

Composer-pianist Hamlish turns toward the pop arena and explores the dual role of creator and performer.

# Marvin Hamlish Scores Big

Millions of viewers awaken daily to his "Good Morning America" theme on network television. He was the recipient of an unprecedented three Academy Awards for *The Way We Were* and *The Sting* just three years ago; four Grammy Awards the following year; and then nine Tony Awards for *A Chorus Line*. But composer-pianist Marvin Hamlish, currently concentrating on the popular-contemporary field, still doesn't think of himself as a "star."

"You either see me dressed up in a tuxedo or with a five-day beard watching the Yankees," says Hamlish. "My mother says I'm Jekyll and Hyde," he continues, explaining that he is a Gemini. It was a Saturday afternoon in late June, and Hamlish was rehearsing at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall in Washington, D.C., with 70 local musicians. His beard reflected two day's growth. He wore navy chino pants and a bold navy-and-red-striped T-shirt.

Hamlish, a perfectionist, exhibited extreme patience as he calmly told the musicians, "I have a couple of notes hanging over. Try it again."

It is ideal for the artist and musicians if time allows, as at the Kennedy Center, for a rehearsal or two. "When I start to panic is when I don't have the luxury of time," he says. The rehearsal for the Kennedy concert takes five hours.

The benefit concert is a very special one for Hamlish: "It's one of those very prestigious places that you look forward to. A beautiful hall . . . and the name Kennedy . . . what it stands for . . . why it was built. There are certain places that just have a mystique — La Scala, Carnegie Hall — and this is

one."

Many entertainers dream of playing a main room in Las Vegas. But six or seven nights a week in Vegas don't compare favorably for Hamlish to the occasional concert in a prestigious hall.

"I like to entertain, but I don't like to do it too much, because then you really lose sight of the fact that you want to create." Hamlish likes the role of creator and performer, but "after a while you keep doing the same show night after night, and it goes against everything in your creative system."

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To protect himself from falling into that trap, Hamlish always ad-libs a portion of each concert. "Twenty percent is just how I feel at that moment, but everything else is totally prepared. Every line may not be the same every night, but I'm mentally prepared for the direction I wish to take the concert," he explains.

After the concert, Hamlish is physically drained. He tries to make the concert not only energetic, "but as we go toward the end, I find it a very emotional experience." He continues: "I can't quickly unwind from that. I can't quickly unwind from going from *Porgy and Bess* to 'A Chorus Line

Overture' to 'At The Ballet' to 'What I Did For Love' to 'The Way We Were' to 'Light The Candles,' and then walk off the stage and say, 'Hey, let's all get a chocolate sundae.' In Vegas you walk off, and you immediately get a hamburger and get ready for the next show."

Each concert is a personal experience for the 33-year-old composer. And he adds a special touch. At the Kennedy Center, he did "A Chorus Line Overture," which he composed specifically for a symphony orchestra.

*A Chorus Line*, which received nine Tonys, is an unusual musical in that it has no overture. The show, which has no intermission, is built around one audition to choose dancers. Says Hamlish: "To keep the tension of the audition there is no fanfare. It's a very documented type of musical."

Hamlish attributes the success of *A Chorus Line* to the fact that "it breaks the mold in every way." And so does Hamlish, who points to George Gershwin and Jules Stein as having had the greatest influence on his music. Hamlish worked on a couple of shows with Stein, *Fade Out*, *Fade In* and *Gypsy*. Hamlish enjoys show music, and keeps wearing out his recordings of *Gypsy*. He includes his own arrangements of a Gershwin medley from *Porgy and Bess* in his concert repertoire.

Songwriting has now become a chore for Hamlish. "It's a job where somebody has a good title, or there's a need for a song in a certain project." Hamlish recalls that when he was younger he could write a song simply because he felt like it, but it is rare that that happens now.

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Hamlish enjoys listening to show music.

Hamlish works with a lyricist. Recently, he has been moving into the pop-contemporary arena and working most frequently with Carole Bayer Sager. "Usually a title comes first, and then I start to try to write music, and then I like it if the lyricist puts words to the music." Hamlish prefers to write the music before the lyricist begins: "I'm not good at writing music to lyrics. That's not my specialty. I'm better at writing music first with titles, then having the lyricist fill in the gaps, and then if I have to make changes, I make changes."

