

Bacharach and David

When Burt Bacharach and Hal David met in the New York City offices of Famous Music in 1957, they were men of rather different backgrounds. Burt was born in Kansas City and raised in Forest Hills, New York. His first musical infatuation was with the modern jazz of Dizzy Gillespie and fellow Kansas City son Charlie Parker. Later he was heavily influenced by classical composers Ravel, Debussy and Stravinsky, and studied for a time under modernist Darius Milhaud. Bacharach worked in New York City as an arranger and pianist for Marlene Dietrich, Steve Lawrence, the Ames Brothers and others before gravitating to the Brill Building's Famous Music Corporation where he was placed under contract as a songwriter.

Hal David was born in New York City and raised in Brooklyn. He studied journalism and landed a job at the New York Post before writing his first song in 1947 for bandleader Sammy Kaye. Hal's musical inspirations were the distinctive, traditional tunesmiths such as Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein and Johnny Mercer.

By the time Hal and Burt co-wrote their first song ("I Cry Alone") both had registered some success writing with other partners. Hal, the ten-year veteran, held credits that included "The Four Winds and the Seven Seas," "Brokenhearted Melody" and "Johnny Get Angry." Some of Burt's previous hits were "Any Day Now," "The Blob" and "Mexican Divorce," the latter two both coincidentally written with Hal's older brother, Mac. The rapport between Hal and Burt was immediate, as was their success. Soon they scored with two simultaneous chart items, "The Story of My Life," recorded by Marty Robbins, and Perry Como's "Magic Moment." The team of Bacharach-David had been launched.

In their years of writing together, they would produce almost 150 songs--including one or two, according to Burt, "that nobody ever heard, and nobody ever should hear." Their working routine would vary. For a few years they composed in the same room, three, four or five hours at a time; but they also worked separately, communicating from different coasts. Sometimes the words came first, sometimes the music, sometimes both at once. One lyric ("Alfie") took three days; another ("What The World Needs Now Is Love"), three years. Later, when Burt was going on concert tours, Hal found projects with other writers, including Michel Legrand and Henry Mancini. Sometimes their collaboration would be interrupted by a long hiatus such as the one preceding their hit Broadway musical, Promises, Promises.

At the moment they are not active together, but both say they will join forces again when the right project presents itself. Through all the changes and vicissitudes of writing for records and films and stage, they created a "standard" body of work that will define taste and excitement to a segment of American popular music for decades to come.

Bacharach and David's earliest efforts, however, were somewhat hampered by the rigid approach to songwriting imposed by the Brill Building in 1957. Burt recalls the prevailing mentality: "It was like being in the Army and dealing with any second lieutenant. Nobody was taking any chances." Songs were geared for whichever artists had recording sessions scheduled that month. The songs were "vehicles" tailored to the style and range of a given hitmaker. Once a performer wore a groove in the charts, his or her subsequent records would hang on sound-alike hooks. Innovation on the writers' part

was distinctly discouraged. Still, working within the system, Bacharach and David, like the other fine contemporary teams they admired (Goffin and King, Mann and Weill and Spector, Lieber and Stoller), turned out some of the best pop songs of that era~ including "Wishin' And Hopin'," "Twenty Four Hours From Tulsa," "Only Love Can Break A Heart," and many more. Early on, their style was shaping into something too advanced for containment by a restrictive format. Both writers grew frustrated at the lack of control over their own material. This growing dissatisfaction forced composer-arranger Bacharach into the role of producer.

"There was never an ego thing on my end about being a producer," he says now. "I didn't care if I got the label credit or not. I just wanted to see the songs done right. I'd been shut out of a few record dates while they sat inside and ruined my song. So what I began doing, whether I was technically 'producing' the date or only arranging it, was to go in and make the record however I wanted to make it, whatever 'producer' was sitting at the console. Everything got done right then and there. You got the vocal on, if not that day then the next night. It wasn't like it is now, where everything is staggered, strings one week, brass the next; you got the record made per se. You went in and executed a whole arrangement, right on the spot. Good or bad or what ever, it was there. And I knew that way it would get done at the tempo I wanted it, and what didn't work with the arrangement I could fix immediately."

"I try to write a song that I like--or love, really. If I love it, chances are a lot of other people will. The one thing I've never done, in the major part of my career, is try to write a 'commercial' song. I don't think in terms of hits. I think in terms of good and bad. You don't want the quick ie, you want the quality."

