

“I Learned To Do It The Hard Way”

Major Lee Burkes Interview

By Scott M. Bock



Major Lee Burkes. Courtesy Major Lee Burkes.

In the late 1950s, while still in high school, Major Lee Burkes worked shows with Ike and Tina Turner, Freddie King, Albert King, and Willie Dixon. In the late 1960s, he released two 45s for the tiny Gulf Records label. The second, ‘Break These Chains’/‘Who Was The Fool’ got airplay and Burkes got noticed as an r&b singer and multi-instrumentalist. Soon, he was touring and working with a who’s who of r&b artists. Major’s future in music appeared assured. He was prepared for the stage by a family that supported his love of music, even though they were ambivalent about blues and r&b.

Burkes found out early that he had a talent for leading bands and he ultimately mastered nine instruments. Now, fifty years later, Burkes finds himself winding down a life as a successful businessman who has done little recording or touring since those early days. If not for a book he authored and interest by Dialtone Records, he might have become another obscure artist – never heard from again.

He is outspoken in his view that racism brought his, and many other careers in music, to a halt. In 1997, frustrated with his lack of recording options, Major released a full length CD titled, ‘Finally Took The Time’. He wrote the songs, provided vocals, and played all instruments with the exception of one cut featuring sax player, Kaz Kazanoff. Then, in 2000, he wrote his book ‘In The Shadow Of Austin’, (L. Star Publishing) chronicling the rise and fall of the music scene he experienced first hand.

Today, Major Lee Burkes is hopeful a new recording will take him overseas where he has experienced the kind of support he believes he deserves. He told me his story sitting in his living room in Austin and in a follow-up call.

Playing The Antone’s Openings

I wrote my book ‘In The Shadow Of Austin’ because guys were dying out. And, Austin is not the live music capital of the world today. There’s no money. They don’t pay now what I made in the 1950s and 1960s. My book is about who played and where they played. I used to work Antone’s. I did all of Antone’s openings for all the Chicago guys and all the big blues guys. Well, when owner, Clifford Antone first got in legal trouble, they changed that. He never really got going again. They shut me down. And, there was just nowhere to go.

You know, going overseas is like being back in the 1950s. It’s like going back in time. I’ve been four or five times – all to Holland. But, you come back home and nothing. I had a chance to go to Japan. I know they want me to – P-Vine Records they wanted me. They actually have my 45s over

there. They sent me pictures. I don’t have any.

So, I just started playing music outside of Austin. Eventually, I just let it go. This was like 1980s. I lost my mother in 1982. So, this was like 1981, 1982. It got really bad. And, it’s sort of how it is today, really. They weren’t only shutting me down, they were shutting everything down. There was no blues and stuff.

And then my house burned down. That was 2001. So, then I rebuilt it and I haven’t really done much with music until now. Eddie Stout, of Dialtone Records wants to record me. We’re working on it.

I own a business – housing units. I’ve got beds for underprivileged people. And, I have apartments that I lease to people that are incarcerated and get out. I take them until they get on their feet and move on. I’m tough and pat them on the back. I’ve done that for years – called ‘Burkes Adult Supervised Living’.

What happened was, my mother was taking care of my grandmother and when my grandmother passed, I had property and I went to the University of Texas and got my certification for drug and alcohol abuse counseling and I counseled drug and alcohol abusers for a while.

I was working for a guy that had a pre-release programme. So, I took six of these pre-release guys and put them in this house. And, in another home, the mentally challenged in that house. All of a sudden I had seven homes.

I’ve lived around Texas all my life. I was born in Smithville in 1942. My family, they moved from Smithville real early. They came to Austin, left Austin, went to Corpus Christi, and then back to Smithville.

I started playing music real early. My father played harmonica and I started playing harmonica – learned from him. My mother saw my talents and she ordered a guitar and then I started playing guitar.

We rented a house that had a piano and I just started playing. It was an upright piano. My mother would just let me play anytime I wanted to. And, I’d just get up in the middle of the night when I thought I heard something that sounded good and I would just go and make music with that. My father, he said sometimes I’d wake him up at night.

I was a good kid. I had to be for so many reasons. The racial barrier was bad because of my father being part Hispanic, and me being lighter than most black kids. That was hard, and then my being able to do things that the other kids couldn’t.

