

What's It All About, Burt?

Frank Cody chats with the master

Burt Bacharach is an American original, a national treasure. Few in the pop pantheon — with the exception of George Gershwin, Cole Porter and Lennon and McCartney — can compare with him for enduring influence. His 66 top 40 hits include “Alfie,” “The Look of Love,” “This Guy’s in Love With You” and “What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love.”

Bacharach combines elements of jazz, Brazilian music and torch songs with unconventional, shifting time signatures and unique chord changes — listen to Manfred Mann’s “My Little Red Book” — to create sophisticated, meticulously crafted songs with unsentimental lyrics courtesy of Hal David. Recently, Bacharach sat down for a far-reaching conversation with Rendezvous Entertainment partner Frank Cody.

FC: *When I was a DJ, a 45 rpm single arrived at the station, “Anyone Who Had a Heart.” It was one of the first records I played on the radio. I hadn’t heard any pop record that sounded like it before.*

BB: Neither had the musicians in the studio that night we made that record.

FC: *That was 1963.*

BB: I remember we did two songs in a three-hour session: “Walk on By” and “Anyone Who Had a Heart.” Everyone had to count seven or eight bars, and almost every bar in “Anyone Who Had a Heart” changed time signature. We all walked out feeling like we had broken some ground, without knowing that it was groundbreaking when I wrote it.

FC: *You never stop breaking ground and challenging yourself.*

BB: I remember going to the Apollo Theater when Dionne Warwick was playing there and “Anyone Who Had a Heart” was in the top 10. The house band was having a difficult time with the music, so I responded, “Why do you make it so difficult? Just listen. Try to listen to it instead of reading it. Try to feel it.” I don’t know how much luck I had scoring my point, but, sure, it can be played. I guess it’s a



Burt Bacharach

wicked tune to put in front of a band until it makes sense. “Promises, Promises” is another.

FC: *That song is interesting because it’s so Burt Bacharach, but it also has a quintessential Broadway feeling.*

BB: Everything that came out of that show [*Promises, Promises*, 1968–1972, Schubert Theater on Broadway] served a purpose — the show — first of all. We weren’t thinking, “Let’s put this in because it may be a hit.”

FC: *When you and Hal David wrote together, would you work together at the same time, or did you come up with the lyrics and melody separately?*

BB: It was always different. Maybe I’d have a four-bar music fragment. I’d play it for him, he’d take it home and work on it, and we’d meet the next day. We both liked to work away from each other. Sometimes I’d almost have the whole melody, and I’d give it to him. We were flexible. Some-

times the whole lyric would come first. “Alfie” was basically the whole lyric, then came the music. Just as “Promises, Promises” grew out of lyrics Hal wrote for the purposes of the play, “Alfie” had to grow out of what was going on in that movie.

I like the snowball effect: one thing that leads to another thing. You see where it could go, and then you certainly have a new section, because it grew out of the section before. Working off a lyric imposes some restrictions. When Carole Bayer Sager and I were married and writing “That’s What Friends Are For,” she would look at me like I was crazy. Why? Because she would start the song, “And I...” I didn’t want to start it with the word “I.” She said, “It’s one word, one note, what difference does it make?” I said, “It makes a lot of difference. It really does.” She saw it in the end.

FC: *Listening to your melodies, it’s hard to imagine lyrics other than the ones that are already there. They match perfectly.*

BB: I was more particular about how a word sounded on a note than what it actually meant. When I’m writing without a lyric, I will sing something that makes no sense at all. A good example is “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” which I kept repeating as I was composing. “On My Own” was another example. Later I started paying attention to what those words really meant and realized how brilliant Hal David is. What about a lyric like “Alfie”? I mean, *please!*

FC: *They’re doing a remake of the movie. I wonder if it would be made again if it didn’t have such an incredible theme that is still part of the musical repertoire of America.*

BB: I hear it’s good. I like the people who are involved musically. Can’t beat Mick Jagger and Dave Stewart.

FC: *You are a contemporary link to the songwriting tradition of George Gershwin and Cole Porter.*

BB: Yeah, who are they?

FC: *You also studied with [classical composer] Darius Milhaud.*

BB: Darius Milhaud, Henry Cowell and Bohuslav Martinu. I wasn’t sure at that time that I wanted to be a contemporary classical composer, but I sure was interested in it. I

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England when the record comes out there. The whole album can be captured with one television show. If it works, it's electric.

FC: *A project like this is like gardening: You can't force anything to blossom. You can make certain that it gets watered and hope for sunshine, but you have to be patient.*

BB: It's a word-of-mouth album. You may find traditionalists who know "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" the way I did it with BJ Thomas years ago who show some resistance to the new version. I couldn't make an album duplicating the sound of the old stuff. I couldn't make "Close to You" like it was on the original Carpenters record. With the orchestrations on the new record I tried to give Ron a lot of room to operate. Nothing crowded — just cushions, nice things. If there are musical figures, make them important, make them count. I hate wall-to-wall music, wall-to-wall figures.

FC: *After working with Hal David, you collaborated with Elvis Costello. Who called whom?*

BB: That came by way of a movie. The song we wrote, "God Give Me Strength," came out of the Allison Anders film about the Brill Building [*Grace of My Heart*]. We wrote it on the phone, using fax machines. We were never in a room together; he was in Ireland, and I was here. I'd send him a tape, dub something melodically on his answering machine, and we probably got it done in three or four days. We made the record sound really great, then realized that it was over 6 1/2 minutes long. From our perspective, "God Give Me Strength" was a really good record; from radio's perspective, it was too long.

