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THE NATIONAL THEATRE MAGAZINE

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SOMETHING TO TWIST & SHOUT ABOUT

Examining the life and legacy of pop songwriter Bert Berns by Harry Haun



**The cast of
*Piece of My Heart:
The Bert Berns Story***

What *Rolling Stone* called "one of the great untold stories of rock and roll" is finally being told. Currently at book stores in a recently-released hardcover called *Here Comes the Night: The Dark Soul of Bert Berns and the Dirty Business of Rhythm and Blues* by former rock critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Joel Selvin—and now in musical form at the Signature Center with *Piece of My Heart: The Bert Berns Story*.

Both titles are songs among the 51 pop-chart singles Berns created in his seven years as a songwriter and record producer, creating

hits like "Twist and Shout," "Hang On Sloopy," "Cry to Me," "Cry Baby," "Tell Him," "Everybody Needs Somebody to Love," "I Want Candy," "Brown-Eyed Girl," and more, for such artists as The Beatles, Neil Diamond, Janis Joplin, Van Morrison, Lulu, and The Isley Brothers.

All of these were written on borrowed time and with a broken heart. At 14, Berns got rheumatic fever and was told he wouldn't live to see 21. He ended up living to see all of 38. Berns died on December 30, 1967 from a heart attack. As Selvin put it, "You know, when Berns died, it was all over."

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Berns rubbed elbows with other musical theatre muses like Carole King (*Beautiful*), Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller (*Smokey Joe's Cafe*), Ellie Greenwich (*Leader of the Pack*), Burt Bacharach (*What's It All About?*) and the like in the corridors of songwriting factories like The Brill Building and other musical Meccas in Manhattan in the 1960s. Now, it's time for Berns's story to be sung.

Piece of My Heart looks at both the past, and the present—the past being the world of the 60s during Berns's meteoric career; the present viewed through the eyes of his grown daughter, Jessie, struggling to get his music catalog from her mother and find the father that she never knew.

"We called her Jessie because she's an amalgamation," explains Berns's son, Brett. "It's mostly my sister, Cassie, but it's a little bit me, and it's also our younger brother, Russell, who was two weeks old in 1967 when our dad died of a heart attack at 38.

"He always said, 'My children will know me by my music,' but that was like a riddle we didn't really understand growing up. He was written up in history books and inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and at some point we realized we'd have to tell his true story in order for him to be recognized for his body of work. Our dad's songs were autobiographical so they lent themselves to a true book musical."

Playwright Daniel Goldfarb began gathering data four-and-a-half years ago, interviewing survivors of Berns's inner circle, and merging the facts with the music.

"There are ten really famous songs in the show," he notes, "but there are also a dozen or so other songs you don't know that are just as good, if not better."

When Selvin's book came out, Goldfarb made a beeline for it. "I was relieved to see that we both tell the same story. My information matched up with his information."

Denis Jones, whose choreography is seen in the Broadway-bound Jason Robert Brown tuner *Honeymoon in Vegas*, began choreographing *Piece of My Heart*

and has now taken on directing it as well. "We started out at New York Theatre Workshop, then went to New York Stage & Film at Vassar in 2011," he says. "We really developed the show the old-school way in New York City under the radar. For me, it has been a four-year journey—and it has been a wonderful one."

Zak Resnick plays Berns from his early 20s to his late 30s. "As an actor," he says, "it's such a dream role to get to delve into and explore. He falls in love multiple times in the show. He had a passion for Cuban rhythms and integrated them into New York music to create his own soulful sound. It takes dark times to get to that place."

His wife/widow is double-cast with relative newcomer Teal Wicks (*Wicked*) and vivacious vet Linda Hart (*Catch Me If You Can*, *Hairspray*). "I sing a Berns song you've never heard of," says Hart. "It's called 'I'm a Liar.' I sing it because, basically, I've lied to my kids all their lives, put their father on a pedestal, told them [that] he went to Juilliard when he was a street guy."

Leslie Kritzer (*Elf*) plays the grown daughter trying to reinforce that rickety pedestal. "I relate a lot to Jessie," she admits. "She's a woman going through this 'Why am I here?' thing, and, through this show, she finds out what her purpose is—that is to carry on her father's legacy in the way she could never carry on her own talent in music. That's basically our story—her finding her dad and making that connection." ♦



Bert Berns (center) at a recording session with Atlantic Records head Jerry Wexler (left)