The Steel Guitar in Early Country Music
Part Two: Jimmie Rodgers's Steel Guitarists
Chapter Eight: Billy Burkes Revisited

This ongoing series of articles—which began in the March 2008 issue—has been examining the ten 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 Victor sides including the instrument.)

Rodgers’s eighth steel guitarist, William Theodore (“Billy”) Burkes (1912-1989) was originally discussed in the September 2008 and March 2009 issues, in connection with Hawaiian steel-player Joseph Kaaia Kaipo (1896-1964). Hookena-born Kaipo—the third steel guitarist to record with Rodgers—played a west-Dallas supper-club gig with Billy and his middle brother Weldon before meeting Rodgers; Billy and Joe Kaipo continued collaborating when Billy participated in five of Kaipo’s fall 1929 recordings with Rodgers.

Since March 2009, I have continued researching Billy Burkes’s life (particularly his post-Rodgers years) while preparing in five of Kaipo’s fall 1929 recordings with Rodgers.

This installment will correct some of the errors/misstatements inadvertently made about Burkes in the September 2008 and March 2009 issues, plus add some of my newly-acquired information (including—where possible—any Burkes activities related to Hawaiian music).

The March 2009 issue detailed Billy Burkes’s birth in Wichita, Kansas on April 3, 1912, to parents from Missouri and Texas; the issue also detailed how Billy and his middle brother Weldon (1910-1971) were taught to sing at an early age by their mother, and how the talented siblings sang locally, then regionally with Wichita’s Brunk’s Comedians, the Southwest’s most-successful tent-theater organization.

Recent research has revealed that the Burkes family’s 1924 move to Fort Worth was sparked by the burning-down of their west-Wichita residence. Once ensconced in Texas, Billy and Weldon began playing instruments, subsequently performing for parties and street-dances, as well as in vaudeville; they also appeared on radio stations, including Fort Worth’s WBAP.

Careful searching at newspaperarchive.com revealed a February 23, 1928 article in the Post-Register in Lockhart, Texas (c. 220 miles south of Ft. Worth) detailing Billy and Weldon’s performance at a World-War-I veteran’s presentation. Describing the brothers as “real artists on the ukulele and the guitar as well as other instruments,” the article related that the two “[performed] several vocal selections to their own accompaniment,” while gushing—a bit awkwardly—that “the program, needless to say, buoyed to the fullest extent the audience.”

As related in the September 2008 issue, by summer 1929, Billy (now seventeen) and Weldon had landed a steady gig roaming tables and playing requests at Dallas’s El Tivoli club (roughly thirty miles east of Billy and Weldon’s west-Fort Worth residence). Billy and Weldon were soon joined by circa thirty-three-year-old Joe Kaipo (who’d come to the Dallas/Fort Worth area after serving in the army); the addition of a Hawaiian steel guitarist proved to be a hit with El Tivoli’s customers.

Billy Burkes met Jimmie Rodgers in early-August 1929, following Rodgers’s arrival in Dallas to make some field-recordings for Victor Records at the Jefferson Hotel. Rodgers—evidencing his usual need for backing-musicians—had arranged an audition for Joe Kaipo, who’d been recommended by local entertainers. Bashful Kaipo persuaded Billy Burkes to accompany him to his appointment; to Billy’s surprise, Rodgers hired them both on the spot, and Weldon Burkes joined Rodgers’s backing-group on ukulele the following day.

Rodgers recorded seven sides between August 8-12; on five of these, Rodgers was backed by some combination of the Burkes brothers and/or Joe Kaipo, with Billy Burkes plying standard guitar on Rodgers’s first four recordings. The best-selling coupling from the sessions was the slightly-risqué “Everybody Does it in Hawaii” b/w Rodgers’s cover of “Frankie and Johnny” on which Rodgers accompanied himself on guitar (Vi 22143). (“Everybody Does it in Hawaii”—composed by Rodgers’s sister-in-law, Elsie McWilliams, the evening of August 7—has been kept alive in recent years via covers by Steve Forbert [1997] and Charlie Dore [2009], as well as Minneapolis-based Johnny Pineapple and His Waikiki Wildcats [2006].)

