

Bacharach to the Future

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As grey-haired, 67-year-old composers go, Burt Bacharach is pretty f***ing cool. Paul Lester interviews the melodic inspiration behind Oasis, Stereolab and Pulp.

What do you call him? Mr. Bacharach? Sir? Your imperial tunesmith?

"Call me Burt."

Somehow, it just doesn't feel right. Burt: it's too informal, too familiar, too insufficiently reverential.

I mean, this is Burt Bacharach, for Christ's sake. First names you use for gardeners, plumbers, members of indie bands. But not for this, this ...holy composers.

Why all the fuss? Because he was the only icon apart from George Best to feature prominently on the cover of "Definitely Maybe." Because his music is the mainstay of London's New Muzak scene and clubs like Indigo and Cheese. Because he and lyricist-partner Hal David have been called "the Lennon & McCartney of Middle America." Because everyone from St. Etienne to Stereolab to Tindersticks to Urge Overkill to Paul Weller to Michael Stipe thinks he's God.

Because, if you look up the word "melody" in the dictionary, you'll see a photo of Burt Bacharach.

If you asked thousands of record buyers and record makers who they considered to be the most gifted pop melodicist of the last 30 years, most of them would probably agree on three men: Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson and Burt Bacharach.

No, we won't be using first names.

Mr. Bacharach, how do you feel about all the attention you've been getting from new British musicians like Oasis?

"I feel flattered," he says, over the phone from his hotel room in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he is mid-way through a mini-tour with a symphony orchestra. "In fact, I'd like to come over to Britain at some stage, to write. With Noel Gallagher? Maybe one day I'm very open to things like that. Oasis are very good."

It's no surprise that Bacharach is held in such high esteem by Gallagher and his peers--most twentysomethings were brought up as much on his little rhapsodies as they were on the songwriting of the Beatles and the rock'n'roll of the Rolling Stones.

In fact, our parents are just as likely to have an LP of "Dionne Warwick Sings Bacharach and David" as they are a copy of "Sgt. Pepper" or Sticky Fingers."

But, whereas the Beatles in their heyday were as much counterculture heroes as they were compositional innovators, and the Stones were often a triumph of attitude over actual creative

achievements, Burt Bacharach--who was already over 30 when he entered the music business in the Sixties--was "only " remarkable for the beauty of his melodies and the breathtaking complexity of his arrangements.

I say "only" ironically because, of course, melody is crucial to any pop or rock, even G-Funk or trip hop record. Don't be embarrassed. Don't think "kitsch." The sort of chord changes Burt Bacharach used to rupture the still silence of the moment on songs like "A House Is Not A Home" resonate down the years, echoing in all sorts of unexpected spaces, from the Mobb Deep/Bone Thugs-n-Harmony school of malicious mellifluousness of the Smog/Baby Bird awkwardly pretty aesthetic

Titles such as "I'll Never Fall in Love Again," "You'll Never Get to Heaven," and "I Just Don't Know What to Do with Myself" speak volumes about Bacharach's art ache and, by extension, about the yearning that is central to the human experience.

"The pathos at the heart of the American hullabaloo," is how rock biographer Albert Goldman described Burt Bacharach's lush melancholia.
Such sweet sorrow.

Why so sad, Mr. Bacharach?

"Well, I never intended to appear introspective," he says, closing the stable door three decades after the horse has bolted. "But then, I've never been a consistent writer of up tempo songs. I kind of veer toward ballads and melody. I'm seldom totally positive. Maybe that's because 'she loves you' or 'I'm so happy' don't make for such good songs."

Bacharach obviously hasn't heard "I'm So Happy," by early eighties Britfunk outfit Light of the World--devastatingly sad. But I take his point.

"I've never been a terribly sad or depressed person. But when I write, I just happen to go toward that sort of thing. It's accidental."

"Knowing When To Leave," "Are You There With Another Girl," "Walk On By." How autobiographical are your songs, Mr. Bacharach?

I don't look too much into my life for stuff," says the cool urban sophisticate, momentarily riled.

"They're just melodic fragments. The autobiographical references are irrelevant. They're reflections, generalizations, not specific. I'm like a sponge. I absorb things. I'm an absorbent person!"

Glad to hear it, Mr. Bacharach

When I'm really moved by something, by a beautiful view, I put that response into the melody. But that's it."

Bernard Sumner of New Order, in a now-famous Melody Maker interview, explained how he received melodic inspiration via invisible antennae that picked up musical ideas from the ether and transmitted them directly to his brain.

How do you get inspired, Mr. Bacharach?

I'm very attuned at night. I hum things into a tape recorder. When me and Hal started back in the Sixties, we didn't have easy access to small tape machines, so we had to write it all down. That would

be my advice to young writers: learned to hear music in your head, then write down the notes and chords."

Talking of technology, Mr. Bacharach isn't just Mr. Melody, he's also synonymous with lavish orchestration and sonic perfection. Along with psychedelia and Motown, his was one of the sounds of the Sixties. Like Phil Spector before him and Todd Rundgren and Brian Eno after, Bacharach realized the studio was the ultimate instrument.

I've been lured by the perfection of computers, keyboard and drum machines lately--they're impeccable," he admits, delighted. "There's lots of stuff that's very addictive about the recording process. I like live bands, and interaction is cool. And the studio can be antiseptic. But I like the perfection of machines."

How relevant can you get?

As the theoretical dispute between the Campaign For Real Rock (Cast, Northern Uproar) and the Neue Modelle Armee (Platistic Fantastic, Orlando) heats up, here I am talking synthetic versus authentic with a man old enough to be Christ Menswear's great-grandfather.

"I still have lots of creative ambitions," he says. "Maybe not the feverish pitch I used to work at 25 years ago--that passion and hunger has gone--but I still have lots to say, musically."

It's funny. Talk to some of the no-mark schmuckos from Bennun's section and they come on like the most arrogant sonsofbithes in the cosmos.

Then you interview someone like Burt Bacharach--one of the three most gifted pop melodicists of the last 30 years, remember--and they're the models of humility.

What's it like being one of the Crucial Three, up there with Paul McCartney and Brian Wilson?

"I don't necessarily...It might be...I ... um..."

The name's Bacharach. Mr. Bacharach

Everybody Burts

Manic Street Preachers: Just recorded a version of Bacharach/David's "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head:" for the Help album.

Stereolab: Were described recently as "Kraftwerk playing Burt Bacharach."

The High Llamas: Stereolab collaborator Sean O'Hagan's Gideon Gaye album is a budget take on the symphonic sadness of "Come Touch the Sun," from Bacharach's Oscar-winning soundtrack to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

St. Etienne: Picked up the piquant MOR of Bacharach/David classics when everyone else was into the Jesus and Mary Chain.

Pulp: Jarvis Cocker spend his lean years going off rock and buying obscure Burt Bacharach LPs from jumble sales instead.

Dexy's Midnight Runners: Mainman Kevin Rowland notoriously couldn't get out of bed in the early eighties without first hearing Aretha Franklin's version of "I Say A Little Prayer For You."

Elvis Costello: Has just written a song with Bacharach via transatlantic answerphone and fax.

Jo Whitley: The all-time favorite record of the leftfield leaderene of the "The Evening Session" is "This Girl's In Love With You."

Blur: Their forthcoming single, "The Universal," from The Great Escape, is pure Bacharach-esque string-drenched schmaltz.