

About Burt Bacharach



Burt Bacharach

Gold Dust Keeps Falling on His Head

By ALBERT GOLDMAN

TELEVISION'S a strange medium. You can do nothing but go downhill. It eats you up, tears you apart. At one time, I was offered four or five series deals. I didn't have to think long to say, 'No.' I don't sing—not really. I don't dance. I don't do comedy skits or acting. There's a definite limit to what I can do. So I can't get too involved in TV. My basic job is to write as much music as possible."

That's Burt Bacharach chatting in New York with that husky, appealing voice of his, nursing a cold and marking time between flights from Los Angeles to New York, New York to London, where he was going that night to tape his fifth TV special, this one with Rex Harrison, Isaac Hayes and Carol Burnett.

"Burt Bacharach: Close to You," next Sunday on ABC, will be the first show Burt has done since his Emmy Award-winning program last year with Barbra Streisand and Rudolf Nureyev. Invariably, the shows have concentrated on Burt in work situations—going over a new song with Dionne Warwick, coaching the band through a recording date, peering earnestly into his movieola while setting "Raindrops Are Fallin'" to the bicycle scene in "Butch Cassidy." Effortlessly, almost casually, these programs have brought into focus a man who sometimes seems more involved in his craft than in himself. The combination of personal charm and modesty with the capacity to become totally absorbed in the job of making music has made Burt Bacharach a very big star—

a star of the Age of Anti-Stars.

Burt's fortune on TV has also been his face, a handsome, purely American face, an image blown back from the Kennedy Years, with those sun-crinkles in the eyes, that trace of silver in the thick, choppy hair, that bareheaded boy-man look that is so enormously appealing to American women. It's easy to feel affectionate toward Burt as he hunches deep and moody over the keyboard, bringing up a strained, lonely suggestion of a melody with words about love, love, love . . . "The only thing that counts" . . . "The thing that nonbelievers can believe in" . . . "What the world needs now."

All the Burt Bacharach shows owe a great deal to the famous guests who have gathered with him around the piano, joked and cavorted with him on camera and then stepped out on their own to deliver performances of his or other writers' songs that have sometimes reached the impressive heights of Lena Horne's performance on the first show or the intriguing new face that Barbra Streisand presented on last year's program.

Burt's approach to all his guests reminds you of a little boy meeting a baseball hero. Burt is an enthusiast, pure and simple. He's obviously delighted to meet people he has long admired, to tell them how much he loves them and to ease back into the role of the accompanist, arranger and conductor which he played for so many years with great stars like Marlene Dietrich. Part of being the anti-star is being frankly infatuated with the big stars and paying

them homage that is utterly self-conscious and delightful—just what we would like to say to them ourselves.

Burt's guests this week are all virtually unknown to him personally, but even before he left New York, he was relishing the thought of meeting them on camera. About Oscar-winner Isaac Hayes, Burt was especially enthusiastic, paying him the sort of tribute that can only be offered by one successful artist to another.

"I love what Isaac Hayes has done with my songs. He makes these monumental numbers out of them—11 minutes of 'Walk On By,' 10 minutes of 'Close to You.' I've never been enthusiastic about rip-off variations on my songs. I think it's kind of presumptuous for a singer to fool around with the

notes of a Richard Rodgers melody— unless he's really improving it, which is hard to do. But I've never felt that way with Isaac. He's a songwriter, but he's got the taste of a producer. An absolutely good producer who knows what he's doing. I kind of feel that his score for 'Shaft' is one of the most brilliant things that's been done this year. I think it's fantastic."

Burt's own career as a film composer is about to take another leap forward, as he brings to completion the score he wrote with Hal David for the Hollywood remake of that classic of the escapist thirties, "Lost Horizon." A perfectionist who figures to hear one of his songs no less than 600 times between its completion and the release of the recording, Bacharach is gratified by the thought that every note of the movie will be accounted for on the final sound track and then fixed that way forever. Several years ago, after he worked himself into a serious illness composing and producing the innovative and highly successful Broadway musical "Promises, Promises," Burt was horrified to discover that the theater pit band would bend the music into a different shape every night of the week. Since that experience, Burt has shifted his allegiance from Broadway to Hollywood.