In early-September 1929, Billy, Weldon, and Joe Kaipo travelled to Rodgers’s newly-adopted hometown of Kerrville, Texas (northwest of San Antonio) to rehearse for a projected national vaudeville tour. While polishing their act, Rodgers, the Burkes brothers, and Kaipo played San Angelo (150 miles to the northwest) and performed for the Kerrville Rotary Club.
A September 19 article on the front page of the *Kerrville Mountain Times* ("Rodgers and Troupe Entertain Rotarians") related that the quartet’s selections included the recently-recorded “Everybody Does it in Hawaii” and that Billy, Weldon, and Joe Kaipo performed the current Freed & Brown waltz-time hit “Pagan Love Song” (the theme-song to MGM’s South-Sea-Island-themed film *The Pagan*, released some months earlier).

When vaudeville-touring plans fell through, Rodgers, the Burkeses, and Joe Kaipo made a brief tour of the Texas Gulf Coast. More careful searching at newspaperarchive.com revealed a previously-unknown two-night stand in Galveston; regarding the quartet’s opening-night performance, the October 12 Galveston *Daily News* reported that “Mr. Rodgers favored the audience with selections from his recorded numbers, several of which were requested,” adding that Billy and Weldon “found the audience equally responsive to their offerings of more-modern syncopations.” The *Daily News* also related that Kaipo “gave one vocal number, ‘Right or Wrong.’” (Kaipo may have known the vaudeville tune from recent Hawaiian-themed covers by acts such as Sol Hoopii’s Novelty Trio [with Lani McIntire on standard guitar] [1927], Frank Ferera’s Hawaiians [1928], or Andy Sannella’s Pathé Hawaiians [1929].)

A week before the 1929 Stock Market Crash, Rodgers, the Burkeses, and Joe Kaipo returned to Dallas’s Jefferson Hotel for a final day of Victor field-recording. In a two-and-a-half-hour morning-session, Billy and Weldon committed some of their “more-modern syncopations” to wax via two sides as the Burke Brothers. (Burkes family-members signed their names without a final “s” in Billy’s younger days.) One wonders if the brothers’ original songs—*At Last My Dreams Have Come True* b/w “Lonesome and Lonely” (Vi 40294)—had been in their El Tivoli- and/or touring-repertoire. The author recently obtained a dub of the recordings from the Pinson Recorded Sound Collection at the Country Music Hall of Fame; related that the quartet’s selections included the recently-recorded “Everybody Does it in Hawaii” and that Billy, Weldon, Joe Kaipo assisting on steel guitar.

After a lunch-break, Billy, Weldon and Joe Kaipo backed Jimmie Rodgers’s adaptation of the 1896 parlor-song “Whisper Your Mother’s Name” (Vi 22319).

Kaipo and the Burkes brothers then went their separate ways; to infer from several passenger-and-crew-list databases at ancestry.com, Kaipo appears to have later worked as a “utility man” on various American naval ships during and after World War II.

In November 1929, Billy alone backed Jimmie Rodgers on nine more sides on standard guitar at Victor field-recording sessions in New Orleans and Atlanta. Burkes and Rodgers’s Atlanta recordings were made at the Atlanta Woman’s Club, in a space then-known as the Meeting Room (now re-christened the Ballroom); their sides included the poignant “Why Did You Give Me Your Love?” (Bb B-5892), a spurred lover’s bitterness at the fleetingness of a “one-night-stand,” with a melody by Burkes and lyrics by Elsie McWilliams. Burkes faithfully underlies Rodgers’s vocals with a waltz-accompaniment on his guitar; since the recording’s 1935 release, the tune has been covered by Ernest Tubb (in 1950, with Dickie Harris on steel) and Hank Snow (in 1953, with Joe Talbot plying steel).

In December 1929, Burkes made a brief southern vaudeville-tour with Jimmie Rodgers and several other performers, including Atlanta fiddler Clayton McMichen (1900-1970) (who—over the previous thirty-six months—had recorded three “Hawaiian” songs, including Fred Lawrence’s “Honolulu Moon”).

In spring 1930, Burkes toured West Texas with his brother Weldon and his older brother Charlie (1906-1936). With Charlie playing ukelele, Weldon plying guitar, and Billy now playing Hawaiian steel guitar (which he’d picked up from Joe Kaipo), the brothers appeared in Big Spring, Abilene, and Brownwood, as well as the Tolpec Café in Juarez, Mexico, across the Rio Grande River from El Paso.

