

rather quickly and the entire recording process took less than a month. Editing and mixing the dozens of hours of tape took nearly a year, however.

"I have been working on this sound for a long time. "We had done a great deal of experimentation in the studio and getting the sound was not something that could be gotten to quickly," T Bone explains. Indeed, the unique percussive and rhythmic textures of ***The True False Identity*** are anchored by the use of three drummers on most of the album's tracks, and T Bone's production approach also utilized guitars, bass and keyboards as percussion instruments. "All instruments are drums really. Some have strings attached, some you blow into, but they are all resonating chambers that you attack in some way. I wanted to put listeners in the middle of this new sound, to experience it almost in 3D. I told the band to imagine we were playing in an auditorium, and to imagine that auditorium as a giant maraca, and that we wanted to shake the audience as if they were beads inside the maraca."

A work of profound poetry and music, ***The True False Identity*** provides tuneful riff-driven inquiries into the nature of consciousness in songs like "Every Time I Feel The Shift" ("When you're out for revenge dig two graves/When you run from the truth it comes in waves"); the inevitability of a fading relationship in tracks like "I'm Going On A Long Journey Never To Return" ("Oh this death/Moment by moment/Darker and darker/Down and down/I feel your cold breath"); the power of love against the insidiousness of hatred in songs like "Seven Times Hotter Than Fire" ("If I was dead and buried in the cold hard ground/I would rise from the grave and come and track you down"); and the paradox of love itself in "Baby Don't Say You Love Me," with its deceptively jaunty melody underpinning a narrative that reads like Lao-Tze's "Art of War" as applied to 21st century romance.

For those familiar with T Bone's impressive repertoire, or who are coming to his distinctive and highly-acclaimed work for the first time through the ***20/20*** retrospective, one of the most striking things about ***The True False Identity*** is how it sounds unlike any of Burnett's other records. T Bone credits his musical exploration of the last 15 years as a key reason for the artistic leap between his previous work as a recording artist and the

bold new songs and sound of *The True False Identity*. "One day when we were in New York, just beginning work on a play, I said to Sam Shepard, 'I've completely lost the handle. I don't why one note should be there instead of another one. I don't even know what music is anymore,' and he said, 'Well, when you do it, that's what it is.' Working in the theater and in films gives you lyrical and sonic freedom you don't have in the traditional record business where I had spent most of my working life. I was determined not to bring any of those old limits and preconceived notions of what a record should be back into the studio with me."

With *The True False Identity*, T Bone Burnett has done it, and that is what it is.

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Born Joseph Henry Burnett in St. Louis, Missouri, T Bone grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, where he first made records in 1965, producing Texas blues, country, and rock & roll bands and, occasionally, himself. In the early 1970s, he relocated to Los Angeles, where he still lives and works as a producer and recording artist. In 1975, he toured with Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review tour before forming his own group, the Alpha Band, with other musicians from the tour.

Burnett returned to recording solo in the late 1970s and has gone on to record numerous critically acclaimed albums--including 1992's Grammy nominated *Criminal Under My Own Hat*--under his own name. He has written music for two Sam Shepard plays--"Tooth of Crime (Second Dance)" and "The Late Henry Moss"--and composed music for a production of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

A prolific and versatile producer, T Bone Burnett has helmed highly successful recordings for Elvis Costello, Roy Orbison, Tony Bennett, k.d. lang, Alison Krauss, Counting Crows, the Wallflowers, Sam Phillips, Gillian Welch, and Ralph Stanley among numerous others. Burnett was musical director for the concert film, "Roy Orbison

and Friends: Black and White Night," which featured Orbison and an all-star band of Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits, Bonnie Raitt, Burnett and many others.

In 2001, he served as Composer and Music Producer for the Coen Brothers' film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?," scoring the film and producing a soundtrack of "old-timey" American music performed by musicians relatively unknown to the public at large. That soundtrack album became nothing less than a cultural phenomenon, selling nearly 9 million copies and dominating the Billboard album chart for more than a year. In 2002, Burnett took home four Grammy Awards: Producer, Album of the Year for O Brother, Where Art Thou?; Producer, Best Traditional Folk Album for Down From The Mountain; Producer, Best Compilation Soundtrack Album For A Motion Picture, Television Or Other Visual Media for O Brother, Where Art Thou?; and Producer of the Year for his work on the above projects and Sam Phillips' Fan Dance.

He was Executive Producer, along with the Coen Brothers, of the "Down From The Mountain" concert documentary, filmed at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville in 2000. The success of that concert and film, along with the phenomenal success of the "O Brother" soundtrack, led to T Bone and the Coen Brothers producing two highly-successful concert tours featuring the music, musicians and spirit of "O Brother, Where Art Thou?": "Down From The Mountain" in 2002 and "The Great High Mountain" in 2003.

In 2002, Burnett and the Coen Brothers joined forces again to form DMZ Records, a joint venture with Columbia Records, and produced the new label's inaugural releases: a new album by the legendary bluegrass musician Ralph Stanley and the "Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood" soundtrack. DMZ has since released several critically-acclaimed soundtrack albums, produced or executive-produced by Burnett, including Cold Mountain (2003), A Mighty Wind (2003), Crossing Jordan (2003), and The Ladykillers (2004), a personal favorite of T Bone's which reunited him with the Coen Brothers for the first time since "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" One of his songs for Cold Mountain, "The Scarlet Tide," co-written with Elvis Costello and sung by Alison Krauss, was nominated

for an Academy Award for Best Song and won the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Anthony Asquith Award for Film Music.

He earned a fifth Grammy for his production on 2003's *A Wonderful World* album by Tony Bennett and k.d. lang.

T Bone Burnett also served as executive producer for the highly-lauded debut album from Ollabelle, released on DMZ/Columbia Records in March 2004. He produced the debut album, *Future Perfect*, from experimental band Autolux for DMZ/Columbia which was released in October 2004, as well as the new album by Cassandra Wilson, *Thunderbird*, which will be released in March 2006. He also wrote the score and several songs for the Wim Wenders and Sam Shepard film, "Don't Come Knocking," collaborating with Bono and Andrea Corrs and Cassandra Wilson, which will be released in the spring of 2006.

He most recently served as Executive Music Producer for the highly-acclaimed Johnny Cash biopic, "Walk The Line," produced the film's RIAA gold-certified soundtrack album and composed its score. Burnett's work on that film earned him another BAFTA nomination in 2006.

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