

The King of Easy

Slacks-sporting showbiz icon and writer of hits for everyone from Dusty Springfield to Dr Dre, Burt Bacharach is back in the UK for the Electric Proms. Johnny Dee asks him to share some magic moments

Johnny Dee

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Burt Bacharach ... 'I started a band at school - it was a good way to meet girls'

Photograph: PR

Burt Bacharach is the most relaxed man in the world. Talking on the phone from his home in Los Angeles the composer of over 50 UK top 40 hits and countless classics such as *Walk On By*, *The Look Of Love*, *I'll Never Fall In Love Again* and *24 Hours From Tulsa* speaks slowly (very, very slowly) and softly (very, very softly). Now 80 years old, calmness surrounds the king of easy listening as he recalls his career ahead of another decade-spanning compilation and a much-anticipated performance at this week's BBC Electric Proms.

"I expect you're excited about Andy Murray," he purrs down the line, directing the conversation to one of his favourite subjects.

Born to Jewish parents (Bert and Irma), young Burt preferred sport and wanted to be an American football player but his height (5ft 8in) and his mother's eagerness for him to learn music led him in a different direction. After a period in the army (spent mainly playing piano at the officers' club) and a spell as musical director for Marlene Dietrich, Bacharach's work took off when he forged a partnership with songwriter Hal David in the Brill Building, the New York home to dozens of publishers and their contracted employees. In the 1960s - a decade of vast social upheaval, the assassination of JFK, and the Vietnam war - *What The World Needs Now Is Love* was as near as Bacharach and David got to a political statement. Untouched by rock'n'roll or rebellion, instead they operated on a different emotional level

writing a string of beautifully arranged, lushly orchestrated hits for Dionne Warwick that were successfully hijacked mid-Atlantic by Brits Sandie Shaw, Dusty Springfield and Cilla Black, plus the soundtracks to Casino Royale, Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid and What's New Pussycat?

A god of the V-neck and safari jacket playboy set, Bacharach was 1960s showbiz royalty; married to Hollywood pin-up Angie Dickinson and admired by his peers he could do no wrong. But, after the failure of his Lost Horizon soundtrack in the early-70s, Burt lost his Midas touch and was sued by both Hal David and Dionne Warwick and split with Dickinson as he withdrew from music.

It wasn't until the mid-90s and his appearance in the Austin Powers movies and as an iconic reference point for Oasis on the cover of Definitely Maybe that he was rediscovered by a new generation. Today he's rightly recognised as a musical genius, a composer of timeless pop masterpieces, and as an artist who - as recent collaborations with Elvis Costello and Dr Dre demonstrate - is still busy creating.

Piano lessons

"It was all forced on me. I didn't like taking piano lessons. I didn't really like music at first. I didn't like what I'd hear with my father and mother in the car on Sundays - Wagner, Beethoven, Brahms - really heavy-duty dark, deep, like the heavy skies filled with rain on the way back from Philadelphia.

But then one day I heard Daphnis and Chloe by Ravel and I thought, 'Boy, that's beautiful.' Then I heard Debussy and Satie and, on the more popular side, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker and that was amazing and as far as making me like music from that point I really got to like music. I started a little band at school. It was a good way to meet girls."

Writing

"I compose everything on piano and in my head. I go back and forth between a keyboard and the couch. I kind of get it bar by bar; for me I don't get a total perspective of where it's going straight away. They're never easy because, you know, it's one of those things; every hole is important, there's no filler time. You've got a limited period of time with a pop song. I always use to think of them as four-minute movies with high and lows."

Pressure

"We were very close to Herb Alpert and they were looking for a song for him to sing on this television spectacular he was doing with the Tijuana Brass. So it was a favour. Hal and I wrote This Guy's In Love With You, changed a couple of lines to kind of fit the situation and went into the studio and conducted and played the piano. I walked out of the studio and got in my car and went home. Six weeks later I hear it on the radio and it was number one. That's what it was like. Often it's best when you're told: 'This is the situation, we need the music in two weeks.'"

Perfection

"I keep going, that's my technique. The first time I met George Martin he was in the booth at Abbey Road when we were making Alfie with Cilla Black. He was such a gentleman and let me do my crazy thing. I don't know if you've seen or heard about that session with Cilla Black; we got to 28, 30 takes, 32 takes and you know what? We'd had it on about take three or four, but I believed in that thing of give me one more take, maybe we can make it better."

Covers

"I feel fine about covers. I don't feel fine if it's a new song and the first time they hear it is somebody else's arrangement. I've heard some great versions and some terrible and I've heard versions that top what I did. Say A Little Prayer is a prime example. I recorded it with Dionne and, even though it was a big hit, Aretha Franklin made a much better record. It's not about the vocal, it's about the way it feels."

Style

"I've always worn what I was comfortable in. Look at my closet now and I have very little clothing, I wear tennis shoes everywhere except on stage. I'm very comfortable in sweats, I don't like to wear jeans, I own like one pair. My father was in menswear and he wrote a column for the Daily News Record. If things had turned out differently I could have easily ended up in

the clothing business."

Keeping up

"You can't go fat as it were. You can't stay put, you have to practise your craft, keep moving. If someone asked me to write a song like Don't Make Me Over now I couldn't do it because that was then; my musical language changes and my musical taste changes. So working with Elvis Costello, with Ron Isley and with Dr Dre was great for me."

Politics

"I was never political, not until George W got in office and the way the election was stolen from Al Gore. I've got these two young kids and I'm worried about the world they're growing up in. I'm scared to death now. I wish that England and France and Germany and Italy could vote. I want Obama to win so badly. I don't understand what's going on with Palin who is against abortion; against abortion on incest, against abortion on rape. I just can't understand how you could feel that way."

Easy

"There's always been this need to give music labels, especially in England. If people want to call Walk On By easy listening then fine, call it that. But hold it up to the light and you see it's not easy at all. I don't know: maybe those songs have lasted because of that, because it was sophisticated at the time

and I took chances."

- Magic Moments, The Definitive Burt Bacharach Collection is out on Mon.
Burt plays the Electric Proms on Wed, London

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