

November 28, 2011

Interview: Burt Bacharach (Part 1)



What lingers most after you have spent quality time with songwriter Burt Bacharach is the sound of his voice. In my [Wall Street Journal](#) profile last week, I describe it as shearing-soft. Burt's voice still has traces of Queens, N.Y., but it's plenty



soothing

and assuring. And the way he releases words

in a sentence is a bit how kids let out string when flying kites. He seems to like to hear the rhythm of words and how they sound together, as though breaking them into measures. In fact, there's a cadence to everything he says. But the pauses and relaxed pace of his sentence delivery are equally thrilling. In music, these pauses are called "rests."

As it should be, considering how much hit music Burt has turned out since the early 1950s. On a list of post-1956 songwriters, Burt has had 133 hits and ranks No. 6—



right after Paul McCartney, John Lennon and the Motown team of Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland and Edward Holland Jr. Put in perspective, Burt is a direct link to the great composers of the '30s and '40s—and author, with lyricist Hal David, of the American Songbook's final chapter.



Moments after Burt and I moved into his spacious living room to talk, I switched on my digital recorders. Burt then urged me to sit right next to him on the couch, virtually shoulder to shoulder. Which was perfect. We both sat low on the sofa, and it was as if we were in an English sports car, with Burt behind the wheel, both of us watching the road and scenery ahead of us zip by.

In Part 1 of my five-part interview with Burt, 83, the famed composer and winner of three Oscars and eight Grammys—whose new musical [Some Lovers](#) now is in previews at San Diego's Old Globe theater—talked about his dad and the early years:

Marc Myers: Your dad Bert was a men's fashion columnist. What style lessons did you pick up from him?

Burt Bacharach: My dad was never a great promoter of himself. But he was the



nicest guy in the world. He did more favors and free jobs for people. Someone from the clothing industry would call and say, "Bert, can you come up to Harrisburg [Penn.] to speak to a group? My dad would say, "Sure." The other guy would say, "How much do you want?" He'd say, "No, I'll just do it." So my dad always undercut himself. [Pictured: Burt Bacharach and his father, Bert, in a 1970s ad]

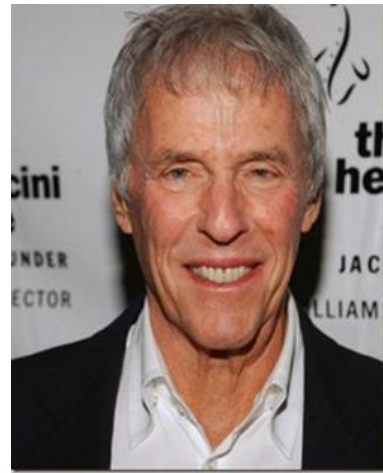
MM: No fashion or grooming tips?

BB: You know, I'm very anti-dressing. I'm going to have



to wear shoes tonight [for a tribute to Hal David](#) rather than sneakers. But when I get dressed up, I get dressed up. The way you see me now is the way I like to dress casually—in a tracksuit and sneakers. But I'm going to get dressed up tonight to do this tribute. Hal's 90 years old. Jesus, how did that happen? [laughs]

MM: How would you prefer to dress tonight?



BB: I like to go on stage wearing jeans, a blazer and an open shirt. But I wouldn't be comfortable like that given tonight's event. That's how I dressed during our performances in Italy over the summer on tour. But I keep evading your question because I don't really know how to answer it. What did I learn from my father? I kind of learned maybe consideration of other people. I'm so grateful my parents lived to see part of my success. They were still around for that.

MM: Are you excited about *Some Lovers*, your new musical with Steven Sater, who wrote the book?

BB: I really am. We did a reading the other day. It went



very well. I'm really proud of the music. *Some Lovers* is a happy song, and I wish we could reprise it in the show. But I don't think we can. We can't find another place for it.

MM: Slightly off topic, but *Alfie* is one of the greatest songs ever written.