In a story titled “Burke Trio Given Warm Reception,” the March 14 *Big Spring Herald* reported on the brothers’ performance at a joint meeting of the Big Spring and Stanton Lions Clubs, relating that

> The Stanton Lion’s Club . . . had complete charge of the program and did a jam-up good job of entertaining its hosts. . . . [T]he three Burke brothers . . . Victor recording artists associated with Jimmie Rodgers . . . offered a half dozen numbers that were well received by the audience.

Other newspaper-items spawned by the brothers’ tour emphasized the “Hawaiian” influence of Billy’s added steel guitar; with an advertisement in an unidentified Abilene newspaper announcing the trio as “The Three Burkes Hawaiian Trio” and an unidentified Brownwood paper reporting that “[the] Burke Brothers Hawaiian Trio [is] Here.”

Sometime after the Burke brothers’ West Texas tour, the Burkes family moved to Houston, where Billy soon married Iowa-born Dorothea Irene Bloom (1908-1988). In late 1931, Billy reconnected with Jimmie Rodgers while Rodgers was in Houston playing a Christmastime tent-theater show; the reunion led to nineteen-year-old Burkes accompanying Rodgers on three final sides at a third Victor field-recording session at Dallas’s Jefferson Hotel in February 1932.

On Burkes’ last two Rodgers sides—“My Time Ain’t Long” (Vi 23669) and Elise McWilliams’s “Mississippi Moon” (Vi 23696)—he played steel guitar for the first time on record. (As related in March 2009, Burkes provided introductions to both recordings, after which he doubled Rodgers’s vocal-line in the high register of his instrument.)
In an e-mail interview, WNAX's current news director Jerry Oster recalled Burke's name surfacing in conversations with tourists beginning to arrive back in Phoenix, it seems likely the duo's Biltmore Hotel gig was beckoning.

"old-timers" in the Yankton area when he arrived at the station in 1976; unfortunately, the loss of most of WNAX's archives before Burke and Sisco's arrival, WNAX's signal had been boosted to 5,000 daytime watts; with the increased wattage, WNAX's daytime signal now traveled as far south as Omaha and as far east as Minneapolis, and by 1938, the station had become the CBS network's top-ranking farm and direct-sale station, and their #5 affiliate overall.

In December 1936, Billy & Dorothy Burke and Ted Sisco moved 1,175 miles northwest to Phoenix (a government-project-enhanced "boomtown" emerging as a "magnet" for the American winter-tourist trade). Billy and Ted soon-established a band at the Arizona Biltmore resort hotel, in then-desert-land north of town.

In late-summer 1938—during a "seasonal lull" at the Arizona Biltmore—Billy Burke and Ted Sisco jouneyed over thirteen-hundred miles northeast, to Yankton, South Dakota, to serve a three-month stint on WNAX radio. (Roughly two years before Burke and Sisco's arrival, WNAX's signal had been boosted to 5,000 daytime watts; with the increased wattage, WNAX's daytime signal now traveled as far south as Omaha and as far east as Minneapolis, and by 1938, the station had become the CBS network's top-ranking farm and direct-sale station, and their #5 affiliate overall.)

To learn more about Billy Burke's WNAX stint, I took advantage of my proximity to Yankton (circa 135 miles southwest of my home of Brookings, South Dakota) and made two research-trips to the community, in June 2009 and September 2010.

Burke's July 25, 1938 Social Security Number application—which he completed to enroll in President Franklin Roosevelt's newly-enacted federal-insurance program—inform me that Burke (and perhaps Dorothy?) boarded in Yankton's Reetz Apartments. (The apartments occupied the second floor of the Reetz Building, on Third Street in central Yankton, a mere three blocks northwest of the Gurney Seed and Nursery Company building, which housed WNAX's studios.)

WNAX program-listings in the Yankton Press and Dakotan newspaper reveal that Billy Burke and Ted Sisco debuted on the station the morning of July 30, 1938, as "Billie and Ted." (Beginning in September, Sisco also resurrected his "Cisco Kid" cowboy-song program from his KFBI days.)

Also on July 30th, Burke began hosting a "Radio Aces" program (the title borrowed from his KGBZ and KFBI stints). "Radio Aces"—also fifteen minutes long—aired one-to-four times a day through November 1st. (On August 30th, Burke's "Radio Aces" program was re-christened "Billy Burke's Radio Aces.")

Burke began hosting a third program, "Billy Burke: Songs of Yesterday," on September 10th. (The fifteen-minute segment aired one-to-four times a day through October 9th.) Burke also appeared on the one-time broadcast "Songs of Johnston and Burke," on September 8th, with an unknown fellow-songwriter.

