

The Steel Guitar in Early Country Music

Part Two: Jimmie Rodgers's Steel Guitarists

Chapter Three: Joe Kaipo and Billy Burkes, Part Two.

This ongoing series of articles has been examining the ten different steel guitarists who recorded with American country-music pioneer **Jimmie Rodgers** (1897-1933) between 1928 and 1933. (The first solo “hillbilly music” star, Rodgers did much to popularize the acoustic steel guitar through his thirty-one sides including the instrument.)

The first two installments discussed **Ellsworth Thomas Cozzens** (1896-1966) and **John James Westbrook** (1901-1974), who recorded behind Rodgers in February and October 1928, respectively.

The most-recent installment (in the September 2008 issue) discussed the first native-Hawaiian steel guitarist to record with Rodgers, Hookena-born **Joseph Kaaia Kaipo** (c. 1896-1964), and the seven sides he recorded with Rodgers in Dallas, Texas in the summer and fall of 1929.

Joining Kaipo on five of his Rodgers recordings was a seventeen-year-old standard guitarist named **William Theodore (“Billy”) Burkes** (1912-1989). (Billy would eventually accompany Rodgers on more sides than anyone else [fourteen on standard guitar and two on steel] and work with him longer than any other musician [from August 1929 through February 1932, nearly two-and-a-half years].)

This article will examine Burkes's career in more detail, including the two sides on which he backed Rodgers on *steel* guitar, in Dallas in 1932.

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Billy Burkes was born in the railroad and manufacturing center of Wichita, Kansas on April 3, 1912. Burkes's parents, **Ezra Clarence Burkes** (1884-?) and **Effie Annie Rowe** (c. 1883-?) were from Missouri and Texas, respectively; the two of them had married in c. 1904.¹ Around the time of Billy's birth, Ezra was working as a janitor for the Getto Block in central Wichita, where the family then-resided.² Wichita city directories from 1915 through 1920 show Ezra subsequently working as a fireman, then engineer for the Wichita Ice and Cold Storage Company (in the northeast part of downtown), with the family living at four different addresses to the southeast, southwest, and west of the city center.³

Jimmie Rodgers's biographer Nolan Porterfield relates that Ezra and Effie — who were musically-inclined — taught Burkes to sing at a young age.⁴ Burkes's introduction to the world of show business occurred in 1921, when travelling-carnival impresario Clarence A. Wortham heard Burkes and his slightly-older brother **Weldon E.** (1910-94) singing at his carnival in Wichita; impressed with their voices, Wortham offered Ezra \$1,000 plus expenses to take his sons on “a ten-week summer tour.” (Ezra — apparently feeling the boys were too young for touring — declined Wortham's offer.)⁵

The following year, Billy and Weldon began appearing professionally, having gained exposure from entering an talent contest sponsored by the Wichita-based Brunk's Comedians. (According to Porterfield, Billy and Weldon began by appearing with one of the Comedians' units whenever they performed locally; they soon became popular enough that they were hired to undertake full-fledged touring with the company.)⁶

By 1922, Ezra had been appointed chief engineer at Wichita Ice and Cold Storage; by c. 1924, however, he no longer held his position with the company, and he and his family (perhaps facing financial difficulties?) had left their west-Wichita residence and were lodging in a room in the southwest part of the city.⁷ The Burkes's left Wichita for Forth Worth, Texas (c. 365 miles south) sometime later in 1924, where Ezra was eventually able to find ice-machine company work at ice plants on the city's west and north sides.⁸

Once ensconced in Fort Worth, Billy and Weldon began learning to play instruments, including a homemade ukelele and an improvised, “skiffle-esque” cigar-box-and-broom-handle single-string guitar, which Billy played Hawaiian-style, using a perfume bottle as a slide.⁹ By 1927, Billy had switched from ukelele to standard guitar and was playing with Weldon in Fort Worth vaudeville houses and on the Texas theater circuit.¹⁰

By the summer of 1929, Billy and Weldon had landed a gig roaming tables and playing requests at the El Tivoli Night Club, a posh west-Dallas supper club on West Davis Street (then one of two highways linking Dallas with Fort Worth), where they were soon joined by **Joe Kaipo** (who may have been introduced to the brothers by Ezra).¹¹ The trio quickly became a hit with El Tivoli customers.¹²

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Jimmie Rodgers arrived Dallas in around the first week of August, in advance of some planned field-recording sessions for Victor Records at the Jefferson Hotel downtown. Rodgers — who was seeking backing performers — had apparently heard of Kaipo from area musicians, and arranged an audition for him. The evidently-shy Kaipo persuaded Billy to accompany him to the audition; to Burkes's surprise, Rodgers hired both of them on the spot.¹³

Billy's brother Weldon joined the group on ukelele the following day.¹⁴ During two sessions on August 8 and 10, Billy played standard guitar alongside Kaipo's steel on four of Rodgers's sides (with Weldon playing ukulele on three of these, including the popular “Everybody Does it in Hawaii,”¹⁵ discussed in the September 2008 issue).

