

## Bert Berns, The Rock Phenom You Never Heard Of, Finally Gets His Due

By Jeremy Gerard on Jul 20, 2014 6:20 pm



Jukebox musicals are the guilty pleasures of Broadway and, ever more frequently, off-Broadway, offering well-heeled patrons the joys of nostalgia and the reassuring sense that the songs we grew up on were classics worthy of revisiting. How else to account for the extraordinary popularity of [Jersey Boys](#), [Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#), [Motown: The Musical](#), [The Million Dollar Quartet](#), [Smokey Joe's Cafe](#), [Mamma Mia!](#) and [Rock Of Ages](#) (not to mention the good, if less successful [Holler If Ya Hear Me](#) and [A Night With Janis Joplin](#))? *Piece Of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story*, which opened Sunday night on 42nd Street, is a bargain-basement jukebox musical as entertaining as the best of those shows.

But it's also on an evangelical mission: To make the case that Bert Berns has a rightful place in the pantheon of American rock-music writing legends that includes Goffin and King, Leiber and Stoller, Holland-Dozier-Holland, Bacharach and David, Mann and Weil, and Barry and Greenwich.



So: Bert *Who?* Say *Twist and Shout*, and [the Beatles](#) come to mind, or, if you're a bit savvier, the Isley Brothers, who first recorded it. *Hang On, Sloopy?* The McCoys. *Piece Of My Heart* and *Cry Baby?* Janis Joplin (though R&B star Erma Franklin recorded *Heart* first). All of them were composed, and many written as well, by Berns, a classically-trained Jewish kid from the Bronx in love with doo-wop and determined to become a Brill Building star. So how come we've never heard of him until now?

That's the point of *Piece Of My Heart*, the irresistible show with a weird but effective book by Daniel Goldfarb, songs by Berns performed by a cast that goes into overdrive to win our sympathy (they succeed) and a production directed and choreographed by Denis Jones that manages to embrace every cliché of the jukebox genre, and still hold us rapt.

The show opens with a young guitar-strumming woman (the appealing Leslie Kritzer) playing to empty clubs and noting that the songs she sings were written by her father. A phone call from a stranger with a heavy Bronx accent beckons her to Broadway, where she discovers her father's office, something she never knew existed. The mysterious stranger (Joseph Siravo) turns out to have been Bert's consigliere, and he warns her that her mother is about to sell the Berns catalogue. Save the day! he insists, just as Mom (Linda Hart) arrives to play the bad-parent role.

All this sets up the recap of Berns's life. Bert (played with nicely reticent, Ben Affleck-y charm by Zak Resnick), hangs with his best friend Hoagy (the excellent Derrick Baskin, from *Memphis*) finds his voice during a trip to Havana, where he may have helped run guns for Castro, wins a contract with Atlantic Records when Jerry Wexler (Mark Zeisler, superbly underplaying) takes him on, and by 1963 has replaced Leiber and Stoller as the label's house producer and appropriator of R&B and other African-American musical formats. Berns gets his own label, travels to London, where he discovers Lulu and a band called Them, producing the first album



for lead singer [Van Morrison](#), and the enduring hit, “Brown Eyed Girl.” He marries a go-go dancer (Teal Wicks, adorable as the young Linda Hart), falls out with Atlantic leadership and drops dead at the end of 1967, age 38, the death sentence having been dealt years earlier by a bout with rheumatic fever that wrecked his heart.

Some songs he wrote in their entirety, others with Jerry Ragovoy and even Wexler, among others. There’s a telling scene in which Wexler has hired [Phil Spector](#) to produce “Twist And Shout.” The session quickly goes all Wonder Bread; Bert explains that the song is his “Guantanamera” and takes over the production for Hoagy (whom Wexler promptly replaces with the Isleys). A bit later, trying to impress his future wife with the fact that he wrote “Twist And Shout,” she responds tartly that it’s just “La Bamba.” She’s right!



I loved the fact that Jones’s period dances are performed by the small company slightly self-consciously, as though they were kids at a Miami Beach discotheque (been there, done that). Alexander Dodge’s all-but-nonexistent set seem to exist mainly to stay out of the way of the actors, and it’s mostly successful. The offstage band is terrific, keeping the focus on the songs. That’s smart. The book makes no

attempt to show how Berns worked as a collaborator, so you come away thinking Berns was a solo genius, not fair to him or history.

*Piece Of My Heart* is exactly the kind of show that should have a long run at, oh, let’s say New World Stages, the off-Broadway complex that the Shuberts are soon to take over. I doubt this production could fill a Broadway house eight times a week. But a theater of comparable size to the one it’s in now at the Pershing Square Signature Center (where it will presumably have to leave once the Signature season gets underway), close by the Broadway district, should give it the long run it, and Bert Berns, deserve.

Check out “Twist And Shout” from the show

here: [http://www.hmsmedia.com/clientfiles/piece\\_of\\_my\\_heart\\_hd\\_download/Twis](http://www.hmsmedia.com/clientfiles/piece_of_my_heart_hd_download/Twis)

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