

# R.I.P. Burt Bacharach

His music had a fresh, astonishingly original way of moving up and down the keyboard.



Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick

by Bruce Bawer

**My parents were very different people** from very different backgrounds, but they bonded over at least two things: movies and music. While their tastes in film overlapped heavily, he liked a lot of movies she didn't care for – such as W.C. Fields comedies and costume dramas like *Becket* and *A Man for All Seasons* – while she was fonder than he was of Westerns and '70s psychological dramas like *A Woman Under the Influence*.

When it came to music, however, their tastes were almost perfectly congruent. Born in the 1920s, they both loved the

American standards – songs by Irving Berlin, Rodgers & Hart, and many others – that had been in heavy rotation on the radio when they were young. And when I was growing up in the 1960s and '70s, our house was full of that music. They both played it frequently on the living-room baby grand – her from a large library of yellowing piano arrangements that she'd had since she was a teenager, him from lead sheets that he'd photocopied out of some musician friend's fake book. For a few years after we came into possession of my maternal grandfather's wonderful Baldwin baby grand, it stood side by side with our trusty old Kimball, and sometimes, while doing my homework upstairs, I'd hear my parents playing duets of "What's New?" or "Why Try to Change Me Now?" or "There Will Never Be Another You." It was the happiest sound in the world, because it was a reminder that, whatever tensions there might sometimes be in their marriage (as in all marriages), they did love each other, and, for the time being, anyway, they were happy.

Inevitably, I, too, learned to play the piano. It was my father who taught me, and it was those old standards in my parents' sheet-music collection (which is now my sheet-music collection) that I played first. I loved those songs, and I still do, and because I learned to play the piano by playing them hundreds of times apiece, I still know the lyrics of many hundreds of them by heart.

My father didn't just teach me to play the piano. He taught me about melodic structure and chord progressions and all that, and he used those old song standards to show me how songs were put together. As a result of his tutelage, I must admit, my teenage self took a highly conservative posture toward song structure. It wasn't exactly that I thought all songs should obey the Tin Pan Alley rule that called for a 32-measure chorus and an AABA melodic structure – many of the songs I loved the most didn't follow that rule – but I could be quite uncomfortable when they deviated too much from that tried-and-true formula.

All this was happening, mind you, during the rock revolution. Born in 1956, I occasionally heard the popular music of my own era on TV or radio, and even played every one of the songs in a collection of sheet music – which I still own – called *Great Songs of the Sixties*. But I didn't care for most of it. Yes, I could see as plain as day that Paul Simon and Paul McCartney were exceedingly talented tunesmiths, but stuff like "Light My Fire" and "Like a Rolling Stone" left me cold. Compared to the jewels in the Great American Song Book, these and many other duds of the rock era tended to have banal melodies, a limited number of simple chords, and witless, repetitious lyrics – which were often shrill expressions of political positions that even I, in my early teens, dismissed as vapid and clichéd.

There was one major exception: the extraordinary musical output of composer Burt Bacharach, who died on Feb. 8 at the age of 94, and his longtime lyricist, Hal David (1921–2012). I don't remember exactly when I first became aware of Bacharach and David, whose biggest chart-toppers include "Alfie," "What the World Needs Now Is Love," and "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?"; but between 1963 and 1969 – the period during which the Beatles dominated the U.S. charts, with groups like the Beach Boys, the Rolling Stones, the Four Seasons, the Monkees, Simon & Garfunkel, the Mamas & the Papas, and Herman's Hermits filling out the Top 10 lists – Burt and Hal wrote some 30 songs, most of them initially recorded by Dionne Warwick, that I eventually recognized as belonging on the same shelf with the best of Cole Porter and the Gershwins. (For the record, my favorite Bacharach & David song of all is the supremely gorgeous and heartbreaking "A House Is Not a Home.")

