

In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk About the Creative Process

Bill DeMain

PRAEGER

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There are five things to write songs about: I'm leaving you.
You're leaving me. I want you. You don't want me. I believe
in something. Five subjects, and twelve notes. For all that, we
musicians do pretty well.

—Elvis Costello

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Introduction

Like ninety-nine percent of the songwriters out there who will read this, I'm not yet able to make my living by my songs alone. I've had some success—placements in TV shows, the odd cover, a few hits in Japan—but I still have to work a day job.

But as day jobs go, I have a pretty cool one. I interview songwriters, mostly for a magazine called *Performing Songwriter*. I've been doing this for over ten years. In that time, I've talked to a lot of well-known writers (David Bowie, Burt Bacharach, Dolly Parton) and a lot of less well-known but by no means less talented ones (John Linnell, Jane Siberry, Ben Folds). Under the guise of professional journalist (I still feel like a dilettante most days), I'm able to get up close and personal with the creative processes of these writers. It's an amazing thing. These discussions have brought me an enormous amount of insight into my own work as a songwriter. It's almost like having an ongoing master class with some of the most successful and innovative songwriters of the last fifty years as my instructors.

Here are a few things I've learned. No matter how frustrated and insecure you may feel at times as a songwriter (and if you don't occasionally feel this way, there's something wrong), you are not alone. Billy Joel feels this way. So do Sarah McLachlan and John Rzeznik. Feel better? Even though they've had Top 10 hits and have sold millions of records, these songwriters are still in awe of the process. John Mayer hit it on the head when he said, "The game is the same no matter what you do and who you are. When you're alone in a room, it doesn't matter how many records you sold, how many people you've got around you. It's you and the possibility and what are you going to do to find it."

I've also learned that in order to write songs, you have to *write* songs. Sure there are tricks and shortcuts (many of which you'll find in these pages), and sure it's essential to listen and read voraciously, but you still have to log the necessary hours with pen in hand. Here's what lyricist Hal David has to say about it: "I work very hard. I work on every word. I spend inordinate amounts of time deciding whether 'and' or 'but' is the right word. To a certain extent, lyrics flow easily, but no matter how much they flow at a given time, by the time you really get it put together and finished and refined to the best of your ability, it's a lot of work."

Another thing. As Yoda once said in a distant galaxy, far far away, "There is no try." That would seem to contradict what I just said about logging the necessary hours. Well, songwriting is full of contradictions. We all know the feeling of working for an entire afternoon and not catching a single line under our nets, then that evening, when we're in the middle of washing the dishes or watching *Law & Order*, a whole verse appears out of nowhere. A combination of work ethic and the Yoda no-try philosophy. Both are necessary to be a songwriter.

I could go on about what I've learned, but instead I think I'll cut to the chase and let you hear from the songwriters you know and admire.

Thanks for reading the book. I hope it inspires you to write a great song of your own!

CHAPTER 1

Burt Bacharach

Interviewed 1998

Hits: “Walk on By,” “The Look of Love,” “(They Long to Be) Close to You”

“I think in terms of making miniature movies,” says Burt Bacharach of his approach to songwriting. “Every second counts. Three-and-a-half-minute movies, with peak moments and not just one intensity level the whole way through.”

For over forty years, his unforgettable miniature movies have been enjoying a near-continuous run with listeners the world over. “Walk on By,” “Anyone Who Had a Heart,” “Do You Know the Way to San Jose?” “Alfie,” “A House Is Not a Home,” “The Look of Love,” “What the World Needs Now Is Love,” “I Say a Little Prayer,” “Windows of the World,” “Promises, Promises,” “I Just Don’t Know What to Do with Myself,” “I’ll Never Fall in Love Again,” “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head,” “This Guy’s in Love with You,” “That’s What Friends Are For,” “God Give Me Strength”—the list of classics is long and illustrious.

Burt Bacharach was born in Kansas City on May 12, 1928. As a kid, he was a typically reluctant piano student who eventually warmed to the instrument thanks to the sounds of romantic classical music and bebop jazz. After studying theory and composition at Mannes School of Music, he embarked on a long apprenticeship—nightclub piano player, arranger for Vic Damone, musical director for Marlene Dietrich—that finally delivered him into the halls of songwriter central, the Brill Building in New York City. There he met the lyricist who would become his partner, Hal David.