During the 1940s, Smithville was a very small town – lots of racial problems. But, my grandfather owned a farm. He owned 33 acres. And, my father leased 30 acres from a guy right next to him. So, we farmed and that whole thing.

My dad had an advantage because he could get work. In fact, he owned a truck in those days. If you had an automobile then they would fire you, if you were black. So, he had a truck and we had cars. We’d keep them in the garage in the country and we’d take a wagon to town and buy gas and come back and put gas in the cars so they didn’t really know we had cars. It was bad. It was bad.

We moved to Austin and I started school here. My senior year I was in a car accident, which my family and my grandmother was injured real bad – couldn’t walk and all that. So, my mother moved back to Smithville to care for her. So, I actually went back there and graduated in Smithville. But, all of my high school years were in Austin.

In the fourth grade, I joined the school band and then I played the clarinet all through high school. That’s where I learned all the actual basics of my music – learning to read and write and all of that came from a clarinet, not the piano.

Now, I play nine instruments. I guess that’s just a born talent. I don’t know. I’ve even taught music and I’ve tried to teach guys to play. And, I’ve taught some that were good and got it right away and I’ve tried to teach some that never got it. So, I think it’s something actually that you’re born with.

I Worked With Any Band That Came Through Texas

I played piano in the Church of God in Christ. It was a church where people got up and danced. There was a gentleman, a gifted person – this was way back – this was the 1940s. He played trombone and he played guitar and he played drums at the same time. And, I played with him in the church.

I grew up with my grandfather who was a minister. And, I started to have questions. He didn’t really answer questions that I had for him that satisfied me so I got upset and joined a Methodist church – which caused a little conflict. But then I played for the Methodist Church and I still played for my grandfather’s church. That led me playing for every church in Bastrop County, which is where Smithville was.

I played music all through high school. I played marching band. I played



Major Lee Burkes circa mid-1970s. Courtesy Major Lee Burkes.

Mozart. But, now all the blues and all the gospel and all that just came on my own. Now, the thing with me is I put [it all] together. That was a big advantage to me to be able to put my natural ear and what I heard to play with music and what I could read.

While I was still in school, I worked with almost any band that came through Texas. In those days we didn't have cell phones or any of that. So, to know where I was going to play, I had to listen to the radio. By the time I graduated, I had played with, Ike and Tina, Freddie King, Albert King, Albert Collins, Willie Dixon, anybody that was anybody. Guys didn't really travel with bands. They'd get a band wherever they were.

I could listen to a record and find everybody's part. And, then you had to teach the guys that were with you what was happening so when the guy came, you had his music.

I won a scholarship to Boston Conservatory of Music and two or three little scholarships but to tell you the truth, I was making money. I made too much money to go away to school.

My grandfather said, 'I'm gonna have to let you do this. All I can tell you is you're going to Hell'. But, he got used to that because I made money all the time. And, my mother and father were divorced real early and mother working by herself so, yeah playing music and making money was okay.

You know it's happened all my life where I would play and guys would come and play with me. My biggest thing of playing with someone else as a young man would be Pigmeat Markham. I led his band in the south and this was a big thing. I had a mixed band which was bad because I played in the south in 1962, 1963 and 1964. So, that's a big story right there. We played every day in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia. I mean every day.

The owners of the black hotel would say: "I wish you would move because you've got white people with you and I feel that my place will be burned down". And, I said: "Okay. If they have to move then I'm moving". A lot of times we would just pack up and go to the next town we were going to play in.

Playing With Pigmeat Markham

Pigmeat Markham was the original creator of 'Here Comes The Judge'. That was made popular by Flip Wilson some years later. But, we actually did that little skit back in probably 1962. He was a very good comedian. He was black and used to wear blackface before I was with him.

I've forgotten now how many performers traveled with us, but it was probably ten people, maybe more. There was a belly dancer. And, there was a vocalist. And, Pigmeat had a wife who, by the way, was Caucasian. And, it was a regular comic show that they did live. I would open the show with a couple of songs of mine. And, then I would like do voices and background noises. We were right on stage behind him.

I was in my early twenties and I think Pigmeat contacted Blues Boy Hubbard and he didn't want to go. He had a really pretty solid gig at the time and I did too. But I was just anxious to do something. And, Hubbard knew that and he told them to come and see me. And, I put up a band together and I was ready to go.

