

PRINTERS' ALLEY... A Nashville Reunion

By Bill Culp ('66)



At a little after the appointed hour in Nashville's renowned Printers' Alley, the door to a bar opens, allowing a gust of cold mid February air to barge in, accompanied by "the guy". He's got his saxophone case slung over his shoulder, his signature goatee has turned snow white and his head is shaved like a cue ball. The house manager of the Bourbon Street Blues and Boogie Bar, along with her wait staff, the bar tender, the bouncer and coat check girl all look up and smile, some shouting out a bold welcome, others expressing a more discrete greeting with a hand gesture of recognition and regard. A musician glances over from the stage and nods, grinning broadly. "The guy" – he with all the "cred" - is in the house.

Mnutes prior to the guy's arrival, the house band has straggled on stage. First, the brass player, blowing long tones, casually warms his Selmer trumpet, while his cornet and flugel horn await his attention. The sound man has finished with setting sundry microphone levels that the lead guitar player/singer is re-visiting: "Check, check! One, one, one... two... wuun tuu... wuuun

tuu... tuuu!" The drummer, bass man and keyboard player stand aside, quietly chatting as rhythm sections like to, while, back of the stage in a make-do green room, another sax player riffs some very intriguing figures and more than a few minor scales.

I do a double take. The rehearsing sax player looks, according to memory, like the person with whom I'm to rendezvous, more so than does "the guy". This house sax man is slight of frame, has black hair and Buddy Holly-style black glasses. And he plays with such fluidity and innate character – a kind of joyful satisfaction even when it's scales and musical fragments – that I'm a little more confused than my second dry martini ("shaken not stirred") might be cause for. I look back to "the guy" at the door, and he's smiling back at me from ear to ear, like he knows what I'm thinking.

As I rise to embrace an old friend whom I haven't seen in decades (hence my momentary confusion), "the guy" strides forward, acknowledging, seemingly, everyone between us. His black leather jacket conceals a burliness I hadn't reckoned on.

"Man, you're bigger than I remember!" I say, reflecting his broad grin as we separate.

"Right back atcha!" says Peter Burger, member of the Class of 1966 of my old school, South Secondary.

[It's mid February and I'm in Pete's town of Nashville, stopping for a few days while on my way to Florida in the company of another '66 Southy, Janet (Dean) Gibson. Jan and I had been invited to a Christmas party seven weeks earlier where Pete's younger brother, Bill, (or "Mort" as Peter called him back in the day) was in attendance. At my Yuletide request, the younger sibling has orchestrated this one on one reunion with my fellow South "band-it" and European "tour-ist".]

Pete Burger was lead clarinet during his time as a Lion music maker, but his impact on his band colleagues was much greater than that brief stint under the baton of conductor, Joe George, would normally be. Burger was the best musician I knew then and I was curious, now 42 years later, why he was so accomplished so early and has been so passionate about music for so long.

"My dad recognized my musical potential before we moved to London from Hamilton in the mid 60s. He willingly paid twenty-five dollars an hour for private lessons for me because he had faith in me and my ability and potential. Twenty five dollars an hour for music lesson was quite a lot of money for anybody to pay then for a kid to play at the clarinet," he says.

And has Russ Burger's faith in his son ever paid off?

"I'm proud to say I've played for hundreds of thousands of very appreciative people since those early days," Peter says. His late dad should rest assured he got his money's worth.



There's no reason to question whether Pete's talent today has diminished from what it was back in his formative years. That young look-a-like house band sax player has just come over and greeted Peter Burger as if he's in the presence of his teacher/guru as much as a respected colleague. After the kid (Pete says he's 23 and a tremendous talent) departs, all the remaining members of the house band more openly acknowledge Peter's presence. I'm flattered and humbled as he introduces me to all as a trumpet player from his high school days.

Then he turns and says, "These young fellows are from Louisiana and I'm their agent."

I wonder if Peter and I are just "geezers" to these young Cajun lions, readying themselves to roar this night in the Nashville jungle. If they do, they don't show it. They're as respectful as you'd expect of Southern gentlemen. But, for Peter, there's more reason for their courtesy and regard.

After a dozen years as the sax guy for the Bourbon Street Blues and Boogey Bar's house band, as well as two decades as a session musician in the recording studios of Nashville, on top of touring from Chicago to New Orleans to Houston and seemingly all points in between, Pete Burger is a mainstay among the musicians of the "Music City".

