

T-Bone Burnett

A Producer With Teeth

by Patrick Berkery

It's only fitting that producer/musician T-Bone Burnett refers to drums as "traps" in conversation, and that he asks—with genuine lack of knowledge—if Tama is a reputable brand of drums.

As you might gather from the at-once funky, mysterious, and rustic sound of Burnett's recordings—like 2000's Grammy-winning *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, and last year's roots 'n' roll collaboration between Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, *Raising Sand*—the Texas-reared vet who cut his teeth as part of Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review is an artist out of time.

That's not to say Burnett's solely a conduit to some odd, old-timey muse. For all that is diffuse (see his latest solo album, *Tooth Of Crime*) and retro (a pending covers disc with The Who) about his work, he's also earned multi-platinum records for producing modern rock acts like Counting Crows and The Wallflowers, and managed to record Spinal Tap without spontaneously combusting.

Burnett's also managed to work with dozens of truly fantastic drummers (ranging from legends like Jim Keltner and Earl Palmer, to up & coming drummers with the stuff of legends, like Jay Bellerose and Carla Azar) during a nearly forty-year career that shows no signs of slowing down.

MD: Even though you've worked with such an impressive array of drummers, is there any one name you're dying to add to that list?

T-Bone: No, not really. The guys and girls I work with have an artist's mentality, not really a drummer's mentality. What I mean by that is there's more to their lexicon than, "I know this beat, I'm going to play this beat," or a pre-disposition to pull a band. All the drummers I work with, they don't pull the band. They play as part of the ensemble. I wouldn't know how to work with the other kind on *any* level.

MD: There's a wide range of drumming styles and drum sounds on your records. But is there one constant you look for in a performance or a sound?

T-Bone: It's easier to say what I *don't* look for. I don't look for "keeping time." That's the last thing that occurs to me anymore, because time is this thing that happens as we go along. It's not something that clicks every second, although it can be thought of that way. Music happens in waves. There are big, wide places for beats.

Right now I'm working with [Robert Plant/Alison Krauss



drummer] Jay Bellerose, who is definitely an artist. He's taking drums to a new place, I think, that nobody's really gone to. Although people have done all the things he's doing, it's just the way he puts it all together.

MD: Speaking of Jay and wide places for beats, one song that comes to mind is "Sister Rosetta Goes Before Us" from *Raising Sand*. It's just a kick and snare played at such a slow, deliberate tempo. Does it take a while to nail something so slow and spacious when there's no hi-hat to glue the beat together?

T-Bone: Yeah, because it was so slow. Also, we were in a different studio—a cement room, so all the sounds were really fast. It was hard to play slow in that kind of environment. You've got all this high, fast sound coming back at you, and it tends to make you speed up. We were trying to catch up with the reflection.

We had a really hard time getting that one, and everyone just had to play back, back, back; *so* back. As an aside, I hardly ever use hi-hats. Jim Keltner made a rule on my last record [*True False Identity*]: no hi-hats. There were three drummers and he said, "Okay, if there's going to be three drummers, then no hi-hats." A hi-hat is like the teacher tapping on the podium with a pointing stick. It's too strict; it's too machine-like, that interpretation of time. It dictates too much.

MD: And hi-hats can chew up frequency space.

T-Bone: We tend to use big, huge bean-shell shakers, so that frequency doesn't go "chk, chk, chk, chk," it goes "frwush, frwush" or something like that. [laughs] It arrives and decays, all part of a wave. That's something else that Jay does. He has shakers on his ankles, and things on his wrists, things in the stick. He can get it going like he's five people. It's just a whole thing that happens. It's a world of sound rather than a drum beat.

MD: You're not one for click tracks, I take it....

T-Bone: That's another thing I *really* don't like. We have to use

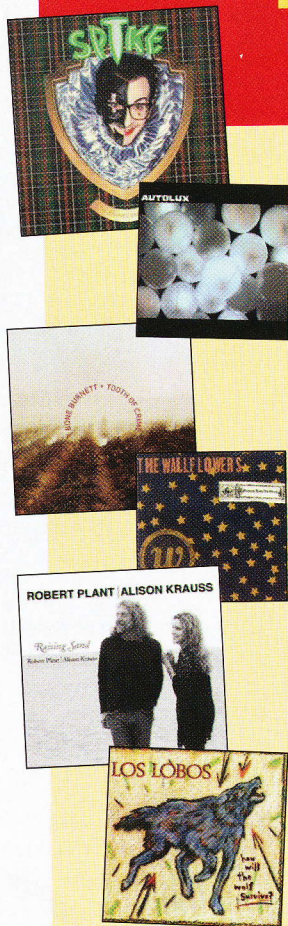
them for movies and things like that. And we've all gotten so good at playing with clicks. Really, we don't need them anymore. That's a good thing, because once the thing starts, everybody just catches that thing and stays there.

