

From Pulse Magazine, October 1995

Props for Burt Bacharach

by Skip Heller

He's Brian Wilson's favorite songwriter. Frank Zappa praised him for the sophistication he brought to Top 40 in the '60s. NRBQ's Tom Ardolino worships him. And John Zorn insulted a prominent jazz critic who took issue with Zorn for performing one of his songs.

His name is Burt Bacharach, and he's a true subversive, a maverick who challenged the conventions of an entire generation of pop mucus songwriters. At a time when the three or four chord pop tune was the rule of thumb ("One Fine Day," "Chapel of Love") Bacharach was employing more sophisticated chord progression, usually associated with jazz. To compound matters, his melodies were often asymmetrical and simply would not fit into conventional 4/4 rhythms. It's normal to hear a Bacharach song that moves through a variety of non foursquare times signatures: 5/4, 7/8, 3/4 . Which sounds like a formula for commercial suicide, yet Bacharach--with his partner, lyricist Hal David--ruled the pop charts through the 60s.

Bacharach's technical sophistication is in itself a wonder. That he could exercise it with such unswaying and versatile musicality is a minor miracle. Bill Evans recorded "Alfie" a half-dozen times. Naked Eyes cover of "Always Something There to Remind Me" -- originally a hit for 60s go go icon Sandie Shaw--has become an 80s classic. And for power pop cultists, there's Elvis Costello's impassioned reading of "I Just Don't Know What to Do With Myself," on Stiffs Live.

This is not the resume of a typical songwriter. As a workaday songsmith in New York's Brill Building circle, Bacharach somehow stood apart from the other writers penning classics there, like teams Gerry Goffin/Carole King and Jeff Barry Ellie Greenwich. In 1960, Phil Spector set up shop on upper Broadway to take advantage of the concentration of songwriting talent there. "Spanish Harlem," "He's a Rebel" and "Up on the Roof" were among the Brill output. It was the era of Spector's little symphonies for the kids."

Hal David came from a decidedly more adult viewpoint than other Brill lyricists; his spare, unsentimental lyrics might have sounded more appropriate coming from George Jones than Lesley Gore. And, of course, he was partnered with Bacharach, who--as a Manhattan teen in the 40s--was exposed to bebop: "I would go to the clubs on 52nd Street with my phony I.D. and just listen," he says.

Bacharach's dose of bebop helps explain the complex chords that mark his style.

Rhythmically, however, Bacharach compositions more far past the 4/4 swing of jazz.

Bacharach had studied modern composition under Darius Milhaud, whose music stressed

polyrhythms and unusual asymmetrical phrases. Another of Milhaud's students was Dave Brubeck, who recalls his own tutelage under the great French composer: "[Milhaud] didn't impose his style on his students," he says. "He never imposed polytonality or polyrhythms, which is what he was most noted for. But you picked it up being around him and hearing his compositions.:

I can really tell if I got that from [Milhaud]," says Bacharach. "The important thing I learned from him was not being concerned about letting melody shine through. He told me, "Don't ever be worried about something that people can remember, whistle or sing."

Predictably Bacharach's "irregularities" were met with resistance, which led him to take a stronger stand in the presentation of his songs. "I became a producer and arranger out of self-defense," he explains. "I'd write a song, and the record company would come to my publisher and say, 'We like it, but Burt's gotta change this three bar phrase to four bars. If he changes it, we'll give him so-and-so to record it.' And we wanted the record, so we'd compromise. But they came out terrible."

In 1962 Bacharach and David found Dionne Warwick singing backgrounds on a Drifters session. Later that year they cut "Don't Make Me Over," a sophisticated plea for take-me-as-I-am acceptance, for Sceptor Records. The single was a hit, and Warwick was put on a multiartist rhythm-and-blues package tour which included the Impressions.



"It was a fantastic hit in the North," recalls Curtis Mayfield. "She was put on the tour when we were touring the South. Hers was a very light-type style compared to what [the southern audience was] gettin down with. And it hurt me so. She came out to do "Don't Make Me Over and they would just not accept the music. I remember Dionne crying and everybody letting her know, "Hey, don't worry about it. You're gonna reach the sky.' And of course she did. But the music was so different for those times and those areas."