Billy and Weldon's El Tivoli gig with Kaipo unfortunately ended shortly after these sessions, after Kaipo drew brief jail time, first in Dallas (following a fight with a Dallas cabdriver), then Wichita Falls (c. 130 miles to the northwest).¹⁶ After Ezra Burkes helped fish Kaipo out of jail in Wichita Falls, Rodgers, Kaipo, and the Burkes' undertook a brief tour of west Texas and the Texas Gulf Coast (playing gigs in San Angelo, Beaumont, and Port Arthur).¹⁷

In late October, Billy and Weldon backed Rodgers and Kaipo on one additional side during another Victor field-recording session at Dallas's Jefferson Hotel.¹⁸ Rodgers — who was afflicted with tuberculosis at this point (and would succumb to the disease in May 1933) — often needed to rest during sessions; it was possibly during one such break that the Burkes and Kaipo recorded two numbers on their own as the **Burke [sic] Brothers**, “[At Last My Dreams Have Come True](#)” and “[Lonesome and Lonely](#).” (The recordings feature Billy and Weldon on guitar-and-vocals and ukelele-and-vocals, respectively, and Kaipo on steel guitar and vocals;¹⁹ one wonders if these songs had been part of the trio's repertoire at their El Tivoli gigs?)

Burkes backed Rodgers on standard guitar on eight more sides through the end of 1929, at sessions in New Orleans and Atlanta.²⁰ In early-mid December, Burkes made concert appearances with Rodgers and several other performers in Tennessee, North and South Carolina, and Mississippi.²¹ (Burkes must have performed on WBAP radio in Fort Worth by the time of the tour, as a December 13 concert-announcement in the *Chattanooga [TN] Times* described him as “the Crooning Guitarist of WBAP.”)²²

After touring with Rodgers, Burkes returned to Fort Worth. (The 1930 census [enumerated in late April] shows Billy and Weldon living with their family in northeast Fort Worth; the brothers — although listed as “musician[s]” working at a “stock show” — were apparently collecting unemployment at the time.)²³

Sometime in c. 1931, the Burkes moved the c. 260 miles south to Houston (where — by the mid-1930s — Ezra found refrigerator-engineer work).²⁴ *Morrison & Fourmy's Houston . . . City Directory 1931-32* shows the Burkes living on Washington Avenue, on the city's northwest side, with Billy now married to a woman named **Betty** (maiden name unknown) (19--?—?) and Weldon married, as well.²⁵

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Jimmie Rodgers reconnected with Billy and Weldon in Houston in late 1931 while making a Christmastime appearance with the repertoire company of tent-theater impresario **Leslie “Skeeter” Kell**.²⁶ When plans for a partnership between Rodgers and Kell fell through, Rodgers abandoned Kell's floundering company and headed north to Dallas (where yet more field-recording sessions with Victor awaited), bringing Billy and Weldon along with him.²⁷

Between February 2 and 6, 1932, Rodgers recorded eight sides in five sessions (held once again in the Banquet Room of Dallas's Jefferson Hotel). On February 4, Billy and Weldon and a string bassist recorded three sides with Rodgers, with the following two featuring Billy on *steel* guitar:

“ My Time Ain't Long ” (Vi 23669)	(recorded 4 February 1932)
“ Mississippi Moon ” (Vi 23696)	(recorded 4 February 1932) ²⁸

(Burkes plays no solos on these recordings, although he does play the introductions to both songs.)

“[My Time Ain't Long](#)” — written by west-Texas-born amateur songwriter Waldo Lafayette O'Neal (1908-1980) — concerns a convict's thoughts in the hours before his execution (in the mold of Guy Massey's “The Prisoner's Song,” from eight years earlier).