Of writing with David in the early days, Bacharach recalls, “We’d work together in a room with a window that didn’t open and a kind of beat-up piano, both of us smoking. You know, your typical image of how songwriters wrote in a room at a publishing office.”

From that small, smoky cubicle came the music that along with the Beatles, the Beach Boys, and Motown would help define the era of the 1960s. It was a breezy sound, gently propulsive, irresistibly melodic, and full of sensuality. It was a sound that challenged listeners with its time changes and dynamic shifts. It was a sound to stir the imagination.

In all, the successful duo penned a string of thirty-nine consecutive chart hits, most of them for their voice of choice, Dionne Warwick. Their songs have been covered by an A to Z of artists, including Aretha Franklin, Tom Jones, Barbra Streisand, Dusty Springfield, the Carpenters, the Fifth Dimension, Rick Nelson, and Herb Alpert. Beyond that, Bacharach and David also wrote a hit musical (*Promises, Promises*) and several award-winning movie soundtracks (*Casino Royale*, *After the Fox*, *What's New Pussycat?*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*).

After Bacharach and David split in 1973, Burt kept a low profile through the rest of the decade. He reemerged in the 80s with a new lyric partner (and his third wife), Carole Bayer Sager, charting with MOR hits such as “On My Own” and “Arthur’s Theme (The Best That You Can Do).”

In the 90s, Bacharach enjoyed a huge revival, which resulted in a three-CD box set, a TV special and, most significantly, a collaboration with Elvis Costello on 1998’s *Painted from Memory*, an album of new material that echoes Burt’s best work of the 60s.

In 2003, Burt Bacharach teamed with legendary soul singer Ronnie Isley on *Here I Am*, an album of classic Bacharach-David songs cut live with a forty-piece orchestra.

What was the first piece of music that made an impression on you?

I heard a couple of things that really influenced me very much, attracted me more than influenced, and one was Ravel’s *Daphnis and Chloe Suite*. I thought it was very beautiful and very different from the kind of classical music that I’d been listening to on drives with my parents—Beethoven, the heavier kind of sounds, Richard Strauss. Suddenly I was hearing something that was really lyrical and beautiful. That kind of turned my head around. Of course, then I heard Dizzy Gillespie’s big band in New York at one of those clubs and Jesus, I’d never heard anything like that. Miles in front of everybody else, what they were playing. It was like a window opening.

Had you written your first song at that point?

No, that was still high school. I don’t think I wrote my first song until I was in college and that was not a very good song. That’s when I tried it.

Do you feel like there are things that you learned in your college composition courses that applied to your pop songwriting?

I think all the technical study, whatever, the solfeggio and learning how to be able to read music and write it down—it's all very helpful. It's like the situation if I was hearing something in my head and I couldn't get to a keyboard to check it out, but I could take a scrap of paper in a hotel or a restaurant or something and just write it out. I think that's very important. It certainly is for me. To read and to be able to write music. I think you learn the rules so you kind of break the rules. What else did I learn? It's hard to teach classical composition, I think, because I don't know that there any set forms that one has to follow or how key that is. You know, you still learn it. With Darius Milhaud, that was an important thing with me. He heard this one piece I was working on and told me that it was very good. It was very melodic and the rest of the class was writing very dissonant music, and he really encouraged me to tap into the melody. It's nothing to be ashamed of, he said.

When you're given a title or a bit of a lyric, what are your first steps in approaching a melody?

I think I just try to see what it means to me, first of all. If it's an attractive thought, an attractive idea. I don't dislike writing to a lyric. It takes you in another course that you might not go into if you were just writing a straight melody, then giving it to a lyricist. It kind of sets [you] out on a road and then you sort of have to follow it in a general direction. Sometimes that's a very attractive direction.

I know you've said you like to get away from the piano as soon as possible when you're composing. What are the main advantages of that?

You can hear a long line that way. You can hear the whole song. You can hear it evolve. And not to be as concerned with what the fingers and the hands are playing, where they're going. It's short term with my hands on the piano. It sounds really good for that one bar but I'm trying to hear the whole thing, and hear how it would sound just coming at you as a song, as a listener. You can hear the long line. I can anyway. Certainly that applies to orchestration as well, to hear what comes in when. I just get a better picture when I get away from the keyboard and just try to hear it that way. You can also get trapped by pretty chords when you're at

the piano. I mean, guys have written great songs and continue to do so while sitting at their instrument, whether it's guitar or piano. Not to say I don't sometimes start at the piano, then get away from it. But I have to have a long-range picture of the whole scope of a piece. I get a sense of balance that I wouldn't get if I were sitting at the piano. I can't say enough about where your hands tend to go, because they've been there before.

