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## Hits

By Lillian Ross

At the age of thirty-eight, Burt Bacharach, the composer of maverick song hits--propulsive, wry, engaging, rhythmically unpredictable, songs that somehow combine elements of bossa nova, calypso, rock and traditional pop, and end up sounding unimpeachably contemporary--disembarked at nine-forty the other night at Kennedy Airport from TWA Flight 840, which had left Los Angeles about five hours earlier. He was met by a special TWA chauffeur named Jerry Blackman and by us. Mr. Bacharach, whose hits include "Alfie," "What's New Pussycat," "What the World Needs Now Is Love" and "Reach Out," was carrying with him, inside a small pale-green fabric-covered zippered overnight case, the score he had composed for the new Broadway musical "Promises, Promises," which will open in late November--the first show he has composed music for--and we were going to watch him deliver it to the people connected with the show. Waiting for Mr. Bacharach's music was David Merrick, the producer of "Promises Promises," Neil Simon, who had adapted the book from the 1960 movie "The Apartment," the cast of actors, singers and dancers and numerous other people who had some direct interest in the fact that Mr. Bacharach was arriving with the score. Mr. Blackman, a friendly, deferential man about the same age as Mr. Bacharach, took the green overnight bag from the composer and led the way to his company's Lincoln. We got in the back seat with Mr. Bacharach, who had a Beverly Hills tan, and was wearing Italian black-rimmed sun glasses pushed up on top of his head. His hair was a curly dark brown with a lot of gray in it. He had a ruggedly handsome face with an aquiline nose and what seemed to be a chronic expression of remote thoughtfulness, or puzzlement, which was no doubt aggravated by five hours of dazed flying through the clouds with a TWA showing of the movie "Thoroughly Modern Millie." Mr. Bacharach was wearing bright California clothes: A green jacket, rust colored slacks, a brown and yellow striped tie, a dark blue shirt. In the car, driving to the city, Mr. Blackman asked Mr. Bacharach about this race horse--his first--a two year old named Battle Royal.

"It was the kickiest thing I've ever done," Mr. Bacharach said. "It was something I had always wanted to own--a winner. He won the first time I raced him. Then he was entered into a fifteen-thousand-dollar claiming race at Del Mar. I was fearful of his being claimed, but my trainer didn't think he would be. I got absolutely obsessed with that horse. He ran his heart out, and he lost by a nose. I saw the jockey get off, and they capped that red tag on my horse's nose: CLAIMED. It was heartbreaking. Jerry, I just can't tell you how heartbreaking it was. Everybody said to me, 'You made *money*. He even *won* once.'"

"How much did you pay for the horse?" we asked.

"I paid fourteen thousand five hundred. But I'm not in it for money. It's like love. First love. I want to get that horse back so badly, Jerry."

"I know," Mr. Blackman said.

"I became fully committed," Mr. Bacharach said. "There's nothing kickier than owning your own horse. I bought another horse that same weekend. I was thinking about naming him Alfie. But I may name him Reach Out. Isn't that a great name for a horse?"

"Great," Mr. Blackman said.

We accompanied Mr. Bacharach to an apartment on East Sixty-First Street, where he placed the green overnight case on a baby grand Steinway in the music nook, which looked out on a ? that ran around a good part of the apartment. Mr. Bacharach looked in the kitchen. "My folks stocked the place for me," He said to us. "Isn't that nice? Scott's paper towels. Pepperidge Farm bread. Eggs. Six lemons. I wish I could say I'm happy to be here. But I'm really sad. I had to leave my wife and little girl in Beverly Hills, and I'm not ashamed to say I miss them very much. Our little girl is two, and, you know, it's better for a two year old girl to be home, running around on the grass, having the pool, backyard and everything. And, besides, my wife, Angie Dickinson, is an actress, and she's just finished a movie. I believe in dual careers. And my wife is a real actress. I can tell. I saw her in that Lee Marvin movie where she plays the girl he sends to sleep with somebody he wants to kill, and I forgot she was my wife. She had me feeling so moved. She was very sympathetic. She captured me very much. Imagine seeing your own wife up there on the screen and having her touch you that much. And with her sitting right there next to me while I'm watching her on the screen. Working on this show means that the next three months are wiped out, and I wasn't keen on the concept of living in New York either, let me tell you. But it's a very exciting thing, working on this show, and Angie will fly in and join me a few times anyway. I'm not one of these guys who resent a wife's career. Not that I like the very strong, very ambitious kind of woman. Angie isn't like that. But I love the idea of a lady working. I really love it. Excuse me just for a minute. I've got to call my folks."

