



Billy Don Burns, the country legend no one has heard of, will be at The Kate on June 23.

Contributed photos

AT THE KATE JUNE 23

Real deal outlaw: Bill Don Burns

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See the country music legend you've never heard of

By Lisa Reisman

OLD SAYBROOK — Billy Don Burns has played in thousands of honky-tonks across the globe for 45 years. He's been stabbed 17 times, been divorced six, and had a deviated septum from the time he was beat up and left for dead. 2014 was his most recent stint at a penitentiary, for a parole violation. His motorcycle was pulled over on Route 66 in New Mexico.

Just don't call the 68-year-old Arkansas native, who will appear at The Kate on Saturday, June 23, an outlaw.

"When you've played honky-tonks for as long as I have, you've seen some action," the 68-year-old said in a recent phone interview while driving from Arkansas to a gig in Alabama. "But I'm a peace lover, trust me, I'd rather get along with everybody, but I will fight if I have to."

Really, the most "outlaw" part of him is not his willingness to get into a scrap or two. It's not all those other exploits. It's not that he wasn't being driven to that Alabama gig on a sleek, mile-long touring bus or even that he doesn't typically wear a wide-brimmed cowboy hat or a big, shiny buckle.

The most "outlaw" part of him is his music.

"I've never been a commercial writer," he said in his weathered Southern drawl, "never will be. I write from the heart, and will probably never have the 'big one.' But that's OK. If I die tonight, it was wonderful."

It's why the likes of Willie Nelson, Connie Smith and Mel Tillis, among hundreds of others, have recorded his songs. It's



Billy Don Burns' latest album cover, "Graveyard in Montgomery."

why songwriting giant Harlan Howard signed him to a publishing contract when he'd just arrived in Nashville at 23. And why Johnny Cash penned him a congratulatory note when Burns' album overtook the Man in Black's for No. 1 on the Americana charts.

It's the simplicity of his lyrics. It's the way they ring simple and plain and true.

Listen to the words of "Graveyard in Montgomery," about a visit to the grave of Hank Williams Sr., from his 2016 album of the same name.

"I was on my way to do a gig on the Alabama coast to meet some folks, make a buck, and play some honky-tonks

Ain't nothing new, it's the way my life has always been

It hit me hard that I was here to talk with him again

In a graveyard, in Montgomery, in a storm."

Look at the song's liner notes

for the rest of the story. "I got out of the car with my guitar, and wrote a verse of the song . . . then I got back in the car, soaked, my guitar soaked, and finished it." He played the gig that night. The next day he stopped at a studio in Tallahassee and recorded the song. "Soon after," he writes, "I married wife No. 5."

Listen to his voice. "The thing we loved about the late, great Hank Williams was the way he made you feel what he was feeling, he cut right inside of you, and that's Billy Don Burns," music journalist Brigitte London writes.

Born in Fifty-Six, Ark., a town of 2.1 square miles named for its school district number, Burns "started out in church like a lot of country boys," he said. But he never figured it would go further than that.

While in the Army, he entered a talent show to get out of KP duty. He performed in front of an audience of 3,000 and won.

"I was shocked," he said. "That was a big deal to me."

He started playing clubs and moved to California in 1970. All along, he was writing songs. A year later, Merle Haggard published two of them. By the time he got his "first cut" by acclaimed vocalist Connie Smith, "Be All Right in Arkansas" in 1973 for Columbia Records, he had relocated to Nashville.

It was only when Willie Nelson recorded his song, "(I Don't Have a Reason) To Go to California Anymore," on his 1990 album "Born For Trouble," that Burns felt as though he'd made it.

By then, Burns had collaborated with iconic names like Hank Cochran, Kris Kristofferson and Johnny Paycheck. He'd played alongside country legends like Ernest Tubb and Porter Wagoner. He'd toured across North America. Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, proclaimed March 27, 1983, Billy Don Burns Day.

"When Willie took my song, he told me I could make a living just doing my own songs, and he told me I was a great writer," he said. "He gave me permission to do my thing."

Between there and here, there have been the drugs, which Burns has put behind him, the jail time, the failed music projects, the divorces, and the grind of the endless miles.

But all along, he said, "what has kept me going is the music. The people telling me what my songs mean to them and how my songs have changed their lives."

Billy Don Burns will perform on Saturday, June 23, at 8 p.m. at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook. Krista Baroni opens. For tickets and information, visit katharinehepburntheater.org or call 877-503-1286.

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