"A song is a very compact form--probably the most compact form. It's supposed to create an emotional response from a listener in two to three minutes time, an emotional response that people can identify with. My idea was always to search for a new way, a fresh way of portraying the emotion. I've always thought of myself more as someone who writes from an emotional point of view rather than a cerebral one."

"I make choices, but how they're made I couldn't say. I've never been very introspective about my work. When you sit down and write, you're involved with your own taste. I guess that's the choice: I write for my taste, not for someone else's. I write what I think, not what I think someone thinks I should think."

In addition to recording Dionne, Bacharach and David worked with other artists. Dusty Springfield, who had earlier done their "Wishin' And Hopin'," had a very big record with "The Look Of Love." Jackie de Shannon sang "What The World Needs Now." B.J. Thomas introduced the hugely popular "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head," from the film Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid. Their first film chores had been the title songs for Wives and Lovers and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance; now they were doing whole scores, like the one for What's New Pussycat, which yielded three chart hits even as it proved the team's ability to augment film action with music.

It wasn't long before their work was being imitated by others. Hal: "I hate to say we were copied, but we certainly influenced a lot of people. It just seemed to be all over town." The resulting records were usually pretty good. Such copying extended the effect of their writing

Other songs emanated from theirs like ripples in a pond, and in this diluted way they were even more responsible for the sound of their times. More important than this superficial imitation was the lasting example they were creating as influences on new careers as promising as their own. Nevertheless, for some combination of reasons, the original Bacharach and David were always distinguishable from their sound-alikes. "I think it gets into the arrangements," Burt suggests, "when whatever the sound that I had in my head got translated . . . That seems to be the link. Because I find a song like 'Wives And Lovers' totally different from 'Walk On By.' Something in the rhythm patterns, maybe, was consistent. But I've never been really able to, or really cared to analyze it." "I don't think we've ever tried to write in such a way as to be recognizable," says Hal. "The 'sound,' the 'personality' of our work grew from a natural evolution."

The composers' pragmatic Brill Building background (although limiting at the time), and their diverse influences, helped them fashion music that knew no specific boundaries. It wasn't exactly rock, it wasn't strictly pop, it was too soulful to be M.O.R. It created its own definition, this Bacharach/David music. It was something unique and good; light and buoyant, or gritty and rhythmic, but always with that identifiable strain running through; that intangible quality linking song to song subliminally, though the interpreting artists were as far apart as Aretha Franklin and Gene Pitney, Billy Jay Kramer and Jerry Butler, Herb Alpert and Dusty Springfield, Jack Jones and Tom Jones, the Walker Brothers and the Carpenters. Sophisticated, yet of the street; elegant and funky--it was contemporary music, of the moment, that transcended the moment and would sound as fresh in ten years' time as it did the day it was first heard.

Two records during this period with which Bacharach gained greater or lesser involvement were Jerry Butler's "Make It Easy On Yourself" and the Shirelles' "Baby It's You." Yet Burt and Hal yearned for an artistic control that was still far away. It was not until the two of them were able to produce their own songs with the artist of their choice that their art truly came into its own.

They had been making demonstration records of their tunes with an unknown singer named Dionne Warwick. When offered the chance to produce her as an artist for Scepter Records, they immediately recognized the opportunity for which they had been waiting. What resulted was not only an impressive string of very fine and popular singles for Dionne Warwick, but the establishment of Bacharach-David in the public consciousness as a songwriting team at the vanguard popular music.

Dionne proved the perfect interpreter of their material. "We could go in almost any direction with Dionne," Burt remembers. "She could have any kind of hit at that time: an r&b-tinged record, or a very white kind of song. She's an incredible singer, very flexible." Not only was she versatile enough to accommodate a number of styles, but her basic approach--twisting, turning, coasting, stretching notes here and rushing phrases there--was a vocal complement to the startling yet natural effects Bacharach was achieving with his highly personal melodic lines. She seemed to sing as effortlessly as someone talking, as quickly as thought itself; the notes flowed from her as freely as they did from Burt and Hal, with no regard for the 32-bar AABA-pattern strict-time-signature "rules" that songwriting professionals had always accepted as *de rigueur*.

"Almost none of the songs fit those traditional patterns," says Hal. "I never found that difficult. I thought Burt's music was original and very interesting, but it was reasonably easy for me to write to it. I

did not have a great awareness that wild things were happening. I thought those shifts were natural ones, and a lot of other people must have thought so too, because the songs wouldn't have been hits otherwise. It was just people who were used to certain traditional forms--musicians, maybe--who would get upset the minute there were departures. I wasn't really a musician, so I wasn't hampered."

