

# Spotlight: Steven Kent

## A Musician at Play in the World of Words

by Ned Balbo

Musicians, as a rule, are pranksters: however gifted or ambitious, most find ways to indulge their playful side within the confines of their calling. Sometimes the pranks are ones that only other musicians get (the reversed melody in Haydn's "palindrome" symphony no. 47), while others come to define their creators: think of some of Ray Davies' biting yet tender classics ("Sunny Afternoon," "Lola") or, recently, Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers' Wet Leg standouts ("Supermarket," "Ur Mum"). From Dinah Washington's bawdy "TV Is the Thing This Year," to R.E.M.'s disheveled wreck of Roger Miller's "King of the Road," to former teen accordionist Weird Al's entire career, you don't have to look far to find musicians giving in to wit at someone else's expense or, quite often, their own.

Steven Kent—the poetic alter ego of Nashville jazz guitarist Kent Burnside—is no exception. Even so, a visit to Kent Burnside's [website](#) yields little that's overtly funny: a modest bio accompanied by rave reviews for his set list, proficiency, and eponymous jazz trio; links to beautifully realized jazz standards featuring Burnside's subtle, richly layered playing; solo acoustic recordings of his own delicately rendered compositions; even YouTube videos of the man himself in action. All of which leaves me wondering...where's Steven Kent? Where's that virtuoso wordsmith who regularly enlivens *Light* with poems of formal panache and sparkling wit? On Kent Burnside's website at least, he's nowhere to be found.

Maybe it's because Steven Kent, like Kent Burnside, is modest. The encomia that grace his books *I Tried* and *Home at Last* (2023 and 2025, both from Kelsay) are rife with ambivalence, from "This is a very recent book" (Hugh Moore Reiter) to "Mr. Kent's writing rises almost to the level of poetry" (Anna Pestyk-Rimes)—remarks from critics whose very names tip us off to their nonexistence. To raise my own *authentic* (in the sense that I do exist) voice against this chorus of back-cover double talk: the blurbs attributed to Reeve Ewer, Anne O'Dyne, et al. are missing the point. Steven Kent is a humorist of rare gifts and sympathetic insight, as well as a top-notch metrical craftsman who can make us smile, wince, or laugh out loud.

Take "Parts Unknown," whose alternately rhymed pentameter quatrains adopt an archetypal voice: that of the Universally Feared Mechanic whose dreaded diagnosis relies on jargon that sounds more like Carrollian / Lennonesque neologisms than plain English:

The camafloric fluid's very gray,  
Which points to defclusion in the base.  
And though your hemispanic looks okay  
I recommend a new one just in case.

(I love that "just in case"—the perfect set-up for the typical automotive customer's surrender to the inevitable.)

Or consider "Progressive Glen," whose skillful sestains navigate that awkward zone where privilege and reflexive political correctness overlap:

Our suburb's new and squeaky clean,  
The whitest place I've ever seen—  
The *houses* here, I mean to say,  
For color blindness is our way:  
Progressive Glen's one neighborhood  
Where folk all talk the talk they should.

With his speaker's inner censor on permanent alert, Steven deftly captures the selective self-awareness of certain affluent suburbanites.

Among these, I'll bet, are the couple using an app to uncover their neighbors' political leanings, rendered sleepless because "the couple to our left is to our Right," although they're perceptive enough to wonder, "[A]re they equally bereft / To learn we're on their right but on their Left?" (The title, "Ignorance Is Bliss," recalls that halcyon era when politically triggered insomnia could be avoided by just not talking politics with your neighbor.) In "It's a Business Doing Pleasure with You," Steven reinvents senescent media baron Rupert Murdoch's real-life e-mail breakup with Jerry Hall, world-famous supermodel and ex-partner of rock stars Bryan Ferry and Mick Jagger. (You might know her as the Joker's girlfriend in Tim Burton's *Batman*, or as the blue-skinned beauty cast ashore on the cover of Roxy Music's *Siren*.) Here, in two trim double ballad stanzas, Steven imagines Murdoch's cold-hearted dismissal of his still-stylish celebrity spouse:

I'll gladly recommend you, dear—  
 You're pleasant, bright, and pretty—  
 But first you'll have to sign off here.  
 (Attorneys, New York City)."

As in these and many more, Steven Kent's body of work is marked by clarity, wit, and formal fluency— qualities as essential to the marriage of words and music as they are to the practice of arranging words in verse. Indeed, the gulf between Kent Burnside's musical career and Steven Kent's poetic pyrotechnics is not nearly as wide as the use of a pseudonym might suggest. Raised in a family of professional musicians, Kent Burnside took an M.A. in English, taught it at the college-level, and even published scholarly work on Shakespeare. At the *Nashville Musician*, his erudition in both art forms combined in feature articles and editorial work while he maintained a 42-year career as a piano technician—all this while continuing to write, compose, perform, and raise four now-adult children with his wife, Jeni. Steven Kent's 832 entries for *Omnificent English Dictionary in Limerick Form* are a decisive testament to his unflagging intelligence and energy. Through sound, word, rhythm, and music, his complementary abilities shine brightly.

That tireless energy finds further outlet in Steven's poems about the trade-offs made by professional musicians. *Home at Last's* "A Life in Music" is short enough to quote in full:

Singing server, made good dough  
 Less than one full year ago;  
 Record label talks increased;  
 I got signed, then got released;  
 Album's in the Closeout bin;  
 Waiting tables once again.

Steven's tetrameter couplets tell a tale as old as time (or at least as old as the recording industry), tracing a career's life cycle in even fewer lines than poor Solomon Grundy got for his whole life. But every record has a flip side. Echoing a certain arboreal-minded Joyce, "The Next Small Thing" begins, "I think that I shall never see / The Next Big Thing; it won't be me..." This finely tuned, self-mocking finale to the book *I Tried* closes with timeless wisdom:

All glitter is not gold, my friends,  
 And this is where the story bends:  
 So many stars have short careers  
 But I'll get work for years and years.

We must be grateful that the gifted musician Kent Burnside is willing to let his inner poet loose on the world, whatever name he chooses to go by while he roams. For that reason, I'm delighted to unleash this small sampling of Steven Kent's wistful, well-turned wit on *Light's* fortunate readers.

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**Ned Balbo's** most recent books are *The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots* (New Criterion Poetry Prize) and *3 Nights of the Perseids* (Richard Wilbur Award), whose title poem appears in the Cambridge University Press anthology *Outer Space: 100 Poems* (Midge Goldberg, editor). Selections of his work are included in *Contemporary Catholic Poetry: an anthology* (April Lindner and Ryan Wilson, eds., Paraclete Press, 2024) and *Attached to the Living World: A New Eco-poetry Anthology* (Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, eds., Trinity U. Press, 2025). Ned has served on the faculty of Iowa State's MFA program in creative writing and environment and has taught at the Frost Farm and WCU poetry conferences, and elsewhere. He is married to poet and essayist Jane Satterfield. Visit <https://nedbalbo.com> for poems and <https://nedsdemos.bandcamp.com> for music.

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