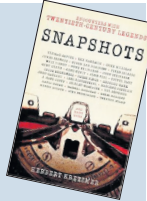


## HERBERT'S THREE INTERVIEWS WITH OLIVER! WRITER SHOWS LIONEL'S

# Bart: Jews need approval is why they entertain so

BEST known as the award-winning lyricist of *Les Miserables* and Charles Aznavour's hit *She*, **HERBERT KRETZMER** has had an equally noteworthy career in journalism. *Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth Century Legends* (The Robson Press, £25) brings together some of his interviews. The book features his encounters with Matt Busby, Spike Milligan, Leni Riefenstahl, Peter Sellers, Walt Disney and Billy Wilder, to name a few. Here, we reproduce three interviews with musical writer Lionel Bart in 1960, 1961 and 1965.



"I was happier when I was playing washboard for Tommy Steele."

BORN Lionel Begleiter in 1930, youngest of eight children of an Austrian Jewish tailor, he grew up in Stepney, London.

His youthful ambition was to be a painter, but a natural, unforced talent for popular melody soon revealed itself.

He wrote the early hits of Cliff Richard, Tommy Steele and Anthony Newley. In 1959 he wrote the lyrics (to Laurie Johnson's music) of the Mermaid Theatre's inaugural production *Lock Up Your Daughters*.

Bigger things were to follow . . .

★  
July 3, 1960

THE most successful British songwriter since Ivor Novello and Noël Coward is a small, dark ex-slum dweller with a chip on his shoulder, three cars in his

## Headache deciding what to turn down

garage, and an income of something like £50,000 a year.

His name is Lionel Bart. It is an easy name to remember, and that's the way Bart likes it. He writes songs that are easy to remember, too.

Some envious rivals decry Bart as 'dead commercial', but any of them would trade their teeth for his common touch and royalties.

It is practically certain that, at some stage in the past few years, you have hummed or whistled a Bart melody (*Fings Ain't Wat They Used T'Be*, *Livin' Doll*, *Little White Bull*) without giving a second thought to the identity of the author.

Lionel Bart has won so many Ivor Novello Awards (the Oscars of British songwriting) that the annual prize-giving event at the Savoy has become known, ruefully, as 'Bart's Benefit'.

Just three nights ago he staged

a triumphant invasion of the London stage for the third time in 1960 with the opening of *Oliver!*, a musical based on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, for which Bart wrote the book, music and lyrics.

He lives today in a plush mews house near the South Kensington tube station (which he never uses) and has found solace in the ownership of expensive automobiles.

I called to see him at his home some hours before the curtain went up on the first night of *Oliver!* He was extremely nervous about the prospects of the show.

"I tell you straight, mate," he said. "If anything goes wrong on the stage tonight, I'm going to walk out of the theatre and wander around Trafalgar Square until it's all over."

Eleven hours later Bart stood backstage at the New Theatre being kissed, backslapped and hand-pumped in a delirium of congratulation after one of the most ecstatic first-night receptions London has witnessed since *Oklahoma!* came to town.

Bart accepted the idolatry with a succession of quick, nervous grins. Perspiration filmed his forehead. He glistened like a garden gnome after a shower.

But all this — and the banner-waving press notices next morning — still lay ahead of him when Bart and I talked in his mews flat.

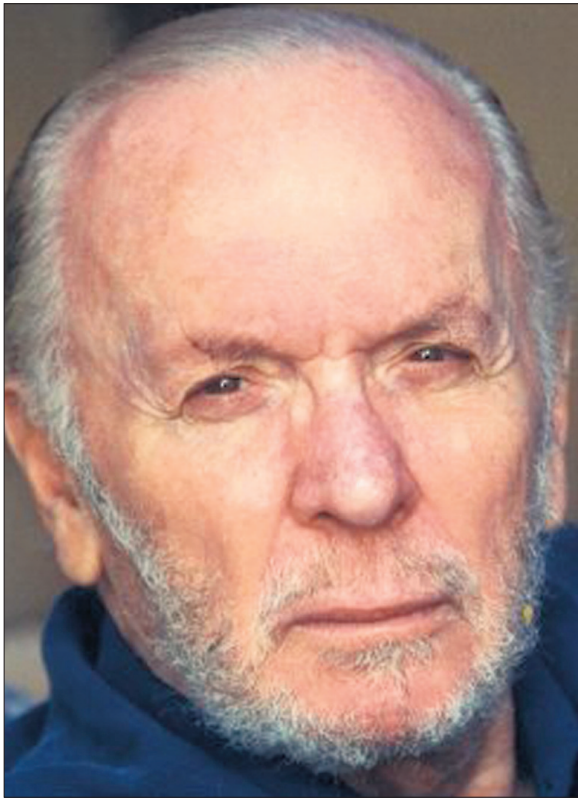
He drank a cup of hot tea and stubbed out a half-smoked cigarette. Success has turned him into an anxious man.

