

4 THEATER

The journey to the stage can be as good a tale as the play.

8 CLASSICAL

Opera innovation in France.  
BY CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM



13 FILM

Mortality, a superwoman and Luc Besson. BY TOM ROSTON

16 POP

Decades later, a hit maker gets his due. BY LARRY ROHTER

THEATER | MUSIC | FILM | DANCE  
TELEVISION | ART

Arts & Leisure  
The New York Times

SUNDAY, JULY 20, 2014

Pop

Many-Hit Wonder, Out of Obscurity



Bert Berns, seated left with Van Morrison, in the studio in 1967 for Mr. Morrison's first album, with the bassist Russ Savakus, left, and Garry Sherman. Below, "Piece of My Heart," a jukebox musical, opens Monday.

Bert Berns (who?) is in the spotlight, posthumously.

By LARRY ROHTER

Even in his mid-1960s heyday, Bert Berns was barely known beyond the obsessives who studied songwriters' and producers' credits on 45 r.p.m. records and LP album jackets. And then, after his death in 1967 at the age of 38, something truly odd happened: Though the songs he wrote and produced, like "Twist and Shout" and "Hang On Sloopy," proved to have durability, growing in stature and popularity as the years passed, Berns's own reputation receded even further into obscurity.

But now, Bert Berns is having a moment. A new biography, Joel Selvin's "Here Comes the Night: The Dark Soul of Bert Berns and the Dirty Business of Rhythm & Blues," praises him as "one of the great originals of the golden age of rhythm and blues," an argument repeated in a documentary film about his life that is in the works, tentatively called "Bang! The Bert Berns Story." And on Monday, a new musical named for another of his well-known songs, "Piece of My Heart," opens Off Broadway at the Pershing Square Signature Center.

"He wasn't the best," Mr. Selvin said in an interview this month. "But his best was as good as anybody's best."

Certainly the story of Berns's life, short though it was, lends itself to the same sense of drama often expressed in his songs. Born into a Jewish family in the Bronx that hoped he might become a classical pianist, he instead developed a love of Latin music that took him to Cuba, where he claimed to have run guns for Fidel Castro's rebels. A late starter in the music business, he had a hand in more than 50 hits in seven years, consorted with gangsters and succumbed to heart disease just as the careers of his last three protégés, Neil Diamond, Van Morrison and a studio guitarist named Jimmy Page, were getting underway.

"I had no idea who he was" before being invited to write the book for "Piece of My Heart," the playwright Daniel Goldfarb said. But now, "I feel like Bert Berns was an artist who had a lot stacked against him and had to fight his way through it." He added: "Even though his music is so diverse, the songs are autobiographical. That's why he's a great artist: He has a voice and knew how to tap into it."

At the time Berns was active, hyphenated songwriting teams, usually with the responsibility for lyrics and music clearly divided, dominated a scene centered on the Brill Building: Bacharach-David, Barry Greenwich, Goffin-King, Leiber-Stoller, Mann-Weil. Berns was different. He either wrote alone ("Here Comes the Night," "Tell Him," "Cry to Me") or with a revolving cast of collaborators that included Jerry Ragovoy, Phil Medley, Wes Farrell, Jerry Wexler and the soul singer Solomon Burke.

The tone of Berns's compositions, many of which he wrote on a battered acoustic guitar, was atypical, too. Burt Bacharach and Hal David created a cosmopolitan sound with complex harmonies, and Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller offered acute social observations with a humorous streak. But Berns's trademark was the dark, angst-ridden tale of love unrequited or gone wrong, often with the words "cry" or "heart" in the title: Within months of Berns's death, Janis Joplin had hits with both "Piece of My Heart" and "Cry Baby."

"Bert was really a purist, after a pure sound that was soulful, had simplicity and



DANNY CHITTS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

was rhythmically solid," said Garry Sherman, Berns's favorite orchestrator and arranger, who has come out of retirement to work as the music supervisor on the play. "The one thing he demanded was that every artist tell a story," and as a result "he was able to get performances that were meaningful, not just a melody and words."

One explanation endorsed by all three of the new works, reductionist though it may seem, is that Berns took a gloomy view of life because he knew he didn't have long to live — or as Mr. Selvin put it, "you can hear the pathology in the music." As a boy, Berns had rheumatic fever, which led to heart disease and doctors' warnings that he was likely to die before he reached 30.

In the studio, "he used to tell me, 'I don't want to jump around too much, my heart you know, I want to stay in the seat,'" said Brooks Arthur, a recording engineer who often worked with Berns and went on to become a Grammy-winning producer. "The writing was on the wall, but he powered through it. He'd talk about it in jazz terms: 'I don't know how much song there is left in me.'"