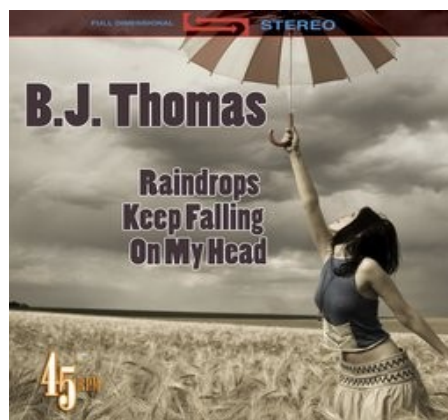
BB: Yeah it's a damn good song. You know what's odd? I don't sing much on tour anymore but I do sing Alfie. It's sort of like I wait until I'm an hour into the music, after we're through the different medleys and all before I sing, to make sure the audience is on my side.

MM: Aren't they on your side from the start?

BB: Yeah, they are.

MM: You want to seduce the audience first?

BB: Yeah. Right or wrong, I need to feel that I have their permission to sing. And I



can sing Alfie way better than I can sing Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head. Way better [laughs]. During our recent concerts in Italy, I started changing how we presented Raindrops. I had one of my singers, John Pagano, take it up to the bridge. Then I came in there. It's better. There's a comfort factor. I was never able to figure out why that song was so tough for me to sing, but it is—for me. And it isn't really that tough a song.

MM: Your songs always have female singers sounding as though they're on the verge of a nervous breakdown, as though there's this panic or desperation setting in.

BB: I always felt much more comfortable writing for the female voice.

MM: Why?

BB: Women just kind of convey more emotion for me, you know? Even singers who I didn't conduct, like Dusty Springfield, have that emotional thing on my songs.



MM: You always seemed to understand women far better than any other songwriter. Why is that?

BB: It's the feminine side of me, I think. I don't know. It's sheer emotion. I can get more with women. How am I going to get that with a guy. Luther [Vandross]? Yeah, but that was different when we worked together back in 1998. Think of Aretha on *A House Is Not a Home*—I mean, Jesus. And also what Luther did with the same song back in 1988.

MM: Did studying with Darius Milhaud help shape your sensitive side?

BB: Darius Milhaud [pause]. That was a small composition class, just five of us, out



at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara. At the time I was hanging out in New York with Lou Harrison and John Cage thinking maybe this is where I'd wind up, writing 12-tone classical music and things like that. So I went to study with Milhaud. And he was very nice. Let's see, what did I learn from him? [pause] How to eat tacos?

MM: How to eat tacos?

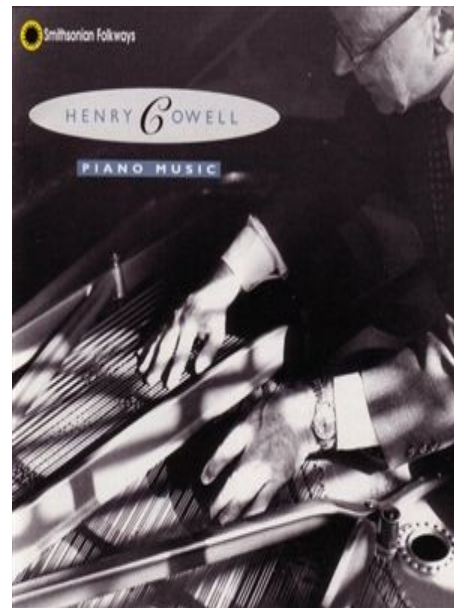
BB: Milhaud [pictured] liked taking the class—the five of us—to a little taco stand in



Carpinteria. The other thing I learned from him came early and was quite authentic and quite major. We all had to write a work for our summer project, for the composition class. And I wrote a sonatina for violin, oboe and piano. The middle movement was very lyrical and very melodic, and I was very kind of almost ashamed of it?

MM: Ashamed?

BB: Yeah, embarrassed by it. Because we all were doing things like [pause] studying



with composer and pianist Henry Cowell. You know, fist to the piano and extreme heavy stuff. But when I played my sonatina for Milhaud, we didn't even talk about it. He just [pause] maybe he sensed my discomfort with the second movement. He said, "Never be afraid... of something... that is melodic... and can be remembered."

