

## See you later, elevator!

**Imprisoned in music's metaphorical lift for years, Burt Bacharach has emerged on to a mezzanine packed with thousands of dewy-eyed disciples. "It's sensational news," he tells Stuart Maconie.**



First, catch your piano. Open the lid. Flex your fingers, crack your knuckles, something for dramatic effect . . . Even better, waft your coat out behind you as you seat yourself. Then find a place where there are a pair rather than three black notes in a cluster. Put your thumb just to the left of the first black note. Now, the fingers that you'd use to give some one "the fingers" . . . yes, those. Put the index finger two white notes to the right of the thumb and the middle finger two notes further on. Congratulations, the entire panoply of pop music is now, quite literally, at your fingertips. Voilal C major - and you can move that little triad pretty much anywhere you like, within reason. What do you hear? Oh, the Sex Pistols, The Jam, rhe Stooges, Buddy Holly, Elvis, Led Zeppelin, Racey ... every band who ever were, really.

But two fingers still aren't doing anything. Put one down. Hmm, a minor seventh, a major sixth maybe. Nice, as the Fast Show's jazz correspondent would have it. And now everyone in the world hears one and the same thing. Burt Bacharach. A Whisky Sour appears in your hand and suddenly you're at the piano of the Intercontinental, Biarritz.

Three decades ago, even as The Beatles were tying up George Martin in knots of audio tape, taking all the drugs in the Home Counties and inventing rock, The Burt Bacharach Sound was one of the dominant pop dialects of the day. But whilst Lennon & McCartney celebrated new cultural elites and Holland/Dozier/Holland and Whitfield/Strong articulated the young urban black experience at Motown, Bacharach's music, drawn from jazz and the classics, spoke of an impossibly sophisticated adult world of sex, work, travel and tristesse.

Implausibly, his first hit as a composer was The Blob, by The Five Blobs, the theme - naturally enough - to the defiantly silly movie that also provided the young Steve McQueen with his first success. At this point in the mid-'50s he was collaborating with Mack David, but destiny beckoned when Bacharach tuned instead to Mack's brother Hal for lyrical support.

Their first hit together was Marty Robbins's The Story Of My Life, an

uncharacteristically folksy ditty complete with cowpoke whistling (It currently accompanies the Guinness ad where male coffin-dodger weds ghoulish Pamela Anderson lookalike), it nevertheless has one thing in common with the scores of Bacharach tunes to follow - it was as catchy as fleas. Four different versions became hits in the UK and Bacharach's career as pop hitmaker by appointment was launched.

Magic Moments (more urbane but still whistle enhanced for maximum cutesiness), as sung by the monumentally unstressed Perry Como, resided at Number 1 for eight weeks. The hits just kept on coming, including the lounge lizard anthem Wives And Lovers by Jack Jones and Gene Pitney's Twenty Four Hours From Tulsa, a song whose arrangement is as brilliant as its story of a life-changing sandwich in a roadside diner is far-fetched. Then, when Bacharach and David became an exclusive partnership in 1962, they forged with Dionne Warwick one of the great canons of popular music. Don't Make Me Over, Anyone Who Had A Heart, Walk On By, Trains & Boats & Planes, I Say A Little Prayer, Do You Know The Way To San Jose . . . writing any one of these songs would have made them immortal. Writing a ten-gallon hat full of them was just taking the piss.

Let's ignore Bacharach's fallow period during the styleless, stack-heeled '70s. He soft-pedalled through the '80s, performing around the globe and writing the occasional chart-topper such as Oscar-winning Arthur's Theme with then-amour Carole Bayer Sager, the not-entirely-good That's What Friends Are For AIDS ballad and the titanic On My Own for Michael MacDonald and Patti Labelle.

And now (though, ladies and gentlemen, he never went away, as Des O'Connor would probably say) Burt is back. He's here in a Mayfair hotel dressed not in tux and Gucci loafers but, disappointingly, in a woolly and wind cheater ensemble one might creosote the fence in. Fence protection has been off the agenda, though, since Burt's arrival in Blighty. Last night, he attended a party thrown in his "honour" at fashionable London niterie Madame Jo Jo's. Gracious to a fault, Bacharach expresses delight at the "sensational news that these really young people are discovering my music and getting all this adulation". Burt purists might say that hearing your timeless creations disembowelled by semi-pro jokers like Count Indigo and other luminaries of the wretched Easy Listening scene is scant reward for a lifetime's endeavours but, soft, with Burt's help, let's first get at the roots of that Bacharach Sound.

