

What his world needs now ...

Melodies are Burt Bacharach's specialty, but it takes lyrics to vent his new political rage.

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A new album titled "At This Time" arrives in stores on the first of the month with some intriguing attributes. Hip-hop beats crafted by Dr. Dre on three tracks. Politically charged lyrics, among them a bruising attack on the Bush administration. And the record label that's releasing the CD stepped in to ask the artist to tone down the raw language.

Most intriguing is that artist is none other than 77-year-old Burt Bacharach, a songwriter best known for his polished love songs and elegant orchestrations. Some of his tennis partners are going to be a bit rattled by all of this.

"I know, I know, all of this is going to surprise some people," Bacharach said in a wispy voice in a phone call from New York, far from his usual Pacific Palisades turf. "I wanted to take some chances. There are things I needed to say."

It's a good fit for him right now, being in a city of rain and hard edges.

"There was no fear here," he said. "I feel I have a new kind of freedom in making an album like this. In a pop song you're always a bit restrained. Where are you going to go in a three- or four-minute song that is intended for radio? There are limits. Here I went where I wanted to go."

Where he wanted to go required some seven-minute mini-operas, a 35-piece orchestra, three hip-hop producers, Elvis Costello, Rufus Wainwright, jazzman Chris Botti and, for the first time in Bacharach's long and illustrious career of melody-making, lyrics he wrote himself.

The result is an album of high polish -- everything Bacharach does with brass and piano is as decorative and shiny as brass buttons on a country-club sports coat -- and gives him an adventurous auteur role here that makes him seem like Moby fashioning an album for a light-jazz radio station.

Bacharach is one of the most famous composers in the world and in his sixth decade in the business. He has won six Grammys and three Oscars. He's collaborated on 48 Top 10 hits but along the way wrote the lyrics to exactly zero of them. Old partner Hal David was the word man on "Walk on By," "The Look of Love," "(They Long to Be) Close to You" and most of the other signature works in the Bacharach songbook.

"Through the years did I contribute a line here or there or a title to a song? Yes. But this is a whole new thing for me." There's a revelation in his writing, too: Who knew the cheerful-looking fellow behind the piano was so angry? Take the most indignant track, "Who Are These People?"

This stupid mess we're in just keeps getting worse

So many people dying needlessly

Looks like the liars may inherit the earth

Even pretending to pray and getting away with it.

Not exactly "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head." The songwriter says politics have never really been part of his personal composition.

"Vietnam, I'm sure terrible things happened, I know terrible things happened, but you know ... some years I didn't vote and politics, that just wasn't my thing," Bacharach said.

When he and David did look to geopolitical headlines for inspiration, the result wasn't exactly high-definition rhetoric. In the gorgeous 1967 hit "Say a Little Prayer," it turns out that it was a distant soldier boy who Dionne Warwick was fretting about during her daily routine. The singer said years later that "we were sending a message to our kids in Vietnam." Who knew? It's safe to say that for most pop fans, that message remained safely encrypted.

Not so with the new CD. Asked about the unveiled references, Bacharach's voice began to vibrate with emotion as he indexed his frustrations with the Bush administration.

"The world I see right now is so upsetting that I feel I have to say what I feel," Bacharach said. "At my age, and at this time, things are getting worse by the minute, worse by the day. And this album is that."

The album opens with "Please Explain," which is hung on the ominous chest-thump and orchestral weave of a Dre-fashioned drum-and-bass loop. The slow build leads to Bacharach's vocals, which have always been limited as an instrument and -- again, like a Moby album -- are often half-hidden behind orchestral corners. ("I'm very self-conscious about my vocals," a sheepish Bacharach conceded.)

The first lyrics on the album make it clear that Bacharach is worried these days that love, sweet love, may not be enough for the world anymore.

There was a song I remember

said "What the World Needs Now ... "

Where is the love

Where did it go

Who broke our hearts

'cause we need to know.

Trumpet player and composer Botti met Bacharach on two separate occasions that were a year apart before the song "Dreams" coalesced as a complete work.

The young musician said that Bacharach's talent is to set aside pop convention and somehow create music that attains a near-universal appeal.