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So you thought easy listening was all about irony-laden cheesiness for people with taste bypasses who like their muzak to be of the wallpaper variety. Well think again. It's not just that easy. To begin your re-education we give you Burt Bacharach, one of the greatest songwriters of all time. Simon Williams chills with the master and pays tribute to the man who was always more than easy.

### Lounge Wizard

As the bishop once undoubtedly said to the actress: if you've got it, flaunt it. If you've made a packet, let the Good Lord of self-indulgence tear it from your pocket; if you're piling up the gold discs, live a platinum lifestyle. Join that exclusive West End club! Be chauffeured up to the front door in your very own chocolate-brown rock'n'roller! Hang with the glitterati after all those hard bastard years hankering after riches! Champagne for goalposts? Oooh, suits *you*, sir.

Damon Albarn has taken the popstar purchases a stage further, buying a share in a racing greyhound. So it's time to stake that and party as his hungry hooch zips maniacally around the neon-splashed circuit at Walthamstow Stadium. Yet even this is minuscule fries compared to the man who sold the world some of the greatest melodies it could ever conceive of hearing. Burt Bacharach races horses. Not only that, but fine horses -- so fine, in fact, that a couple of his most thoroughbred mares have galloped off with the ludicrously prestigious Kentucky Derby in American these past two years.

"It's appealing," says the master of the track, blue eyes twinkling at the mere thought of causing more equine mayhem in the future. "Why do we love it so much? Because it's out of our control. In the studio you can control things. With horses you can't do anything except sit in the stands. If it doesn't run right, you didn't have anything to do with it and if he ran great you didn't have anything to do with it, either--you're a custodian. But it is exciting. We're running this one big horse in the World Cup in Dubai in a week and a half's time, which is amazing!

As a matter of fact, in Dubai they know me more for my horse than for my music, ha ha ha ha. It *is* possible.

Only just, Burt. Only just...

**AS SOMEONE** observed recently, class is something you ooze rather than discover in a pint of booze. The case in point? That Take That had lumbered around with Lulu while The Pet Shop Boys and The Smiths had already had their musical thrills with the far superior Dusty Springfield and Sandie Shaw respectively.

Burt Bacharach, naturellement, had written for both Dusty and Sandie a long time ago. He avoided Lulu. He also worked with Aretha Franklin. And Dionne Warwick. And the Carpenters and The Walker Brothers and Gene Pitney and anyone else who had a heart for dewy-eyed beauty and the sort of melodic instinct that inspires Noel Gallagher to burble Burt's praises. Let us not forget the Bacharach portrait casually, yet oh-so sublimely, featured on the sleeve of "Definitely Maybe." Cool? Oh, all right, then...

It gets cooler. This is the man who started his musical career at the close of the '50s as personal composer to Marlene Dietrich. This is the man who swanned through the '60s on the gossamer wings of the sensationally swish orchestral arrangements, and partnered by lyricist Hal David--flooded the Western world with waves of tearjerking joy. That he was still having hit records in the '80s is one thing. That songs he crafted over 30 years ago are still being cherished and discovered by starstruck novices is another. That he is sitting in a Mayfair hotel room (touchÇ) on a spring-time Monday morning is simply bizarre.

At 66 years old, Burt Bacharach radiates the air of a stupidly loaded man marginally slumming it for the sake of lesser mortals. The healthy dark tan he can do little to disguise, but the ensemble of blue jeans, NBA sweatshirt and whit trainers is the off-duty staple of people forever snapped in snazzy tuxedos.

Softly spoken his trim physique seems almost dwarfed by the vast bowl of dried fruit on the table. He also appears to be mildly perplexed at the prospect of spending the week nibbling on the nostalgic digestive with the British media. And he is currently insisting that, well, the sexy, saucy, sunny old '60s weren't that ker-razy, actually. Say, WHAT??!

Three big asses on a park bench! Surely BB was the king of the cool, the jet-setting, lady charming, Martini mixing lothario chilling out in the Cote D'Azur while I say A Little Prayer," "Make It Easy On Yourself," and "Walk On By" wrenched the sophisticated pop ethic away from the mundanities of MOR and into the realm of raw emotion and string driven magnificence with a fearful commercial kick, right? Other personalities changed with the seasons. But Burt's season was always in the sun, and so, tanned and impeccably-coiffured, he remained. Crucially (unlike the chainsmoking David), Burt even looked the part. For an entire decade, Bacharach and David's only serious creative competition came from a couple of fly-by-nights called John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

"In retrospect, I didn't participate in all that or enjoy it too much," Shrugs El Burt, shattering a mirror-storeful of illusions with each weary syllable. "I didn't allow myself to, because I was always going, 'What's next? Oh, I've got a record to make here, another song to write here,' and I was in a pretty strong work mode.

"Nor did I sit back and evaluate myself and see what or who I was, so I to always devalue myself. I didn't think I looked as good as, maybe, the person I was dating, so I would go for someone, uh, lesser because I thought someone better would turn me down."

This, he reckons, was primarily down to his New York childhood. Being second toughest in the infants may be fun for a while, but Burt had "terrible difficulty in making contact" with anyone in a high school where he was the shortest of 3,000 kids. Including girls. As the man rolls back the years he insists: "Even as a celebrated composer, you still carry some of that stuff with you."

And carry it through he did -- through the Marlene years, the dodgy early efforts (see "The Blob" by The Five Blobs--I shit you not, lounge lizards), the first hits and the stirrings of stardom. Then suddenly, Burt was whisked from the relatively anonymous confines of the studio and plonked into the middle of the spotlight, performing the songs he's painstakingly prepared for a string of bona fide singers.