Burkes plays the melody line in the upper register of his steel guitar throughout the two long verses, also doubling Rodgers's yodels at the end of each verse. With Billy now on steel, Weldon plays standard guitar, with ukelele duty entrusted to Billy and Weldon's older brother **Charlie** (1906-1991?),²⁹ who — at the time of the 1930 census — had been working in a Fort Worth stockroom.³⁰

“[Mississippi Moon](#)” — written by Rodgers's sister-in-law, Elsie McWilliams — is a nostalgic, sentimental waltz-ballad in which an aging man recalls the moonlit night his sweetheart agreed to marry him. The song had previously been recorded twice with just Rodgers and his guitar in Camden, New Jersey in June 1928 (with the recordings left unissued by Victor).³¹

Billy once again plays the melody line in the high register of his steel guitar (very faintly, in the background), adding a few embellishments and fills during the second verse and chorus, and supplying a rising glissando in the final bar, while Weldon contributes off-beat patterns on the guitar.³²

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When the author began this article, little was known about the last c. fifty-seven years of Burkes's life. The author was able to obtain a copy of Burkes's July 1938 application for a Social Security Number, which shows him then-working in Yankton, in far-southern South Dakota, employed by WNAX radio.³³

From a close reading of the footnotes at the end of the chapter introducing Burkes in Porterfield's Rodgers biography, the author gleaned that Burkes was living in Tucson, Arizona by the mid-to-late 1970s;³⁴ a May 2007 post by Los Angeles-area radio-program host **Ben Elder** on the *Steel Guitar Forum* website relayed that Burkes had indeed lived out his later years in the city, playing western swing-style steel guitar.³⁵

Elder (who in c. 1992 had purchased a post-World War II Rickenbacker D-16 steel guitar previously owned by Burkes)³⁶ suggested northeast Tucson instrument-dealer **Paul Blumentritt** as someone who might have remembered Burkes; through Blumentritt, the author was given contact information for Tucson guitarist and western swing bandleader **Dean Armstrong** (b.1923), in whose **Arizona Dance Hands** band Burkes played for c. twenty-five years. Armstrong very-graciously agreed to share his knowledge of Burkes's later days.

According to Armstrong, by the late 1940s, Burkes had divorced his wife Betty. In the late 1940s/early 1950s, Burkes had a trio that may have performed for a time in Houston at the then-new Shamrock Hotel,³⁷ a 1,100-room, \$21 million resort complex built by Texas oilman Glenn H. McCarthy in the southwest part of the city.³⁸ (McCarthy's life — and the Shamrock [which opened on St. Patrick's Day 1949] — provided part of the inspiration for Edna Ferber's 1952 novel *Giant* [adapted for film by George Stevens in 1956].)³⁹

Burkes's gig at the Shamrock would have been short-lived, for he eventually made his way to Tucson, Arizona⁴⁰ (where — ironically — Jimmie Rodgers had worked briefly some twenty-five years earlier, as a switchman for the Southern Pacific Railroad, while singing and playing guitar and banjo at local venues, until his performing began interfering with his railroad work).

Burkes apparently first gigged with **Larry Cockerel and His Sunset Riders**,⁴¹ a western swing band engaged by downtown Tucson's Pioneer Hotel to play for square-dances.⁴² Some three-to-four years later, Burkes was asked by H. Porter's of Tucson (a western-wear store, also located downtown) to organize a band to promote the store via performances at area fairs and rodeos.⁴³

Armstrong, in the meantime, was establishing a reputation with his Arizona Dance Hands (a western swing band he formed in 1948), which Burkes eventually joined. (Burkes began playing with the Dance Hands sometime between c. 1953-55, first on a part-time basis [while still running the H. Porter's band], then eventually full-time [after Porter's proved unable to provide him with long-term employment].)⁴⁴

Burkes played with the Dance Hands for c. 25 years (until c. 1978-80?), including their long-standing Friday-and-Saturday-night gig at Lil' Abner's Steakhouse near Marana, in the far-northwestern reaches of the Tucson metropolitan area (which the Dance Hands continue playing to this day). Armstrong remembered Burkes as a good friend who was always friendly to the people that came to the Dance Hands' gigs, and always glad to talk with them, even while playing his steel guitar.⁴⁵

Armstrong described Burkes's steel-guitar technique as "closer to Hawaiian," estimating that he "could play probably fifty Hawaiian songs" (e.g., Charles E. King's "Hawaiian Wedding" ["Ke Kali Nei Au"], which Armstrong remembers Burkes often being asked to play).⁴⁶ (King's song had been revived on the American Mainland in early 1959, via Andy Williams's English-language cover [with an unidentified steel guitarist], which reached #11 on the pop charts.)

