

For the SCL Score

The Loneliness of Collaboration
By
Michael Isaacson

I recall the giddy feelings I experienced when I would look at a publicity picture of collaborating songwriters like Rogers and Hammerstein or Lerner and Lowe at the piano. They were all elegantly dressed in suits and ties casually grouped at the keyboard with their hands on the other's shoulders as if on the verge of another "You'll Never Walk Alone" or "Wouldn't It Be Lovely". I used to imagine them meeting at their "office" at a sane 11 a.m., working for an hour or two, going off for a sociable lunch at the studio commissary or a club where they would meet their friends and colleagues, catch up on the latest news, and then, refreshed, return eagerly to their creative tasks for another few hours as an amiable duo.

Of course, this was all a publicity agent's pipe dream. More often than not the writing was done in isolation with interim, terse, joint progress reports. Richard Rodger's agony working with Larry Hart is legendary and Alan Jay Lerner's gloved, bleeding hands attested to his anxiety collaborating with Leonard Bernstein on the ill fated *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*.

When one is tuned into the lone songwriter, luminaries like Irving Berlin and Stephan Sondheim seem to have the best of both worlds. They didn't have to put up with the peccadilloes of their collaborators, and if they agonized over their work (though its hard to conjure up a vision of Irving Berlin agonizing) they had the good manners to do it in private.

Today it seems both composers and lyricists are alone whether they are creating individually or in collaboration. No one physically meets for any length these days; the freeways are just too time consuming. Creative partners send sound files, instant messages, PDFs, and e-mails, but they no longer hang out much together, more rare are those civilized lunches at the commissary, and rarer still are those *tête-à-têtes* that brought two creative minds into elegant synchronization.

I wonder if this isolation is reflected in the resulting creative products of today. The ensuing songs may be sleek, but are they humanistically elevating? Are they borne mechanically or are they the consequence of a craftsmanship that expressed itself in a fellowship as well? Do we need to face the generative dragon alone or can our trusty companion and sidekick accompany us along the way?

As I get older, I long for more shoptalk and collaboration and less "lone-wolfing" it. I understand that the act of writing is a solitary pursuit, but it is comforting if not energizing to share the loneliness in a crowd of two or more. Maybe I'd even put on a suit and tie and lean my elbow knowingly on a piano.

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Michael Isaacson is a versatile composer, conductor and orchestrator who, aside from his own extensive credits, has assisted John Williams, Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, Walter Scharf, Charles Fox and many others. He now gives private composition and conducting lessons. Dr. Isaacson may be reached at: eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net