MM: Sounds like a big transition.

BB: Yes, it was. And Milhaud knew how to eat tacos, so what could be better than that for the summer? [laughs] He was a very kind man.

MM: Were Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller an influence?



BB: Great. I mean, I learned a lot. I did write one song with Jerry [pictured] and his son Jed [Falling Out of Love in 2003]. We were always friends. That's how I met Dionne [Warwick]. I was rehearsing a background vocal group for the Drifters in 1962 on a song I wrote with Bob Hilliard called Mexican Divorce. Which is where I got to work with and observe Jerry and Mike in the studio.

MM: What was the big takeaway?

BB: The big takeaway was I never saw or figured out how Jerry did it.

MM: What do you mean?

BB: Mike stayed in the booth mostly. But to go into Bell Sound, which was just a box



of a room, and put the Drifters or Ben E. King in there with a background vocal group or a string section plus four guitars and three percussionists—things that are unthinkable now. Nobody could think in those terms then. To get things going like Jerry's Spanish Harlem [1960], with the leakage in

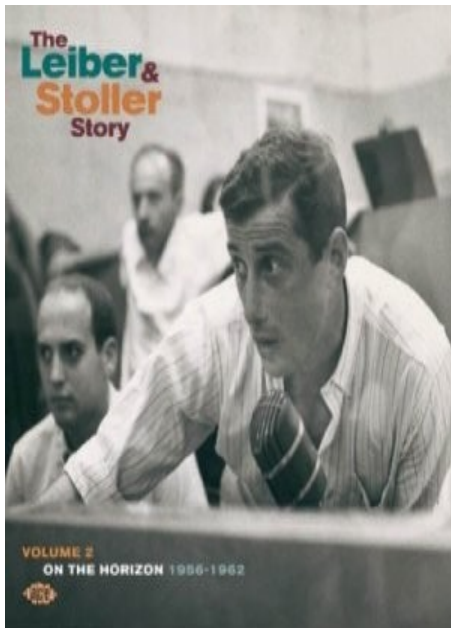
that room. Wow. But watching Jerry, you didn't know how he pulled it off.

MM: Leiber was quite a producer—an unusual combination for a lyricist.

BB: It was. Jerry didn't know how to write music. He was just a soulful guy. Everyone thought he was part black, but he wasn't. He was just totally immersed in the culture, the music. We used to hang out together in New York. I learned a lot about recording and producing records just by watching him.

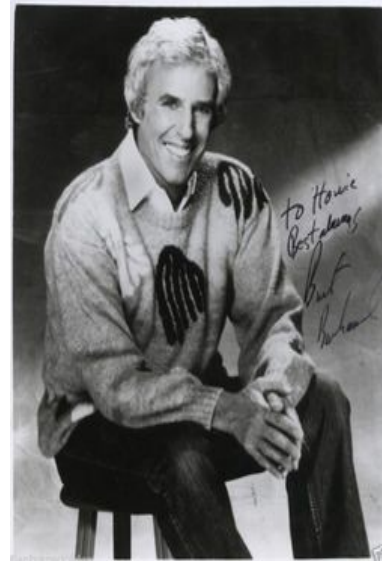
MM: What did you see?

BB: He was doing stuff like crowding studios and



layering with tape years before Phil Spector. Phil was brilliant—and very nuts. I learned a lot from Jerry, and we remained friends. We always said that in this lifetime we had to write one song together before it's over. And we finally did in 2003. It took a long time to write, and Aretha got it to record.

MM: Do you like the recording?



BB: I made the record... produced the record. It's called Falling Out of Love. It's a good song. Could I have made a better record? Yes I could have. Could I have written a better arrangement? Yes, I could have. Should have. You're not going to get that many cracks at that. I did record Aretha a couple of other times as well, you know. Love her.



JazzWax tracks: Burt Bacharach's recordings divide into several different large categories. There are his pre-1962 hits, his early '60s recordings with Marlene Dietrich when he was her musical director and conductor, his recordings with Hal David for Dionne Warwick, his instrumental sessions for A&M in the '60s and '70s, his theater and movie hits, his non-Warwick hits in the '70s and '80s, and his 1990s recordings and artists who have recorded his works recently.



