

Artistry in Music

Lyricists Alan and Marilyn Bergman celebrate 50 years of collaboration and bringing the art of the lyric to film

By Janet Margolis

“Our girl is lovely, Hubbell,” Katie says as she strokes the lock of hair on Hubbell’s forehead. The music swells as *The Way We Were*’s title song and accompanying scene become entrenched in our hearts forever.

This year, “The Way We Were” songwriters Alan and Marilyn Bergman are celebrating fifty years of artistic devotion to their life’s work: writing lyrics, many of them to the soundtracks of well-known films.

Before fate brought them together, Alan and Marilyn had similar upbringings.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, they both recount memories of their mothers’ commitment to music in their lives; piano lessons and visits to Saturday morning free children’s concerts at Carnegie Hall helped create a path towards a life in the arts. It was not until years later (in Los Angeles) that they met and began collaborating on their passion for writing songs.

They had their first success with the song “Yellow Bird”. “That helped pay the rent for quite a few years while we kept writing and honing our craft,” explains Alan.

The couple always knew they wanted to write for film and, one day, the opportunity came knocking—literally. As the Bergmans tell it, neighbor Quincy Jones asked if they’d be interested in writing a title song (to be sung by Ray Charles) for the film *In the Heat of the Night*. The director of that film, Norman Jewison, then offered them an assignment for his next movie, *The Thomas*



Alan and Marilyn Bergman working with composer Michel Legrand. Image courtesy the artist.



Alan and Marilyn Bergman. Photo by Spike Nannarello.

Crown Affair, which produced the Golden Globe and Academy Award-winning “The Windmills of Your Mind”, one of the most important and memorable examples of how music enhances the tension in a film, develops the mood and sets the tone. This was the beginning of multiple award-winning projects such as 1973’s *The Way We Were* and 1984’s Academy Award-winning score for *Yentl* (for which they wrote the lyrics).

In between movie assignments, theater projects, and TV title songs (“Maude”, “Good Times”), Alan and Marilyn contributed some of the songs that comprise what is known as The Great American Songbook. Their lyrics grace “How Do You Keep the Music Playing?”, “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers”, “The Summer Knows”, “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?”, and “Where Do You Start?”, to name but a few.

When asked about their artistic process, the Bergmans tell of the seamless interchanging of roles of creating and editing that goes on between

them. When writing for film, their first loyalty is to the screenplay, to which they try to be an extension. With director and composer, they discuss the role of the song and the point of view of the lyric—both are important in supporting the scene and marrying the images that an audience will remember long after leaving the theater.

“Songs bring associations,” explains Marilyn. “When the singer, film and song are powerful—larger than life—it is like the stars are aligned!”

Now, *Lyricaly*, a 13-song collection, features for the first time Alan singing some of the Bergmans’ most popular works. The critically acclaimed CD includes the couple’s award-winning songs created in collaboration with such famous composers as Michel Legrand, Dave Grusin, Neil Diamond, Marvin Hamlisch, and Cy Coleman, among others.

Marilyn, the president and chairman of the Board of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) and its foundation, is also blazing new ground in the field of musical education for children. *Children Will Listen* is just one of the programs she has helped institute to educate children in all aspects of theater—particularly the musical—by affording young people the opportunity to experience and attend a Broadway show.

From their induction into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1980 to a commissioned 2002 jazz concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. titled *Portraits in Jazz: A Gallery of Songs*, the Bergmans’ list of accolades and credits is overwhelming. But they seem to take it all in stride. “We are a work in progress. We still have a lot of things to say, a lot of things to write and a lot of things to learn,” confides Marilyn.

So the next time you hear a song with lyrics that conjure up images of a classic film, thank Alan and Marilyn Bergman for their unique artistry. ■