

Bacharach and David: Reconciled and Honored

After an acrimonious split, the look of love is again in their eyes. They receive ASCAP's Founders Award tonight
By DON HECKMAN, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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"It was a very messy situation--and a very unfortunate time," said Burt Bacharach.

Looking back on the 10-year hiatus during which he only talked "through attorneys" with Hal David and Dionne Warwick, his hit-making collaborators of the '60s, Bacharach's primary desire was to put the past to rest.

"Look, there's no point in going over all the gory details," he said this week, as he and David recalled the estrangement that began in the late '70s. "It's all over now. I had a falling out with Dionne, then Hal got involved. And if I had to do it over again--I never, never would do it the same way.

"For whatever reason, it happened. But we finally made our settlement, Dionne and I are touring again, and Hal and I found a touch of the old spark when we wrote 'Sunny Weather Lover' for Dionne's new album. It was the first song we'd written together in 17 years."

The reconciliation is an appropriate lead-in for tonight's ninth annual ASCAP Pop Awards Dinner at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, at which composer Bacharach, 65, and lyricist David, 72, will receive the song licensing organization's prestigious Founders Award, and Warwick will sing many of their best-known songs.

"We use this award," explained Morton Gould, ASCAP's president, "to celebrate the founders of the society by honoring our most gifted contemporary songwriters. And I can't think of any team that deserves the honor more than Burt and Hal."

Bacharach and David's explosion of hits in the mid-'60s was one of the extraordinary events in a remarkable musical decade. Going against the tidal stream of rock, they synthesized their own blend of pop, R&B and mainstream ballads, adding quirky rhythms and interval-stretching melodies rarely heard before in popular music.

"Of course, we didn't start out that way," David said. "Our first two big songs, 'The Story of My Life' (for Marty Robbins) and 'Magic Moments' (for Perry Como), didn't exactly break new ground."

"Yeah, but it sure was great to finally have a hit," added Bacharach with a laugh.

The hits began to come in bunches after they met Warwick in 1962, while she was working as a back-up singer for the Drifters on "Mexican Divorce."

In December of that year, she recorded Bacharach and David's "Don't Make Me Over." The next few years saw the release of "Walk On By," "Message to Michael," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose," "Alfie," "The Look of Love" and "I Say a Little Prayer" to name only a few of the numbers that have become pop classics.

In 1968, the team expanded its horizons with "Promises, Promises," a Broadway musical collaboration with Neil Simon that ran through 1971.

Despite the decade of problems that followed their successful association with Warwick, Bacharach and David are now unstinting in their praise for the singer.

"She was terrific with lyrics--a great translator," said David. "And so musicianly, with the lyrics as well as the music."

"Right. The more that she could do musically, the more chances we could take," added Bacharach. "And she did it almost effortlessly. The range didn't matter; the difficulty didn't matter. I don't think there was another singer who could have listened, taken direction and then delivered the way Dionne did."

Both Bacharach and David have strong entertainment business connections in their families. Bacharach's father Bert was a well-known New York journalist, and David's brother Mack wrote songs for Disney's "Cinderella" and dozens of other films.

Their partnership began, like so many other songwriting alliances, at the Brill Building in Manhattan.

"We started out writing 'normal' songs," said David. "But I never, from the very beginning, found Burt's music to be difficult. I never heard the songs in three, or four, or seven, or eight. They just seemed exactly the way they were supposed to be, even with all the three-bar phrases and unusual rhythms."

"Working with Hal has always seemed very natural," added Bacharach, "probably because we've never had any particularly set pattern."

"The majority of the songs we wrote had a melodic start, but we've written some wonderful pieces that started with a lyric. Hal had most of 'Alfie' done before I did the music. The same thing was true of 'A House Is Not a Home.' And a lot of the lyrics for 'Promises, Promises' were done first, because Hal had to connect and tie things in so the songs would come out of the Neil Simon dialogue and make sense."

Now that they've broken the ice with "Sunny Weather Lover" for Warwick, will the duo produce more tunes together?

"It's always possible," said Bacharach.

"Yeah, we'll probably write more songs," continued David. "Why not?"

"But there has to be a real purpose--a reason to sit down for a specific project, like the title song for a film, or maybe even another Broadway show. That would really interest me," said Bacharach. "How about you, Hal?"

"It sure would," David replied.

"But you never know if you can do it again," said Bacharach, who prides himself in not living on past glories. "All you can do is try. Can you get the same magic you had before? Who knows? I guess we're a pretty tough act to follow."

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