If a songwriter wanted to improve his or her melody writing, what kinds of things would you suggest?

Try to get away from your instrument and work that way. It's very tough nowadays, because you can be duped by the technology we have. I can have my two-and-a-half-year-old go to one of my MIDI keyboards and play a couple of notes and it'll sound great. If you have a keyboard that's MIDI'd with a couple of synthesizers, so you have strings and horns, you can sound glorious. But when you take it all apart, when you peel back the cover, what do you have? Do you really have a song, do you really have a melody? It's like the same principle when you take something you've recorded and play it on a little, cheap tape machine. If it's there, it's there. I remember Quincy Jones playing his album *The Dude* one night at his house for a group of friends, and he played it on a small boom box. I guess Quincy was thinking, "If it's good, it's going to sound good on the least expensive equipment."

All those great intro figures you've come up with—"Walk on By," "I'll Never Fall in Love Again"—did you compose them as part of the songs?

Very often they came as part of the songs. Very often when I wrote those songs, I was hearing everything that went with it—the drum pattern, the bass. I never liked to go into the studio with just a chord sheet and a rhythm section. I liked to write out a drum part, a bass part, a guitar part. At least it would be a framework, a structure so they would know what I had in mind. It would change, but at least it had a start. The drummer would know where I wanted a cross stick. For me, if I just went in with a chord sheet, it's too loose.

I've read too that you would often write words under the notes of an instrumental line.

Yes, even if they didn't make any sense. It had a word and if you sung the word on your flugelhorn, it would be more than just a note by itself.

I've always been a big believer in words with notes. I used to write for the trumpet players, or the reed players, anybody that would have a singular statement to make on a record, I'd write the lyric underneath. So they'd be playing melody notation but they'd try to speak through their instrument the actual lyric. People that I worked with in the studio who knew me didn't think it was so crazy, and whether they thought it was crazy or not was unimportant to me. There was a reason I did it. There are certain things that can't really be notated, I find, in an orchestration. It's maybe two eighth notes, a sixteenth note, and another eighth note and that's the way it should be notated, but that's not the way it totally feels. But if you put words with it, or even vowel sounds, it does make a difference.

Do you have an ideal environment for composing?

No, but the more beautiful a setting is, the more beautiful an environment, the harder it is to write. We used to write in the Brill Building with a closed window, no view, no air, and Hal smoking all over the place. Then you get into a dream setting, and it's like the Ian Fleming thing, where he used to go to the Bahamas and he'd close the curtains so the light wouldn't come in and he wouldn't know where he was, and therefore he could write.

Have you found over the years that you're more effective at certain times of the day, or do you write at night?

I try not to write at night. Sometimes I can't help it, because I just find that it kind of stimulates me and I'm hearing it all night long. I hear the music all night. It just keeps going around in my head. It wakes me up, keeps me awake.

The records that you've produced of your songs always have great dynamic range.

It's about the peaks and valleys of where that record can take you. It's to a different dimension than you might be able to get. You can tell a story and be able to be explosive one minute then as kind of a satisfying resolution. I think one-level records always made me a little bit uncomfortable after awhile. They stayed at one intensity. It kind of beats you up, you know? It's like a smile. If you have a great smile, you use it quick, not all the time.

Do you have any recollections about writing “Wives and Lovers”?

It was an assignment for a movie. It was a song for hire. I don't know what we got paid, not much. Without an assurance or much of an assurance that it would go in the picture. It was just a promotional film. So Hal and I wrote it. It's a shame it didn't make the picture but it has probably had way more value than the picture in the long run. It's the same with “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.” That again was a song that wasn't anything other than a promotional song.

Had you written anything with that jazz waltz feel before?

Maybe not. It might have been the first.

Whose is the definitive version in your opinion?

I'm not sure I have one. I like Dionne's record. I think she did it more like I thought it should be. I like Jack Jones' record too, though I had to get used to it. It was very different than what I'd imagined. But it started to do really well and became a hit, so I thought, “I can get used to it that way.”

