



## Parade

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### **Who Wrote the Beatles Hit “Twist and Shout”? The Amazing Story of Bert Berns**

By Jeryl Brunner

Chances are that you’ve never heard of a man named Bert Berns. But most likely you know the songs “Twist and Shout,” “Piece of My Heart,” “I Want Candy,” “Here Comes the Night,” and “Hang On Sloopy.” Those timeless tunes were written or co-written by Bert Berns, the many-hit wonder who thrived as a songwriter, record producer, and label chief with his own label, Bang Records. Not only did he write a string of hits, Berns also produced the iconic songs “Under the Boardwalk,” “Brown Eyed Girl,” and “Baby I’m Yours.” What’s more, he launched the careers of Neil Diamond and Van Morrison.

In the most tragic turn, Berns didn’t start having hits until he was 30, and died of a heart attack at 38. But from 1960 to 1967, he had 51 chart toppers. “He did the trifecta, which no one else did,” explains his eldest child, Brett Berns. “He was the songwriter of standards, the consummate record producer. He could maneuver in the business world and have a successful record label. And he was a great talent scout who discovered so many icons and legends of rock and roll, rhythm and blues and soul music.”

But even with all the hits, after Berns died in 1967, he drifted into obscurity. You won’t find him in the Songwriters Hall of Fame or the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. “Why is he so obscure? Because he died young. He didn’t have a press agent to get him that lifetime achievement award and he left behind bad bones with powerful record company people,” says Brett. “The people who could have honored him, decided to bury him further. Time covered him up.”

But that’s just wrong. Just ask Sir Paul McCartney, who declares in an upcoming documentary about Berns’ life, “Bert deserves to be elevated to his rightful place in the music industry and respected and honored for it.”

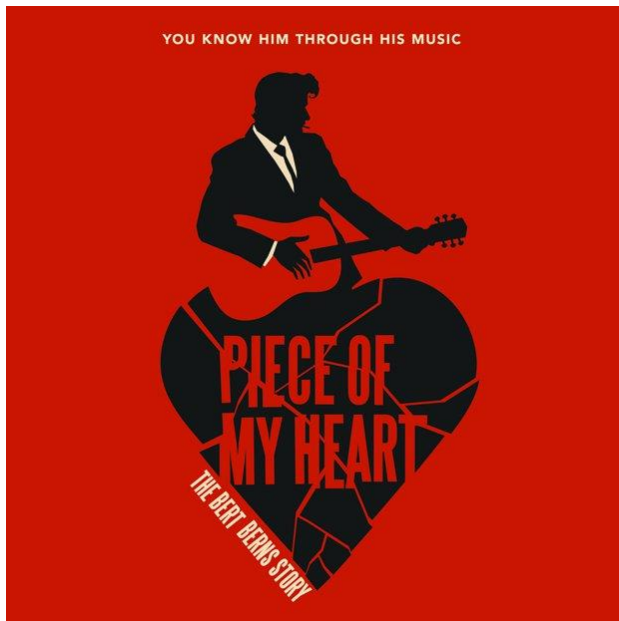
47 years after his passing, Bert Berns is finally getting that recognition. His children Brett and Cassie Berns have placed their dad and his epic and brilliant musical repertoire front and center in the new bi-musical *Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story*. The music-packed show, which tells the story of Berns’ triumphs and travails, is now playing at New York’s Signature Theater. “We had to tell his incredible true-life story in order to get him recognized for his musical legacy,” says Brett about the acclaimed musical, which was 15 years in the making. “That was the only way we could get my dad honored for his music.” Brett Berns shared some astounding facts about his father, his indelible influence on music, and the songs we continue to cherish:

Many people think The Beatles wrote their early hit, “Twist and Shout.” But in fact, Bert Berns wrote the song, which was based on “La Bamba,” a Mexican folk tune. Even the Beatles thought that The Isley Brothers (who recorded it before them) had written it.

Berns looked under every stone for the next great talent. During the British Invasion, Berns was the first and only American record producer to go to England to work with artists like Lulu and Van Morrison. He even connected with The Rolling Stones. They recorded Berns’ song, “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love.”

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In London, Berns recorded with a stable of artists at Decca Records. And every time he went across the pond, he used a kid named Jimmy Page as a session player who could play a mean guitar. He ultimately introduced Page to the heads of Atlantic records and they signed his group to the label. That group was Led Zeppelin.

After Berns died, Led Zeppelin recorded a song called “Tribute to Bert Berns” for their debut album, Led Zeppelin 1. However, the song never made it onto the 1969 record. For years, “Tribute to Bert Berns” was a lost, basement track that only Led Zeppelin bootleggers knew about. However, a version of the song was finally released with the title “Baby Come On Home” in a box compilation set in 1993.

There was a young songwriter who no one would give a chance as a singer. Bert Berns signed him to his Bang Records label and had him work with

songwriters/producers Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. That unknown artist was Neil Diamond. Bang Records released Diamond’s early songs including “Cherry, Cherry,” “Solitary Man,” and “Kentucky Woman.” Berns made many Hitchcock appearances singing backgrounds, clapping hands, and playing percussion on Diamond’s early hits.

Bert Berns produced The Drifters’ colossal hit “Under the Boardwalk” for Atlantic Records. On the day of the scheduled recording session, the group’s lead singer, Rudy Lewis, was discovered dead in his hotel room from a heroin overdose. Vocalist Johnny Moore ended up singing the lead.

Berns was known to treat singers like artists and not just as hired hands. The night before a session, he’d invite them to his apartment for steaks and drinks. They’d stay up late talking about love and life. When they went into the studio the next day, they felt like they were working with a friend, with somebody who had their back and cared and respected them.

The number 1 hit song, “Hang On Sloopy,” was written by Bert Berns (and Wes Farrell). The classic tune was named the official rock song of the State of Ohio. (Ohio is the only state to have an official rock song.) At every Buckeye game, before the start of the 4th quarter, the Ohio State University marching band plays “Hang On Sloopy.” “Hang On Sloopy” is also the official song of the Cleveland Indians and comes on during the middle of the 8th inning.

Berns produced Van Morrison’s hit song, “Brown Eyed Girl.” He even sang background vocals and did the claps. Whitney Houston’s mother, Cissy Houston (with her group Cissy and the Girls) also contributed background vocals. Some radio stations banned the song because of the racy lyric about “making love in the green grass.”



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Berns wouldn't make a record without Cissy and the Girls doing background vocals. Besides Cissy Houston, the band also included Dee Dee Warwick (Dionne's sister). Beyond contributing backing vocals to other recordings, the group made their own records under the name The Sweet Inspirations.

One of the last songs that Berns wrote was "Piece of My Heart." He originally recorded it with Erma Franklin, Aretha Franklin's sister, as Cissy and the Girls sang background vocals. "With all due respect to Janis Joplin who later recorded the iconic song, Erma's is the definitive version," says Brett Berns. Berns died just a few weeks after making "Piece of My Heart."

At the end of his life, one of Berns' greatest triumphs was to work with his idol and favorite singer, Cuban music legend Arsenio Rodriguez, who is said to have invented the mambo in the 1950s. The album they did, *Viva Arsenio*, includes a Latin version of "Hang On Sloopy."

When he died, Berns left behind three children who were just two weeks, ten months, and two-and-a-half years old. In three years, he'd had three children with his young bride, who was widowed at 24. None were old enough to remember him, but they are devoted to keeping his legacy alive.

Click on the link to watch the videos

<http://parade.condenast.com/333416/jerylbrunner/who-wrote-the-beatles-hit-twist-and-shout-the-amazing-story-of-bert-berns/>