"I found it a hard transition moving to the centre of the stage," he frowns. "A lot of my musical life had been spent in the back or conducting for singers, and suddenly I was doing concerts by myself as the star, as the attraction. I had to talk to the audience but I could hardly get a word out because I was so nervous. It was tough."

"With the songwriting process you can stay totally in the background. But I'd reached a different level-- I was quite a good-looking guy, there was a certain photo opportunity when I was married to a high-profile actress, Angie Dickinson. And still I couldn't really understand why people were paying me so much to go and play concerts in Paris or Las Vegas, just to see me conduct my music. I mean, I didn't tap dance, I sang with a very, very limited voice ... I was sure I'd better not sing too much otherwise people would see how bad I really sounded."

The man doth bumble himself too much. You may believe you have never heard a Burt Bacharach song in your entire life. If so, you hearby qualify as mad fish of the troutist order. The Stranglers, The Cranberries and Manic Street Preachers have all covered him. Even the indie-mungous XFM occasionally sneaked a Burt sween in between Suede and Scrotum Clamp. Sartorially-pissed clubs have spring up in the past few years eulogizing Burt's way with a tune and teeth-quavering perfection. A&M currently have no fewer than three Burt records-- a "Best Of..." instrumental affair, the excellent "Look of Love" compilation with the original artists and Burt's solo A&M debut from '68, "Reach Out"-- on the promotion schedules.

This ignores the fact that barely a week goes by without some corporate giant tearing through their vaults for 'classics' of the kitsch, laid-back variety to foist upon an entirely suspecting public. It also ignores the fact that the best of Hal and Burt's oeuvre is blessed with depth, dynamics and, in certain cases (see the masterful "What Do You Get When You Fall In Love?"), a cynicism that scarcely deserves an easy, cheesy-peasy listening tag.

"My attitude is: call it what you want, but keep playing it!" enthuses The Burt-like One. "Keep liking it! You wanna put a name on it? Put a name on it! I mean, I never knew what they were going on about over here when they talked about the Bacharach Sound. What is a Bacharach sound? Is 'What's New, Pussycat' really the same as 'Walk On By? And how could something as touching and heartfelt as 'Anyone Who Had A Heart' be easy listening? But again, it doesn't matter what the tag is. Does it affect you? Great!"

Essentially, the "grrreat" smell of Burt is inhaled most strongly by the sad individual; the heartbroken bloke sitting alone in the corner of the bar nursing his pain with a few pints as "Always Something There To Remind Me" or "I Just Don't Know What To Do With Myself" smooch from the jukebox.

"Oh you won't find a lot of up-tempo tunes with me," nods the man whose name -- somewhat alarmingly -- rhymes with "hurt." "They are songs from the heart that help people who are hurt. There is something very satisfying about strangers saying that, at a certain point in their lives, they had a real difficult time and the music helped them through. It makes you feel good."

Are you a big old sappy dog, Burt?

"No, but I am a romanticist. And I like melody. I like songs that can be remembered but get to your heart at the same time."

**OF COURSE**, it hasn't always been plain sailing on the good ship Burt. Not every one of his scores has scaled the heights of "Do You Know the Way to San Jose," which is hardly surprising when the composer himself can't even guess at how many he's responsible for.

"I know I've written some horrible songs," he shivers, "really, really bad songs. And I've gotten killed in the press."

Indeed, the stormiest time came in the early '70s. Having previously infiltrated the cinema with "Alfie" and "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head" (from "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid"), Hal and Burt started work on a film called, somewhat aptly, "Lost Horizon."

"We wrote all the songs, but then I had to execute the music. I had to teach the singers and go through pre-records and score the whole film, which was a monstrous film to score. It was just a huge lumpen disaster. I hated the movie. I hated the embarrassment of being involved with it. And it was killed, I mean absolutely *killed*."

So he split from Hal and, bereft of inspiration, eventually hit the performance trail armed only with orchestras, tuxedos and his trusty back catalogue. Then he met songwriter Carol Bayer Sager and, against all odds, not only found a new creative partner but also landed back in the charts with the likes of "On My Own" and "Arthur's Theme" -- overwrought slabs of pseudo-soul perfectly designed for the lavish early '80s.

Be warned, kids: musical genius he may be, but Burt is not always your friend, as he proves by breezily admitting his fondness for Michael McDonald, The Eagles and Mariah Carey. And that's the key to the Bacharach door -- Burt has never attempted to take the naff 'chill out daddio' route in an attempt to bridge any ever-increasing generation gaps. And nor does he need to as long as his disciples persist in frantically flying his flag.

"Oasis? I do like them. I wouldn't have listened to them as much if Noel hadn't shown attention and affection for some of my songs, but it certainly made me go check those guys out, and they're good. I didn't have a hard time listening to their album at all."

The past two months, he reckons, have been "pretty intense" on the creative front, not least because he's been working with Elvis Costello in New York ("Jeez, it's a record I'm really proud of. He's a very decent guy -- he's an adventurer, he takes chances"), as well as various other projects. British live dates are being planned for the end of the summer, to follow up last year's European excursion with Dionne Warwick. And with "The Look of Love" already racing past the 100,000 sales mark in this country alone, only a deaf aardvark would fail to appreciate that Burt Bacharach's sun is far from setting.

"When I'd virtually stopped writing in the '70s," says the Lord of Burtness, "the years went by and you find you've written two songs. The fewer songs you have, the less chance of having a hit. It's like having two horses in the stable instead of 15 -- you've got more chance to win with 15 horses."

And how many horses you got, Burt?

"Too many."

Class.