How about “The Look of Love”?

“The Look of Love” was really targeted for that one character in the picture [*Casino Royale*], for Ursula Andress. It was really written just watching her on my Moviola. Very sensuous, sexual theme. I treated it as an instrumental first, then Hal put lyrics on it. We got the ideal singer for it, went in and made that version for the picture with Dusty.

When you gave a melody to Hal, would you be careful not to have the dummy words in there?

Not really. The dummy words have to be in there so you have the right length, the right amount of syllables, the right amount of words, all to take home with him. I know one example, on “Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head,” I kept singing that title. Even though Hal tried to change it, we never came up anything that felt as good. He made it make sense overall, though he tried some other ways first because it's not the most natural way one would think to write that lyric.

I'd like to ask you about a few of your contemporaries in the 60s. Were you a Beatles fan?

Moderately. You know, I was on the same bill with the Beatles in London, I think when they did the Royal Command Performance. I was conducting for Dietrich. They had already recorded “Baby It’s You” on their first album, but you know they just were happening. My recollection is that I talked to one or two of them, but not much, in rehearsal that day. I’d seen posters in Sweden when I was there a couple of months before when I was there with Dietrich. I didn’t know who they were. But I soon did.

I interviewed Jimmy Webb, and he cited you as a major influence, especially when he first started writing. Did you guys have much contact?

I admired Jimmy. I thought that album he did with Richard Harris [*A Tramp Shining*] was one of the great, great albums. I think the songs are just unbelievable on it. The production was great. He made Richard Harris sound just fantastic. I have a lot of respect for Jimmy. We never communicated really. He was on the West Coast, I was on the East Coast.

So many groups from that time, when I listen to them now, like Eric Burdon and the Animals or Paul Revere and the Raiders, sound very stuck in that time. Yet the stuff that you and Hal did with Dionne still sounds fresh to me. Any thoughts about that?

I can’t say it was a little ahead of its time, because it wasn’t. It was right in the time. It’s like clothes maybe. Clothing gets outmoded. I’m not sure I know the reason why hairdos get outmoded. You look at them and you feel it’s very off, because it is very off. It’s just another time. It’s the same thing with records. I think the, I don’t want to say cheap songs or less substance songs, or more like rock ‘n’ roll or what was going on at the time, or simplified songs have less of a chance to survive. Take “The Long and Winding Road”—it was incredible then and it’s incredible now. Maybe it’s got something to do with a substantial song to start with. What the song says and how it’s treated, and if it’s not surrounded by a dated arrangement, or just an arrangement that would work at the time. Maybe then it will hold up thirty years later. That’s my only read on it. Ballads, you know? Up-tempo tunes, maybe because of the very framework they had to be in, maybe didn’t have the same chance to grow.

I wanted to get your impression on the difference between Hal and Carole Bayer Sager as lyricists. Do you feel like Hal's lyrics brought different kinds of melodies out of you than Carole's did?

I'm not sure. I think it's very possibly a different time as well. They're both great lyricists. Carole is one of the fastest lyricists I've ever seen. Too fast for me the way she writes, just because I'm that far behind. I'm still working on one note or something like that, and she's basically got the song done. Hal was more like the one who would take it home, work on it, bring it back the next day, and we'd look at it. Then he'd go back and I'd go back and we'd work alone a lot. Then together.

Hal seems like he might be a less sentimental person than Carole. Is that true?

You know, one is a woman, a beautiful woman, and the other is . . . if you look at Hal, then you listen to the lyrics, you've got to be stunned at the insight that Hal has in those lyrics. Brilliant stuff. And Carole too. I was lucky to have worked with them both.

I was really knocked out by "God Give Me Strength," the song you wrote with Elvis Costello for Grace of My Heart. It sounds more like the stuff you were writing in the 60s. Was that a conscious choice?

No, not at all. I'm not sure that was so. The picture was about that time, so I think that influenced the way people think too. I don't think I was writing backwards or trying to put it in a time-set.

When you think of your songwriting, do you ever see it in the way a painter might recognize different periods in his work?

Yeah, I think it's got to be in periods. Certain things I did then, there's no way I could do now. There are songs, like the first couple of hits I had, "Magic Moments" and "Story of My Life"—that's another way of thinking than I've certainly thought the last twenty or twenty-five years.

