

When it Mattered

Episode 22: Kevin Burt

- Chitra Ragavan: Born and raised in Waterloo, Iowa blues artist, Kevin Burt, had a tough childhood that put him in chronic survival mode for most of his life, forcing him to make a bunch of career and personal sacrifices to support his family.
- Chitra Ragavan: Then last year, Burt made a decision that changed everything. Hello. Everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan and this is When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. I'm joined today by Kevin Burt, who after more than two decades on the local and national blues circuits is well on his way to becoming a recording artist of international merit. Kevin, welcome to the podcast.
- Kevin Burt: Thank you for having me, appreciate it.
- Chitra Ragavan: You told me recently that your survival mindset began at age five when your parents were separated. What was your life like after that moment?
- Kevin Burt: It's just one of those things where you know that every day it's about making sure that you make it to the next one. It wasn't so much that it was out of danger. It's just out of not knowing. It's the knowing that your mom's doing the best she can and you've got siblings and you're watching them do the best that they can. Your responsibility was to do the best you could too. It was a collective mindset versus just being a kid.
- Chitra Ragavan: Your mother had to raise ... How many kids on a very limited income?
- Kevin Burt: There were four of us. My parents separated, they never divorced. My dad was always there but not, and so he was ...
- Chitra Ragavan: But not there.
- Kevin Burt: Yeah, yeah. He was living his best life. I don't fault him for that. It was his choice to make. Mom raised four of us, three boys, one girl.

All three of us boys ended up being all American football players and our sister was the best athlete in the family.

Chitra Ragavan: This was on food stamps?

Kevin Burt: \$5,000 a year in food stamps. Fixed income is just that. The one thing that it taught me is that I knew that I didn't want my kids to ever experience it. It wasn't a situation where it was, hey, we're living the dream. It was just reminding folks a nightmare is a dream too. We always had love and never felt like we were in a position where we were destitute by any stretch. It just meant that what you did had to matter.

Chitra Ragavan: You had a lot of people helping you get through those early years.

Kevin Burt: Yeah. The neighbors were always there. I could always count on them to ... I would do things for them as I got older. My brothers and I would shovel snow, and cut grass, and all of those kinds of things for a lot of the older folks in the neighborhood. They were all friends. We all went to church together. They'd known us. We stayed in the same neighborhood my whole life. All of the folks that were there watched us and helped us to grow up. They were all a part of who ended up being. I used to disappear sometimes and go over to some of my neighbor's house. There were a lot of older ladies in my neighborhood and a lot of grandmas I used to call it. I used to sneak over to their places. They always have cake or cookies. I'd sit in there and listen to stories and have cake. My mom always knew. If she didn't see me outside playing, I'd stumbled, somebody had baked something.

Chitra Ragavan: Your mom's difficult experience and how she handled it, what did that teach you about life?

Kevin Burt: The one thing is, is that no matter how tough things may have been for her, we always laughed. We always smiled. We always enjoyed the fact that we were together and we knew that we could count on each other. We leaned on that quite a bit. My mom, she was my original superhero. She was the person that if things weren't going well, she would find a way to make it. I say it might not be the best, but she'd make it better. A lot of times, I described her as the most powerful force in the universe. Everything began and ended with mom. It wasn't that she was a domineering kind of a person or any of that kind of stuff, she had a big heart and that heart was always wide open, always.

Chitra Ragavan: You've talked about being in survival mode. Can you describe what survival mode is? I mean, what are its characteristics?

Kevin Burt: The biggest thing is, is you're always working from a position to get to okay. I've always said that if you're not okay, you can't move forward. It's almost like you're digging yourself out of a hole. Sometimes folks forget that if they dig and they put the dirt under their feet, it helps to fill in the hole as you're going along and eventually you can get out of it. Once you're out of that hole, now you're on even ground with everybody else. Sometimes you find yourself just ... You're so worried about the basics of day to day that there's no way to think about tomorrow, there's no way to think about not a day from now, not a week from now, not a year from now.

Kevin Burt: You can't make future plans if you're not okay. You're just surviving. That hustle turns into the worst kind of a loop to be in. Because you hustle and you work all day and you don't see that it made a difference. You go to bed, you wake up, and tomorrow is the same thing. You're just working to try and get to okay. It's taken a long time to get to a point where I can stop thinking that it's not, that I'm not okay, or that things aren't going to be okay.