The Berns revival is occurring at a moment when jukebox musicals like "Beautiful," "Jersey Boys," "Motown," "A Night With Janis Joplin" and "Million Dollar Quartet" have encountered success on and off Broadway. In addition, a raft of documentary films about overlooked pop music figures have been released in recent years, including the last two Oscar winners in the documentary category, "Sugarman," about the Detroit singer Rodriguez, and "20 Feet from Stardom," about backup singers.

So there is an understandable temptation to view the Berns musical and documentary as somewhat late entrants in what is becoming an increasingly crowded field. But Berns's son Brett, who is involved with both projects, took pains to note that the musical has been in the works for at least seven years, and that its origins go back even further, to the 1990s, when the Berns family recaptured control of the copyrights to the songs he had written.

"That was the impetus for doing all

A short life that yielded rock 'n' roll classics like 'Twist and Shout.'



TONY CENCOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

these projects," Mr. Berns, 49, said in an interview this month. "We have this great catalog of known songs by an unknown songwriter, so what are we going to do with this? Really, for 20 years my sister and I were music publishers who really worked the catalog, that was our day job."

But the rebirth of Bert Berns is not the standard feel-good story of recognition delayed and belatedly bestowed. It is accompanied by a deep sense of grievance, as well as accusations that he was deliberately denied his rightful place by powerful enemies in the music industry. "To me, there is no doubt he has been overlooked and neglected," said Brett Berns, who was 2 when his father died. "He's not in the Songwriters Hall of Fame, not in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. So, yes, there is a grievance. That's why we set out on this mission to tell his story, to get him recognized and champion him."

All three of the new works about Berns point a finger at the men who ran Atlantic Records: the Ertegun brothers, Ahmet and Nesuhi, and their colleague, Mr. Wexler.

They were partners with Berns in a label called Bang (Bert, Ahmet, Nesuhi, Gerald) but had a falling out that was acrimonious in the extreme: In "Here Comes the Night" (Counterpoint Press), Mr. Selvin writes that when he asked to talk about Berns, Mr. Wexler, who died in 2008, replied, "I don't know where he's buried, but if I did, I would urinate 'on his grave.'"

According to these accounts, the Atlantic triumvirate tried to muscle Berns out of the music publishing part of the soured relationship by summoning Mafia contacts to threaten him. Rather than giving in, Mr. Berns prevailed by turning to a higher-ranking friend of his own in the mob, Thomas Eboli, who eventually became the boss of the Genovese crime family.

That goes against the standard version of pop music history, especially as regards Ahmet Ertegun, who died in 2006, 17 years after his brother, and cultivated an urbane, man-about-town image in his later years. "This is a revisionist history, a viewpoint from a different angle," said Mr. Selvin, formerly a music critic at The San Francisco Chronicle and the author of several other books about pop music. "Berns is a figure who needs and deserves revision."

The Berns boomlet can be said to have begun as early as 2008, when Ace Records, a British label, released the first of two CDs chronicling his abbreviated but hit-filled career, "Twist and Shout" and "Mr. Success." A third installment, due out this year, will feature rarities recorded by the Shirelles, Wilson Pickett, Mr. Morrison and one of Berns's main inspirations, the Cuban singer-guitarist Arsenio Rodriguez.

"I think the fact that he died in 1967, just as singer-songwriters were starting to displace the Brill Building professionals, is a reason why so many people have not heard of him," said Mick Patrick, author of the extensively researched liner notes that accompany the project. "But without Bert Berns as their house producer, Atlantic Records may well have floundered" in the years preceding those changes.

Berns has always been especially admired in Britain, where his reputation was never eclipsed. When he started receiving royalty checks for songs that the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds and the Animals had made into hits, he was quick off the mark in sensing the opportunities there, and beginning in 1963, made trips to London to record performers like Them and Lulu, often with Mr. Page on electric guitar.

It was Berns who first brought Mr. Page to New York and introduced him to the Atlantic team, which signed his band Led Zeppelin just months after Berns's death. The group recorded "Baby Come on Home (Tribute to Bert Berns)" at the sessions that yielded the first Led Zeppelin album, but the track ended up being left off the record and was released only in 1993.

It appears that even more efforts to raise Berns's profile are yet to come. There is talk both of a movie and a tribute album in which today's stars would sing some of Berns's best-known compositions. In addition, his heirs recently signed a deal with MPL Communications, the music publishing company founded by Paul McCartney, an unabashed Berns fan, to distribute the more than 200 songs that make up the Berns catalog.

All that stands in sharp contrast to the reception Mr. Selvin received when he has been trying to get his book project off the ground a decade or so ago. "You can't imagine how many times editors and publishers said to me, 'Nobody has ever heard of him,'" he recalled. "But that turned out to be the hook."