Instead of toning it down in an effort to stay on the charts, Bacharach used Warwick as a vehicle to push pop music's envelope. "She has a perfect voice," he says of the singer who now cohosts a Psychic Friends Network infomercial, "and the more we wrote, the more chances I found out I could take."

The result was songs like "Anyone Who Had a Heart" and "I Say a Little Prayer," which took all kinds of liberties with rhythm and harmony. Time signatures shifted, bitonal harmony underpinned hooky pop melodies, and Warwick lodged about two-dozen singles in the Top 40. Many aspiring players cut their teeth on these intricate songs, as they were staples of the Top 40 cover band repertoire in the 60s. Among these musicians was avant drum god Joey Baron, then playing in soul bands. "I learned those songs according to how the phrases breathe," says Baron. "It wasn't like an intellectual exercise. It was odd compared to the normal symmetrical eight bar form, but it never got in the way. That's really genius."

By 1965 Bacharach was truly at the top. With Hal David, he wrote (arguably) the first rock opera--a TV special starring Rick Nelson, *On the Flip Side*. The plot was simple: A teen idol must wise up on his way down. It must have cut close to the bone for Nelson, who by then hadn't had a hit in a good long while. Bacharach doesn't recall much about the show now, except to say, "I don't think it was very good."

He was also starting to write music for films (he'd penned a song for 1958's *The Blob*), resulting in such non-Warwick hits as "What's New, Pussycat?", "My Little Red Book," "Casino Royale," "The Look of Love" and "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head." There were also singles with other artists which met with varying degrees of success. (Rhino is said to be preparing an anthology of these for release next year.)

There were also two Bacharach LPs on Kapp and one amazing single on Liberty, "Juanita's Place." In 1967 he signed with A&M and made *Reach Out*. The tracks were mostly rearrangements of hit hits, but he drastically recast the melodies, often changing the character of the material at hand.

"It was intentional," he confirms. "I would only sing part of a song. I was afraid to do more. Then the girls would sing the rest. Or I wouldn't have a whole instrumental. If there were key lines I'd use vocal dramatically. Or maybe an English horn, which I'd try to use as judiciously as possible. Then maybe two flugelhorns. There's only so much expression you're going to get out of a lead instruments, so I would try and keep it interesting."

Bacharach's singular orchestral sense makes *Reach Out* (and the followup *Make It Easy On Yourself*) something of a neglected link between the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and Randy Newman's 1972 *Sail Away*. It's the bridge between the "teenage symphonies to God" which

Brian Wilson created and the more adult composer as auteur ethic that set Newman apart from his Southern California contemporaries.

The Bacharach/David team would continue into the early 70s. It was contracted to write the music for *Lost Horizon*, the epic 1972 feature film whose failure went unsurpassed until the 1986 release of *Howard the Duck*. Bacharach and David split up for a short time, and Dionne Warwick signed with Warner Bros. and was soon working with Thom Bell and other producers.

Bacharach would make three albums for A&M in the '70s, compose more film music (most famously for *Arthur*) and collaborate with Carole Bayer Sager, to whom he was married.

But it's a cinch that he will be remembered mainly for his '60s output, which fortunately has been well anthologized. A&M released the Classics collection a while back, and recently reissued *Reach Out*. Also there's Rhino's indispensable *The Dionne Warwick Collection--Her All Time Greatest Hits*, as well as the companion Hidden Gems disc, which (mostly) lives up to its title.

Burt Bacharach's career is one of pop's most impressive. And for all of the compositional richness (and dare-devilry) therein, it's easy to lose sight of the basic component of his real contribution to American music.

"I'm not qualified to discuss the technical aspects," says one fan, roots-rock poet laureate Dave Alvin. "But that's just great songwriting."

Skip Heller is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.

The above article reprinted with permission of the author from the October 1995 issue of Pulse Magazine, available at Tower Records.