To be sure, there were impediments to my immediate appreciation of Bacharach's music, which I played from another sheet-music collection – I still own this one, too, tattered though it is – entitled *Dionne Warwick's Greatest Hits*. Not only did Bacharach routinely violate the 32-bar and AABA

rules; he did a whole lot of things that I'd rarely, if ever, seen in the works of Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, Harry Warren, and other songwriting legends whose opuses I was constantly, and fondly, playing on the piano.

Bacharach used a lot of accidentals. He switched time signatures – “I Say a Little Prayer” starts in 4/4, but goes on to include measures in 2/4 and 3/4, with the time signature changing no fewer than 10 times over the course of a 26-bar (!) refrain. Some of his most stellar songs included remarkable harmonic surprises and took unexpected harmonic turns; some of his melodies went off in a totally new direction just at the point where you fully expected an ordinary eight-bar repeat; and some songs moved from one distinct musical figure to another – and then another, and another – in a way that totally broke with everything I thought I knew about songwriting.

But somehow it worked. You could say (as many have pointed out, but that I didn't know enough back then to recognize) that he'd been influenced both by bebop jazz and by the group of French composers known as *Les Six*, including his mentor, Darius Milhaud. All I knew was that his tunes had what felt like a fresh, astonishingly original way of moving up and down the keyboard. At times they could seem briefly almost to be wandering off course only to end up, somehow, in just the right place. They were full of excitement, of wit, of sheer coolness and contemporaneity, and often – paradoxically, perhaps – of marvelous tenderness, as well. And their gorgeous chordal palettes made them fun to play at the keyboard.

In fact they seemed to dance, often to ever-shifting rhythms of a sort you'd hardly ever heard before. It was as if Bacharach's melodic gift was far too fecund for him to be satisfied by simply writing a song made up of one main melody, repeated twice, plus a second melody for the bridge, all of it played at a relatively unvarying tempo and with predictable chords underneath the notes, one or two per bar – although he

did write some uncommonly fine songs, among them “Walk on By” (ABAB) and “Wives and Lovers” (ABABAB), that more or less followed that old recipe.

As I’ve said, Bacharach’s heyday was in the 1960s. But he lived a long time. Before that magical decade, he studied music, served in the Army, and then traveled the world as musical director for an aging but still lovely and libidinous Marlene Dietrich; after the ’60s, he broke with Hal David and, in collaboration with Carole Bayer Sager (who became the third of his four wives, the second being actress Angie Dickinson), had scattered hits with songs like “Arthur’s Theme (Best That You Can Do)” in 1981 and “That’s What Friends Are For” in 1985 – which, while catchy, just didn’t reach the level of his finest work.

In my family home, I wasn’t alone in appreciating Bacharach and David. Although my parents didn’t play too many contemporary songwriters on the piano, they enthusiastically played and sang the songs of Bacharach and David. As my sister [wrote](#) on Facebook on the day of Bacharach’s death: “He was one of my father’s favorites. I can still see my father at the piano singing and playing these songs, my mother in the kitchen joining in singing the harmonies.” Imagine how many families owe happy memories to Burt’s brilliance!

In my teens and 20s, when I thought about the men and women who created out of nothing the golden age of American song – which had begun around 1918 and ended around the time I was born – I always had to remind myself that Bacharach and David belonged on that list, too, even though they’d started writing their most accomplished songs several years after most of the *oeuvres* in the Great American Songbook had been completed. Years later, it became clear to me that America’s two Broadway musical virtuosos of our time, Jerry Herman, who died in 2019, and Stephen Sondheim, who died in November 2021, also had to be included in that pantheon. With the loss of these masters within such a short time frame, and with Bacharach dying a

mere two days after a Grammy Awards ceremony that was widely derided as a well-nigh unprecedented display of vileness, vulgarity, and all-around musical mediocrity, American popular music seems a terribly diminished thing – and when I say “diminished,” believe me: I’m not talking about a chord consisting of a root, a minor third, and a diminished fifth.

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