MD: With your recordings, the sound of the kit is as integral to the song as the performance. When you hear a song initially, are you mapping out how you want the drums to sound?

T-Bone: No. That's why I work with a lot of these guys, because I don't have to do that. We've developed such a good communication over the years. There's an aesthetic we've developed. I think of it as an ethic, actually. I just listen and say, "Let's do *that one* now," and everybody creates their own world of sound.

Keltner and I have been working together almost forty years. [Engineer] Mike Piersante and I have been working together for ten years, especially in low register complexity. And Keltner is a genius at that. He's always played with very ringing drums and with all kinds of funky stuff. So we're working in "booms" and "clangs" and "dings" and "rings"—we're working in that kind of world. And Keltner's taught me a tremendous amount. Drummers especially teach you a lot, because they deal in tone from a completely unique perspective.

MD: When I hear the drum tracks on your records, I



TASTY T-BONE

10 Choice Drum Tracks, Recorded Under T-Bone Burnett's Watch

1. "Turnstile Blues" Autolux, *Future Perfect*

Carla Azar lays down a busy, booming rumble, akin to John Bonham and Bernard Purdie having a drum-off in an empty gymnasium.

2. "Anything I Say Can And Will Be Used Against You" T-Bone Burnett, *Tooth Of Crime*

Jim Keltner's meaty shuffle and snappy rolls offer a nice counterpoint to this song's discordant wall of noir noise.

3. "Veronica" Elvis Costello, *Spike*

Jerry Marotta picks just the right spots to drop in some frantic fills in this upbeat pop song.

4. "Sister Rosetta Goes Before Us" Robert Plant & Alison Krauss, *Raising Sand*

Jay Bellerose plays to the spacious vibe of this dark dirge, keeping deliberate time that is beautiful in its sparseness.

5. "One Headlight" The Wallflowers, *Bringing Down The Horse*

Studio drummer Matt Chamberlain pushed this song nicely with a four-on-the-floor groove and—listen closely—not a single cymbal crash.

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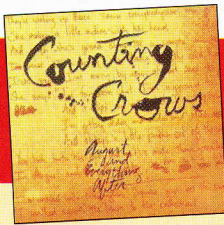
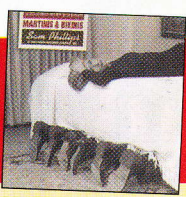
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6. "Round Here"

Counting Crows, *August And Everything After*

Burnett thought drummer Steve Bowman was the best musician in Counting Crows, and it's hard to argue that point after hearing the funky groove he lays down here.

7. "Zero Zero Zero!"

Sam Phillips, *Omnipop*

It's a team effort on this infectious fusion of Polynesian guitar and pop: Jim Keltner playing a marching figure on snare, with Paulinho Da Costa on bongos and Matt Betton on marimba.

8. "Gone, Gone, Gone (Done Moved On)"

Robert Plant & Alison Krauss, *Raising Sand*

Jay Bellerose's long gone beat sounds and feels like something tracked at Sun, circa 1955.

9. "Baby I Can't Please You"

Sam Phillips, *Martinis & Bikinis*

Mickey Curry lays down just the right groove for the percussion to take the lead and give this song its galloping feel.

10. "Don't Worry Baby"

Los Lobos, *How Will The Wolf Survive?*

Louie Perez kicks this rootsy rave-up into high gear with his steady shuffle.

can't help but think that you sifted through a hodge-podge of old Leedy and Rogers kits, and pored over a dozen vintage snare drums to find the right combination. But are my ears being deceived and what I'm actually hearing is a brand new Tama kit?

T-Bone: No, they haven't. [laughs] Tama...is that one of the good kits?

MD: Yes, they make top-of-the-line stuff....

