

Music: Cover story

Bruce Burch and the business of music

A former hit songwriter develops a new program at UGA that teaches students how to succeed in the music industry ... without being musicians

Published 01.23.08

By [Scott Freeman](#)



Joeff Davis

SONG MAN: Bruce Burch had a successful career as a songwriter and music publisher before he helped start the music-business program at UGA.

INFO

Bruce Burch songs on YouTube:

Reba McEntire, "Rumor Has It," ;

Reba McEntire, "It's Your Call," ;

T. Graham Brown, "Water into Wine,"

Drive-By Truckers on YouTube:

"Never Gonna Change," ;

"Lookout Mountain,"

Recording A Blessing and a Curse

LINKS

- [UGA's music business program](#)

AUDIO

Listen to a podcast interview with Bruce Burch and Steve Dancz on the music-business program at UGA, hosted by CL Senior Editor Scott Freeman.

The old guitar has seen lots of hits. It's a classical, like Willie Nelson plays, and it rests on a stand in a corner next to the couch in a room inside Caldwell Hall on the UGA campus.

Burch smiles when it's noticed. He bounces up, grabs it and strums a chord. "I love this guitar," he says. "It uses gut string, so it's easy to play and doesn't hurt my fingers."

Burch carries it back to his chair, sits down and strums another chord. "Don't look so sad, I know it's over," he sings in a sad, plaintive voice.

It's the Kris Kristofferson song that made Burch fall in love with country music in 1972, just as he entered the University of Georgia. And it's the song that inspired him to learn to play the guitar. "That song hit me like a ton of bricks," he says. "It was like this guy was living my life. Three months later, I wrote my first song, about my grandmother. It just spilled out."

Years later, after Burch had penned No. 1 hits himself and had become creative director of EMI's publishing division, he worked with Kristofferson and pitched his material to artists who depend on Nashville's songwriting factory. Burch eventually confessed to Kristofferson that his music was the reason he got into the business.

Kristofferson looked up and deadpanned, "Don't blame me for that shit."

Burch laughs as he strums the guitar. "You know, these days I only write one or two songs a year," he says. "I used to write a hundred every year. I'd get up, write in the morning and then pitch songs all afternoon. That was my routine."

When he graduated from UGA in 1975, Burch knew he wanted to be a songwriter, but had no clue how to get into the music business. It took him five years to get his first song recorded. When one of his tunes finally cracked the top 10, he was still waiting tables for a living.

Once Burch was established, he realized he'd become as much businessman as songwriter. He opened his own publishing company so he could peddle his songs, and found his fortunes rested on how well he networked and sold himself.

Then, six years ago, Burch hatched an idea so obvious that it's a wonder no one had ever thought of it before: a music-business program at UGA. Now he's co-director of the fledgling program, which he learned last month will be the recipient of a \$500,000 pledge from a prominent Atlanta businessman.

For Burch, the program provides an opportunity to teach students the lessons he learned the hard way during his rise in Nashville.

"Writing songs, you're living by your wits," he says. "In the music business, success is surviving."

When the 70 students in the music-business program show up for their first day of class after the Christmas break, there are four somewhat scruffy-looking characters seated behind a table on the podium. For the students, the visitors need no introduction: They are members of the Drive-By Truckers, one of the übergroups to rise out of the Athens music scene.

The Truckers are home to play a three-night stand at the 40 Watt Club that will introduce their new album to the world and kick off a long tour. Burch worked for days with bandleader Patterson Hood to nail down a commitment for the Truckers to speak to the music-business class; it's been difficult to arrange because the group is in deep rehearsal mode. But Hood is a logical pick – he spoke to the very first music-business class when the program kicked off in January 2006.

Burch tries to have as many guest speakers as possible. He wants the students to get an education they would never find in a textbook, or in a music magazine. "Why should I try to teach them about management when we can bring in Bertis Downs or Buck Williams?" says Burch, referring to, respectively, the general counsel for R.E.M. and co-manager of Widespread Panic.

There's nothing like a big-name band sitting in front of them to grab the students' attention. Only about a third of the kids are musicians; most hope to be behind-the-scenes players in the industry. And when the floor is opened up to questions, there are few inquiries about the new album or the tour or who plays what guitar. These students want to know about the band's management, how they work with their booking agent, how they interact with their producer.

One thread of questions leads to a long discussion of the behind-the-scenes drama that led to the release of the band's breakthrough album, *Southern Rock Opera*, in 2001. The Drive-By Truckers had no label at that point. The band members paid the recording costs out of their pockets, which put them on the verge of financial ruin. Hood says they played a sold-out showcase at the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas, in the hope of landing a recording contract. But the Truckers left Austin with nothing more than what they already had: an album that no label wanted to release.