Mr. Bacharach dialed a number. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. How are you?... Not bad... No, we didn't circle too long, and, besides, it didn't matter. It's such a beautiful night. The apartment's fine. You did a beautiful job. The apartment looks beautiful."

We looked at framed things on the walls of the apartment. A three-foot-square blowup of a photograph of Dionne Warwick. Three different photographs, signed with varying expressions of affection and esteem, of Marlene Dietrich. A framed certificate that read, "Presented to Burt Bacharach to Commemorate the Sale of More Than One Million Copies of the Scepter Records Pop Single Record 'I Say A Little Prayer.'"

"The first album I made as a recording artist, three years ago, sold thirty-five hundred copies," Mr. Bacharach said to us. "My second one has been out for nine months, and it's already sold over a hundred and thirty-five thousand copies. The wild thing about my songs is that they cross the two age gaps. They're hits with people my parents' age and they're hits with the kids, too."

"How do you explain that?" we asked.

"They're *songs*," Mr. Bacharach said. "The songs are basically sophisticated. I write the music the way I feel. Hal David, my lyricist, writes the words the way *he* feels. No matter how groovy the electronic devices are these days, there's got to be a song. Electronic devices are marvelous. But nobody's going to whistle electronic devices. You've got to have a song."

Mr. Bacharach went over to the baby grand and touched the green overnight case. "All my original sketches. The rhythm patterns. And about fifteen or sixteen songs for the show," he said., and the chronic look of thoughtfulness, or puzzlement, seemed to deepen. "I think the songs are consistent with the way I've been writing. If you asked me have we changed gears for the show, I'd say I hope not. I would like to feel there's been no compromise."

"When did it all start?" we asked.

"Well, in London one day two years ago, David Merrick came over to me at a party," he said. "I was in the middle of scoring "Casino Royale." I wasn't thinking about doing a show. I was just getting my feet wet scoring movies, which is fantastic. All the things you can do to the action in a movie with the music! Working with the Movieola! All that. Later on, Merrick asked me if I'd be interested in working on a musical version of "The Apartment." Merrick is very astute. He told me the theatre was going to change—that it had to open up to people to do their own thing. And he was thinking correctly. So I started working on the show last summer."

"And before *that* started?" we asked.

"I'd say everything all started five or six years ago, when I decided to stay put in New York and pursue writing seriously. Before that, I worked with Marlene Dietrich as her accompanist. I traveled all over with her, Poland. Germany. Italy. Russia. When you went into a country with her, you went in as a conquering army."

"And before that?"

"I've got a great Dad. Bert Bacharach, the columnist. And I've got a great Mom. She has gray hair, too, which she keeps gray. Lovely hair. And she's a lovely lady. I was born in Kansas City, where my dad was a clothing buyer for the Woolf Brothers department store. In 1932, we moved to Kew Gardens, where I grew up and went to school. When I was fifteen, some of the guys at school and I formed a band. Ten pieces, with myself at the piano. We played at parties and at the local dances. I graduated from Forest Hills High School, and then I enrolled at McGill University, in Montreal, where I studied music. I wrote a song there called 'The Night Plane to Heaven,' which was published and then died before it had lived. After college, I was drafted into the Army and toured the First Army area billed as a concert pianist, which I was not. After my army discharge, I played piano in night clubs, including Nino's Continental, on Fifty-third Street, and the Bayview, on Fire Island. Then I worked as accompanist for Vic Damone, the Ames Brothers, and then Marlene Dietrich. I started writing my own orchestrations as a kind of self-defense. No matter how good the words or the melody of a song, it has got to be showcased properly. And then, you can write a great song, but you need a successful record if you're going to have a hit. You need that certain magic to happen at a recording session. Much of the feeling of a record—my records—comes from the rhythm section. And that's something I'm going to watch carefully in this show. I want to come into that show with the rhythm section steaming. Not steaming in New York. Steaming in *Boston*. I won't be able to do my own orchestrations. I don't think it can be done in a show. You finish writing a song at four in the morning on the road in Boston, say, and then start doing and orchestration, and they'd *carry* you home. We'll have a lot of music rehearsals for this show. I'm so deeply committed to the show. I'll pay for the rehearsals myself if necessary. I put such utter heat in myself when I write; I want to work the same way whether it's for this show or

anything else. The pressures of success sometimes have a way of turning you around. I'm very concerned about the brevity of all kinds of living. But I don't have a fear of running dry. I just always have the feeling that time is running out on me."