Do you have the sense that some of what you wrote with Hal for Dionne will be around a hundred years from now?

I think there's a chance that some of it will because it lasted thirty years. I think at that time you could make songs that had a chance to last.

I don't think we would be having hits with songs like that now perhaps in today's market.

What's the most difficult thing for you these days as a composer?

I think the market is very tough for good songs. It's very difficult because there's less space for good songs. There's a very youth-oriented radio format, much rap on urban stations. You know, artists that you could count on to make an urban hit then have a pop hit, like Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Dionne, or Patti LaBelle, it's no guarantee anymore. You used to be able to have a Top 5 urban hit with them, then it would cross over into the pop market. But they don't necessarily get played or accepted at radio like they did. It's a shame. There are terrific singers out there like Toni Braxton, Tony Rich, and Babyface. They make great records, great songs.

If you were hired to teach a workshop on composing, what kinds of things would you stress to your students?

It's hard to teach composing. I studied composition and I think you should learn the basic stuff, like to be able to write music down. If you hear it in your head or you play it, you should be able to notate music and write it. I think it's helpful. It's so easy now, you just play something and dump it onto a tape machine. I'd have my students learn to read and write music. I think it's important. I think that you learn to try to listen when you're writing your own music, to get a long picture of it, as I said before. It's a discipline to be able to do that. Hear where it's lacking, where it's good, where it's boring, where it's overkill. The same with a record. You try to hear the record in your head, then hear it again. It's a fine-tuning thing.

What are three things that you haven't done yet as a songwriter that you'd still like to do?

I think I'd like to do another musical. I'd like to write something for a symphony orchestra, other than the way I did with the Houston Symphony [the *Woman* LP]. And I don't know, that would be sufficient, those two.

Do you have any thoughts on pop music in the next century?

I have no idea what's going to happen, if it's going to get better or worse, with more machines or live musicians. All I know is this. If I was

a young musician, a violinist, and I went to a music school like Julliard, I would think that things would look very bleak, because there wouldn't be recording dates to play. The synthesizer takes the place. And if I wasn't up for a symphony orchestra—which isn't easy for a young musician—a violinist coming out of Curtis or Julliard, maybe they wind up in Oklahoma with a city orchestra, but they don't wind up with the Philadelphia Orchestra, not yet anyway. Also, French horn players. The samples are so unbelievable on the synthesizers. I like it, but I don't like it, you know? You can make a perfect record even if you're not a good bass player. You can play four bars of a bass part on a synthesizer, copy it, paste it. So it's good and it's bad. I don't like it that live musicians don't work as much as they used to do. Like drummers. There's the drum machine. It never slows down, it's perfect for dance, perfect for techno. But no matter what happens, I have to believe that there'll always be room for a good song.

CHAPTER 2

Hal David

Interviewed 1996

Hits: “Alfie,” “What the World Needs Now Is Love,” “I Say a Little Prayer”

“Above all, I try to create an emotion to which others can respond,” says Hal David. “Unless I can create an emotion to which I can respond, I throw the lyric away. I assume that if it moves me it may do the same for someone else.”

David’s modest assumption has been proven correct with hundreds of three-minute masterpieces, especially those cowritten with composer Burt Bacharach. Few lyricists have expressed themselves on the subject of love with the grace, empathy, and simplicity of David. Whether sensuous (“The Look of Love”), spiritual (“What the World Needs Now Is Love”), romantic (“This Guy’s in Love with You”), humanitarian (“The Windows of the World”), or David’s specialty, broken-hearted (“Anyone Who Had a Heart,” “I Just Don’t Know What to Do with Myself,” “A House Is Not a Home”), he always achieved that goal of making a deep emotional connection.

Hal David was born May 25, 1921, in Brooklyn, New York. Inspired by his older brother, renowned Tin Pan Alley lyricist Mack David (“I’m Just a Lucky So and So”), Hal began his lifelong passion for writing when he was a teenager. While serving in the army during World War II, he wrote lyrics for military revues. After he got out, he wrote special material for nightclub acts. In 1949, he scored his first hit when Mel Tormé took “The Four Winds and the Seven Seas” into the Top 10.

During the 50s, David collaborated with a number of composers and made the hit parade with “American Beauty Rose” and “Bell Bottom Blues.” In 1956, while a staffer at Famous Music in New York City’s Brill