In desperation, they decided to write a prospectus and find investors. It worked. "We printed up 5,000 copies of the CD, and had enough money left over to hire a publicist for three months and to buy an old van to go on the road," Hood says. "We hit the road, and we had to book ourselves because we'd just fired our manager."

The band got its first mainstream attention when the album received rave reviews from *Rolling Stone* and other music publications. Yet the band was mostly selling the CD at concerts. "We'd hit a wall," Hood says. "And we still owed the investors." The Truckers eventually hooked up with a small independent label. *Southern Rock Opera* finally made it into record stores.

The students want to know more details about the band's novel approach. "How did you identify potential investors, and how did you convince them to invest?" someone asks.

"It was pretty moving, actually," Hood replies. "We had a tiny fan base at the time, but they really believed in us. We went to them. We told them not to loan us anything they were scared to lose, that we'd pay them back within 15 months at 15 percent interest."

The students want more specifics. "How much money did you have to raise to put the record out?" someone asks.

For a moment, Hood seems taken aback by the directness of the question, and he briefly stutters before he answers. "We needed \$30,000 and raised \$24,000," he tells the class. "That was the bare minimum we needed to print up 5,000 copies. And the first run sold out so fast, it almost scared us."

Burch, 54, grew up in Gainesville with a passion for football. He even played a year at East Tennessee State on a partial scholarship. The team finished 0-9-1 his freshman year and, as Burch tells it, things got so bad that two assistant coaches got into a fight on the sideline during a game. He left school and spent a summer in Atlanta, where he heard Kris Kristofferson and fell in love with country music. That fall, he moved to Athens to go to UGA.

He worked behind the front desk of an Athens motel called Kay's Inn, and kept his guitar there so he could work on songs during the down time. One night, an old friend from Gainesville named Johnny Jarrard stopped by and saw the guitar. They realized they were each budding songwriters. "The next thing I know, we've set up a little recording studio in the bathroom with a reel-to-reel recorder," Burch says. "We fed each other's fire. I moved up to Nashville in 1977, and he moved up after that. He came up because of me, and I stayed because of him."

Jarrard found success first. He penned hits for Don Williams and George Strait, and fed Alabama a string of chart-topping songs. Meanwhile, Burch spent five years knocking around Music Row trying to get his foot in the door. Hope flickered when a friend passed his tape to someone who worked at Combine Music, a major publishing house, but Burch never heard from him.

On a Sunday afternoon two years later, Burch received a call. It was the guy from Combine. "Hey, I just listened to your tape," he said. Burch drove over to his house, played every song he'd ever written and was signed that afternoon.

Burch penned two top 10 hits: "Out of Sight and on My Mind" by Billy Joe Royal, and "The Last Resort" by T. Graham Brown. Then Reba McEntire recorded a song Burch co-wrote called "Rumor Has It," and it became a No. 1 hit in 1990. The irony is that Burch had met McEntire in 1977 when she made her first Grand Ole Opry appearance and checked into a motel where he worked as the front-desk clerk. A few years later, McEntire came into a restaurant where Burch was working as a waiter; he waited on her table and used the opportunity to chat her up. Two years after that, she recorded his song. And two years after that, she had a second No. 1 with "It's Your Call," another song Burch co-wrote. "I tell the kids that one person can make your career," he says. "And you never know who it is going to be."

By the time he reached 50, Burch was creative director at EMI's publishing house and also ran two publishing companies of his own. He'd write in the morning, then pitch songs in the afternoon.

But the music business was also wearing him down. Burch went through a divorce. His two kids enrolled at UGA, and he returned to Athens often to see them. "I was living by my wits so long," he says. "Pitching songs is a tough job because you're told 'no' 99 percent of the time. It was getting harder and harder. I was coming back down here, and reconnected with a lot of friends."

Burch was surprised to discover that UGA – sitting in the middle of one of the epicenters of the indie-rock scene – didn't have a music-business program. He had taught classes on publishing at the entertainment and music program at Belmont University in Nashville. "I'd learned everything from the school of hard knocks," he says. "I knew that if you put together academic discipline and real-world experience, it would make a great program. And what better place than Athens?"

Steve Dancz grew up on the UGA campus. His parents led the Redcoat Marching Band for 37 years. Dancz, a pianist, moved to Los Angeles shortly after he graduated from the university. He naively thought he could forge a career scoring films and television shows. "Looking back, it was nuts moving to L.A.," he says. "My third year out there, I was having a deep understanding of why people commit suicide."

Dancz, 50, eventually wrote scores for National Geographic and "Designing Women." He returned to Georgia in 1999 and became director of UGA's jazz-studies program. The first thing he noticed when he returned was that nothing had changed in the music school since he'd been a student. Dancz thought the school would be better served if it offered students the chance to learn how to survive as a professional musician.