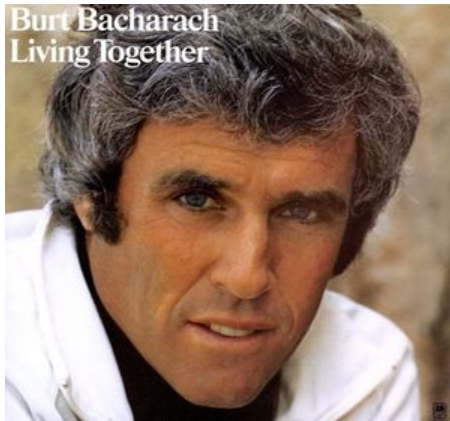
For starters, Burt's pop recordings from the 1950s are neatly packaged on *Burt Bacharach: The First Book of Songs 1954-1958* at [Amazon](#). There's also *Rare Bacharach: 1956-78* at [Amazon](#). Or *The Look of Love: The Burt Bacharach Collection*, a three CD set at [Amazon](#). *Marlene Dietrich With the Burt Bacharach Orchestra* also is superb. You'll find it at [Amazon](#).

November 29, 2011

Interview: Burt Bacharach (Part 2)

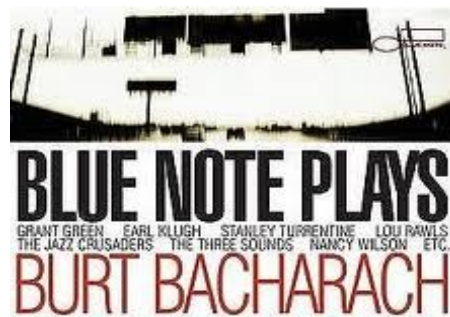


Pulling into Burt Bacharach's driveway a few weeks ago in Los Angeles, I looked in the open garage. There, parked neatly, was a relatively new white Jaguar XJ12—exactly the kind of car I had imaged Burt would drive: Sporty, comfortable, powerful and, once upon a time, English-made. Entering his ranch-style home, I waited in his music room for a few minutes before he arrived. Naturally, his walls



were covered with photos of celebrities and musicians. There was even one of Burt and Dizzy Gillespie. Which made me think: If not for Burt and Hal David's music, jazz might have suffered even more than it did during the rock era. [Photo at top of Burt Bacharach at A&M's Los Angeles studios in 1972 recording *Living Together*, by [Paul Slaughter](#)]

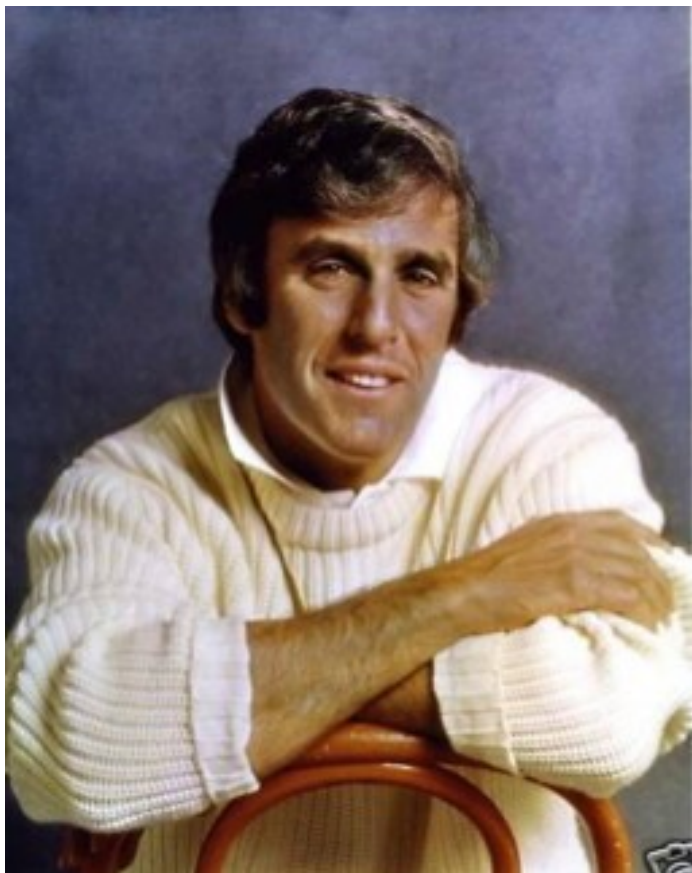
Think about how many jazz artists in the '60s recorded Burt's music, in many cases



