

From Us, October 1996

Burt Bacharach

by James Hunter

Apparently, what the world needs now is Burt Bacharach. As songwriter, arranger, and producer, Bacharach, with lyricist Hal David, created standards like "Anyone Who Had a Heart," "Alfie" and "The Look of Love," often delivered in the lithe voice of Dionne Warwick. They were tunes for World's Fair afternoons, new Mustangs and midnight check-ins at the Plaza Hotel--pop for an America that had stopped jitterbugging. At 66, Bacharach is brilliantly back. Rediscovered by recent converts including REM, Oasis, and Blur, he has joined forces with Elvis Costello on the elegant "God Give Me Strength," which appears on the GRACE OF MY HEART soundtrack. After finishing breakfast at his home in Santa Monica, Calif., Bacharach was headed for his summer rental in Del Mar, Calif., to join his family on the beach.

Q: How did your recent partnership with Elvis Costello come about?

A: It was requested by Allison Anders, the [GRACE OF MY HEART] director. Elvis had already written a song for the picture. This other one was put to us as a possible collaboration. I've always had the utmost respect for Elvis. He's a real risk taker.

Q: Was writing together difficult, considering he lives in London and Dublin and you live in L.A.?

A: We did the whole thing talking on the phone: him calling me up and leaving 8, 16, bars dumped on my answering machine, then I'd listen, and we'd talk. I'd take the 16 bars off and write it on a piece of music paper, then fax it to him. It went back and forth between fax and answering machines, talking live on the phone and playing something at the keyboard. All the pieces he did on his own seemed to merge with the pieces I'd done on my own like well-knit cloth.

Q: At six minutes, the song is practically epic.

A: I never realized [it] until we were making the record, because it just felt so good. But it doesn't feel like you're getting pushed around or overloaded or weighed down. It's like a theater piece, a small movie, maybe a little European in character.

Q: You studied music as a child. Did you have an immediate affinity for it back then?

A: I used to hate the rides from Philadelphia [after visiting relatives] with my parents in the car, Sundays, listening to the New York Philharmonic because my mother had it on the radio. The music was serious; it was sad, it was depressing. Those were not great moments for me.

Q: What changed?

A: I heard some music that cut through the drudgery: Debussy, Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloe: Suite No. 2." That was an opening for me. I had a similar experience when I heard what the bebop generation in jazz was doing: Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker. They were just in another world, musically--a very fresh world. So that was kind of exciting. It caught my interest.

Q: How does today's music strike you?

A: The past two nights I've been driving around, trying to keep an open mind, just trying to listen. What I heard was 75 percent rap based, but I found some really nice melodic hooks and interesting sounds and daring in these records.

Q: One of your first jobs was as musical director for Marlene Dietrich's cabaret act during the late 50s. How did you get that gig?

A: I was on my way to California to try to learn something about film scoring and maybe get a chance to score a movie. And I got a call from Peter Matz, a friend who conducted for both Dietrich and Noel Coward. Matz was in a bind and asked whether I would consider, like, working with her. I said, shoot, yes, that would be great! I went to see her the next day at the Beverly Hills Hotel in one of the villas. She was intimidating, you know, just this legend.

Q: But she ended up being a big fan of yours.

A: We once came out of a stage door in Edinburgh [Scotland]. We'd just done a concert, and there were about 50 people out there waiting for her to sign autographs. Marlene said to them, "Ah, you don't want my autograph, you want...Mr. Bacharach's." And they were like, "Who's he?" And she said, "Ah, you'll know one day."

Q: Another famous woman in your life was actress Angie Dickinson. What was it like being married to Police Woman?

A: She was busy all the time. Yet I was glad to see her get that hot. When you're with somebody and care about them, you want them to do well.

Q: How high has your own star risen of late?

A: This last trip to England, in June, I was doing two concerts at Festival Hall with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. To walk out onstage, and before I play one song...the whole place stands up? I've never had that at any time in my life. I'm really appreciative.