Burt professes as little awareness as Hal of the changes he was wreaking in the pop song format. "A lot of the things we did perhaps hadn't been done before successfully. The music was maybe a bit more sophisticated. Occasionally there would be 'complaints.' With 'What's New, Pussycat?' someone said, 'This is in 3/4,' it's a waltz, how is somebody in a disco in Paris going to dance to this?' I said, 'They'll find a way. It feels right the way it is. They'll find a way to move to it.' You can't think about things like that. I never bothered counting the bars, about seeing whether or not there were eight bars in the first section. Sometimes there'd be nine bars, sometimes twelve. I never paid any attention. I never paid any attention to a changed time signature. I think it was Dionne who told me the turn-around bar on 'Anyone Who Had A Heart' was in 7/8. She counted it out, and I couldn't believe it. It wasn't intentional, that's just the way it came out.

"Those things never bothered me. They bothered some people. An A&R man in the early days might say, 'Here's a three-bar phrase instead of a four-bar phrase, and it really makes me uncomfortable. If you'll make it a four-bar phrase I'll record the song, but the way it is now I won't.' And I did that a couple of times, and I ruined a couple of good songs."

As soon as the first record was made with Dionne Warwick--the obliquely appropriate "Don't Make Me Over"--Bacharach and David never again had to worry about their material being misinterpreted. They had begun the public phase of the career that marked them as the class in their field. Hal and Burt wrote and co-produced a chain of hits that earned an immediate and permanent place in the consciousness of those who heard them. "Anyone Who Had A Heart," "Are You There With Another Girl," "Reach Out For Me," "Message to Michael", "Don't Make Me Over" -- these and all the others were classic singles, three-minute pieces of magic coming out of the radio to complement your life. "Walk On By," perhaps the greatest Dionne Warwick record, apotheosizes so many elements of the '60s, that one can't help thinking this is the specific song Susan Sontag had in mind when, in her 1965 essay, "On Culture And The New Sensibility," she argued to an intellectual audience not yet comfortable in the unashamed appreciation of popular art that "the singing style of Dionne Warwick" was "a complex and pleasurable event" on a par with a Rauschenberg painting, to be experienced "without condescension."

Bacharach's arrangements for these records were powerful yet subtle, polished but also meaty; as inventive, playful, versatile and surprising as Dionne's own vocals. Beneath the effort less sound lay a discipline exemplified by Burt's attitude towards his recording sessions. "When ever I do a record, I always play the arrangement first on the piano for all the musicians, to demonstrate the feel. Certain things can't be put on paper. I mean a written drum part cannot convey much emotion; it looks like so much mathematics. So there's a reason I'm sitting there at the piano. And if somebody doesn't want to listen -- he's not going to be around on the next date, you know?"

In a career that sometimes seemed preordained in every detail, there were surprises. Burt never wanted "I Say A Little Prayer" to be released; he didn't like the feel of the record -- but the public certainly did. Hal fought Dionne's idea to change "Message To Martha" into "Mess age To Michael," but when she

did and it worked for her, he conceded he had been wrong. Then there were songs the pair thought should have been hits that were not. Hal is fond of "Everybody's Out Of Town," "This Empty Place" and "Windows Of The World." Burt's "un discovered" favorites include "Windows Of The World" and "Paper Mache."

"I made them too subtle," Bacharach suggests of the latter two. "There wasn't enough energy in the mix. I treated them more the way I wanted to hear them, perhaps, than the way the world might have wanted them. They could have stood a little more grease in the sound. If the drums had been playing from the start on 'Windows Of The World,' if the feel had been a bit harder, I think we would have had a better chance with it." Still and all, Burt admits, "I wouldn't really change much of what we did."

This touches upon the self-contained integrity that is the only "formula" Bacharach and David had for writing. Burt: "I don't think you can really sit in a room and write a song, visualizing that people are going to like it better this way or that. What you have to do is gratify yourself. You have to be happy with the song."

Hal's lyrics speak most frequently of the rules of and need for love, from the pointed questioning of "Alfie" to the pointed message of "What The World Needs Now." They are effective statements, stylish and economical, and they linger as moods in the memory. David's description of his approach to writing echoes his partner's sentiment about trusting one's own instincts.

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