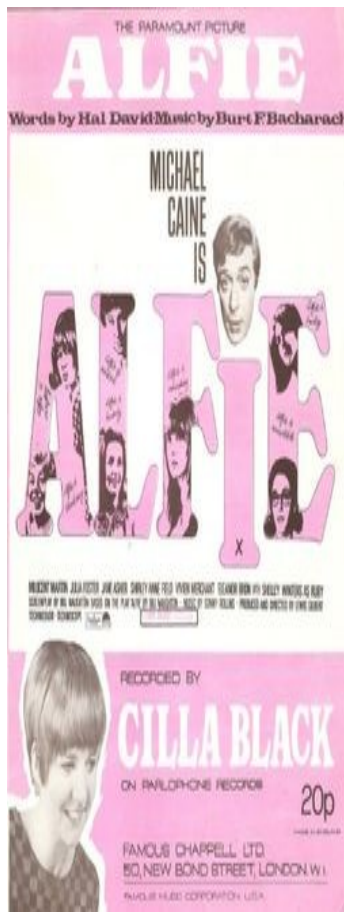
devoting entire albums to his songs. Burt's compositions were billed as pop, but jazz musicians knew they were a sophisticated hybrid that gave jazz artists plenty of space for improvisation. Unlike many of the restrictive tunes by singer-songwriters of the '60s, Burt's melodies were adaptable by anyone who could pull them off.

November 30, 2011

Interview: Burt Bacharach (Part 3)

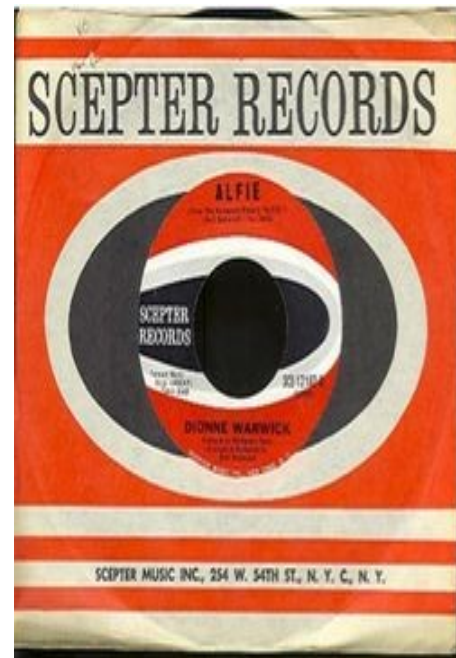


As long-time readers of this blog know, one of my favorite songs is Alfie. I love the rising and falling melody, the challenging lyrics and the song's big build. I've posted



on the song in the past [here](#) and [here](#). I'm sort of torn between Cilla Black's version and the one Dionne Warwick recorded. Black's has that nervous breakdown thing going, that edge, while Dionne's is as smooth as suede. So at Burt's home, when I mentioned how much I loved the song, he got up from the sofa at one point and went over to the piano to play and sing it for me.

Imagine my shock. Burt said he was going to have to play it that night at a tribute to



Hal David and needed to warm up anyway. Burt's voice is rarely in tune, which is part of its brave charm. But what Burt lacks in perfect pitch he more than makes up for in passion and heart. When Burt played and sang Alfie for me, he was immediately all the way inside that song, feeling every note and word. Which is what's interesting about Burt: He unashamedly loves the sound of his own songs, as if someone else had written them and he's a fan.

