

The current line-up of the Burns Sisters consists of Marie, Jeannie and Annie Burns, respectively, sibling numbers seven to nine in a family of seven brothers and five sisters. In concert this trio performs a harmony rich blend of folk/country/pop originals and covers. For the past two-decades they have been based out of Ithaca, a town that lies at the southern tip of one of the Finger Lakes in Central New York State. As the crow flies, Ithaca is only about forty miles from the town of Binghamton, where Mr. and Mrs. Burns raised their brood. Their father, John J. Burns, now retired, was a politician who was elected the first Democrat Mayor in the state, and subsequently became the Democratic Party Chairman for New York state. In 1964 when Bobby Kennedy stood, successfully, to become the Senator for the state of New York, John J. Burns was his campaign manager.

The latter should hint at what being raised in the Burns of Binghamton household meant, at least, politically. By the time each child reached his/her teenage years, they were enlisted as *cannon fodder* when campaigning was required on behalf of the Party. Not that music was forbidden at home. Far from it, as their mother, Teresa McMahon, had been an opera singer. As Jeannie told an American reporter a couple of years ago, *"Our older brothers had a band in high school. We all grew up singing."* In fact their mother made a point of teaching all of her offspring how to sing harmony, during their pre-teen years.

In their original form, the Burns Sisters consisted of the trio that still tours the States to this today. They became a quintet, when older sister Sheila, and youngest sister Terry, joined them during the mid-eighties. Terry subsequently moved to Nashville where she signed a writing deal with MCA Publishing, while Sheila became art teacher in Ithaca. After performing in the clubs of New York state for around a decade, the Burns Sisters signed a recording contract with SBK Productions and CBS Records in 1985.

Two albums resulted from the deal, although their contract was terminated during the week before the release of their sophomore effort. The first album titled **"The Burns Sisters Band"** was released in 1986. Produced by Richard Goddard the disc spawned a couple of minor hit singles. Ostensibly the recording was pitched at the pop/rock market, although the disc closed with a rousing version of Bernice Johnson Reagon's anthem "I'm Gonna Stand." Reagon founded the Grammy award winning, a cappella gospel group Sweet Honey In the Rock. Of the remaining nine cuts on the disc, Ron Riddle, their drummer, provided the music to lyrics written in various combinations by Sheila, Marie, Jeannie and Annie. **"Endangered Species,"** their second album, arrived three years later and was allowed to sink without trace by CBS. The latter recording was co-produced by Bob Marlette and David Kershenbaum.

In 1980 three of the sisters made a brief appearance, singing, in the late Louis Malle's movie **"Atlantic City."** A couple of the older Burns' brothers, who worked in Hollywood as film technicians, arranged for the sisters to appear in the movie. While dispirited at the loss of their recording contract, in their lives to date, the sisters had never been apart for an extended length of time. Taking stock of the situation they decided to disband, as a number of them were now married and raising families.

It's a fact that when music has permeated your soul and being for most of your life, it's impossible to turn your back on it. Now multiply the latter factors by five. In 1992 the sisters decided to make one more record. This time around however, it would be on their terms. They didn't want record label executives telling them what to wear, and they were certainly going to choose what songs they sang. The result was the nine-track, self-produced, folk/rock collection **"Songs Of The Heart"** released on their Art For Art's Sake label. Following an already established pattern, the *usual suspects* wrote the songs, although it was noticeable that Sheila, Marie and Annie, in particular, had begun working with other writers. For instance, the penultimate song, "Willow," was co-written by Marie and British ex-pat, Martin Simpson. As we'll see Marie returned to that song a few years later, in a completely different format. Co-writing had been a major feature of the contents of their **"Endangered Species"** set, albeit driven by SBK Productions, and producer Bob Marlette was credited as co-writer of six of the nine tracks. With the arrival of **"Songs Of The Heart,"** there were strong indications that the sisters were becoming comfortable with collaborating with other writers – but, on their terms.