Chitra Ragavan: Yeah. You went to college and wanting to be I guess in football, but then you ended up with a career as a singer. How did you make that transition? When did you first realize that you could not only sing but that you could also support yourself through the blues?

Kevin Burt: Well, the powers that we have are ... They're remarkable. They always introduce you or put those things that you're supposed to do around you. Music has always been in my life, but I never thought it was what I was going to do. I always saw myself ... I believed that I was going to be a professional athlete. I thought that I had worked to become that. My true senior year of college playing football, the third play of the first game, my knee got dislocated. You go from being a preseason All American to damaged goods. The folks that were reaching out to you from the NFL and all of those places, those letters stopped coming. You struggle to get yourself back.

Kevin Burt: At a smaller school, there's no rehab program. There's no special doctors that are there to help you to get better and to rehab that injury. You do the best you can, what you got. You come back the next year, you do the things that you can do. It opened up a door for me to try out with a professional football team in Canada, the Hamilton Tiger-Cats. At the end of my tryouts, they basically just told me that they liked me but I was too short too American. They

sent me home and the game of football told me it was done with me essentially. That's one of the things that people don't think about in terms of sports.

Kevin Burt: You can always find a pick-up game of basketball and then you can keep playing that game. There's recreational leagues of hockey even. Tennis, you can find a buddy and go do that. There's no pick-up football. There's no way to just go and do that casually. When the game of football is done with you, it decides it most of the time. That leaves a lot of ... It was my expression, it was my outlet, it was my sanity. It kept me from dealing with my own anger issues because I could bottle it all up and take it onto a football field and use it and play it out to the point where I was exhausted.

Kevin Burt: Everything that frustrated me with the world, I could take it out on that football field and use it as fuel. To have that just taken away, to be told by the game itself, you don't get it anymore. It's the worst breakup of a relationship you could probably imagine. Luckily, I'd gotten my degree while I was in school. I was thinking I might as well get into graduate school. I came to Iowa City, Iowa to get into graduate school. I applied for seven jobs, got offered five and decided I'm not going to do school, I'm just going to work. I took all five jobs that I was offered and I started working.

Kevin Burt: I figured if I was going to be awake, somebody going to pay me to be there, somebody's paying me for being awake. There were days that I'd work 20 hours in a day and other days that I'd just work one or two of the part-time jobs or the full-time job kind of thing. I thought that I was doing well for myself. One day, my boss, at one of my full time jobs, heard me singing in the office and stuck her head in my office and said, "Damn boy, you could sing." I was like, "Whatever." She's like, "No, you really can sing. My son is putting together a blues band. They can't find somebody who sing. You need to come audition." I was like, "Ah, whatever. It's not on my list of things to do." Eventually, she invited me over to have dinner with her and her family. I got to the house and there was no dinner. It was just rehearsal for the band. She tricked me into going over for a rehearsal.

Chitra Ragavan: No cake either, right? There's no cake.

Kevin Burt: Yeah. I got nothing. No cake, nothing. I ended up trying to audition for this band and they liked what I sounded like, and so it started. I went from five jobs and doing music every once in a while to four jobs and doing music pretty regular, and three doing more regular, and two, and finally down to one. In that span of time, I met the

woman who would eventually become my wife. We did the things that we need to do for her to be pregnant. Right before our first child was born, I decided that I should go full-time with music and focus on it. She looked at me and said, "It's about time." That's not the general response that most folks would expect.

Kevin Burt: When somebody believes in you, has faith in you, you can't allow them to have more faith in you than you're willing to have in yourself, and so at least that's my take on it. I didn't want to prove her out to be a liar. I went all in. I started working as a musician and as a vocalist. I'm just saying, I didn't play any instruments at that time. As it found me, it took over and it became that thing. Not that I could do, but it really did become that feeling of this is what you're supposed to do.

Chitra Ragavan: You spent about six years playing solo shows six nights a week, some years doing 300 shows, even 400 shows one year. You're one of the hardest working artists on the blues scene. You've performed with some blues legends. Can you name some that have been the most special to you and the ones you've been most proud of?

Kevin Burt: Well, I'm proud of every opportunity. Getting a chance to share a stage with folks like Koko Taylor, and B.B. King, and Buddy Guy, and Junior Wells, and Luther Allison, and ... Gosh, it's a big old list, David Honeyboy Edwards, Lonnie Brooks, Lil' Ed and the blues Imperials, Joanna Connor. There's a lot of the folks that are in that contemporary blues scene right now are all folks that I've gotten a chance to cross path with before all of this happened. Then, I get to now hang out in a room with them and it's a pretty cool feeling.

