

# Bacharach: That's what elections are for

Steve Taylor / Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer February 8, 2008

"I think he'll probably go down as the worst president we've ever had." In a week when the race for the White House in the United States has been building up steam, there's a fair chance that Burt Bacharach won't be voting for George W. Bush's party in November.

"He's leaving such a mess behind, who can come in and clean it up? I really don't know how long it's gonna take. Yes, it's doable, [but] I mean, the reputation of the United States has been soiled basically all over the world," he told The Daily Yomiuri over the telephone from Los Angeles ahead of a visit to Japan for a short tour later this month.

The man responsible for writing the music for numerous pop classics over the past 50 years said that he was driven to comment on the current U.S. administration on his last album, *At This Time*, in 2005.

As songwriter, he was able to express his thoughts verbally for the first time and approached the task with relish, though some of his lyrical ideas on the song "Who Are These People" never made it out of the studio.

"The last two lines, Elvis Costello sings, 'We've gotta make a change/Before it's too late.' Well, I never wanted 'Before it's too late,' because the way we had it on the record was, 'We've gotta make a change/ Or we're all f---d,'--and nobody could sing f---d like Elvis Costello," he explained before adding, "The record company said, 'Well, you know, we won't be able to sell this record in Wal-Mart,' and I said, 'You won't be able to sell this record in Wal-Mart, no matter what the lyric is.'"

Born in Kansas City, Mo., nearly 80 years ago, Bacharach worked with the legendary Marlene Dietrich as a conductor and arranger for three years in the late '50s, though by that time he had already had some success as a songwriter.

When Perry Como's "Magic Moments" replaced Michael Holliday's "The Story of My Life" at the top of the British charts in February 1958, both songs were milestones in pop history, marking the debut of Bacharach and Hal David, a songwriting partnership to rival John Lennon and Paul McCartney or Elton John and Bernie Taupin.

In the 1960s, their string of hits was phenomenal, with Dionne Warwick frequently delivering their songs. "Anyone Who Had a Heart" (1963), "Walk On By" (1964) and "I Say A Little Prayer" (1967) all made the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100, though "I Say A Little Prayer" would become forever linked with Aretha Franklin once she recorded her version the following year.

When Bacharach is asked about his favorite compositions, it comes as no surprise when he nominates a couple from that era.

"Well, you have to put 'Alfie' [1966] near the top 'cause it's just a very powerful song. 'That's What Friends Are For' [1985]--I like that one too. 'What the World Needs Now is Love' [1965], glad we wrote that," he said.

Bacharach has every right to be proud of his works, yet he admits they are sometimes the result of a lot of hard effort.

"(The Man Who Shot) Liberty Valance' [1962] was a challenge. They're never easy because, you know, it's one of those things, every hole is valuable, there's no filler time...You've got a limited period of time with a pop song, that's what's so interesting about pop songs. Small forms," he explains.

Yet one of the biggest hits for his "small forms" on both sides of the Atlantic in 1969 demonstrates that sometimes a great tune doesn't have to be the result of agonized deliberation.

"I think the fastest song I ever wrote was '[I'll] Never Fall in Love Again,' yeah, 'cause that was during the time of [the musical] Promises, Promises and we were in Boston. The show had started in Boston...and I'd caught pneumonia in Boston so I wound up in the hospital for about five or six days.

"When I got out of the hospital...Hal [David] and I wrote it in the afternoon and it was in the show two days later. And that's where Hal got the great line, 'What do you do when kiss a girl/You catch enough germs to catch pneumonia/After you do, she'll never phone you,'" he recalls.

Though Bacharach will be remembered for his partnership with David, he has worked with numerous songwriters, and he is generous in his praise of two British wordsmiths.

"I've written a couple of things with Tim Rice. He's a great writer. You know, we've never been in the same room. It's very odd we did the main title for Stuart Little ['Walkin' Tall'], I just sent him the melody, he wrote it.

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"Elvis [Costello] and I started that way, 'God Give Me Strength.' Bits and pieces, you know, faxes...I like working with Elvis," he said.

Unfortunately, Painted From Memory, the 1998 album he recorded with Costello, barely dented the Billboard chart, though Bacharach has his own explanation for its lack of success.

"You know, it just seemed the record company was being knobbed...so it didn't get the attention we would have liked. It's very like a cult album, a lot of people love this album, I like it a lot."

And as for a partner he would have liked to have worked with, Bacharach opts for another musical heavyweight.

"Alan J. Lerner and I talked at one time about maybe trying to write something. I just wanted to write a hit song with him, he wanted to write a show. He wasn't interested in hit songs," he said.

With his picture gracing the sleeve of Oasis' debut album, Definitely Maybe, and cameo roles in the Austin Powers movies, Bacharach's appeal has endured over the decades, though he is reluctant to think too much about the reasons for his continuing popularity

"I'm not a good historian delving into why it [the music] exists now. I'm just really grateful that it does," he said.

Burt Bacharach and the Tokyo New City Orchestra will perform at Tokyo International Forum in Yurakucho, Tokyo, (03) 5436-9600, on Feb. 16 at 6 p.m. and Feb. 17 at 3 p.m.; Green Hall in

Sagamiono, Kanagawa Prefecture, (042) 742-9999, on Feb. 20 at 7 p.m. and Festival Hall in Osaka  
(06) 6233-9999, on Feb. 22 at 7 p.m.

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