"I am always worrying about what comes next," he said. "It's a dodgy lark, I tell you. Some people get dizzy with success. Not me. I get apprehensive. That's the word . . ."

Bart rubbed the side of his nose with his knuckles. It is a long, thin nose that is poised over his mouth like a permanent exclamation mark.

"The phone never stops ringing," he mock-complained. "I am inundated with offers. People want me to write songs for shows, songs for films."

"It's a headache deciding what to take on, what to turn down. I have just rejected a Hollywood offer to write all the songs for Elvis Presley's next picture.



COLLECTED WORKS: Herbert Kretzmer

"Everything I do must be bigger and better than anything I have done before. That's my kick, mate."

The ivory telephone rang at his elbow. Bart spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Who wants seats for the show? Lord Whom? OK, tell him he can have two."

Bart replaced the phone, lit another cigarette, juggling with a heavy silver table lighter, which was reluctant to ignite.

"Where was I?" he said. "Basically I'm successful because I never write into a void. I always know just who I'm writing a song for."

"When I write a Tommy Steele song, like *Handful of Songs*, I write it specifically for Tommy and nobody else. It works better that way, mate. It really does."

Lionel Bart talks in a soft sandpaper voice with more than a suggestion of a lisp. He comes from London's East End, a notable crucible of Jewish artistic talent.

"I was born," he told me, "in a maternity home we called Mother Levy's."

"I was the youngest of eight

of needing to be approved of, than minority groups like Jews and negroes. That is why they make such brilliant entertainers. They need all that approval, all the applause.

"It's a kind of love, isn't it? People like me who come from the gutters of the East End, we haven't got time for all that surface chi-chi like *Salad Days* (a musical about a magic piano by Julian Slade). We have seen too much that is real."

Bart now plans to go into hibernation for a year. His major project for the next year is a massive folk opera, conceived on the scale of *Porgy and Bess*, which will describe the life of London's East End under bomb fire.

The show, ready in 1961, will be called quite simply *Blitz!*

Bart writes songs with remarkable speed (maximum time per song: 60 minutes), but claims that he needs days and months, even years, of thinking the song out before he reaches the point of creation. He would not describe himself as a happy person.

"I was happier," he said, "when I was playing washboard for Tommy Steele in the early days, and loafin' around Soho with 15 bob in my pocket."

Now when he sits in his £4,250 Mercedes Benz convertible (registration plate LB 4), Lionel Bart knows that he has come a long way. But he knows something else too, that at 27 he is just beginning.

★  
With three consecutive hit shows to his name, the unstoppable Bart now turned his attention to an epic musical that, he boasted, would dwarf its predecessors. Conceived on the scale of grand opera, *Blitz!* would re-tell the story of the German air raids on London in 1940. It would be a tribute to the fighting spirit of London's East End.

★  
September 30, 1961

A few minutes after 11 o'clock last Tuesday morning, in his little mews house in South Kensington, Mr Lionel Bart reached for a fat pencil and scribbled 10 words of a song lyric on a large sheet of white paper.

"No more bunking over walls," he wrote, "Duty calls, hallelujah, duty calls!"

He underlined the words and sat back. Another Bart musical was done.

After six years of planning, four months of actual writing, *Blitz!* to be presented in London in the spring of 1962, was in the bag. *Oliver!* had a successor.

Yesterday Mr Bart was still pretty wound up about the enterprise. The expected elation following the completion of a big show had not materialised.

He paced the floor like a small, nervous ant-eater.

"Man, it's finished. But it's just beginning. Now we start pulling it to pieces."

## RISE AND DRAMATIC FALL WITH TWANG!!

# - and that brilliantly



ARROGANT: Lionel Bart

*Blitz!*, he told me, was the biggest thing he had ever attempted.