Chitra Ragavan: That happened because you entered the International Blues Challenge last year and it's something you almost decided not to do because you were so busy working and in survival mode. What convinced you to enter the challenge and you swept the awards. You won the top award for harmonica, guitar, and then Number One in the solo/duo category. What was it like when you heard the awards being announced?

Kevin Burt: It was surreal. It felt kind of stupid and I felt stupid. Because I didn't go there in the mindset of, man, I'm going to win this. I went there and said, okay, if they like me they like me, if they don't, I'm still doing this. That was really the mindset. I spent a lot of time reading the instructions for the competition.

Chitra Ragavan: Somebody had to convince you to do it, right?

Kevin Burt: I had a handful of folks. A good friend of mine, Ken Valdez, his band, he had won the Minnesota Blues Challenge. He was going to get the opportunity to represent the state of Minnesota at the International Blues Challenge. He talked me into doing the Iowa Blues Challenge as a solo artist. I went ahead, and I entered that, and I won the Iowa Blues Challenge. Then when it came time to go to Memphis, I was contemplating not going. I heard from him. My wife and daughters were the ones that stepped forward and said, "What are you doing? What are you thinking? Go, do it. Worst case scenario, you come back here and you do what you've always done."

Kevin Burt: That's true, that's exactly it. Win, lose, or draw, it wasn't going to change the path that I'm on. The only thing that it changed is the width of the lanes, I guess. It's a lot more comfortable path to be on right now. Still, it's got its own hazards, but no. The International Blues Challenge is over 240 acts from around the world that won their way to Memphis. They won preliminary contests in their state with their blues society, with their country, whatever. The solo/duo category had 240 folks and the band category had 300 plus. All of these artists, all of these groups converged on Memphis in January.

Kevin Burt: They have this competition that's called the International Blues Challenge. Again, like you said, the three categories, the Lee Oskar Harmonica Player of The Year, Top Harmonica Player, the Cigar Box Award for the most promising acoustic guitarist, and then the overall winner in the solo/duo category. I'm the only person in the 35-year history of the International Blues Challenge to sweep all the categories.

Chitra Ragavan: You didn't believe it when it was happening?

Kevin Burt: Yeah. When we were lined up waiting for them to announce, they did the Lee Oskar Harmonica Award first. I didn't think that I had won that because I only did a couple of songs in the finals with harmonica. There were a couple of really, really awesome harmonica players. Well, they announced my name. I was like, okay, well, you got the consolation prize, that's cool. Because nobody had ever won all the awards or anything other than an award at the Blues Challenge. I was like, okay, I got the consolation prize, that's cool. I actually walked off the stage and I was in the hallway behind the stage, and there was a stage hand who would prop the door open.

Kevin Burt: He and I were having a conversation and I stopped because I thought I heard him say from Des Moines, Iowa in regards to the

Cigar Box Guitar Award. Because I knew I hadn't won that. I'm not a real technically savvy guitarist. I taught myself to play. I know how to play for me, but I don't consider myself a guitarist. They announced my name for the Cigar Box Award for guitar. I looked at the stage and I was like, "Did they just say my name?" He smiled and he said, "Yeah, man, you better get back in there." I had to weave my way from backstage and it took me about a minute to get back to ...

Chitra Ragavan: You were late for your own award.

Kevin Burt: Yeah. They were, "Where'd he go? Where'd he go?" I literally just almost left the building. They handed me that award, I had the photo up. The gentleman who handed me the award said, "Don't go too far," as I'm walking away. It didn't really sink in until I got just off stage, behind the curtains. They announced the overall winner and it was me again. That's when everything started swirling. It got real, remarkably surreal in that moment. Because it really did feel like ... It felt fake. It felt like I was out of my own body almost. It's remarkably humbling because I knew the caliber of the musicians that were there.

Kevin Burt: Anybody could be chosen a winner and nobody could feel bad about it because everybody was fantastic. To sweep all of those awards amongst that level of talent, again, just remarkably humbling. One thing that I've heard from other artists, other performers is that there's no substitute for stage time ever. That's where I've learned to do everything that I do. I didn't get a guitar and learn to play the guitar and master it before I ... Then get harmonicas and master the harmonica, and take voice lessons and be comfortable with the vocabulary that I have with my voice, and then hit a stage polished and ready.