In Part 3 of my five part conversation with Burt, captured for my [Wall Street Journal](#) profile a week ago, the composer, arranger, conductor and producer talks about his new musical, Barbra Streisand, David Merrick and why he never thought he'd be writing for the stage again:

Marc Myers: [Some Lovers](#) will open soon [now in



previews], but the last time you wrote the music for a musical was *Promises, Promises* in 1968. That's a long time.

Burt Bacharach: Yes, it is. *Promises* was a hit, but I kind of got turned off by shows. [Pictured: Burt Bacharach rehearses cast of *Promises, Promises* in 1968]

MM: Why?

BB: A week and a half after the show opened, I got a phone call from the producer,



David Merrick [pictured]. I was out in Palm Springs at the time. I was exhausted from the whole experience. The show was doing well. David said, "I want you to know, Burt, that we did a Saturday matinee and [composer] Richard Rodgers was there. And you had a substitute drummer, a substitute trumpet player..." There were like five subs in the band.

MM: What did you think?

BB: I said to myself, "I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to do another show." I like it better when I got it and it's there, just the way you wanted it, on tape, in a recording studio.

MM: Speaking of perfection and control, you've been quoted as saying that you like working with artists who torture themselves. What did you mean by that?

BB: I don't think I said that. If I did, I didn't mean it that way.

MM: Do you have that same feeling about perfection and control today that you did in 1968?

BB: I kind of learned more recently that if there's a



pimple—or two in a take, it's OK. If the guitar player is off, you can fix it with Pro Tools. But before, you couldn't. But if the feel is there and it's all there, there is something magical about the immediacy of having it all captured perfectly...

MM: Is there a perfect album of Burt Bacharach songs?

BB: I did an album with Ronnie Isley, which is an album I'm



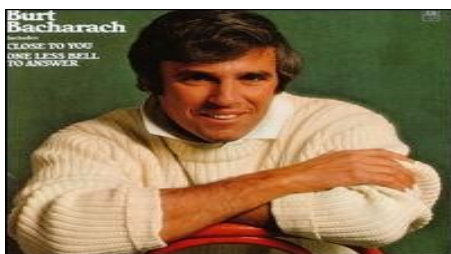
quite proud of [Isley Meets Bacharach,2003]. To do what we did with two studios at Capitol, with the string section in Studio A and the other members of the orchestra in Studio B. And to be able to have a singer who's going to give me something, and a male voice no less. It's a killer. And in some cases there were only two takes. We got Alfie on the first take.

MM: In the 60s and 70s, your songs seemed crafted to ensure that singers and musicians would be out on a ledge.

BB: Good point. What I'm trying to do, really, is make a miniature movie when I write songs. That's why there are peaks and valleys, high points and suspense. I've never been much for one-level records.

MM: Even the best singers were challenged by your music.

BB: Challenged is another good word. I wonder if I could



do now what I did with Barbra Streisand on Close to

You. To have the audacity and balls to sing with her—and sing harmony with her, and have that kind of beauty with the string quartet playing live and the way Dwight [Hemion] directed it and shot it. It looks like I’m falling madly in love with her.

MM: And her, you.

BB: Could I do that again? I don’t think so. It’s a time in your life when you can do something like that.

MM: So that call from David Merrick was distressing?

BB: Look, when I walked away from Promises and heard David tell me in so many words, “You don’t have the musicians you wanted—you’ve got five subs,” it was disheartening, and I no longer had an interest in theater. But now is different.

MM: Do you feel strongly about the music for Some Lovers?

BB: You bet. Do I feel that there’s anything I’ve written that could be... Oh Jesus,



never mind, that could be bad [laughs]. I like it all.

Steven [Sater] is a very good person to write with because he gives me the lyrics first on everything. Because he is so musical in his wordage, the way he ... his lyrics don’t dictate the melody but dictate where I can go with it.

[Burt gets up from the sofa and sits down at his walnut baby grand piano to play one of the songs from Some Lovers: Ready to Be Done With You.]

MM: Wow, that’s beautiful.



BB: You see, the singer's pain has to bleed through. There's a lot of pain... Maybe I'm feeling my pain for them. The hurt. The hurt that I've given other people over the years. There's a lot of heartbreak in this musical. There are some really good moments in the show.

