

I AM WOMAN STORY RECALLED - By Ray Burton
The Man who wrote "I AM WOMAN"
Lifetime Honorary Member of the International Songwriters Association



Ray and Helen in the early 1970s

Having been born into a show-biz family, you could say I grew up in the band room. By 4, I was on stage performing, and it was said, "I brought the house down."

My professional career (earning a living) as a musician began at 16 when I was performing with the Dave Bridge Quartet. In my teens, I toured Australia supporting several international bands during the 1960s British Rock Band invasion.

As my skills progressed, I joined the renowned Delltones as the tenor singer and shared lead vocals. The members of these bands were much older than myself, their mentoring and support taught me invaluable lessons in musicianship and stage performance.

In my early 20's, I set sail for America with the highly successful Australian band The Executives" We had already toured extensively, and management believed we were ready to showcase our talents in the USA. With great enthusiasm, we boarded P&O's *Oriana* and sailed away to our destinies.

The Executives were managed by American Frank Day, who also managed Bobby Rydell, etc. Frank Day worked out of the same entertainment agency as Jeff Wald (Helen Reddy's husband and manager at the time) and Ron Deblasio, who was involved in the management of a very young Billy Joel. Frank, Jeff and Ron, all shared the same office/agency in Hollywood.

Helen and I knew each other in Australia where we'd worked in similar venues. We were Aussie expats in a foreign port; hanging out together meant we could speak the same language and share a similar culture and upbringing. We were on the same page so to speak.

Coincidentally, my Mother had her band in the 1960s. She backed Helen Reddy for one of Helen's very early Australian shows at the Hurstville RSL in Sydney. My Mother's band, which also included my singing MC stepdad, had a long-time residency at this venue. They were The Crazy Crotchets.

When I arrived in Hollywood, Helen still, after two years there, only had one song on the American charts, "*I Don't Know How to Love Him*" from the "Jesus Christ Superstar" musical. Fearful her career was going nowhere and her husband busy promoting other talent, Helen needed material for an album.

Knowing I was a songwriter, I was invited out to dinner on a few occasions with Helen and her husband, Jeff. I would meet them at their house, which was located off Mulholland Drive; then we would all hit the town in Jeff's luxurious Mercedes Benz, dressed to impress anybody and everybody we encountered.

The number one topic of conversation at these dinners and outings?--songs of course! We discussed: who, in my opinion, were the best songwriters at the time? the finer points of songwriting, various successful songwriters, and how these songwriters broke through? Helen didn't write music or songs, so she was keen to collaborate with me and learn if she could. Why? We had known each other for some time and she trusted me to support, guide and help her.

We started collaborating once or twice a week, writing song ideas that might work for Helen's career. Our goal was primarily focused on writing Helen a hit song that would appeal to the American market and maybe even the world.

While I was helping Helen, I also wrote 90% of the songs for my band, The Executives (renamed Inner Sense by then). We were recording at Record Plant West, on West Third Street in LA, and between Helen's music project, my band's recordings and ongoing band rehearsals, I was kept very busy!

With my lady friend at the time, I also looked after Helen and Jeff's house up on Mulholland Drive (house-sitting), Several times, we watched over Helen's then-young daughter Traci as well. This gave Helen and Jeff some much-needed personal and social free time. We did this often and because we were friends.

At the time, all around the world, Women's Liberation groups were forming at a rapid rate; and Germaine Greer seemed to flood the media talking about women's liberation and equal rights, while at the same time, promoting her book "The Female Eunuch."

During the heady times of the late 1960s and throughout the early 1970s, there were many female "networking" gatherings up at Jeff and Helen's house. I was an early male advocate for women's equality, probably due to my mother's band leadership and her fierce independence. I

was the only male invited to these gatherings (or perhaps the only male brave enough to be there?)

As a songwriter and a wordsmith, I'll admit, I sometimes felt like an alien at these gatherings. Yet, I was fascinated by the passion, anger, hurt, and spirit of the conversations once the subject of "women's rights" arose. Gender equality was so controversial at the time, it was at the forefront of almost every female psyche. Activists like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and Germaine Greer had exposed massive inequality towards women, and there was nowhere to hide. From personal lives to work life, finances to contraception, you name it, it was on the table and hotly discussed at Helen's sometimes heated gatherings.

On the streets, we saw in the media the marches, the protests, the demands for change exploding all around us. They were up against every level of power--politicians, bosses, "the system," even fathers, husbands and brothers were struggling with the demand for change. It all felt so scary yet somehow stimulating to watch. However, from a male songwriter's perspective, I knew this was powerful subject matter for a controversial song!

At our next songwriting session, I suggested to Helen, "After watching and listening to you and all of your friends' views on equality for women, I believe this issue is larger than life, do you agree?" Helen said, "Of course, it's bigger than we can even imagine because it's bloody well right!"

My response was this: "Look, if you feel so strongly about women's liberation, Helen, why don't you write something down for me to work on?" She did, and about a week later, she presented her words to me on a small A5 note-sized sheet of paper.

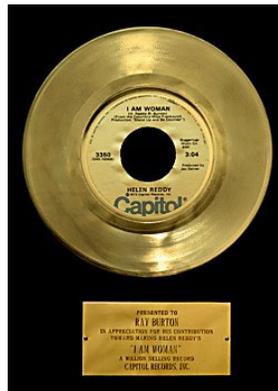
Her words were mostly in prose form, not so much in rhythmic song form. So, I tossed around Helen's words all night and the next day or so. I wanted the song to be convincing and come together in a perfect marriage of lyrics and melody. Something Helen could deliver well and something every woman could relate to and sing out loud with total conviction, e.g. "I Am Woman hear me ROAR!"