"Have you changed since all this has happened to you?" we asked.

"It's much easier for me to say no to people now," he said. "I get into enough of a pressure cooker all on my own. I'm not concerned about whether I'll be in fashion next year, or whether the bubble bursts a little. Of course, I'm concerned about staying healthy. I'm a great believer in exercise. I play basketball. I swim a lot. I believe in massage. I've got this little girl, and I want to be a good father to her. And I want to be a live father. There's that. But every time I get into a recording studio, there's that final moment of truth. The whole life leads into that one evening. It's a highly personal thing. I don't care if thirty-two people tell me it's great. It has to satisfy me. You preserve the success in your own mind. My gratification standard is how I personally feel."

A couple of days later, we joined Mr. Bacharach in the lounge of the Royale Theatre. A piano had been set up just outside the Ladies' Room. Mr. Bacharach sat at the piano playing one of the songs for "Promises, Promises." He wore a navy-blue knit shirt, white slacks with dotted blue stripes, white socks, and white, very clean Topsiders. His sunglasses rested on top of his head. On the piano was his sweater, a black cardigan with leather buttons. As he played—with immense concentration and intensity—he kept his Topsiders on the pedals and pumped his legs vigorously. He was rehearsing a song called "Wanting Things" with Ed Winter, a handsome young man who is to play the Fred MacMurray part in the musical. Mr. Winter was wearing black-rimmed glasses (in front of his eyes), dark slacks, loafers, and blue shirt open at the collar. He was singing, "Tell me why music I keep wanting things, / Needing things that just can't be mine..." Singer and composer went through the song, and parts of the song, a few times, with great concentration.

"I love the two levels of it," Mr. Bacharach said when they took a break. "I love to be able to approach it conversationally and musically."

"They were joined by Arthur Rubinstein, another young man with black rimmed glasses, who will conduct the show's orchestra. Mr. Bacharach told singer and orchestra leader how he wanted to have the song presented where liberties should not be taken, where he loved to use strings and asked them again if they worked, and when he'd like to have the singers try not to breathe. Then he picked up his cardigan with the leather buttons and ushered it upstairs.

"It's a wild experience to go into something as a novice," he said, the puzzled look getting deeper again. "I like to show them what I don't like what I do like. We'll work from that as a springboard. It's kind of a teamwork thing, but the basis has got to be how I feel. You've got to protect your own taste. It doesn't look like any big ego problems, with the music staff. They're all young in spirit and in enthusiasm. We all have great hopes. And we're getting Phil Ramone, the best sound mixer there is, to mix the sound in the theatre for us. We're going to build a different kind of orchestra pit for this show. It will be partially enclosed. And we'll have voices in the pit to reinforce the voices onstage. We'll have an orchestra that will travel with us to three different cities."

Then there was the big day of the first full-case rehearsal. On the sixth floor of the Riverside Plaza Hotel on West Seventy-third Street. David Merrick was there, pacing up and down, wearing a dapper tan ? with a pink shirt, and no glasses. Neil Simon was there wearing a dark suit with a cream colored shirt and black-rimmed glasses. The choreographer, Michael Bennett, and the director, Robert Moore, were there. And all the actors, singers and dancers. Mr Bacharach arrived with his green overnight case and sat down at the piano. A handsome man six and a half feet tall who had a dark mustache and ? and was in shirtsleeves stood up at the piano, facing everybody. The people in the room seemed to be ? and somewhat nervous, but he sounded cheerful, relaxed, and happy.

"Hi folks," the tall man began. "I'm Charlie Blackwell, your stage manager. I'm required to read these Stage Equity rules to you. 'One, you must have signed a contract and have paid current dues before reporting for rehearsal. As an Equity member, you ? right to waive minimum conditions of the contract. No change in the minimum conditions of the contract shall be made by the Actor or Manager except when authorized by counsel or the Executive Secretary in writing, and the company shall be notified of same. Two. Rehearsal hours: Rehearsals prior to the last seven days before the first public performance..."

As Mr. Blackwell read on, Mr Bacharach quietly and slowly opened the green overnight case. He took out a pile of sheets of music and careful, without rattling the sheets of paper, set them up in front of him at the piano.