Hamlish casts his lyricists just as a cast-

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ing director casts the stars of a film: "Obviously, *The Way We Were* needs a romantic movie theme, and the Bergmans are the best at that. If I'm doing a very commercial, rock-oriented thing, I go with Carole Bayer Sager."

Ed Kleben, lyricist for *A Chorus Line*, and Hamlish had never met. Hamlish elaborates: "Kleben was recommended by Michael Bennett, who said he was brilliant and witty, and you have to be witty in a Broadway show. It's very much like the way you choose color for an orchestra when you're doing orchestration, and you know you want the oboe here and the strings there. I feel the same about lyricists. They each bring a different color, and it's a question of what color you want at the time."

Hamlish insists that the two questions he dislikes the most are, "How much do you make on a picture or a show?" (his reply: "not enough") and, "What's going on in your personal life?" However, he makes no secret that he and Carole Bayer Sager are a twosome. This could have some bearing on the recent trend in his music. The personable composer, who was eager to discuss his music, tactfully interrupts personal inquiries with such observant comments as, "The Muzak is now playing in B-flat."

The couple have known each other professionally for more than two years. "She started working on a lyric that she could never write for me," he says laughing. "She just went blank on it. Then we wrote 'Break It To Me Gently' instead." That song was recorded by Aretha Franklin.

Hamlish's songs in collaboration with Carole Bayer Sager also have been recorded by Carly Simon ("Nobody Does It Better") and by Carole on her debut album.

The two also work with other writers. "I think it would be a mistake if we were writing solely together," says Hamlish. "In the same way that I can't write certain things that she can write, she can't write certain things that I can write. Again, it's casting."

"I can't worry about someone's feelings getting in the way at the business level," he adds. Carole had a big hit song this summer, which she wrote with Albert Hammond. "Why would she turn off the possibility of working with Hammond? Why would I turn off the possibility of working with Ed Kleben, who wrote a smash show?"

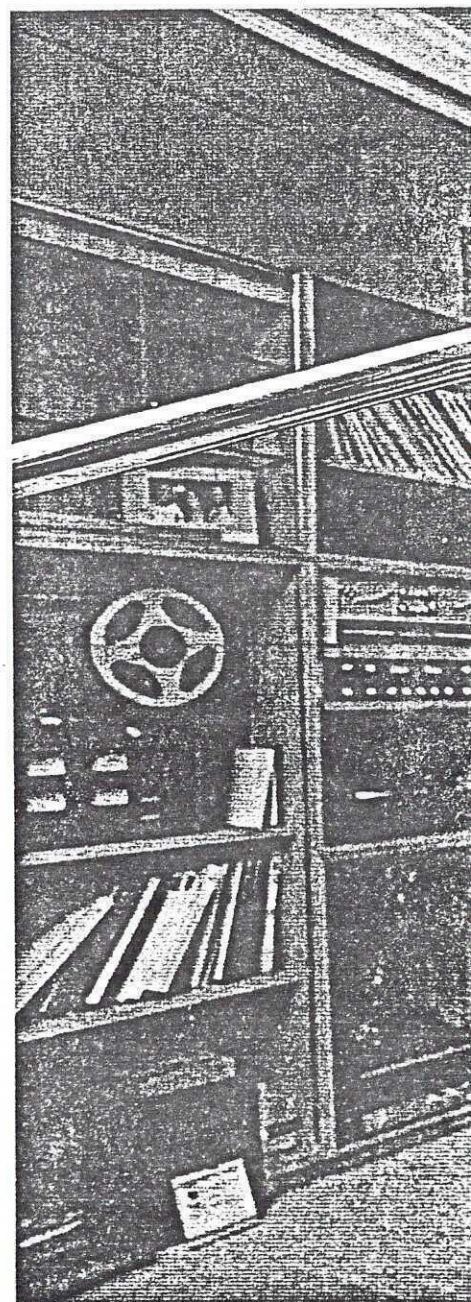
Hamlish's favorite songwriting is for shows. "I love theater," he says. "I love seeing a song performed, as opposed to just buying a record. 'At The Ballet' [from *A Chorus Line*] is a song that will never be a

hit song. People can't dance to it, and yet I'm very proud to have written that song."