T-Bone: Do they? Just generally speaking, those kinds of sounds—it's not what I'm looking for. Less in drums probably—I really hear it in guitars, the jagged noises that transistors and such produce. I don't know, maybe it's just the way a newer kit looks, too?

There's this great video of Al Green from *Soul Train*, doing "Here I Am," and the drummer is playing a kit where one of the drums is pink, another is red—it's just this completely insane looking set of drums. And he's killing! At the end of the day, it's the person, not the instrument. Whatever the rig is, if it's happening, it's happening.

MD: You've worked with Earl Palmer. I imagine he could find the sweet spot on a brand-new kit.

T-Bone: On anything! [laughs] That's right....

MD: With all the commercial and critical success you've had, your work with Spinal Tap on *Break Like The Wind* gets obscured. The big question is this: Who played drums? "Stumpy Joe" Childs and Ric Shrimpton are credited.

T-Bone: I can't even remember who played drums on that! It was one of their guys. I think it was the actual guy in the movie. That was truly working in period—you know I love to work in period. [laughs]

MD: And people associate you with period-sounding recordings, very rustic music. But one of your best productions, I think, was the band Autolux, who are a pretty booming and dynamic alt-rock band with a fantastic drummer, Carla Azar. 2004's *Future Perfect* is a killer record.

T-Bone: I've done a lot of stuff with Carla. She never plays anything straight. She's always doing some-

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T-BONE BURNETT

thing beyond. And she can play more quietly than anybody else I know and still groove.

MD: And she suffered a horrible accident, when she fell from a stage and broke her elbow, necessitating reconstructive surgery. Did she have to re-learn to play in a certain way?

T-Bone: No, it came back to her just great. God, what a freak-out that was. What a horrible, horrible night. We hadn't started the record at that point, but it did put us back a few months.

MD: Another record you produced that gets lost in the shuffle was Counting Crows' *August And Everything After*. Steve Bowman was the Crows' drummer at the time, but Denny Fongheiser is also listed in the credits. Was it a case of replacing a younger guy with a more seasoned player?

T-Bone: That's an interesting story. Steve Bowman was the drummer in Counting Crows and, really, he was the most exciting musician in the band—really, really great musician. He played a lot of Tower Of Power-type grooves, and he had studied under a couple of their drummers, actually. He played a lot of the interesting stuff on that record, but he didn't like that beat on "Mr. Jones." He just said it

was square. He thought it was country music and he refused to play on it because he just didn't like it. [laughs] So I called Denny and we cut it in one take, about five minutes of work.

MD: Pretty ballsy on Bowman's part....

T-Bone: Yeah, it was ballsy. That kind of attitude got him into trouble later, because *I think* he was asked to leave the band; maybe he left on his own, I don't know. And it's too bad because I think they lost a lot when they lost him. They lost their best musician, really.

MD: Juggling drummers on a project can't be easy, but you did a good job of it on the Elvis Costello records you produced. You used guys like Keltner, Earl Palmer, Mickey Curry, Michael Blair, and Jerry Marotta, even though Pete Thomas was still in the fold.

T-Bone: Elvis just wanted to break out, really. He had just made the record *Punch The Clock*, which I think was a way of him saying, "Alright, here's another record, another tour." It didn't have anything to do with Pete or anybody else. He'd just gotten to a point where he needed to shake himself out of a rut of sorts. We had actually been on the road for a bit, cooking up stuff, hatching ideas. And one of the ideas was for *Spike*, where half of

the record was going to be The Attractions, and half would be this other assortment of guys.

MD: "Veronica" is such a strong track from that record. And the drum part in the verse is so great, how the kick lays out of the front half, then doubles-up to four-on-the-floor in the second half. It really pushes the song nicely.

T-Bone: Yeah, that's Jerry Marotta. Marotta especially is a Keltner acolyte. He just makes sounds out of whatever he can find. But he can also play the song so well and make it interesting, like on "Veronica."

MD: And Pete Thomas was cool about all these other players being involved? He wasn't territorial?

T-Bone: It was a long time ago, but I don't recall any problem. He and Elvis always seemed to get along great. And you know, when The Attractions were knocking out their stuff on the record, man, *no one* played like Pete. Just the energy he brought to the songs was something—truly great performances. And, really, every drummer I've worked with, man, they're *all* killer-great.



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