Kansas City-born, unlikely as that might seem for the archetypal sophisticate, Burt studied composition with celebrated French composer Darius Milhaud at a time when the owl-strangling sounds of serialism dominated American classical music.

"I liked Berg and I liked Webern . . . I hung out in New York watching Cage and Lou Harrison. I was aware of the angular side of music but I liked tunes too. There were five

of us in Milhaud's class and for an exam we had to write a piece and I wrote a sonatina for oboe, violin and piano which had one particular movement that was highly melodic and quite different from what everyone was writing. And I felt ashamed, or should I say self-conscious at having written something that wore its heart on its sleeve so obviously. But Milhaud said, Never be ashamed to write something that people can whistle. I learned that and how to eat Mexican food from him. Hewasavery decent man."

That said, a genius like Bacharach's cannot be taught. There are certain components of his art (listen to the bracing chord that comes straight after the words "Don't make me over") that are clearly somewhere buried in his DNA.

"Ha! Yeah, perhaps it's genetic. I don't know. I do voice things in a certain, recognisable way. It may be that I have . . . a more extensive musical vocabulary than some. I just wouldn't be able to write a song in three chords, simple vanilla G majors and stuff. What, no suspension on the fifth, no seventh? I couldn't do it.

"I guess that's what they meant by the Bacharach sound . . . or something about the orchestration or the rhythm flow. I never really understood it because Walk On By is so different from What's New Pussycat and Wives And Lovers sounds nothing like Anyone Who Had A Heart. What does happen with me is that I tinker, I fiddle, I've never had a song come to me fully formed in a blinding flash of inspiration . If it comes too easy I don't think it's any good. So I turn it upside down and look at it in the middle of the night. It's a short form, three and a half minutes, so everything counts. You can get away with murder in a forty-minute piece but not in three and a half. Some songs, you know, they beat you up. Too notey, too wordy, too much. You think, I don't wanna hear that again in a hurry."

As might be appraised, particularly if one constructs one's reality via the Sunday Supplements, Bacharach is enjoying some kind of renaissance via the "easy listening revival". What this amounts to is one freak, amusing hit single and a handful of fashion school students dressing up. Certainly it has left Redcar and Carlisle culturally unscathed. But what really galls about it is that term "easy listening": whilst it might just about apply to A Walk In The Black Forest, it offers no purchase on Burt Bacharach . Without ever "beating you up", Bacharach's tunes make the average rock song, even the way-above-average offerings of Lennon, McCartney or Noel Gallagher (a Burt devotee) look like schools programme toddler singalongs a la Bobby Shaftoe. Ever heard a busker playing Promises Promises, a song whose melody is reminiscent of climbing the stairs in the dark and finding extra stairs that aren't there?

"Promises Promises is a very difficult song for a singer. They used to hate me. Dionne can do it but Dionne could make anything sound easy. When I think of easy listening I think of muzak. I don't think my music is that easy to listen to. But I understand the tag . I don't mind. At home I have an original cartoon on my wall. It has a guy waiting for

an elevator and there are three in front of him and above them it says Mancini, Manilow and Bacharach."

Bacharach's songs have now, of course, become the property of the world. Should he forget this fact, there are constant reminders. Taking his son to gridiron play-offs last year they stopped off at a diner and the guy waiting for his eggs at the next table was singing Do You Know The Way To San Jose. When Bacharach arrived in London this time around, the hotel doorman, oblivious to who he was, was whistling Alfie. This has worrying implications for the composer's social life.

"You'll go into a piano bar, and when the guy spots you he'll try a few songs and, usually, he blows a few chords or he blows the tune. But, hey, he means it as a compliment. You have to turn off your critical faculties. I mean . . . well, there is a singing group in Los Angeles who each year honour a particular composer and they wanted it to be me. Now these people aren't singers. They're people who use music as therapy to make them feel better about themselves. They wanted me to go to a concert of my music and I said no. They can do it with my blessing but I don't want to sit there and listen because I won't be comfortable, I'll be anxious and I won't enjoy it and then I'll have to go backstage and say, That was nice when it wasn't nice. So I said, You go ahead but I won't be there."