Kevin Burt: I bought a guitar on a Thursday because my band quit on Wednesday. I played my first show with it the following Friday. Everything that I've learned to do, I've learned to do on stage. I started booking shows. From that one show, I started booking crazy. Everything I've learned to do, I've learned to do on stage. I've spent some time practicing on my own, don't get me wrong, doing the woodshed thing. Every time I'd have a rehearsal for an hour and a half, two hours, I'd have a show that night. I always put it to practice. Everything was about, and has always, and will always for me be about making sure that I'm ready to perform.

Chitra Ragavan: Winning all three categories in that challenge has put you in a completely different league now, what's different?

Kevin Burt: Being a musician is like ... It's playing that game. Or it's that old thing where you used to see folks on a variety show spinning plates. They'd have the stick, and they'd put a plate on it, and they'd get it spinning, and then they'd put another plate on, and get it spinning. Well, all of my plates were in about a four-hour radius of home for 20 years. Every once in a while I'd sneak off and do a one-off show on the West Coast, or one-off show on the East coast, or one-off show down here, over there. It was just one show and then I'm back home, back in the Midwest. Now, I'm spinning plates and those plates are in Denmark or in the Netherlands.

Kevin Burt: They're over in Marseille, France. I've got plates spinning now in Canada, and Seattle, and in California, and Las Vegas, and up and all over down the East coast, and all points in between in the Midwest now. It's a bigger hustle. Instead of having to play 350 shows in order to make a living, I can knock it down to maybe 250 or 275. Where it seems like that's a lot of shows, it feels like a vacation to me.

Chitra Ragavan: In an interview, after you won the Challenge, you said that you were "remarkably unprepared" for now. How are you preparing yourself for this?

Kevin Burt: The biggest thing is, is sometimes you got to get out of the way and let some things happen. Other times you got to know when you got to step in the way and make it happen. I'm learning the difference in those things. Most of my career, I've got out of my own way so that things could happen. Now, I have to know when I have to make things happen. That's important. The difference between two years ago and now is I played a lot of shows but not a lot of people knew who I was. Now, there's a lot of people that know who I am and it's my responsibility to make sure that they now get a chance to hear me. They've heard my name.

Kevin Burt: They know of me, but they haven't heard me do my thing. Now, the hustle shifted to make sure that you get places to perform, make sure you hit those stages. Make sure when you hit those stages, you bring in an A game that nobody's ever seen before or at least they walk away going, "Okay, I've not seen that before." I'm not going to invent a new chord. I'm not going to do anything musically that people haven't already heard. The difference right now is the emotion that I try to bring to a stage whether I'm performing for 100 people or 100,000. It's my responsibility to give as much of an emotional exchange as I can bring. It's the difference in then and until now I think is hitting those spaces and being able to deliver to that many souls, to be able to connect with that many souls.

Chitra Ragavan: In addition to being a performer and a recording artist, you're also a blues educator. It's something you take very seriously. You've been speaking a lot about in your talks about the overlooked importance of Iowa in the evolution and history of blues music. Tell us a little bit about that.

Kevin Burt: Iowa is seen now as a flyby state. You fly over it to get to wherever it is you're actually trying to go. Flying didn't use to be the primary mode of transportation for musicians. You either drove, you either got in a bus and drove, or you got on a train. When the trains were happening, Iowa was the hub for a few of the different railroads. A lot of musicians coming from Chicago trying to get any other direction would come from Chicago, hit Iowa, and that's where the train would get turned. They'd be in Iowa for days at a time, laid up. Well, there were a lot of dance halls here. A lot of folks played music in Iowa.

Kevin Burt: It created little pockets of music history in places like Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Oelwein, Iowa where the hub for the Sioux Line was. Different marks were left. The places along the Mississippi River, towns like Burlington and Clinton, places not far off, Davenport, right on the river, places like Waterloo, when Des Moines ended up being places that were extensions of the Chitlin Circuit, as they say, folks would make it up this way. There were a good dense population of Blacks that were transplanted from the South to work at places like John Deere and Rath meatpacking, and different places along the Mississippi river.

Kevin Burt: A lot of music came to Iowa and was played. People wanted to be entertained. Finding out those, it's not written down in a lot of places. Seeking out the history, luckily, I got to hang out with a lot of older people and listen to them tell stories when I was little. I think those kinds of things sparked curiosity and connected a little bit of the past to my soul always. Getting that information, making sure that it gets passed on, and pushing the folk artistry of blues to another generation, I think is important.