Finally, after a lot of manipulation and effort, "I Am Woman" DID at last come together! I remember feeling rather excited about what I'd come up with. I immediately recorded a demo of the song with my vocals on it and presented it on cassette tape to Helen the next day. Helen loved it. Jeff Wald loved it too, and he believed we were onto something big. Jeff had something to sell! Jeff, being the super salesman that he was, quickly sprang into action, promoting Helen over the phone and spreading Helen Reddy's name far and wide throughout the offices of Capitol Records on Hollywood and Vine. The name Ray Burton, the man responsible for the song, barely rated a mention though.

We were all so confident this song was a winner that Helen recorded it on her very first album for Capitol Records. We were right about how good it was, but our timing was off. In the music industry, some songs are called "sleepers"—"I Am Woman" was exactly that. It was two years later, in 1972 after being placed in the movie "Stand Up and Be Counted," that "I Am Woman" was released and the song made history. It launched Helen Reddy's career and that story later

became a movie. A movie that didn't necessarily project the absolute truth. Again, the name Ray Burton barely rated a mention, except for the roll-down credits at the end of the movie. That's if you were prepared to wait five minutes or more after the movie ended, to see those credits. Most audiences leave the theatre after the movie, and never see those credits. It can be very disheartening for a creator, to say the least.

"I Am Woman" is the goose that laid the golden egg for Helen Reddy. Without it, her career would have floundered, like so many other great talents in history that most of us never get to hear or see. It takes a combination of many assets to collide at the right time for a hit song to get through, and once the world knows your name, the doors of opportunity open wide to make room for even more opportunity. It's a well-known fact!



Internationally, I AM WOMAN launched, then rapidly climbed the charts like a rocket speeding toward the stars.

I believe that I am a very large part of Helen Reddy's success and history! That is not an egotistical or arrogant statement, I am, in fact, a humble or maybe even introverted personality, I'm just telling the absolute truth here, from my vantage point. Emotionally painful for me, Helen and her management denied and undervalued my significant contribution from the moment that song began climbing the charts.

For once, I want the absolute truth told for the sake of myself, for my family, for my grandkids and beyond. In the Helen Reddy movie, the information, be it true or false, will live on in the archives, and that's what the people who see the movie will remember and believe FOREVER. Again, for me, that causes deep concern.

The truth is, I AM the MAN who wrote "*I AM WOMAN.*"



I am weary of being buried in the shadows, never once either properly acknowledged or even mentioned as Ray Burton, the songwriter, in any of Helen's interviews. I DO "get it"! It didn't "look good" for a MAN to have had anything to do with writing such a worldwide feminist anthem, did it? No! Imagine the dire consequences if all of the irate women of the world knew that a man was responsible for such a large percentage of this now-famous song.

RAY BURTON . . . TRACK RECORD:

THE TELSTARS - Band - CBS - Sven Lebek - achieved a big hit in Sweden

The Telstars - Reef Ride 1963

THE SINNERS - Band (Sydney Easter Show + Country Showground Circuit - Laurel Lee etc. - Con Lianos Marque)

THE DAVE BRIDGE QUARTET (@ 16 youngest member) - Band - Festival

THE DELLTONES - Vocal Quartet - Festival - Singer (@ 18 youngest member)

THE QUESTIONS - Band - Guitarist / Vocals with Doug Parkinson

DYNASTY - Band - - Lead Singer-Guitarist

THE EXECUTIVES - Band - Festival - Singer-Guitarist / Songwriter - Off to the USA

Songwriter - wrote I AM WOMAN for/with Helen Reddy in the USA - Capitol Records

Played guitar (2 tracks) for Billy Joel on Cold Spring Harbour album - Paramount

BURTON & CUNICO - Duo - Paramount - Top 10 USA FM charts

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE - Top Band (Northern NSW)

PUNCH - Band in Los Angeles USA

LEO DeCASTRO & FRIENDS - Band - Mushroom - Melbourne

BURTON, MAGUIRE & KENNEDY - Band - Trio - Mushroom - Melbourne

AYERS ROCK - Band (Foundation member) - Mushroom - Melbourne

THE FERAMONES - Lead singer - Band (Byron Bay Area)

Toured and played shows with Internationals:

QUEEN

THE SMALL FACES

THE WHO

PROFUL HAREM

JIMMY WEBB

JOHN PAUL YOUNG

MANFRED MANN

PJ PROBY

JOAN ARMATRADING and more . . .

TV Shows:

COUNTDOWN

IN MELBOURNE TONIGHT

THE GRAHAM KENNEDY SHOW

HEY HEY IT'S SATURDAY

BANDSTAND (Brian Henderson)

6 O'CLOCK ROCK (Johnny O'Keefe)

THE DON LANE SHOW and many more TV shows in the USA

Albums:

THE EXECUTIVES - Festival Records

STRIVE SEEK FIND - (USA) Paramount

DREAMER & NIGHTFLYERS - Warner Brothers - WEA

BLU-AZZ - Independent - Recorded at Studio 301 Byron Bay

*The views expressed here are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.