As well as working together, a few of the sisters became involved in *outside* musical projects. Jeannie formed a folk influenced trio called Isn't It, with sister Terry, and Walter Strauss. 1994 saw the release of a solo album by one of the sisters. Titled **"Into The Wild"** and credited to Annie Burns & The Rain, the disc possessed a folk/rock feel. The Rain, equated to Rich DePaolo [guitar, slide guitar, percussion] and Doug Robinson [bass, guitar]. Mac Benford moved to Ithaca in 1990 and soon afterwards assembled the Woodshed All-Stars, primarily to record an album to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. The sound produced by this old-time string band was built around the North Georgia twin fiddle sound of Pete Sutherland and John Kirk, and the voice and original compositions of Marie Burns. The resulting cassette **"First ½ Century"** issued by the Marimac label in 1991, proved so successful that the group became a permanent ensemble. Half a decade later, Rounder Records issued an album by Mac Benford and the Woodshed All-Stars titled

“Willow.” In addition, Marie worked with an Ithaca band called Southern Tears. In terms of timescale, we’ve jumped ahead of the sisters story by a year, as 1995 witnessed the re-emergence of the Burns Sisters as a trio.

Produced by Rich DePaolo, **“Close To Home,”** and released by Rounder/Philo, Marie’s heartfelt “We Never Said Goodbye” opens an album that, at the time of its release, was a personal turntable favourite. It still is. A less frenetic interpretation of Annie’s “Into The Wild” [than her solo album version] follows, and the marriage of the sister’s voices in this reinterpretation endows the song with a dreamlike quality. While the title of Sheila and Marie’s “New Kind Of Old Fashioned Girl” could be applied to any of the sisters, this cut left no doubt that the Burns Sisters country chops were intact. Cover songs among this dozen strong collection included Van Morrison’s “Irish Heartbeat,” “I Am A Patriot “ one of their live show anthems penned by Steve Van Zandt, the traditional “Bright Morning Star” and “Freedom Rings” written by Ithaca resident Aro Venio. During this period, in concert, DePaolo’s guitar and Eric Aceto’s violin were essential support elements in the trio’s overall sound. Although the sisters had enjoyed national attention during their CBS years, it was nothing compared to the acclaim they received for their Philo debut. Previously restricted to touring within New York State, they began performing in markets farther afield.

From the liner artwork, through to the vocal contributions on the eleven tracks, the sisters next Philo recording project, **“Tradition,”** subtitled **“Holiday Songs Old & New,”** proved to be, a family affair. The faces and fashions of [past and present] generations of the Burns dynasty were featured in the liner artwork, while the voices of the Annie Jeannie and Marie, along with their respective offspring, can be heard throughout this recording. The session players included Mac Benford, John Kirk and Martin Simpson. While the collection included well-known Christmas songs like “Silent Night,” a considerable portion of the recording featured inspirational content. The traditional “Shaloo Shalom” was a prayer for peace in Israel, while the words of “Come Come” by thirteenth century Persian poet, Rumi, had been set to music. Appropriately titled, Marie’s composition, “Songs We Love” opened the collection.

The inclusion of a Steve Van Zandt tune on their Philo debut, had established a link, albeit tenuous, with a rock legend from the neighbouring state of New Jersey. I’m referring, of course, to Bruce Springsteen. When the time arrived to record their third Philo effort the trio headed south to the blue grass state, and Nashville. Apart from Marie and Sheila’s “My Father’s Blue Eyes,” **“In This World”** was produced by Springsteen’s bass player, Gary Tallent. While employing local talents Jerry Douglas, Pat Buchanan, and Daryl Burgess, Ithaca pickers [and Burns Sisters support band regulars] Rich DePaolo, Eric Aceto and Doug Robinson also partook in the sessions. Released in 1997, it was almost inevitable that the sound would lean more toward country than their previous folkier efforts. Hazel Dickens’ “Working Girl Blues” was the only cover among the thirteen songs. Jeannie the least prolific writer, co-wrote the closing “No More Silence” with Marie.

Although their fourth Philo disc was completed and ready for release before the end of 1999, the disc, **“Out Of The Blue,”** didn’t appear till midway through the following year. The delay undoubtedly caused some anxiety. Cutting the basic tracks at Tombstone Studios in Nashville, the sisters returned to the familiar environs of Ithaca’s studios, and over a period of eight months Marie, Jeannie and Annie refined their vocal contributions while sharing in the production of the recording. Jimmy LaFave sang a duet with Jeannie on his tune “Never Be Mine,” and as usual there was an array of new tunes by Annie and Marie. On “Two Step Recipe” the trio proved that northern girls could handle a cajun rhythm [with ease]. The only other cover in the pack was “Something Real” penned by Nashville scribes, Steve Seskin and Allen Shamblin. There was a definite hint of Mary Chapin Carpenter’s folkier style about the sound of the latter track. True to their Catholic upbringing the sisters closed with a musical setting of the “Prayer Of St. Francis.” Whatever your stance on religion, their performance was hauntingly beautiful, and breathtakingly executed.