Then, I signed with a record company and made a 45. The owner of the record company Don Caesar heard me play and wanted me to record. It was Gulf Records in Corpus Christi. The big one – it was 'Break These Chains'. 'Who Was The Fool?' was the flip side. And, 'I'm In Love' and 'You're Going To Need Me' was the other 45. I did two 45s with him.

'Break These Chains' got me lots of gigs – made my money go up. I kept working with even larger people. I went on the road for the record company. And, that kind of went for just years. I was working with Lou Rawls and Etta James and you know it was a different gig. I played the Blue Diamond in Fort Worth a lot. I played with everybody there, Solomon Burke, Johnnie Taylor, Little Johnny Taylor, Etta James.

Freddie Empire played with me for a while. He'd play with me at the Blue Diamond and then we'd go to Dallas and play – late 1960s because I came off the road in 1969.

I was playing r&b. I loved Jimmy Reed. I used to just race to the record shop to get Jimmy Reed. I like Little Walter. I liked the guys that made sense to me. I liked Howlin' Wolf.

But, I played r&b because the twelve-bars were really confining. I was playing with so many different people and they all played twelve-bar blues but all in different keys. So, that was something that I had to learn to do at an instant. So, I said, "Okay, I'm gonna play that twelve bar blues in all thirteen keys. I'm not gonna have a problem with this". And, that's what I did.

In those days at one point I bought all the band things for guys that worked with me. They all had matching stuff.

The Pianos At The Clubs Were Just A Mess

So, I was probably on the road for ten years. We had nine guys in the band – baritone, tenor, alto sax and trumpet. We didn't do much cover stuff. Writing songs came from school – from that clarinet. I just learned to write. I learned to score. I learned the whole thing.

I think about that in my later years – thinking what if I had gone to Boston. I would have been real mad today because what I learned to do takes time and it's really mathematical.

Now, I can do that with a computer in minutes. You don't have to know any of that stuff. You can put it on a score. You can print it and a guy can play it, today. I learned to do it the hard way. I learned how you played a note and you learned where it goes on the scale and now that computer's perfect.

I played piano with most of the bands. But, the pianos at the clubs were just a mess – keys were broken. They were out of key. And, I like the Hammond organ. That's number one. But, it's a big organ. It's heavy. And, the cabinet with it is big and heavy. So, I started trying to scale down.

They finally made electric keyboards. That Wurlitzer finally happened sometime in the early 1950s. I ordered one right away. It was still heavy. And, guys would help me at the beginning of the night and at the end of the night they weren't there to help me. So, I got mad and went to guitar and just switched back and forth between the two. I'll even play the keyboards and I'll wear the guitar – play both at the same time. I never did much horn work.

Eventually, I took a day job and worked and played music at night. Then, I hit disco. But, disco hit me. I figured people aren't going to pay for that. But, it got stronger and stronger and it just got really bad for playing music.

I was running a real large facility – housing units for 3000 students for University of Texas. Then, I lost my grandfather and I stopped playing for like two or three years. It was kind of sad. And, then I started back. I played a little. I made extra money but it didn't really get going. And, I left and went to work at Austin Community College.

The band director for Dionne Warwick came to ACC. And, he found out I played. So, I started working with his 33 piece band. It was ACC's Jazz Ensemble. Then, we took ten guys out of that and made a smaller group called Blues Company and we worked clubs around town. I did that for about three years. This was just on weekends.

We did some openings for Stevie Ray Vaughan at auditoriums and we would play little clubs. But, I ran into racial barriers and we couldn't get work. Club owners didn't know whether I was black or white when they booked us. But, as soon as I would play then I couldn't get another weekend. That got real hard. So, I hired a lady to book that band just to see what would happen. She went right out and booked that band. Once they figured out who she was, then that kind of shut me down.

I did one CD in 1997 for Stardom. I play every instrument there one at a time. Just the way I want it. Kaz Kazanoff is the only other person on here

– he's got a saxophone solo. Eventually, I stopped playing regularly. I worked.

I'm divorced. I have four kids, and twenty grandchildren, and nine greats. I decided I better write the book. That's what that's about.



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