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Musical 'Piece Of My Heart' Examines Bert Berns' Songwriting Career
Stefanie Cohen



Zak Resnick, as Bert Berns, and D'adre Aziza perform during a press preview of "Piece Of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story."

Getty Images

The man who wrote the songs "**Twist and Shout**," "**Piece of My Heart**," and "**I Want Candy**" isn't in the **Songwriters Hall of Fame**, or in the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame**, but he does have a new musical, a new book, and an upcoming documentary all coming out within the next year.

Bert Berns, the songwriter who penned hits out of the Brill Building has gone largely ignored since climbing the charts in the 60s. He had 51 pop chart singles in seven years, produced "**Brown Eyed Girl**" with **Van Morrison**, watched "Twist and Shout" get recorded by **the Beatles** and "Piece of My Heart" and "Cry Baby" would later be recorded by **Janis Joplin**.

But the music world has largely overlooked Berns, even while glorifying his contemporaries including Carole King, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, and Cynthia Mann and Barry Weill. Diagnosed with rheumatic fever as a child, he died at 38 in 1967, leaving three children under two and a 24-year-old widow.



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Now, two of his children, Cassandra and Brett (who, along with their brother Mark, own their father's catalogue in partnership with Sony), are trying to get their dad in the limelight. A book by rock writer Joel Selvin, "Here Comes The Night: The Dark Soul of Bert Berns and the Dirty Business of Rhythm & Blues," came out in April, a documentary with interviews with Van Morrison and Paul McCartney will open next year, and a new musical, "**Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story**," opens at Signature Center on Monday.

In the musical, written by playwright Daniel Goldfarb, (who was commissioned by Brett and Cassandra to write the piece) audiences learn that Berns, a kid from the Bronx, used his bad heart as a reason to live hard: hanging out with mobsters, running drugs and guns in Castro's Cuba, and writing songs that take on a new meaning in light of his condition. (The line "Take another piece of my heart" sounds a lot sadder if he's talking about his own.)

He also fought to control the songs he wrote and produced, forming Bang Records with partners Ahmet and Nesuhi Ertegun and Jerry Wexler (the heads of Atlantic Records.) When Mr. Wexler tried to buy him out, Mr. Berns used his mob connections to threaten Mr. Wexler, according to the play. In the show, Mr. Wexler (who had mob connections of his own, according to the play) backs down but threatens: "I'll do everything in my power to make sure the name Bert Berns is nothing more than a footnote."

Mr. Goldfarb says he believes that's exactly what happened, and that Berns' children are trying to undo the Wexler curse through the musical, book and documentary projects.

The play includes 24 songs — only ten of which are well known to audiences. The actor who plays Mr. Berns, Zak Resnick, sings like a cross between Justin Timberlake and Mel Torme, says Mr. Goldfarb, who adds that that regard, Mr. Berns' forgotten voice was a benefit: "We didn't have to find someone who sounded like him, because no one knows what he sounded like," he says.