All this work on "Lost Horizon," however, has put a big retard into Bacharach's once-flourishing career as a concert and nightclub artist. Asked what happened to the hectic schedule of one-nighters that was fast making "Burt Bacharach in Concert" one of the most successful offerings from Las Vegas to Miami, Burt grew thoughtful.

"I sort of decided last summer, when I was living down on the beach at Del Mar, that I've been doing too much. I'd never had a more frenetic year—concert appearances in cities clear across the country, TV shows, all-night recording sessions, traveling all the way to Japan. I just thought, 'Wait a minute! You're doing too much. You're not writing enough. Not as much as you once did. You can't sit in Kyoto at night and write.' Principally, I believe I'm supposed to write more than I perform.

"Performing," he continued, "is like a novelty. A toy. The money is fantastic, but it's not the primary thing. The real charge is being out there on the stage with all those people around you. You look up to give the violins a cue

and you see people, maybe 10 or 15 thousand people all around you. Now that's got to be a little zingy!

"Especially, after all those years when I was backing up other performers. When I worked with Dietrich, they used to put a scrim in front of me. Not that she was trying to hide me, but they used the scrim for lighting effects. Then, for the last three numbers, they'd open the scrim and—lo and behold!—there'd be a Jewish piano player!"

The vast amount of attention that has been lavished in the past couple of years on Burt Bacharach, the performer, the star, the man—as opposed to the success achieved earlier by his songs—has made a strong impression on this once-invisible song writer. I asked Burt about the changes in his personality wrought by success.

"I have changed somewhat. Earlier in my life, I was more in a shell. I was a quiet one. Success made me a little more outgoing. It has to give you a little more confidence. If it doesn't move you up a little bit, something's very wrong! As far as changing in any deep way—that's out of the question for me. I don't feel I'm any different now than I was 10 or 15 years ago. I feel lucky. And I don't feel anything is owed to me. I do worry a little about being able to keep up. That's a natural concern. But if my creative flow were cut off, I'd still be grateful for the time it was flowing.

"The other thing that's terribly important to me," he added, "is just living a healthy, happy life with my family. Angie and I bought a house down by the beach at Del Mar. It's a fantastic location—20 seconds from the ocean, five minutes by car from the racetrack. I've always loved horse racing and now I own seven horses, though none of them is really a top horse. I find that hanging around with my trainer has a good effect on me. Seeing a horse gradually develop teaches me patience, which is an important lesson for a man who has always worked in such a frantic business.

"In fact, last year when I was sitting out at the beach, I used sometimes to get a daydream going. I'd think, 'Suppose when the track session ends out here, I just get a job playing piano in a bar and just live with Angie and our daughter Nikki. Then when the track opens in the spring, I'll have this perfect life—playing four sets of tennis in the morning and then swimming for 45 minutes in the ocean and then maybe playing tennis again in the afternoon. Finally, the dream ended and I agreed to the film project.

"Now I'm back at it again, and I feel so good about this score. We'll play some of it on the TV show. Rex Harrison will recite a long soliloquy from the movie. Maybe we'll play the Shangri-la theme. The idea of the picture is very close to me. Imagine! Somewhere in Tibet in the middle of those mountains, there is a place called Shangri-la. Where you can live forever—almost. And you can stay healthy! And there is love! And peace! It's not sticking your head in the ground—it's exactly what everybody wants today."

April 16, 1972

FREDERIC BAIRD, A RAILROAD AIDE

Deviser of the Family Fare'
for N.Y. Central Is Dead

Frederic Harold Baird, who retired in 1957 as New York Central Railroad's assistant vice president in charge of passenger sales and service, died Saturday in Greenwich (Conn.) Hospital. He was 79 years old and lived in Riverside, Conn.

Mr. Baird, who served the railroad for 48 years, was credited with arranging many new concepts in the travel industry, including the development of the widely copied "family fare" plan. This plan, which allows members of a family to travel with the head of the family at half fare or less, was introduced by New York Central in 1952.