

Burt Bacharach's Pop Star Has Never Really Dimmed

By Larry Printz

The numbers are impressive: More than 500 published songs recorded by nearly 1,200 artists yielding 66 Top 40 hits, five Grammy Awards and two Oscars.

Burt Bacharach, who has been making music since Eisenhower was president, embodies a pop songwriting tradition that has all but vanished. But Bacharach's talent has remained visible over the last five decades. As recently as 1998 he recorded a widely acclaimed album with Elvis Costello, "Painted From Memory."

But to Bacharach, 74, that's old news. Consider:

"American Idol," last summer's surprise hit TV talent show, hired him as a kind of musical quality-control supervisor.

His latest recording partner is hip-hop icon Dr. Dre.

He is overseeing a retrospective of his music, which will open on Broadway on Valentine's Day.

All this activity doesn't stop Bacharach from hitting the road. He does about 45 concerts a year, including one tonight at the Keswick Theatre in Glenside and another on Sunday night at Symphony Hall in Allentown. It's a comfortable schedule for Bacharach, whose last tour took him to England.

While in Britain he saw a popular show called "Pop Star." Oddly enough, when Bacharach returned to the United States, he was contacted by "American Idol" producers and asked to work with the show's amateur performers.

"It was their idea to [have me] go on the show and work with the singers, coaching them and making sure the key was right," says Bacharach from his home in Los Angeles.

When it came to selecting material, however, the youthful singers weren't shy about letting Bacharach know which of his songs they wanted to sing.

"Kelly [Clarkson, the eventual winner] wanted to sing 'Walk on By,' but I thought she should sing 'Anyone Who Had a Heart.'"

(For the record, he had no opinion about runner-up Justin Guarini of Doylestown Township.)

Asked if he thinks the show will launch long-term careers, Bacharach is skeptical. "That show is like last week's newspaper. The voters have short-term memories. They don't remember what you did last week. Kelly had a No. 1 hit record right away. This kid's now out on the road. I'm not sure she can fill an arena."

But such is the state of the music business today, one quite different from when Bacharach was riding high.

"There are only five record companies left. There used to be the majors and all the independents. You wouldn't get the kids out of Seattle now, [or] the companies staying with them for three albums until they hit," says Bacharach, referring to the grunge groundswell of the early '90s.

"With any artist, even established ones, there are no guarantees," adds Bacharach, who says he finds it amazing that proven artists such as Gladys Knight, Dionne Warwick and Patti LaBelle are all without recording contracts.

"The business just sucks," opines the usually soft-spoken Bacharach, who is not prone to making such stark pronouncements.

It's an opinion, however, that has been shaped over a half-century.

Born in Kansas and raised in Queens, Bacharach started playing the piano to please his mother. Rather than enter the men's clothing business through his father's contacts, Bacharach chose to try his hand at pop songwriting. Landing a job in the fabled pop-music factory known as the Brill Building, he started a fruitful collaboration with lyricist Hal David. They hit paydirt in 1957 with Marty Robbins' "The Story of My Life" and in 1958 with Perry Como's "Magic Moments."

The classic Bacharach sound, however, would not evolve until the early 1960s, while working as Marlene Dietrich's musical director.

Bacharach's biggest success would come as writer and producer for Warwick, whom he had met at a recording session for the unremarkable Drifters song "Mexican Divorce."

With Warwick and lyricist David, Bacharach would record some of the '60s' most romantic, heartbreaking music. A very partial list: "Don't Make Me Over," "Anyone Who Had a Heart," "Walk on By," "Message to Michael," "I Say a Little Prayer," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose" and "I'll Never Fall in Love Again."

Bacharach and David also wrote for other artists, including Chuck Jackson ("Any Day Now"), Tom Jones ("What's New Pussycat"), Gene Pitney ("Only Love Can Break a Heart"), Jackie DeShannon ("What the World Needs Now") Dusty Springfield ("The Look of Love"), B.J. Thomas ("Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head") and the Fifth Dimension ("One Less Bell to Answer").

A Broadway show, "Promises, Promises," and an award-winning film score, for "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," made it seem like the good times would never end.

But Bacharach's career cooled in 1974, as did his partnership with David.

A new lyricist would change that.

Teaming with future wife Carole Bayer Sager a few years later, Bacharach scored big with Christopher Cross' "Arthur's Theme (The Best That You Can Do)." Success continued throughout the '80s, including hits for Warwick ("That's What Friends Are For"), Patti LaBelle and Michael McDonald ("On My Own"), among others.

While his success would never reach the fever pitch of the '60s and Bacharach's music, though timeless and eloquent, came to be thought of as the audio equivalent of shag carpet.

Lucky for him.

It was that very vibe that brought Bacharach back into public view, as he made a cameo, along with his music, in the 1997 movie "Austin Powers International Man of Mystery"

Bacharach's recent pairing with Dr. Dre, whom Bacharach met through a mutual friend, "was Dre's idea. He gave me about seven drum loops to work with. It's very different from writing a pop hit. I can go back to my jazz or classical roots without having to worry about putting a lyric to it."

Bacharach likens it to working on a film. "You want the music to be cohesive to the story, like on a soundtrack."

As for the retrospective of his music, Bacharach, ever the perfectionist, bemoans the fact that he can't be in the orchestra pit to make sure the music is absolutely flawless.

However, when it comes to the singers who will perform his songs, perfection is not uppermost in his mind. "I don't want trained Broadway voices singing my music," he says. "You must keep the soul in the song."

For all his work with new partners, Bacharach remains in touch with people from his past. He is writing a song with Bayer Sager for Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds, and has reteamed with David for a song they just finished for a new movie (it is their first pairing since the 2000 Bette Midler film "Isn't She Great," which focused on Jacqueline Susann's roller-coaster literary career).

Asked about the song, Bacharach would only say: "It's an Academy Award type of song."

Given his track record, it would be foolish to bet against it.

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THE DETAILS

BURT BACHARACH

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: Symphony Hall, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown

Tickets: \$39-\$55

Info: 610-861-0678