Good Morning, Nashville

Country music deejay Hoss Burns gets a wake-up call

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The hundreds of thousands of radio listeners who tuned in to Hoss Burns' country music show on Nashville's top-rated WSIX nearly heard a strange weather report a few years ago: "I thought I would lose my mind on the air and say something crazy," says Burns, recalling his conflict over whether to disclose his HIV positive status -- "Like, 'It's 74 degrees in Nashville, and I have fucking AIDS.'"

Burns' serostatus wasn't the only thing he kept quiet. One of WSIX's most popular personalities, Burns had carefully tended his macho-black-cowboy-hat image for years by wrenching his sexuality into hidden corners of his life. Without AIDS, he might have stayed in the closet, which Burns now believes would have killed him far faster than any virus. "If it weren't for AIDS, I'd be dead," he says, recalling the bottle of Everclear he drank in a suicide attempt seven years ago. "I might have died of a cocaine overdose or been shot in the head by some trick in an alley," Burns says, his tender voice a far cry from the canyon-size tones he's known for: "There's just no telling."

One of the ways in which Burns acted out his fear of disclosure was through charity. He delivered (with Crystal Gayle) a trailer full of water and blankets to Midwest flood victims in 1993. His "We Are the World" -- style recording, "Let's Open Up Our Hearts," raised more than $150,000 for Project H.O.S.S. (Help Our Schools Survive). A series of radiothons brought in more than $500,000 for pediatric AIDS care. "I'm a nice person, but I also knew I had this secret," Burns says. "I was hoping to win the love of my listeners so they wouldn't hate me when I went public."

Hate him they didn't. In August 1995, WSIX released a statement to the press -- Burns was afraid of blurting out that obscene weather/serostatus update. In a surge of support, the station organized a 12-hour radiothon in his name. More than 100 country music stars -- including Garth Brooks, Billy Ray Cyrus, Reba McEntyre and Lorrie Morgan -- called in or dropped by the station.

And contrary to Burns' fears, bigots did not come looking for him in the middle of the night. He recalls "a big redneck in a University of Tennessee t-shirt" stopping him at a restaurant. "I was thinking, 'He thinks I'm a fag.'" Burns says. "Instead, he said, 'Aren't you Hoss Burns? I just want to commend you for what you've done.'" Burns learned a lesson that night: "I was so sorry, because I knew I'd been the judgmental one."

Since his public announcement, Burns has been taking time off for private reconciling. While he still hosts *Country Hitmakers*, a weekly syndicated show with two million listeners nationwide, he left his full-time job at WSIX. Still, country music remains an important part of his life. Burns is using the extra time to restart his songwriting career, and he's working on an autobiography that is helping him meld his past with his present.

That past started in Port Arthur, Texas, hometown of Janis Joplin and George Jones. Robert Charles Burns -- a.k.a Hoss -- was raised by his strict, Catholic grandmother, who still believes he is going to hell. Burns is banking on heaven, though his version of the hereafter is admittedly different from the Bible's teachings: "A paradise beach in Mykonos with boiled shrimp, good island pot and a cute waiter bringing over piña coladas."

Despite his sonorous voice and enormous success, Burns says he was a shy child. "Robert Charles was this little, clasped-handed boy with no fingernails because I was so nervous. Hoss personified my always jovial, always charitable, always sensitive self," he says. "The two had to meet and shake hands. AIDS has helped me to love my shadow."

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