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First Look at 'Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story' (Exclusive)
By Suzy Evans

The songwriter and record producer's children, Brett and Cassie Berns, are mounting a jukebox bio-musical on their late father's life, hoping it will add to his legacy.

Brett and Cassie Berns never really knew their father. When label executive/songwriter/producer **Bert Berns** passed away from a heart attack after suffering ticker trouble his whole life, Brett was almost three and Cassie was 10 months. Their younger brother **Russell** was just two weeks old.

PHOTOS Ray Davies, Donovan, Imagine Dragons Honored at Songwriters Hall of Fame

Now, in an effort to get to learn about their father and re-introduce him to a world that they feel has largely under-celebrated his legacy—which includes writing hits like “Twist and Shout” and “I Want Candy,” producing singles like “Under the Boardwalk” and “Brown-Eyed Girl,” and discovering artists like **Van Morrison** and **Neil Diamond**—Brett and Cassie are taking *Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story* to the stage, with performances Off-Broadway starting June 25.



“This is the greatest untold story in the history of rock ‘n’ roll,” says Brett, as he steals a moment out of rehearsal. “You couldn’t make this stuff up.”

The musical follows the artist's life from age 30, when he spent time in Cuba “running guns for Castro” and “turning a warehouse into a nightclub” to his return to New York and meteoric rise in the record business to his death at age 38. Playwright **Daniel Goldfarb**, who crafted the musical's book around 26 selections from Berns' catalog of hit songs, created a dramatic structure in which Brett and Cassie are actually a composite character: the fictionalized daughter Jessie Berns. The musical moves between past and present as Jessie tries to learn about the father she never knew. “It fulfills his desire to be known, to leave his mark,” Cassie says. And Brett and Cassie, who are the lead producers on the project, hope the show will cause the recording industry to take notice.

“Our goal is to get him recognized for his accomplishments by the industry he helped create,” Brett adds. “I would like to see him in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Songwriters Hall of Fame. You can put that in bold! How can they leave out the guy who wrote “Twist and Shout,” “Piece of My Heart,” “Hang on Sloopy,” “I Want Candy,” “Tell Him,” “Here Comes the Night,” “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love,” “Cry to Me,” “Cry Baby”—if he'd only written three of those songs, he should have been in the Songwriters Hall of Fame.”

“We had to do it,” Cassie adds.



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The show will open at Signature Theatre in New York City, after it had developmental readings at New York Theatre Workshop and New York Stage and Film. Though the show is not a part of the Tony-winning non-profit theater's regular season; they are renting out the space as a commercial run hoping it leads to Broadway and international productions.

"That's the goal: Broadway and beyond," Brett says. "There was early interest in this show from the U.K. We've already had interest from Japanese producers. This show has the potential to be the kind of juggernaut that *Jersey Boys* and shows like that have become."

However, do they worry that there has become fatigue from so many bio-musicals recently? "After watching this last season where shows like *After Midnight* and *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* did so well, I think this is what people want," Brett adds. "Our show is really not that. It feels more like a classic book musical, more like *West Side Story* than *Jersey Boys*."

The musical is part of a large, admittedly organized, push to get Berns' story told. Veteran San Francisco rock journalist **Joel Selvin**'s biography *Here Comes the Night* hit shelves in April, and Brett is also directing a documentary, *Bang: The Bert Berns Story*, which features major figures from the artist's life, including **Paul McCartney**, **Solomon Burke** and **Ben E. King**. A release date has not been announced, though Brett reveals that they're in talks with "major producers and networks" about the project. Cassie also shares that, with this resurgence of Berns' story, "Hollywood has come calling," and they're in talks to work on a film. However, theater became the first place because of the immediacy of the audience connection.

"Theater is the ultimate art form, and in the theater we were able to combine all the elements of his incredible music and incredible life story," says Brett. "We could never have done that in a tribute album, a movie or a documentary. On the stage, we brought our father back to life."

Check out an exclusive first look at the cast of *Piece of My Heart*, featuring **Zak Resnick** as Bert Berns, **Leslie Kritzer** as Jessie Berns, and **Teal Wicks** as young Ilene Berns.

- See more at: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/first-look-at-piece-my-711871#sthash.yOTSxkkI.dpuf>