

“What the World Needs Now is Love”—Jackie DeShannon (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Serene Dominic (guest post)*



Jackie DeShannon

Burt Freeman Bacharach. No other American composer navigated the 20th and 21st century pop landscapes so deftly and bridged the gaps between classical composition, pre-rock Tin Pan Alley to the Brill Building to Broadway to the British Invasion, jazz, soul, pop, punk, Britpop and even rap (he worked with Dr. Dre and Isaac Hayes’ cover of “Walk On By” has been sampled by virtually every old school rapper). And now, with his recent passing at age 94, no one else ever will.

Ever the workaholic, Bacharach’s industrious output has left us enough passionate explosions of pure music, enough Top 40 masterpieces, enough dissertations of heartbreak and betrayal to last till the end of time. But the idea that no more will be forthcoming is more than a trifle depressing.

Throughout his illustrious career, Bacharach has garnered 73 US Top 40 hits, with 21 of them sung by Dionne Warwick. Six were “Billboard” number ones, three composed with his longtime lyrical partner Hal David (“(They Long to Be) Close To You,” “This Guy’s In Love with You” and “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head”), and three with his third wife and lyricist Carole Bayer Sager (“That’s What Friends are For,” “On My Own” and “Arthur’s Theme (The Best That You Can Do”). He’s had five Academy Award Best Song nominations (“The Look of Love,” “Alfie,” “What’s New Pussycat?”, “Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head” and “Arthur’s Theme”--with the final two collecting the Oscar statuettes).

But none of these chart-toppers or award accruing songs became Bacharach’s signature song--that honor went to “What the World Needs Now is Love,” a Top 10 hit and Grammy nominated number. Since Bacharach began making concert appearances, this song been his perennial

opener and finale--even Bacharach's first two TV specials were similarly bookended. It's the go-to number any talk show house band would strike up whenever he walked onstage to tumultuous applause. It's as synonymous with Bacharach's celebrity as it is with "love sweet love," maybe more so.

Which might explain why the hundreds of cover versions sound more like a tribute to the man and his musical genius rather than the rumination of a world overstocked with mountains, hillsides, meadows and wheatfields but where love is the most depleted natural resource there is.

Hal David wrote what amounted to a gentle yet forceful protest song, its title an attention grabbing advertising slogan for love or the lack thereof. In its day, AM radio was wall-to-wall with songs about love, but always of the I-love-you, you-love-me-or-maybe-you-don't-love-me variety. Here was possibly the first pop song about universal love, one that also manages to take the Almighty Himself to task for being a stingy supplier. "*Oh listen, Lord if you really want to know,*" DeShannon chides the Man Upstairs like he's a well-intentioned but tone-deaf friend who needs to take more of an interest in what's going on instead of showing up with yet another unnecessary hillside. Pretty heady stuff to be going up against "Wooly Bully" and "I'm Henry the VIII"!

And yet the song almost didn't happen. Originally written for Gene Pitney but never shown to him when Bacharach and David had a falling out with Pitney's manager, it was then pitched to torch singer Timi Yuro who told Bacharach what he could do with his precision vocal coaching and lived to regret her hubris.

Bacharach lost faith in the song after Dionne turned it down for being "too country" (most likely she heard the demo meant for Pitney). It was only at David's urging that he play it for Jackie DeShannon that Bacharach pulled it out of a drawer after eight months.

It's doubtful that Hal David would've allowed the first of his "message" songs to languish unheard forever. In his book of prose titled "What the World Needs Now and Other Love Lyrics," he states that this lyric had the longest gestation period of any Hal David ever penned. "I had thought of the idea at least two years before showing it to Burt. Then one day, I thought of 'Lord, we don't need another mountain,' and all at once I knew how the lyric should be written."

It probably helped that DeShannon, an accomplished hit composer in her own right, could look at the number as an objective peer. Once she became sufficiently enthused about its chances, Bacharach quickly booked a session at Bell Studios with the usual crew, including Cissy Houston on background vocals, and voila, it's a monster! Dionne Warwick finally got around to recording the song in 1967 and has sung it in concert ever since, giving it the veneer of implied ownership. Although it's a fine rendition, the DeShannon version renders it anti-climactic.

What especially makes it so memorable is DeShannon's hesitant accents on "*What the world*" (the exact phrasing that Timi Yuro refused to do to Bacharach's specifications) and her soulful *woe-woahs* on the chorus sounds as if she's genuinely empathetic about the sad state of world affairs. Although never directly mentioned, the unrest of living with an escalating and unjust

Vietnam War informs every second of “What the World Needs Now Is Love.” Only the background vocal and timpani buildup, which starts at two minutes and 35 seconds, conveys any sense of real anger about the long wait for universal love. After climaxing, the record ends as it began, with that sad little tuba riff, to remind listeners if they continue to withhold love, the waiting might never end.

The fact that a 1971 cover version by KGBS Los Angeles DJ Tom Clay which consisted of a six minute and ten second sound collage, superimposing sound bites of boot camp drills, the Kennedy assassinations, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Clay’s quizzing of a preschooler on the subject of bigotry and prejudice over the schlockiest Vegas medley of “What The World Needs Now is Love” and Dion’s “Abraham, Martin and John” could made it up to number eight proves that waiting for universal love would be a lot longer than even Bacharach and David could have predicted.

Serene Dominic is a freelance writer whose works have appeared in “Phoenix New Times,” “The Arizona Republic,” “Detroit Metro Times,” “Dallas Observer,” “Guitar Magazine,” “Seattle Weekly” and “New York Press.” His book “Burt Bacharach: Song By Song” was published by Omnibus Press in 2006 and was endorsed by the man himself.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.