“Alfie” - Dionne Warwick

My assigned song is “Alfie” by Dionne Warwick, released in 1967 and written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David. When considering this piece within the context of this class, Thinking About Popular Music, it is important to delve into a multitude of aspects of the song, ranging from the intricacies of the music itself to the broader historical context it exists in.

“Alfie” is a pop and R&B ballad that questions love and purpose, with undertones of existential despair. The opening line, “what’s it all about”, questions life itself and its underlying meaning. When examining the lyrics further, it becomes clear that the song is examining cynicism through questions of whether or not kindness and compassion are still relevant in a world that feels cold and transactional. When considering the historical context of this song, and that it was written during the Civil Rights Movement, it demonstrates a despair felt by many during this time. Moving into the backstory of this song, it was originally written for the movie “Alfie”, recorded by other artists, but Dionne Warwick’s version was the prevailing and dominant one in the United States. The soul behind her vocals coupled with its melodic shifts and message resonated with so many Americans, especially during a time in the United States where there was much unrest and questions of whether or not there would be much needed strides towards equality for all Americans.

Dionne’s contract to record her unique rendition of “Alfie” is a result of successful previous collaborations with Bacharach and David, as well as her prominence as a leading pop and R&B vocalist. Her other hits, “Walk on By” and “I Say a Little Prayer”, among others, caught audiences’ attention across the country, making her an ideal candidate for recording this beautiful work from the hit movie. Even though Warwick was initially hesitant to record the song because there were already multiple versions on the market, her version of the song was received fantastically during its original release, and it became the definitive version in the US, going as far as to receive a Grammy nomination. While this song does not have as much popularity in mainstream media today, it had immense success when it was released.

In terms of music technology when this song emerged, there was multitrack recording and stereo sound, which made it possible to create fuller, richer songs. The orchestration, with its swelling strings and unique yet home-like chord progressions, feels almost like something out of a Broadway show, something I feel a deep affinity for as someone who grew up doing musical theater. Upon listening to this song repeatedly, I have noticed the orchestration grows throughout, further eliciting an emotional response from me. When Dionne sings the high “above” at around 1:22, I feel the hope of having a heaven above that connects back to the overarching hopeful method of the song.

Throughout the song, I feel a sort of longing to experience the love and joy it brings because of Dionne's beautiful and inspiring vocals. I also reflect back on cherished memories of mine that I hope to experience again in the future. This song inspires me to continue living my life and connecting with others because of the feelings of liveliness and maximizing life that it instills within me.