By 1965, Burkes had remarried — *Polk's Tucson [Pima County, Ariz.] City Directory 1965* shows him wedded to a woman named **Mary I.** (perhaps Ohio-born **Mary Irene Cannon** [1913-2006]?).⁴⁷

In between his Dance Hands gigs, Burkes also worked several other jobs. . . . The 1965 Tucson directory shows Burkes working as a salesman at a store attached to the El Corral Motel in northeast Tucson, while the 1969 directory shows him working as a clerk at the hotel; the 1976 city directory lists Burkes as working as a salesman back at H. Porter's.⁴⁸

Dean Armstrong remembered Burkes travelling from Tucson to Jimmie Rodgers's hometown of Meridian, Mississippi, to play steel guitar at the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Festival⁴⁹ (held intermittently in May since 1953 as a means of honoring Rodgers). **Eddie Bishop** — of Meridian's Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Museum (which displays an Epiphone mandolin owned by Burkes) — believes Burkes appeared at the Festival in the late 1970s⁵⁰ (perhaps in 1978? [and—perhaps again in c. 1984?]).

Bishop recalled Burkes as a very "jovial-type person;"⁵¹ both Bishop and Armstrong remembered Burkes being very modest about having recorded and toured with Jimmie Rodgers, noting that although he would talk about those days when asked, he was never one to boast about his experiences.⁵²

Burkes died in Tucson in early-June 1989 at the age of seventy-seven;⁵³ his remains were evidently cremated.⁵⁴

Next — in Chapter Four — Jimmie Rodgers's summer-1930 recordings with Lani McIntire's Hawaiians (and their unidentified steel guitarist), at Victor's then-recently-opened Hollywood Studios in Hollywood, California. Anthony Lis 2009

Notes

1. *1920 United States Federal Census* (Wichita, KS; 7 January 1920).
2. *Polk-McAvoy Directory Company's Wichita City Directory 1914* (Wichita: Polk-McAvoy, 1914) 115. According to Beccy Tanner's 20 May 1933 *Wichita Eagle* article "German Immigrant Getto Believed in Wichita's Future" (posted on Josephine McDonald's "JoJo's July Jamboree" website <http://jojojulyjamboree.com/ancestors/newspaper_clips/>), the Getto Block was named for Peter Getto (1841-1902), a Wichita mineral- and soda-water manufacturer; Getto's block was anchored by the multi-story Getto Building, at the corner of Second and Main Streets.
3. *Polk-McAvoy Directory Company's Wichita City Directory 1915* (Wichita: Polk-McAvoy, 1915) 111; *Polk-McAvoy Directory Company's Wichita City Directory 1916* (Wichita: Polk-McAvoy, 1916) 115; *Polk-McAvoy Directory Company's Wichita City Directory 1917* (Wichita: Polk-McAvoy, 1917) 99; *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Wichita City Directory 1919* (Wichita: R. L. Polk, 1919) 119; *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Wichita City Directory 1920* (Wichita: R. L. Polk, 1920) 143.
4. Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*, new ed. (Jackson [MS]: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) 207.
5. *Ibid.* 207.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Wichita City Directory 1924* (Wichita: R. L. Polk, 1924) 164.
8. *Morrison & Fourmy's Fort Worth (Texas) City Directory, 1928* (Fort Worth: Morrison & Fourmy Directory Co., 1928), 299; *Morrison & Fourmy's Fort Worth (Texas) City Directory, 1931* (Fort Worth: Morrison & Fourmy, 1931) 238.
9. Porterfield 207.
10. *Ibid.* 207-08.
11. *Ibid.* 223.
12. *Ibid.* 208.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.* 209.
15. *Ibid.* 399-400.
16. *Ibid.* 213.
17. *Ibid.* 213-14.
18. *Ibid.* 401.
19. Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 143-44.
20. Porterfield 402-04.
21. *Ibid.* 221, 226, and 227.
22. *Ibid.* picture- and poster-gallery between 226-27.
23. *1930 United States Federal Census* (Fort Worth, TX; 30 April 1930).
24. *Morrison & Fourmy's Houston (Texas) City Directory 1935* (Houston: Morrison & Fourmy, 1935) 314. (The 1935 Houston directory lists Ezra Burkes working as a "refrig[erator] eng[ineer]," without identifying a specific place of employment; the 1931-32 and 1934 directories list no occupation for Ezra, while Ezra's name is absent from the 1932-33 directory.)
25. *Morrison & Fourmy's Houston (Texas) City Directory 1931-32* (Houston: Morrison & Fourmy, 1932) 420.
26. Porterfield 316.
27. *Ibid.* 306, 307, and 310.
28. Catalogue numbers given for the first Victor release, from Porterfield 414-15.
29. Porterfield 414.
30. *1930 United States Federal Census* (Fort Worth, TX; 30 April 1930).
31. Porterfield 394.
32. *Ibid.* 415.
33. William Theodore Burke [sic], *Application for Account Number, U.S. Social Security Act* (Yankton, SD; 25 July 1938). (Porterfield [222] notes that Billy's family believed their surname was spelled "Burke"; only after obtaining a copy of his birth certificate later in life did Billy learn that the legal spelling was in fact "Burkes", which he subsequently adopted.)
34. Porterfield 224 and 223.
35. Ben Elder, "Billy Burkes" (15 May 2007 posting at The Steel Guitar Forum website [steelguitarforum.com]) <<http://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?t=109236&highlight=billy+burkes>>.
36. *Ibid.* Elder's post briefly details how Joe Loving — a retired Phoenix firefighter (and longtime Jimmie Rodgers devotee) who befriended Burkes in his latter years — assisted with the sale of Burkes's instruments after his death; Burkes's other instruments included a "Gibson L-10 archtop" and a "Gibson Console Grande."
37. Dean Armstrong, telephone conversation with the author of 11 January 2008.
38. Terri Langford, "Shamrock Recalled Each St. Patrick's Day" (undated Associated Press news story); *Laredo (Texas) Morning Times* online news archive <<http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:j9Pr3rvpwfUJ:lmtonline.com/news/archive/031898/pagea4.pdf+%22terri+langford%22+%22shamrock+hotel%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us>>.