Having said all this, Bacharach has had his lean periods. The musical Lost Horizons was a critical and commercial flop. After 1970's Close To You success with The Carpenters, Burt spent the best part of a decade having metaphorical policeman telling him that he was free to go.

"I've got all these diplomas and lifetime achievement awards but I still have to worry about whether Michael Bolton will like it or Clive Davis or Gerald Busby at Motown. Reputation doesn't count for much in this business. You know, right after I got an academy award for Butch Cassidy, I heard the studios were looking for a young Burt Bacharach. Christ, I was 39! Gimme a break!"

He acknowledges that a young Burt Bacharach would have problems today: "Every singer wants to co-write half the album these days, They want to get their slice of the publishing. Records have meteoric rises nowadays but they don't hang around long enough to be standards. " Last year, it should be noted, he enjoyed Gangsta's Paradise: "It had a good, hookable melody I can see the social function and significance of rap but I have a hard time listening to it."

Bacharach still performs around the world, an activity he relishes: "It's so much easier than song writing. All you have to do is play the songs and try not to make it sound like you did it 200 times before. Plus, you can't walk down the streets of Santa Monica and

get a standing ovation, you know. These people are saying, Hey, Burt, we like you, we like your stuff and we showed up to let you now. And you get paid!"

And the rest of the time, he does just what Burt Bacharach ought to do - like racing horses around the world. Tomorrow he flies to Abu Dhabi for a big international meeting. The horse in question, as befits its owner, is called Soul Of The Matter: Q duly places a bet at a nearby turf accountant, while Bacharach instructs one of his staff to pop out and do likewise. A combination of his whispered tones and natural discretion prevents Q catching the size of the wager - but the look on her face suggests that though he may be dressed like your uncle, the way the cabaret king places a bet is still pure Bacharach.

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## **JUST ONE LIBRETTO**

### **Why did birds suddenly appear? Because Hal David decreed it thus**

Before Bacharach & David, there was Bacharach & David. Tin Pan Alley lyricist Mack David had co-written a couple of tunes with the promising young composer (notably a single called The Bbb) when, in 1959, he introduced Burt to his younger brother, Hal. Hal, born in Brooklyn in 1921, had already penned hits (eg Sammy Kaye's Four Winds And Seven Seas) having started writing lyrics while in the army.

He would share a by-line with Bacharach for the next 12 years. In that time David progressed from the bat-and-ball banalities of the early '60s to a period of consistently sophisticated insights into love and travel. Trains And Boats And Planes (1965) had pathos on an international scale ("They mean a trip to Paris or Rome/But not for me"), while the same year's Make It Easy On Yourself was full of long sentences and personal doom: "And if the way I hold you can't compare to his caress/No words of consolation will make me miss you less. "

Message To Michael (1966) began with possibly the best verse David ever wrote: "Spread your wings for New Orleans, Kentucky bluebird/And take a message to Michael (message to Michael)/He sings each night in some cafe/In his search to find wealth and fame, I hear Michael has gone and changed his name." Such vocabulary of distance was surely an important influence on Jim Webb.

While Bacharach went for musical complexity, David kept it simple. He'd throw in the occasional word rarely found in pop lyrics: "combing" (I Say A Little Prayer), "magnet" (Do You Know The Way To San Jose) or "wheat fields" (What The World Needs Now Is Love). At times playful, he memorably rhymed "catch pneumonia" with "he'll never phone ya" in I'll Never Fall In Love Again. One of his rare acknowledgments of a

political world was *The Windows Of The World* (1967), which contained references to conscription, pollution and global depression.

When he and Bacharach split in acrimony in 1971, David moved into publishing while continuing to write songs with other partners. With Albert Hammond he wrote *To All The Girls I've Loved Before* for Julio Iglesias & Willie Nelson in 1984. Hal David's legacy lived on in the occasional lyrics of Chris Difford from Squeeze (eg *Woman's World* or *Someone Else's Heart* from *East Side Story*) and in certain songs by Elvis Costello. David's elegant line in *Alfie*, "something non-believers can believe in", found echoes of rhythm and realism in Costello's *Clowntime Is Over*: "Who's making Lovers Lane safe again for lovers?"

After an 21 -year estrangement, Bacharach & David finally got together to write a song for Dionne Warwick's 1993 album, *Friends Can Be Lovers*. The years apart had not been inspirational to either.

*David Cavanagh*

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