"The story covers, like, the whole canvas of the German air raids on the East End," he said.

"It takes place in the Underground shelters and in Petticoat Lane. The leading lady is a big Cockney Jewish mama."

"I already got someone in mind. Real matriarchal. She'll be wild."

The story goes back to Bart's own roots. Born within a shout of Petticoat Lane, he was a 10-year-old awaiting evacuation when the bombs began to fall. He saw London burning.

It is no coincidence that both *Oliver!* and *Blitz!* are spelled with exclamation marks. Bart likes to think in superlatives.

He describes his new show as something the size of *Porgy and Bess*.

"Folk opera!" he says. "Orchestra of 35! Cast of 60! Maybe 70! 25 songs, plus seven repeats. The second act came fast. Finished it in 10 days. When it flows, man, it flows."

Bart jumped up from his chair. Then sat down again. He is full of quick, unexpected moves.

"I'll tell you," he said. "The show is full of kids. Listen . . ."

He rested his lean, tanned hands on his knees and sang an appealing little song at me called *Mums and Dads*. He sang it with a soft, childish voice, dropping aitches all the way.

"I think it'll go," he said.

The most successful British songwriter alive was unknown two years ago, hanging around Soho, churning out tummy-tum ditties for guitar-strumming boy wonders.

Then came the stage shows — *Lock Up Your Daughters*, *Fings Ain't Wat They Used T'Be* and *Oliver!* — three hits in a row. The money began to roll in, and the publicity stories began to roll out. The buzz was fuelled by Bart himself, who, despite occasional

man who dearly loves to see his name in the papers.

Not one in 10,000, I suppose, could name the writers of *Irma La Douce* or *Espresso Bongo* or *The Music Man* (all musicals running in the West End at the time). But everybody has heard of Lionel Bart.

The buzz is not always complimentary. Bart has something of a reputation for conceit and arrogance. Bart is not unaware of this.

"Man, what do they expect me to do? I can't be a nice guy to the whole world. I can't recognise everybody in the street. I have no delusions of grandeur."

"I'm not an intellectual like Peter Ustinov. I'm just a simple guy. They just don't know what the pressures are."

Another attitude towards Bart seeks to nail him as a copy-cat composer. A Bart tune, say his critics, is an old tune tricked up to sound new.

Bart says, "Listen, mate. *Fings* is deliberately derivative of the Thirties. And *Blitz!* will be deliberately based on the musical mood of the Forties. The wartime songs . . . You've got yourself a good popular song when the audience can almost feel the next note, the next lyric. I want my songs to sound familiar."

By adhering to such simple rules, Bart has made a fortune. He says he cannot estimate his income.

"I've got a mental block about figures. At school, when the teachers wrote sums on the blackboard, I kind of blanked over. I don't add up my money. I just use it."

But certain things of his boy-

hood remain with him. These are the things he has poured into *Blitz!*

"I wanted to do something particularly British. Something that owes nothing to American influence. What I remember of the war is the wonderful blitz spirit. It didn't matter if you were Jewish, or black or yellow. You had one common enemy."

"You laughed at the same jokes. You sang the same songs. It shouldn't be necessary to have bombs dropped on our heads before we learn to live with each other and love each other. I hope *Blitz!* says that. I think it does."

★  
*Blitz!* had a respectable, but hardly sensational, run of 568 performances. It contained no outstanding hit songs and is seldom revived.

★  
March 6, 1965

Songwriter Lionel Bart is about to write a musical based on the legend of Robin Hood. The show will not follow the party line about the merry outlaws of Sherwood Forest.

"It is going to be a naughty show," Lionel Bart told me in conspiratorial tones.

"A very naughty show. Robin Hood is a con man, Maid Marian a nympho and Little John an abject coward. You might describe it as a satirical girlie show that is definitely not for the family trade."

I was talking to Mr Bart in his newly acquired house off the Fulham Road — a rambling, 25-roomed mansion with minstrel galleries, carved stonework and stained-glass windows, not to mention a hand-painted mural of the Battle of Agincourt, and seven lavatories, one of them done up as a paneled throne room.

"I'm on a big medieval kick," Mr Bart explained. "Both my next two musicals are set in medieval times. First, the Robin Hood bit. Then a massive spectacular about the Hunchback of Notre Dame in which every line of the dialogue will be sung by up to 100 voices."