He floated the idea of creating a music-business program in 2003, and was sent to meet with George Benson, then dean of UGA's Terry College School of Business. "About 15 seconds into my pitch, he's nodding," Dancz says. "I'm thinking either he has palsy or else this is the easiest sales pitch of my life. What I didn't know is that he'd been talking to Bruce for a year about the same idea."

Burch and Dancz met for breakfast a few days later. "We basically crawled into the same boat," Dancz says. "Here, you've got one oar, I've got the other."

The program was set up as a joint venture between the business and music schools. Dancz and Burch were named co-directors, and Burch's charge was to find the money to fund the program.

A friend of his knew a UGA alumna named George Fontaine, who had made a fortune distributing Red Bull in parts of the United States. Fontaine is also a self-described "freak for music." He owns New West Records; the label is home to three of Athens' most significant artists: the Drive-By Truckers, Randall Bramblett and Vic Chesnutt.

Fontaine visited the university to meet with Burch and Dancz. "I liked the idea," he says. "I had the wherewithal and they had the vision."

Fontaine donated \$1 million to get the program off the ground. Burch and Dancz then set up the parameters of the course work.

It would, at least initially, be a "certificate" program, not a full major or minor. The students would take seven classes, including two taught by Burch and Dancz, an accounting course and a music-theory class geared to non-musicians.

They didn't expect the students to be musicians, but they did want them to be passionate about music. They wanted to give them as much practical experience as possible through internships in the industry.

They also would divide the kids into groups. Each group had to work as a record company and concert promoter. The team would find a band, oversee a recording session and help set up a marketing plan. And it would produce a concert. The students would do everything from promoting the show to setting up the P.A. system to stocking the dressing rooms with food and beverages.

"We wanted," Burch says, "to provide a boot camp for kids who want to be in the music business."

As today's class with the Drive-By Truckers winds down, a student raises his hand with the question that burns in every student's gut. "How do we go from where we are now," he asks, "to the point where you are, of making it a permanent career?"

Hood smiles for a moment. "You make it in music by being stubborn and relentless and not giving up," he says. "We're all poster children for not giving up. I'm 43. And I've made a pretty decent living only in the last three or four years."

Burch has spent the class seated in the back, asking an occasional question but mostly listening. He reserves the final question of the class for himself. "This is for everybody in the band," he says. "Give us some advice. What would you tell these students about the music business?"

The band members look at each other. Brad Morgan, the drummer, has sat mostly silent during the class. Finally, he speaks up. "My advice? Don't be an asshole. Have ethics. Don't try to rip people off. People get into the business and want to take and take and take, and it can get ugly."

Hood picks up the train of thought. "It can get brutally ugly," he says. "There are people who rip artists off. They know artists love to play, that we'd do it for nothing. And they use it for exploitation. It makes us ripe for the picking."

After the class, a dozen or so students mill around the band, handing out cards and chatting them up. After all, you never know which person will make your career.

One of the kids, Taylor Lindsey, a senior from Washington, Ga., says she never imagined a career in the music business when she first enrolled at UGA – even though her older sister co-wrote Carrie Underwood's No. 1 hit, "Jesus Take the Wheel," and is one of Nashville's hottest songwriters. "Everyone in my family thought music would be my sister's domain," she says. "But all of us have a passion for music."

Now Lindsey's dream is to start her own publishing company. She's already had two internships – including one at ASCAP, the music-licensing company – and has used them as a learning lab and a networking opportunity. "This program has given us a security blanket," she says. "We're not walking out there blind."

After class, Burch strolls over to his favorite watering hole, just down the street from the Georgia Theatre in downtown Athens. He's excited because he's just learned that the program received the half-million-dollar pledge from the Atlanta businessman.

The pledge isn't only significant for its size, but because it comes from a high-profile businessman and can help bring the program credibility with the Atlanta business community.

Burch and Dancz eventually want to turn the program into a full-fledged school of entertainment and music business, and that will entail major fundraising. "We want to be one of the premier programs in the country," Burch says. "That's a pretty lofty goal. But between Athens and Atlanta, we're located in the fastest-growing entertainment scene in the country."

Ultimately, the program will be judged by how many of its students succeed. So far, Burch and Dancz say, 17 of the first 22 students to graduate with a music-business certificate have gotten jobs in the industry.

Burch reminds his students almost every day how wide open music is today. He points out that the two most recent innovations for bands to build their fan base – YouTube and MySpace – were invented by people in their 20s.

"Our job is to produce the music leaders of tomorrow," Burch says.

But it's also important to him to have his students go into the business for the right reasons.

"I tell the kids, if you don't love the music business, don't do this, it's not for you," Burch says. "People who are successful in music have perseverance and drive. It's not a job. It's got to be something you love doing."