

Bert Berns records
Van Morrison for
Bang Records,
New York City, 1967



AHMET ERTEGUN AWARD

Bert Berns

He wrote and produced timeless hits,
ran his own indie label,
and discovered major talents.

BY JOEL SELVIN

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ert Berns can't be easily explained in a few words. He was a consummate record man who died at age 38 in 1967, after seven years in the record business. He left behind a wife, three small children, and many bereaved friends and associates who loved and looked up to him. He also left behind a number of angry enemies. Some of them remain pissed to this day.

Berns did take short cuts in his career. He had to: As a teenager growing up in the Bronx, he suffered from rheumatic fever and, in those days before heart surgery, he was told he would not live to be 21. He didn't make his first record until he was 31; he then made fifty-one chart records in seven years. But more than writing and producing hits and thus playing an important role in the history (and solvency) of Atlantic Records, Berns ultimately wound up running his own successful independent label, Bang Records, and discovering major talents such as Van Morrison and Neil Diamond.

His songs have been recorded by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Led Zeppelin. Janis Joplin based her career on his "Piece of My Heart" – a song torn from his own pathology – which Berns had first recorded with Aretha Franklin's sister Erma. "Twist and Shout"





Clockwise from top left: With Neil Diamond, Ellie Greenwich, and Jeff Barry (from left); with various producers and songwriters, including Sam Cooke, Phil Spector, Jerry Leiber, and Mike Stoller, c. 1963; with son Brett, 1965; with Jerry Wexler, c. 1965.



was a song he batted out in a few minutes with Phil Medley, another songwriter down the hall at 1650 Broadway, the other Midtown music headquarters besides the Brill Building customarily reserved for upstart rock & rollers; he used the chord changes to Berns' favorite Ritchie Valens song, "La Bamba." Whatever "Twist and Shout" is, it is so much more than a hit record. It is a touchstone of every rock & roll band; the song that launched a thousand jams; some kind of ultimate pinnacle statement of the meaning of life and music.

Berns' first hit was "A Little Bit of Soap" by the Jarmels, in 1961. He was working as a fifty-dollar-a-week pluggger for song publisher Robert Mellin Music. By the end of the following year, he was living in a Manhattan penthouse with a fishbowl stuffed full of royalty checks, as he was too busy to go to the bank. He worked elbow-to-elbow with all the greats of the Midtown R&B scene. He almost landed a major break on "If I Didn't Have a Dime (to Play the Jukebox)" with Gene Pitney until disc jockeys turned over the single and broke the B side, "Only Love Can Break a Heart," a hit by another up-and-coming songwriter, Burt Bacharach. Producers Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller made a Top Five hit out of his "Tell Him" with the Exciters in 1962.

He was encouraged by Jerry Wexler, one of the partners in Atlantic Records, who gave "Twist and Shout" to another unknown producer, 19-year-old Phil Spector, who made a mess of Berns' song with a long-forgotten duo called the Top Notes. Berns went to Scepter Records, where he produced the song with the Isley Brothers – complete with his original Afro-Cuban vision – and the record stayed high on the charts throughout the summer of 1962. Wexler brought him into the Atlantic fold, and there Berns supervised a series of records that made Solomon Burke one of the signal figures of R&B, starting with "Cry to Me" in 1962.

Berns loved Cuban music – he danced in mambo parlors all over New York as a youth and even traveled to Havana before Castro took over – and he put the mambo in rock



With Wexler and Nesuhi and
Ahmet Ertegun (from left)

& roll. His 1964 version of his song (cowritten with Wes Farrell) “My Girl Sloop” with veteran rhythm & blues group the Vibrations was a towering fusion of Afro-Cuban and rhythm & blues.

After the Beatles made “Twist and Shout” a worldwide sensation, Berns, alone among his New York contemporaries, went to England, where he conducted sessions for Decca Records. The first American producer to work in British studios, he also made use of a young session player named Jimmy Page, then 19. When Berns returned to England, it was to produce the first hit by the Northern Irish rock band Them, featuring vocalist Van Morrison. He recorded the band singing his song “Here Comes the Night,” which became one of the biggest U.K. chart hit records in 1965 – not a bad year for the British charts.

He started Bang Records in 1965 in partnership with the three owners of Atlantic – the label name is an acronym drawn from their first names (Bert Berns, Ahmet Ertegun, Nesuhi Ertegun, Gerald Wexler). Bang scored hits out of the box via Berns songs by the Strangeloves (“I Want Candy”) and the McCoys, who reprised his song as “Hang On Sloop,” earning the new label a Number One in the first months of operation. Berns also signed an unknown Neil Diamond, a protégé of his close friends, the songwriters Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. He brought Van Morrison over to the U.S. to produce his first solo record, “Brown Eyed Girl,” for Bang.

After a dispute over the Bang partnership was settled on Berns’ behalf by Genovese family boss Tommy Eboli – another close, perhaps less savory friend of Berns – Wexler refused to speak to Berns again. Wexler had been more

than a supporter, mentor, and friend; he had been almost a father figure, and singularly responsible for Berns’ career – and considered the break a mortal betrayal.

For his part, Berns thought he was protecting his own hard-won domain. He knew his time was running out; he could not afford to wait and would not compromise. He fought back, fiercely. In his waning days, as he and Diamond battled and Morrison chafed under his hand, as he kept himself surrounded by Pall Malls, pills, guns, and mobsters, he was ruling an empire as vital and vivid as any of the lords of the Manhattan R&B scene. His “Are You Lonely for Me Baby” was a Number One R&B hit for Freddie Scott in 1966, and he cut the searing Erma Franklin version of “Piece of My Heart” in the last months of his life.

When he died on December 30, 1967, of that long-expected heart attack, he was building a house for his family, preparing for the future. His third child, Mark, had been born three weeks before. He was moving forward at full speed, unaware that his era was already over: He had already outlived his time. He had walked with the men and women who invented the music, but artists like Diamond and Morrison were bridges to a new era in pop, an era beyond the echoes of Tin Pan Alley. But during the golden era of rhythm & blues, an almost mythical moment in American music, Bert Berns was one of its princes.