With the arrival of the new millennium the sisters set about launching the next phase of their evolving musical careers. In the fall of 2000 Marie Burns self-released her debut solo album, on the Sure Thing Record label. Titled **“Free Little Bird,”** and self-produced, the Nashville recording sessions were supervised by Rich Adler. The material - there’s fifteen tracks - was almost equally split between Marie Burns originals and co-writes, and cover songs. In terms of the former, Marie revisits “New Kind Of Old Fashioned Girl” as a duet with her daughter Anna Burns Lashley. Among the covers, there’s the upbeat opener “Dance With The Gypsies” from the pen of Oklahoma composer, Bob Childers. Appropriately, the latter cut featured a Jimmy LaFave backing vocal [#]. While there were contributions from contemporary writers Mike Henderson and Fred Eaglesmith, Marie stayed true to her love of more traditionally based material by covering Hazel Dickens “Ramblin’ Woman.”

When the Burns Sisters appeared at Kerrville’s Wine & Music Festival on September 2nd 2000, they spent the early part of that day in the studio with Jimmy LaFave singing backing vocals on a handful of songs that subsequently appeared on his 2001 album, **“Texoma.”** Following Marie’s lead Jeannie’s solo debut **“Coming Up Close”** appeared in early 2001, while Annie’s sophomore **“Days In Italy”** arrived later the same year.

Jeannie's album was produced by guitarist Jim Henry, and recorded at the original Signature Sounds Recording Studio in Palmer, Massachusetts. Henry, also a Signature Sounds Recording Company artist, toured with the Burns Sisters as their accompanist for a number of years, although during 2004 he consistently supported Tracy Grammer on the road. Apart from the closing track "Ella," co-written by Jeannie and Henry, the other material on "**Coming Up Close**" consisted of covers of songs by roots musicians such as Ray Bonneville, Cliff Eberhardt and Fred Eaglesmith. Rock musician Aimee Mann penned the album title track.

The lyrics to the title track of Annie's "**Days In Italy**" were inspired by the passing of her best friend, following a 10 year long battle with cancer. The top-flight session players included, Bob Dylan's then musical director Tony Garnier [bass], Jim Kimball [guitar], Larry Campbell [guitar] and Shawn Pelton [percussion]. On the recording Annie reinterprets some old Burns Sisters material including Sheila's "The King's Gonna Fall" from "**Endangered Species**" and her own "God Made Woman." The latter song is definitely a Burns Sisters *in concert* anthem, and the three covers includes "John Of Dreams" from British based folk musician, Bill Caddick.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, the Burns Sisters have been remarkably quiet on the recording front, although they continued gigging albeit less regularly than during the late nineteen-nineties. In the summer of 2002 Marie released the thematic collection "**Good Dog**" featuring original and cover songs dedicated to the canine species. The basic tracks for the album were cut in Nashville at Bill Vorndick's new Mountainside Studios, and the vocals were added at Hiltronix's Sound in Ithaca. In Nashville bassist Dennis Crouch [Nashville Bluegrass Band], and Robert Bolin [guitar and fiddle] contributed to the sessions. Other guests on the recording included Jeannie Burns, Val Denn, Barbara Lamb, Mac Benford and John Kirk. Around the time that "**Good Dog**" there were rumours that a Louisiana based independent record label was scheduling a new Burn Sisters recording, but nothing has surfaced to date. A live Burns Sisters album was also mooted at one stage, but once more the end result has been nada. During the Spring of 2004 the sisters contributed to a number of Ribbon of Highway Shows. This touring ensemble, the brainchild of Bob Childers [the show's narrator], Jimmy LaFave and LaFave's booking agent Val Denn, pays tribute, in narrative and song, to the works of Woody Guthrie, and first toured the States during early 2003 with a stage line-up that also included 2004 folk Grammy nominee Eliza Gilkyson, Sarah Lee Guthrie & Johnny Irion, Slaid Cleaves and Ellis Paul. The Burns Sisters are slated to play further Ribbon Of Highway shows in the Spring of 2005. As for a new trio album by Marie, Jeannie and Annie your guess.....

Note.

[#] – LaFave and Childers are long standing friends, from the period when Jimmy LaFave resided in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

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