Burke and Sisco's names vanish from WNAX's program-listings after November 1, 1938; with trainloads of winter-season tourists beginning to arrive back in Phoenix, it seems likely the duo's Biltmore Hotel gig was beckoning.

In an e-mail interview, WNAX's current news director Jerry Oster related Burke's name surfacing in conversations with "old-timers" in the Yankton area when he arrived at the station in 1976; unfortunately, the loss of most of WNAX's archives in a December 1983 fire makes tracing Burke's name in any old station-paperwork apparently impossible.

Back in Phoenix, Burke helped open the South Seas Room at Skipper's South Seas restaurant downtown on October 26, 1939. (An advertisement in the Arizona Independent Republic related that the space—taking its cue from other recently-opened "Island rooms" like the Hawaiian Room at New York City's Hotel Lexington—was "a room truly typical of the South Sea Islands", with "tropical rains, tropical drinks, [and] tropical music . . . by Billie Burke's Hawaiian Trio.")
The recently-released 1940 United States Census shows Burkes and his wife Dorothy living on Maryland Avenue in the then-far-northern edge of Phoenix. To infer from the census, Burkes was re-immersed in his Biltmore Hotel-band-leading, which had netted him twelve hundred dollars the previous year (c.$19,820, adjusted for 2013 inflation)

Burkes left the Biltmore later in 1940, to work a salesman for the N. Porter Saddle and Harness Company, a downtown-Phoenix business which soon branched out into western-wear. Burkes did continue playing music in the evenings—apparently embracing a more pop-based sound, Burkes led a dance-orchestra which played for functions at Arizona State Teachers College (now Arizona State University). Editions of the Arizona Independent Republic at newspaperarchive.com show Burkes also leading a dance-trio at the Mecca, a northeast Phoenix restaurant, from mid-April through early-December 1943. (One wonders if Burkes’s Mecca threesome was Hawaiian-oriented, as the trio he provided for the Skipper’s South Seas opening had been.)

Following a stint in the U.S. Navy in the latter days of World War II, Burkes relocated to Tucson, Arizona (c. 120 miles southeast of Phoenix) where he worked at the Porter family’s Tucson western-wear store. Burkes also eventually led Porter’s Western Band, including Dorothy on bass and former radio-broadcasting-partner Ted Sisco on rhythm guitar. (The band promoted the Porter’s store at conventions for cattlemen and wool-growers, as well as local dances, fairs, and rodeos.)

Burkes also gigged in Tucson with his own orchestra—from circa early-November 1946 through at least late-April 1951, Burkes played for Saturday-night dancing at the Odd Fellows Hall downtown; Tucson Daily Citizen advertisements chronicle Burkes’s orchestra playing “music that is different,” with Burkes leading his group from his console-model electric steel guitar. (The “difference” in Burkes’s music-making apparently referred to the Bob Wills-influenced, western-swing style of dance-music he’d embraced by the late 1940s.)

Billy Burkes appears to have taken a break from performing in the mid-to-late 1950s, when he and his wife Dorothy resettled in Cheyenne, Wyoming (circa one thousand miles northeast of Phoenix); there, Billy worked at three different western-outfitter stores, in either a management- or sales-capacity.

By August 1958, Burkes was back in Tucson, managing the saddle department of Porter’s Tucson branch. By the late 1950s, Burkes had divorced Dorothy and married former Youngstown, Ohio department-store employee Mary Irene Cannon (1913-2006).

The March 2009 issue relayed information about Burkes’s later Tucson years, including his late-1950s return to performing as a member of Dean Armstrong’s Arizona Dance Hands western swing band and the group’s long-standing gig at a far-northwest Tucson steakhouse (where Burkes entertained customers with renditions of Hawaiian-themed songs like Charles King’s “Hawaiian Wedding Song”, which Andy Williams had revived in 1959).

In his later years, Burkes—regarded as a “senior statesman” country music’s early days—furnished important information to scholars including Jimmie Rodgers’s biographer Nolan Porterfield, country-music historian Bill Malone, and Tucson folklorist James Griffith. Griffith conducted a lengthy interview with Burkes at his north-Tucson trailer-home in March 1976; from this meeting (and photocopies Griffith made of items in Burkes’s personal scrapbook) the author gleaned details of Burkes’s spring 1930 West Texas tour and his KGBZ/KFBI radio-stints.