FC: *Tell me about "Don't Give Up," which you wrote and recorded with Dave Koz.*

BB: Dave Koz is one of the great, great players, and one of the great guys. Isn't it good to know a nice guy who is a brilliant player? I spent some time with him in Cuba; we collaborated on the song working with Cuban musicians. I wish it had been a hit single, but the album did very well. All of Dave's albums do well.

FC: *When you have five No. 1 Smooth Jazz songs on one album and it's a gold record, it's an amazing album. You also gave radio, Smooth Jazz in particular, a great gift by inviting Dave to play on a special edition of "Close to You."*

BB: He really makes a big difference there. Impeccable taste. Not a lot of places to play on there, keeping Ronnie's vocal intact like it was. When we put his sax on it, I found that besides his good taste, Dave's pitch is so cleanly on target. I don't know a lot of sax players who play like that.

FC: *I'd like your response to another smooth jazz artist, Chris Botti.*

BB: I first heard of Chris when he played in Sting's band, three years ago. I was very impressed. When he was working on his own album, we got together. He took one thing that

I'd already written with Dr. Dre — the drum loop was Dre's. That's on Chris' album now, "The Last Three Minutes." Chris is a wonderful musician with a great sound. We started writing something together that we're going to finish up in the next couple of months for a cutting-edge album that I'm doing for Sony in England. It'll be cutting-edge for me. The instrumental loops combine with music on top of it. This stuff is as good as anything I've written.

FC: *Popular music that comes under the umbrella of chill or lounge is a throwback to some of the sounds of the '60s and '70s. Clearly, some of it is inspired by your biggest hits.*

"I could never say, 'If I had just written a serious symphony. It was a mistake I didn't do that.' I don't feel that way at all."

BB: Lounge? Easy listening was a good one for me. I never got the feeling that my music was easy listening, but people like to have a label for everything. They can do it, as long as they like it, play it and hear it. Call it elevator music — fine, whatever. I'm fine.

FC: *A lot of the jazz players take umbrage at smooth jazz.*

BB: The real hard-core jazz players. Many jazz musicians resent Kenny G. He is a really good player and makes good, successful records, but I also understand people who worship Coltrane.

FC: *I can recall people putting down artists for doing covers, but weren't covers part of the tradition of jazz? Coltrane did covers. Duke Ellington did covers.*

BB: Miles did Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time."

FC: *Your thoughts on Michael McDonald?*

BB: He's a big favorite of mine. I made a couple of records with him; the best was "On My Own." I'm very happy to see the success he's having with his Motown album. Michael is a great singer — and what a writer.

FC: *Let's go back to Ron Isley. How many people know that "Windows of the World" is a protest song, a song about war?*

BB: It depends on what's going on in our world. If you sang the song in quiet times, it would mean one thing. If you do it now, it's a real observation about what's going on. I started doing it in concert after 9/11 — just myself at the piano with the rhythm section. The first couple of times it was hard to get through.

FC: *You wrote "This Guy's in Love With You" for Herb Alpert. Herb is more famous with the trumpet than he is for his vocals, but it worked.*

BB: It did. Herb and Jerry Goffin asked me to write the arrangement, conduct the band and play the piano as a favor. I went in and made the record. Little did I know it would be No. 1 in four weeks. I always loved the way Herb plays. He has an unmistakable sound. It's that thing again — recognizable: Dusty's voice, Dionne's, Isley's, Luther Vandross'. Maybe four bars, and you got it.

FC: *That may be why it is more difficult for smooth jazz musicians to cut through, when their voices are totally dependent upon an instrumental performance. But then, think of Joe Sample or Dave Koz. You hear a few notes and know it is Joe or Koz.*

BB: Sometimes even if you don't understand the words, you will love a song. Maybe it sounds romantic, and you would be surprised to learn the artist is singing about some heavy-duty, political thing, because it may be sung in such sensual, sexy language. Quincy Jones had Ivan Lins do a whole album in English, but it lacked the charm that it might have had if it had been sung in Portuguese.

FC: *Is there anyone you always wanted to work with who you haven't recorded with yet?*

BB: A few times I got to record with Aretha Franklin, so I can't say her. People will be talking about Aretha's voice for centuries.

FC: *Do you like her version of "Say a Little Prayer"?*

BB: I like it better than the one we made. It's freer, looser. I like her choice of notes better than the ones I wrote. It's great. It makes me happy when I hear it. I never even wanted Dionne's "Say a Little Prayer" to come out. It felt too forced, too fast. But I was wrong. It's nice to be wrong about a song that suddenly turns out to be big. Then something you totally believe in never breaks the top 100.

FC: *It's going to be really wonderful and interesting to see how the Isley Meets Bacharach project continues to grow and spread around the planet, because it's a very special album.*

BB: Word of mouth will be important. People will hear it and say, "Wow!"

FC: *It's like Praful's album, One Day Deep [Rendezvous]. It's selling very well, and our research shows that people are buying it because somebody told them about it or they heard it on the radio or at someone's house. They'd ask, "What is that?"*

BB: It's good to have patience. Otherwise, if you take a major act, the record comes out, and if in the first week it doesn't do the numbers, it's over. It's no different from a movie opening.

FC: *Working with Dave Koz, Hyman Katz and our little record company, Rendezvous, we often say that we want to be the A&M of this moment in time. We want to be like GRP, where you can count on the quality, and also in the spirit of A&M, in the sense that A&M was like a repertory company, where people knew each other and played with each other. There was purity to the music too.*

BB: Sounds like what you've got going with your label is great. Just don't get swallowed by a major.

FC: Deal.