The biggest thrill for him is to hear an audience react to one of his songs. "You know, kind of a hush, even a gasp to certain songs," he explains. "To know that you can do that to an audience is exciting."

Hamlish is one of the few composers who plays the piano well. "I get my kicks playing out there, just moving the hands around, and then I must say I love conducting. It's the most fun, especially when an orchestra responds to the conducting."

Of all the kinds of songs, Hamlish prefers to write ballads. He likes the emotional audience response to them. "If you do a fast song today in rock terms, you're emotionally responding to the beat more than anything. A ballad is more of a heart response."



There's a kind of moving response," he explains, snapping his fingers.

Hamlish considers it a major achievement when he plays a new song, such as the theme from *The Spy Who Loved Me* or "Sweet Alibis," and you can hear a pin drop in the house. "One of the things that's interesting that happens on stage that most people don't understand is that if I'm playing something fast or loud, there is no way I can tell what the audience is doing. I have no idea if they like me or are walking out." He compares doing a soft song to taking your life in your hands, because you can hear the coughs and whispers. "I'm very aware of what's out there." It's trying out new numbers that gives Hamlish the greatest satisfaction: "If they are really quiet in 'Sweet Alibis,' you know you have

a special evening."

Hamlish wrote the score for the James Bond film, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, in London in early summer in 1976. "This loneliness problem of a writer is not a kick," he

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recalls. "I mean it's a real truth. I was writing in London. I could have been writing anywhere. You don't know you're in London when you're writing. You're just writing. By the time you finish the score,

you're already pushed into the recording hall to record it, and then you only have about a week left and that's it. I could just as well have been in New York writing because you're inside. Being inside is being inside."

In the United States Hamlish is always being sought out by autograph seekers. "In London," he notes, "no one knows me, and I have to say, in all vanity, I missed it. People associate my name with my music there and not my face. After a while I kind of missed some recognition on the street. I felt like, 'Boy, something went wrong somewhere.'"

Hamlish has progressed a long way since his days at Julliard and as a rehearsal pianist on Broadway. He had his first hit, "Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows," at



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16. In those days he also was composing for another high-school student, Liza Minelli.

While in college he received a phone call from a woman asking him to be a pianist at a party. Hamlish first declined, only to be told that the party was for producer Sam Spiegel (*Lawrence of Arabia* and *On The Waterfront*). He told her he'd be right over. He played the party. Three days later, Hamlish had completed the theme song for Spiegel's *The Swimmer*, and Hollywood film work had begun.

Hamlish did a dozen films he doesn't talk about, and then hit gold with No. 13, *The Way We Were*, and No. 14, *The Sting*, and No. 16, the current *The Spy Who Loved Me*.

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After composing *The Spy Who Loved Me*, Hamlish got the same positive vibes he had with *The Sting*. When he composes for a film, he keeps a tape recorder running. "I play it with the scene and play it over again and again," he says. "Then there comes a moment. It's very much like when you put on a dress or put on a suit, and you go to a mirror, and all of a sudden, you just know. That moment occurs with music also. All of a sudden you go [snaps fingers] 'boom!' It just works. It's a feeling."

Hamlish tries to stay in the pop-contemporary idiom in terms of the rhythmic qualities. "That sells, but at the same time I try to invest the melodic part of the song with good melodic content." Hamlish does feel that his songs are not quite as catchy as he'd like the first time through, with the exception of "The Sting." He adds, "but I didn't write it." (It was his adaptation for which he won an Oscar for best scoring.) "The Way We Were" is not a catchy song, and yet, some of those from *A Chorus Line* are."

"My music is not first-glance music," he contends. "The idea of my music is not to say, 'I love it,' or 'I hate it,' but, 'Gee, I want to hear it again.' " He also tries to avoid reactions he describes as, "Oh, I heard it," "I know it," "Don't," "The end." He continued, "You have to work a little bit on my music, You can't just accept it . . . at face value." A

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