"I feel like this is my town. I've played with literally hundreds and hundreds of the top musicians in this business." He loves what he does and what he has done. He's unequivocal about how he's lived his life; and he has lived it large.

After South, Peter played his tenor, alto and baritone sax and his clarinet around London at the Latin Quarter, the Firehall and anywhere he was invited to play. One day, he got an offer to play with an American blues and rock group who needed a reed player for a Chicago gig. He jumped at the opportunity.

He says Chicago was an unforgettable experience, especially the day after the bandleader was arrested by a cigar stub chewing cop. And, since Peter had been staying in the bandleader's loft, he was suddenly without shelter in the "Windy City" and with very little money. This was just the start of a litany of adventures, all of which he has survived relatively unscathed, but has learned from and embraced. Pete Burger has had a full life as a professional musician and he's delighted to recount how it got to be such. But it was a South band-related adventure that Peter Burger says was one of his most memorable.

"Remember that last night of the British Isles part of the South band's European trip (Summer, 1966) and we were in a hotel in London? "

I say I dimly recall the situation, but the details are vague. Peter gleefully recounts the event that has remained crystal clear in his memory.

"The next morning, we were to board a ship at Southampton for the Mediterranean cruise part of the tour."

Then he interjects. "It's important to know that, before I came to South, I had already been an on-the-road musician for almost a year and I was a little older than the rest of you guys."

I reflect on this, realizing how brash it was to think we were on an equal footing with Peter's musical talent as much then as now. We were such wise guys, I think fondly; he must have been amused.

"Anyway, the plan was to go with two of my fellow reed section members to a jazz club at some point while we were in London, but there wasn't any opportunity until that last night. So, around midnight, the three of us snuck out of the hotel for an all night 'crawl' and we got back at 7 a.m., just in time to be intercepted by a teacher/chaperon named Dick something. He said he had us nailed and told me - because I was the brains behind the whole thing, - I would be sent home to Canada immediately, before boarding the ship if at all possible."

Here, Peter pauses to rub the top of his head. I stare a little too long at the top of his melon and he interjects that it's a relatively new image and a result of a bass player's telling him his head was perfectly shaped for the shaved look, so he cut his ponytail and voila. I remember another head shaving incident from school days gone by as he grins, Cheshire-like, and resumes the tale.

"When I didn't react to this threat the way he expected a high school student should, he said he was also going to confiscate my horns. So, I looked him straight in the eye and told him I was a 20 year old young man, not a teenager, and that he had no authority to send me anywhere other than to direct me to the bus to get to the ship. Then, I said that I'd charge him with theft if he even touched either of my sax or my clarinet. Well, this 'Dick' had second thoughts. I got on the bus with my horns like everybody else and that ended that."

Peter sips his drink and I see behind his wire-rimmed glasses that he's delighted to be able to relate this tale. He tilts his head wryly and smacks his lips in satisfaction.

"It was a highlight moment," he says.

Being satisfied sums up what being a professional musician is for Pete. He's been in the company of countless musical artists and creative entertainers across the continent for his entire adult life. He's played with some of the best and loved every minute.

Being part of that community is important to Peter Burger as much as being recognized as an individual and a professional. And being part of a community started, he says, when he went to South Secondary, especially the day that Joe George welcomed him into the school's concert band.

"Joining that band was a very important moment for me. Before South, my school days were anything but happy and enjoyable. But when I joined that group of high school musicians, everything changed for me. I was welcomed and respected, without hesitation, by everyone. I loved my time at South. And I've loved my life ever since."

The house band is now going full throttle and the sax man is playing like a man possessed. The trumpet player is dancing a Cajun-style jig, pointing a finger at the flying fingers of the 23 year old doppelganger. The keyboard player is rolling his eyes and grimacing in tortured pleasure. The patrons of the Bourbon Street Blues and Boogie Bar are going crazy again tonight. And all the while, Pete Burger is in a groove. He's in his element and not about to be summarily removed from it. And I'm right there with him.

FINAL NOTE: Peter sent us an email recently with links to some **videos recorded at the Bourbon Street Blues & Boogie Bar, Oct 2008**. Have a look.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzEpwzfbHuQ>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_3WpmnkPe0