"There will be," Bart added as an afterthought, "no orchestra."

He talked about the Robin Hood musical, commissioned by a company headed by Peter Sellers.

"We are calling the show *Twang!!* with two exclamation marks. On the posters we shall have an arrow quivering in a tree.

The show will be subtitled 'The Misadventure of Robin Hood'."

Mr Bart and I took lunch in his spacious study. Between courses he threw back his dark, earnest head and sang me a couple of numbers from *Twang!!*

The first song was titled *Locksmith For The Lady*, and will be sung by a line of leggy girls encased in iron chastity belts by their husbands, who have gone off to the Crusades.

The main burden of the song is concerned with the determination of the lonesome wives to secure the services of a locksmith to liberate them from their frustrations.

Mr Bart followed up with another song in which the wives, now emancipated and unlocked, sing a ditty proclaiming their immediate availability.

The title of this song is self-explanatory: *Thou Hath It Made*. Both songs were pithy, wittily rhymed, and promise well for the rest of *Twang!!*

"What we are doing in *Twang!!*," said Mr Bart, "is to satirise the Crusades, the attitude of the Church and, above all, human gullibility, which can turn an outlawed con man like Robin Hood into some kind of heroic saint."

"Personally, I find con men very colourful," he allowed. "They are, and have to be, chameleon characters, and that is very good theatrically."

Robin will be played by James Booth, veteran of con men roles. *Twang!!* is being written in a hurry. Mr Bart started work on songs

## I find con men very colourful

a fortnight ago. He says he will have the entire first draft of the show written in another week or two.

"In one single night last week I wrote four new songs. That's the way it comes sometimes, in a kind of flood. I can't always write music that way, of course; I have to enjoy doing it. It has to be a labour of love, not a love of labour."

"I can't sweat on lyrics. If I write a song, and it is basically a good song, and for the moment I cannot find a good line or a good rhyme, I don't beat my brains out. I just let it go. It will come later, maybe during rehearsals. The thing to do is not to panic."

After *Twang!!* and the Hunchback musical, Mr Bart plans to stop working altogether and take a year or two off to relax and recuperate.

He said: "I haven't stopped working for eight years. I now receive about a dozen projects a week. I turn them all down."

Mr Bart looked pleased and calm and assured. The world is knocking on his heavy oak doors. He can afford to be choosy.

★  
*Twang!!* was a famous disaster. Lionel Bart rashly tried to save the show by trading his *Oliver!* royalties. He spent the next 20 years, more or less, lost in a stupor induced by drugs and drink, though he occasionally surfaced to announce grandiose new musicals, which existed only in his head.

His only 'hit' (you could hardly call it that) in 20 years was *Happy Endings*, a 30-second advertising jingle for Abbey National featuring Bart sitting at a piano, singing to children.

Lionel Bart died of cancer in 1999 and was cremated at Golders Green,

## NEWS EXTRA



LINK-UP: Robert Weiner

## Alliance will allow movements to 'speak with one voice'

THE Movement for Reform Judaism is creating an alliance with Liberal Judaism.

The link-up will allow them to "speak under one voice," according to MRJ chairman Robert Weiner.

"This is a big opportunity in not only appealing to all our members, but also to the unaffiliated," he said. "We can offer a more compelling and meaningful message."

The alliance will see an expansion of collaboration between the two movements in areas such as student chaplaincy, social justice and social action.

But its leaders stress it is not a merger — and the two movements will retain their autonomy and distinct identities.

Mr Weiner, who implemented the idea with Liberal Judaism chairman Lucian Hudson, said: "Our message is a modern, inclusive message which empowers members to be involved."

"It is very much a current view of Jewish life, as opposed to the traditional one, which can be more problematic. We want to galvanise a lot of people."

He added: "The mechanism is for our movements to better understand how we can work together for the betterment of progressive Judaism in the UK."

## JNF shelters for Bedouin

JNF UK has bought three mobile bomb shelters to protect members of the Negev's Bedouin community.

The charity has linked with the Municipality of Rahat to purchase them.

Rahat, which has a population of 60,000, is the largest Bedouin settlement in Israel.

The shelters will be delivered on Monday. Two will be situated in schools, with the third at a nursery.



FLOP: Actress Barbara Windsor talks to Lionel Bart during rehearsals for *Twang!!*