39. en.wikipedia.org website ("Shamrock Hotel") < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamrock_Hotel >.
40. Armstrong, phone conversation of 11 January 2008.
41. Ibid.
42. Paul Alan (son of Larry Cockerel), e-mail to the author of 29 January 2008.
43. Armstrong, phone conversation of 11 January 2008.
44. Ibid.; Armstrong, telephone conversation with the author of 15 January 2008.
45. Armstrong, phone conversation of 15 January 2008.
46. Ibid.
47. *Polk's Tucson (Pima County, Ariz.) City Directory 1965* (Dallas: R. L. Polk & Co., 1966) 166.
The *Social Security Death Index* database at the ancestry.com website includes a listing for a Mary I. Burkes born on 16 October 1913 who died in Tucson on 26 June 2006 <http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/ssdi.cgi?auth=&cj=1&nt=exact&lastname=burkes&start=0&birth=1913&first name=mary&death=2006&o_xid=0002370638&o_lid=0002370638 >.
The author obtained—from the Social Security Administration—a copy of the *Application For [a] [Social Security] Account Number* made by the person described above; the SSA's records show the application having been made on 31 March 1937 by a **Mary Irene Cannon Weston**, born 23 October 1913, to Michael Cannon and Mary Mahhoy, in — apparently — Youngstown, Ohio. (At the time of her application, Mary was living in southwest Youngstown, employed by Strouss-Hirshbergs [a Youngstown hat-shop?].)
The author searched editions of the (*Tucson*) *Arizona Star* from 26 June through the first week of July 2006 for a death notice or obituary confirming Mary Irene Cannon as Burkes's wife; unfortunately, no notice or obituary was found.
48. *Polk's Tucson (Pima County, Ariz.) City Directory 1965* (Dallas: R. L. Polk, 1966) 166; *Polk's Tucson (Pima County, Ariz.) City Directory 1969* (Dallas: R. L. Polk, c. 1969) 162; *1976 Tucson (Pima County, Ariz.) City Directory* (South El Monte, CA: R. L. Polk, c. 1976) 122.
49. Armstrong, phone conversation of 11 January 2008.
50. Eddie Bishop, telephone conversation with the author of 22 January 2008.
51. Ibid.
52. Armstrong, phone conversation of 11 January 2008; Bishop, phone conversation of 22 January 2008.
53. *Social Security Death Index* <<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?rank=0&gsfn=william+&gsln=burkes&sx=&f9=&f8=&f10=&f6=&f5=&f7=1989&f1=&f15=&f14=&f13=&f12=&f20=&f0=&prox=1&db=ssdi&ti=0&ti.si=0&gl=&gss=ERROR&gst=&so=3> >.
54. Armstrong, phone conversation of 15 January 2008.

To ascertain the birth and/or death dates of certain individuals, the author also consulted the *Social Security Death Index*.