Billy Burkes died of cancer in Tucson in early-June 1989 at age 77. In the wake of Burkes’s death, his instruments and accessories passed to various entities. A double-neck Elektra steel guitar owned by Burkes was acquired by the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Museum in Rodgers’s hometown of Meridian, Mississippi. (As relayed in March 2009, the museum also displays an Epiphone mandolin owned by Burkes.) Burkes’s pre-World War II steel-guitar bar and finger-picks eventually passed to Louisiana resophonic-guitarist Eddie Ortega. (In an April 2012 e-mail to the author, Ortega related that he regularly-utilized Burkes’s finger-picks.)

Nolan Porterfield—in summing up Billy Burkes’s achievement—described him as “a genial, modest gentleman who through the years quietly cherished his association with Jimmie Rodgers . . . ”

One wonders what success Burkes might have attained as a songwriter, had he chosen to focus on that activity—Burkes’s three recorded creations show him possessing songwriting-talent, with an ear for durable melodies and cogent (and occasionally surprising) chord-choices.


Anthony Lis
Immense popularity in his time, Jimmie Rodgers defined the role of the singing country star with his colorful personality and freewheeling musical approach. Between 1927 and his premature death from tuberculosis in 1933, Rodgers recorded a series of “blue yodels” and dozens of other songs that drew on blues, jazz, folk, and vaudeville elements. Rodgers’s rousing vocals and unorthodox guitar style have inspired generations of artists.

Born 1897
MISSISSIPPI
Burkes Photo-captions


2. Billy Burkes (left) and his brother Weldon, early 1920s? (University of Arizona Library Special Collections)

3. "Everybody Does It In Hawaii"—with lyrics by Jimmie Rodgers's sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams—one of four sides on which Billy Burkes backed Rodgers in Dallas on August 8, 1929.

4. Background Photo: "Pagan Love Song," the title song from W. S. Van Dyke's 1929 Island-themed film The Pagan, which Billy and Weldon Burkes performed with Hawaiian steel guitarist Joe Kaipo in fall 1929. (From the collection of the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University)

5. Billy (left) and Weldon Burkes, at the time of their fall 1929 Texas Gulf Coast tour. (University of Arizona Library Special Collections)

6. Record-label for the April 1935 Bluebird release of "Why Did You Give Me Your Love?" (Despite the label-credit to Jimmie Rodgers, the song's melody was actually written by Billy Burkes and the lyrics by Rodgers's sister-in-law, Elsie McWilliams.)

7. Billy Burkes, Tucson, Arizona, 11 March 1976. (Photo by James S. Griffith; University of Arizona Library Special Collections)

8. Billy Burkes's grave-marker; Evergreen Memorial Park Cemetery, Tucson (Photo by Kay Ellen Fleming, findagrave.com)

Andy Cummings...the man behind 'Waikiki'

One of Hawaii's great composers/performers, Andrew Kealoha Cummings was born in Honolulu and attended school on Maui and Kauai. He learned the ukulele early, and the violin and trumpet in high school, but he was known for grabbing his guitar and singing at the drop of a hat.

He was a gifted athlete and played in his church's orchestra, but his professional musical career began when the Cummings family moved to Hilo and he joined the Huapala troupe in 1933. Several years later, he had a regular Sunday radio show, billed as the 'Wandering Troubadour' and he joined the Hilo Police department, where he sang in the glee club. This and his work with the force's pistol team, took him to the mainland for the first time in 1937. Impressario E.K. Fernandez spotted the group of cops dancing and playing Hawaiian music and booked Andy and the Huapala troupe on a 9-month North American tour.

This excursion to the Toronto and on to Kalamazoo, Detroit and Lansing, Michigan, was when Andy wrote the song generally acknowledged to be the greatest Hapa Haole song of them all, 'Waikiki,' while longing for home. He also met his future wife—hula dancer Florence Kalua Ikuw a—on this tour.

Andy played at a few local nightspots upon returning to Honolulu, and was working as a tug operator in Pearl Harbor as the war began in the Pacific.

After the war, he formed a new group which played at all the hot spots, including Chock See's By the Sea, the Outrigger Canoe Club, Kilohana Gardens, Florentine Gardens and Queen's Surf.

In addition to songwriting, Cummings never let a local event go unmusicalized—he wrote 'No Puka in the Pali' to oppose the tunnel, another to promote statehood. He also specialized in commercial jingles, and was a musical ambassador for the islands while working for Hawaiian Airlines as a sales promoter.