

# What the world needs now...

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WAITING for Burt Bacharach in the Berkeley Hotel - waiting an hour and a half for him to show - I devise impossible counting games; for instance, how many times the great man's songs have wafted through tired foyers, paint-peeling piano bars, dining rooms where the dish of the day is always ennui, served tepid - and, of course, elevators.

Bored with this after a while, I wander outside into London's Knightsbridge where a wedding party are assembling at the church across the street. Will Bacharach soundtrack the reception, maybe even the ceremony itself?

I head out on to the main drag. Cinema billboards compete for the Saturday shoppers' attention. Remembering the rom-com *My Best Friend's Wedding* where Rupert Everett led the communal singing of 'I Say A Little Prayer'... how many movies, splashing around and gasping for air, have been towed to shore on the back of a Bacharach classic?

He's everywhere. Thinking of his songbook makes you sing it: 'Anyone Who Had A Heart', 'This Guy's In Love With You', 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again'. He's everywhere today and yet nowhere. And now I've just found out my time with the silver-haired melody god is to be cut back so he can be sped across town for a TV interview.

"The Irish version of Jonathan Ross," says the international PR, in a manner which suggests I should be impressed. In all, four women - two PRs, manager, make-up - are pulling Bacharach this way and that. Hey, be careful: he's just a little guy.

At a guess, 5ft 3in. Those groovy high stools much favoured by crooners could have been designed with him in mind. An old guy, too: 77 now. He's dressed in jogging bottoms, sweatshirt and trainers, and for a while he sticks with the puffa jacket and scarf needed for the outdoor shoot, even though the room is overheating because of such a large retinue. Pity. I was rather hoping he might greet me in a tux. In the Swinging Sixties, Bacharach epitomised the bachelor lifestyle (deluxe version). And the married man lifestyle - Mrs Bacharach was Angie Dickinson.

"Mr Bacharach always wears a tracksuit, he works out every day," confirms his manager. Finally, we're left alone, and he slumps onto the sofa, almost disappears into the folds, and tries in vain to reach the coffee table with his tiny legs. There's only one word for it ... his brilliant lyricist Hal David never used it, but I bet he could have found the rhyme - he's knackered.

Some schedule, I say. "Wheesh!" he replies. And it's not over yet. Tomorrow will be his first day off for three weeks, then he jumps on to a plane for more promotion in New York, and from there it's on up to Buffalo for a concert.

The reason for this frenzy of activity is his first solo album for, oh, so long he can't remember. There was one with Elvis Costello (1998's *Painted from Memory*) and another two years ago with Ron Isley which wasn't even released in Britain. "But this is the first with just my name on it since the A&M days," he says, evoking a time, not like now, when labels had personalities.

Dr Dre. Yes, Dr 'F\*\*\* Tha Police' Dre. What's he doing in an article about Burt Bacharach? Well, he guests on the record, *At This Time*, providing "drum loops". This will shock Bacharach's worldwide constituency of grizzled hep-cats, seeing their hero hang out with the who's-the-daddy, hip hop majordomo behind Eminem and 50 Cent, but not as much as this: *At This Time* is Bacharach's political album.

On the first couple of numbers, he laments the passing of a kinder, gentler age: "There was a song I remember/Said 'What the world needs now...'/Where is the love, where did it go?" His lyrics - for the first time he's written most of them himself - refer to the New York subway, about how it's more dangerous than when he was a lad, and you think you've got Political Burt sussed: his concerns are local, personal, the-old-days-were-best.

But come track three, 'Who Are These People?', sung by Elvis Costello, and he's shifting his watery-eyed gaze to Iraq: "This stupid mess we're in just keeps getting worse/So many people dying needlessly/Looks like the liars will inherit the earth".

BACHARACH HAS surprised even himself with this album. Back in the 1960s when the Vietnam War was raging he wasn't remotely political and just kept turning out the pretty tunes. "I'm talking about the US administration, obviously," he says. "At first, I was in favour of us going into Iraq, but now..." He gazes up to the ceiling. Bacharach has no time for those who can't admit to their mistakes. One of his biggest was falling out with Hal David and he regrets it still.

The pair teamed up in the Brill Building choons factory in New York, just down the hall from Phil Spector ("A wild man even then"), but couldn't get published for 18 months. "We wrote some awful stuff in the beginning, 'Peggy's In The Pantry'..." "How did that one go?" "Don't make me sing it!"

His lyrics here aren't on a par with David's - here was a wordsmith who could find the great, lost rhyme for "pneumonia" - but you can't deny their poignancy. They come, first and foremost, from a parent, an old parent. He probably reads the obits page of the Los Angeles Times as much as he does the leader column.

"I'm the oldest dad at both my kids' schools - I wish I wasn't, but it is what it is," says Bacharach, who has a nine-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son by his fourth wife, Jane Hansen, a ski instructor. "My desire is to be present for them as much as I can be. I go to their soccer games and Oliver plays drums and Raleigh the guitar so there's a musical connection which is pretty special.

"They keep me young, but old, too. Recently, Jane's father passed away and Raleigh, my little girl, had a real meltdown about that. She knows numbers. She knows how old he was, and how old I am..." His voice, already a whisper, trails away.

Bacharach is "pretty sure" they like his music. Being rap fans, they probably appreciate the Dre collaboration. The two met three years ago and, bizarrely, hit it off. Bacharach has never been 'street'; more 'Pacific Ocean Highway'. Diplomatically, he says: "I appreciate why rap exists, but it works best for me when I can hear some melody." To these ears, Dre adds little to his sound. But then few of us hear music like Bacharach.

He reckons he probably thinks in musical notes; sleeps in them, too. "My mind is like a jukebox when I'm working, the melodies and orchestrations turn over and over all the time. It's better if I don't work at night but sometimes I'll wake up with a sound in my head and I'll just have to go downstairs to the piano."

In legend, he would wear a silk dressing-gown for this. In reality it's probably another tracksuit. No matter. BB wrote some of the greatest songs, ever, and they can't take that away from him. What's his record? "The fastest-written? Well, 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' was completed in an afternoon, just after I'd gotten over pneumonia." That might not seem very quick, compared with the balloon who'll rhyme "moon" and "June" for an easy chart hit, but genuine class takes a little longer.

This afternoon, Bacharach has run out of time. He wades out of the sofa and puts on his puffer for the next round of promo for an album he calls the most honest of his career, and the best since the soundtrack to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. I leave him with his own kids uppermost in his thoughts.

In My Time (BMG) is out now