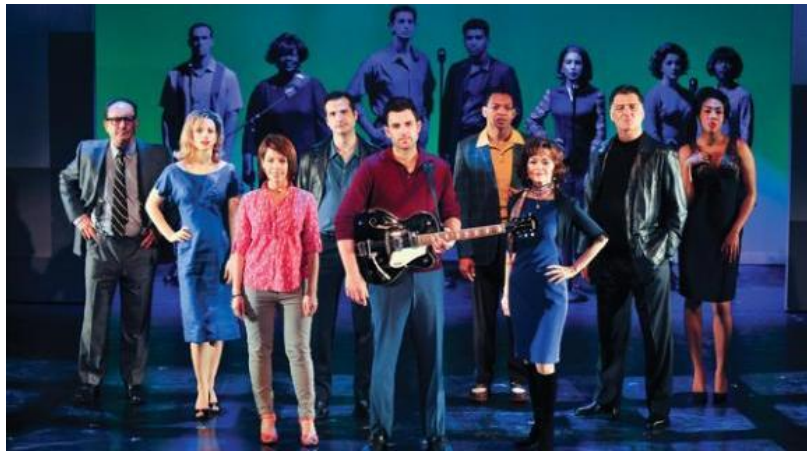




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For Bert Berns' Children, A Labor Of Love
By Ted Merwin



They never knew their father, but the children of songwriter Bert Berns have spent the better part of a decade trying to rescue him from oblivion. And they are making a lot of people wonder why the creator of “Twist and Shout,” “Brown-Eyed Girl,” and “Here Comes the Night” ever slipped from the rock music radar in the first place.

“Our father said that his children would know him from his music,” Berns’ eldest son, Brett, told *The Jewish Week*. “We’re children of the long-lost man who left so much and has been so misunderstood and underappreciated by the industry that he helped to create.” And now, with the recent opening of the new Off-Broadway musical, “*Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story*,” starring Zak Resnick (“*Mamma Mia*”) as Berns, both Brett and his younger sister, Cassie, have succeeded in restoring their father to the pantheon of pop. As Brett put it, “We’ve cried 10,000 tears watching the finale of the show.”

Bertrand Russell Berns was born in the Bronx in 1929 to Russian immigrant parents who worked in the garment industry. As a teenager, he contracted rheumatic fever, which left him with permanent cardiac damage; he was told that he would not live past the age of 21. But he did live into adulthood, and with the multiethnic sounds of his neighborhood echoing in his head, he traveled to Havana before the Cuban Revolution.



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Returning to New York, Berns wrote heart-rending rhythm and blues songs that introduced Afro-Cuban mambo to rock and roll. Working either alone or with various collaborators such as Jerry Ragovoy and Solomon Burke, he wrote or produced more than four dozen hit songs over the next seven years for groups like The Drifters and the Isley Brothers. Berns also signed and supervised the first solo albums by Neil Diamond and Van Morrison. And then, at the age of 38, he died of a heart attack, but not before enlisting the aid of the Mafia to enable him to prevail in his battle against his former mentor at Atlantic Records, Jerry Wexler, who, along with Atlantic executives Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun, were trying to cut Berns out of the profits his songs sent their way.

Like “Beautiful,” the currently running Broadway musical about Berns’ much better known contemporary, Carole King, “Piece of My Heart,” directed by Denis Jones, provides a window into the largely Jewish world of 1960s pop music. Many children and grandchildren of Jewish immigrants were creating America’s top hits inside the Brill Building and its Midtown neighbors, at a time when American culture was being turned upside down by the popularity of African-American and Latin rhythms, along with the “invasion” of British rock. Laura Collins-Hughes of The New York Times calls the new show “gorgeously tuneful” with “stellar singers and splendid eight-piece orchestra.”

As Joel Selvin writes in his a new biography, “Here Comes the Night: The Dark Soul of Bert Berns and the Dirty Business of Rhythm and Blues” (Counterpoint, 2014), for Berns, ““take another piece of my heart’ was a plea straight from his life.” His songs, Selvin notes, “have been covered, quoted, cannibalized, used as salvage parts, and recycled so many times, his touch has just dissolved into the literature. His name may be lost, but his music is everywhere.”

Like Galadrielle Allman, who has just published a book about her father Duane Allman, a guitarist with the pioneering Southern rock group The Allman Brothers, who died at the age of 25 when she was just 2 years old, the Berns siblings have no direct memories of their father. Brett was about to turn 3 when Berns died; Cassie was less than a year old. (Another brother, Russell, was just 2 weeks old.) In the musical, Brett and Cassie have been combined into a single, composite character named Jessie; she is played by Broadway veteran Leslie Kritzer.

The Berns siblings told The Jewish Week what bringing their father back to life has meant to them — a “cathartic” experience, as Cassie put it, to “fulfill our dad’s dreams” by their own involvement in music publishing, beginning with their father’s catalogue, which they have recently sold to Paul McCartney. They



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have also produced a soon-to-be-released film documentary, “Bang: The Bert Berns Story,” based on interviews with Ben E. King, Cissy Houston and others who worked with Berns.

Their father, Brett added, exuded tremendous warmth in addition to creative brilliance. “He would give you the shirt off his back. He brought African-American musicians to his penthouse to eat steaks and smoke and drink — they got to know each other on a personal level that transcended into the recordings the next day. He made people feel equal, honored, and understood. But if you crossed him, then the fighting Jew would come out. And he loved Israel. During the Six-Day War, he took his colleagues on a Circle Line trip and ordered them all to empty their pockets for the Jewish State.” Brett inherited his father’s love for Israel; he served for two years as an Israeli paratrooper in Gaza.

Goldfarb had never heard of Berns when Brett and Cassie approached him about writing the book for the musical. “But I found his life riveting, colorful and dramatic,” he said. “And his songs are so personal, deep and soulful that I realized that they could function as theater songs.”

Goldfarb often deals with Jewish themes in his plays, which include “Adam Baum and the Jew Movie,” “Sarah Sarah,” and “Modern Orthodox.” He also wrote the books for “Jerry Christmas” (about a Jewish TV comedian doing a Christmas special) and “Martin Short: Fame Becomes Me.” But “Piece of My Heart” is his first show that uses a quote from an ancient rabbi as inspiration.

“Brett once said something to me about the importance of living every moment as if were your last,” Goldfarb recalled. He realized that this captured the essence of Bert Berns, who lived in constant fear of his own heart stopping. The book writer decided to weave into the show the philosophy of Rabbi Hillel the Elder: “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?” Indeed, Goldfarb said, “the tagline for the show could be “If not now, when?”

Resnick, who plays Berns, has an intuitive grasp of what made Berns tick. “Since I’m Jewish myself,” he said, “I understand where he comes from and what certain things mean to him.” Berns’ story, he said, is a revelation to audiences. “Everyone is moved by his story and shocked that they never heard of him.”

“Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story” runs through Sept. 14 at the Pershing Signature Theater Center, 480 W. 42nd St. Performances are Tuesday through Friday at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday at 8 p.m., and Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets, \$31.50-\$99.50, call TicketCentral at (212) 279-4200 or visit www.pieceofmyheartmusical.com.