MM: Are you expecting big things for the musical?

BB: Naturally you hope it gets off the ground and has the legs to get to Broadway.



It's a small show. But this is what I should be doing now, not go into the studio with a new artist. Soon after Promises, Promises I vowed never to do another show because each night's results were different. But

this [Some Lovers] is really what I should be doing now. The record business is gone, but I still have songs to write.

MM: Going back to how you led recording sessions in the '60s, didn't you risk crushing or shredding singers in your search for something magical?

BB: I always got the most I could from them. You



push gently and work with them and give them love. You smile and say softly, "Give me one more." You never get magic by beating up singers or attacking them.

MM: But after a while, isn't there a risk of diminishing returns?

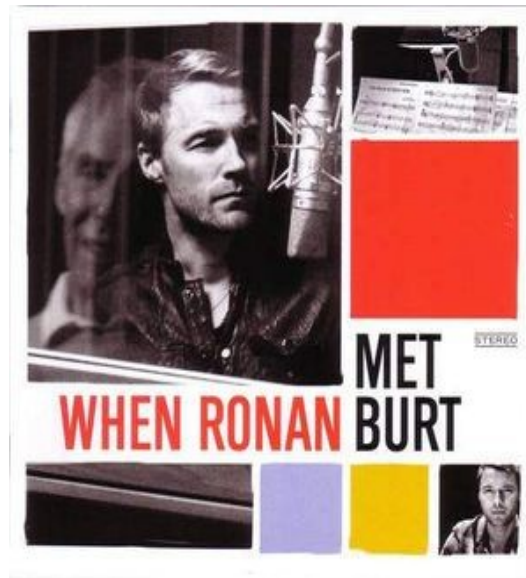
BB: You know, I just don't give a shit. I'm just going for it, man. You know? You smile



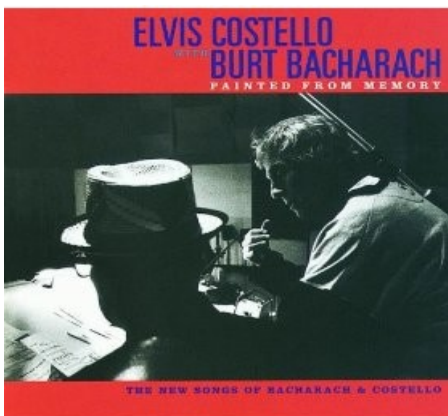
and say, "Give me one more." Everything was live then in the studio, which I loved. There were so many elements to worry about. I had to wonder and worry, "Did we take the tempo too fast when the singer came in?" And lots of other things. I really wanted to get as close to perfection in a take as possible. In that era, splicing tape took forever. [Pictured: Burt Bacharach with Dusty Springfield]

MM: But weren't you hearing things that elude most people?

BB: Not really. The average listener hears more than you think. I don't really want to



be in a recording situation with someone who can't sing. For example, we got the maximum out of Ronan Keating earlier this year [When Ronan Met Burt]. There are some really good tracks in there. He's such a pro. We had an hour and a half for each track, and he pulled it off. I met him for the first time on a Monday morning, and he was gone that Saturday. And that made you work in a different way [snaps]. My favorite track on that album is This House Is Empty Now.



MM: Your album with Elvis Costello, Painted From Memory, remains a brilliant work.

BB: Yes, it really is something, isn't it? [pause] I love what we did.

JazzWax tracks: If there's one Burt Bacharach box set that I love more than



any other it's [Burt Bacharach, Something Big: The Complete A&M Years...and More!](#)(Hip-O Select). It's a five-CD set housed in a hardback, snapshot photo-album format (7.5 x 6 inches).

Be aware, these are all Burt's own recordings—either



singing or arranging, producing and conducting. Many are instrumentals. The remastered albums in the set include Hit Maker(1963), Reach Out(1967), Make It Easy on Yourself (1969), Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid(1971), Living Together (1973), In Concert (1974), Futures (1977), Woman (1979) and quite a few singles and unreleased tracks.