Chitra Ragavan: You've been on the blues scene for more than two decades. What's the biggest difference that you see today about the industry and how it's evolving?

Kevin Burt: Well, one thing that the recording industry overall, one thing that's happened in the last 10 to 15 years is that blues festivals, the performance opportunities for blues artists continue to grow, continue to create more and more opportunities every state. Now, most countries are starting to have blues festivals and they're

fantastic. People come out and they enjoy the music. I was talking to somebody that day and I was just like, "Of all the blues festivals I've been to, I don't think that I've ever seen like an altercation at a blues festival." Those things don't happen. People are into the music and the music makes everybody smile.

Kevin Burt: At the end of the day, everybody enjoys themselves. They're starting to happen all over. Well, the music industry itself is losing a couple of different genres because of the recording industry. There's not a lot of money being made by the old rock bands that used to cover blues artists, but tell everybody that they were rock bands. You've got those groups that the southern rock groups, the ... Now all of a sudden, instead of being southern rock or being just rock and roll, now all of a sudden, everybody's going, "I'm doing a blues album." You've got folks that have been out there grinding and building themselves.

Kevin Burt: Even prior to me, the Bernard Allison's, the Eric Gales, the Shemekia Copeland's, the Ronnie Baker Brooks, the Wayne Baker Brooks, a lot of these other folks that are out there and they're doing ... They've gotten themselves that they've built their name to the point where they're starting to be looked upon as headliners for different festivals. Then all of a sudden, you get guys like ... Not knocking on it, but you get guys like Boz Scaggs that just tell you I was loud. "Hey, I'm going to do a blues album now." All of a sudden, they become the headliner for blues festivals.

Kevin Burt: They've not been grinding and hustling doing the performance, the touring stuff as a blues artist for years. It's just that all of sudden your royalty checks are starting to dry up and you need more outlets to perform in. You need bigger outlets to perform in. Those festivals, they're big deals. It turns into those things where I've noticed that as a Black folk art, it's the one folk art that other cultures try to adapt to themselves. You don't see a group of brothers getting together and saying, "Hey, man, what we need to do is put together a slamming polka band." I think that what we could do is we could put together a Celtic group that's better than a bunch of Irish guys.

Kevin Burt: You don't find a group of Asian guys that are saying that about a bunch of Irish guys. Blues is the only folk art that other cultures try to assimilate to themselves and devalue the originators. That's just an observation, that's my opinion. It's an observation that I'm making that I wish I didn't see. I say those things just so hopefully that folks will stop for a second and think and go, wait a minute, that's right. That is a culture's folk music. I think that it's fantastic

that everybody thinks it's cool. I think that's awesome. It's one of those things where you can't step in and say, "I do this as an outsider. I do this better than you." That's remarkably bold to me.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back at your former self and where you are today, do you have any closing thoughts on what you might say to those grandmas who fed you cakes or to your superhero mom who's not here to see you today at your peak?

Kevin Burt: The biggest thing that I'll ever say is, thank you. I appreciate every moment, every nugget of wisdom that you offered me even if I didn't think that I was trying to hear it. The fact that you cared enough about me to share it with me so that it would always be there. Once you hear a bell ring, you'll never forget the sound of that bell. There's been a lot of people that have shown a lot of kindness to me in my childhood and, in my adulthood as well. I hope that I can offer that kindness at the same level that they offered it to me. To me, that's the thank you that I offer out there. I thank my mom for teaching me to keep my heart wide open. Every once in a while, somebody's going to pour a little salt on it. It's going to hurt. It's going to sting, but that doesn't mean that I'd close it off. I keep it open and I let that part pass. Because the other part is too valuable.

Chitra Ragavan: Well, thank you so much for joining me. I was wondering, would you like to sing and play something for us?

Kevin Burt: Absolutely, absolutely. Let's see. Why don't we go ... We've talked and had been pretty serious the whole time. I should do something that's a little bit uptempo. Let's have some fun with it here. There's a song that I put together, it's called You Should Have Never Left Me Alone.

Kevin Burt: (singing)

Chitra Ragavan: That was absolutely spectacular. Thank you.

Kevin Burt: Thank you very much.

Chitra Ragavan: Well, Kevin Burt is an Iowa based blues singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist. He's long been a fixture on the blues performing circuit and is adding international performing and recording artist to his long list of accomplishments.

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