

FOREFATHERS, EARLY INFLUENCES AND NONPERFORMERS



When rock and roll itself was still a baby, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller were among its youthful prodigies. Beginning with their 1952 breakthrough, a catchy blues romp called "K. C. Loving," Leiber and Stoller rapidly grew into one of the most prolific and creative teams in the music's history.

Had they done nothing more than turn out a stream of songs for Elvis Presley — "Love Me," "Jailhouse Rock," "Treat Me Nice," "You're So Square (Baby I Don't Care)" — Leiber and Stoller would rank among the most renowned composers of the rock and roll era. But as pop auteurs — the writer-producer-arrangers of timeless recordings by the Coasters, the Drifters, Ben E. King and so many others — Leiber and Stoller not only sold millions of records but advanced rock and roll to new heights of wit and musical sophistication. ("K. C. Loving," by the way, was later retitled "Kansas City." It became a rock-R&B standard recorded by everyone from Muddy Waters to Ann-Margret.)

Jerome Leiber, the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, grew up on the edge of Baltimore's black ghetto, where he was first exposed to jazz and rhythm and blues as a delivery boy for his widowed mother's grocery. In 1945, the family moved to Los Angeles; at age sixteen Jerry began clerking in a record shop. Although he'd briefly studied piano in Baltimore, Jerry couldn't read music; his real interest was in words — poetry, drama, song lyrics. In 1950, he found the collaborator he'd been looking for, a Los Angeles City College freshman named Mike Stoller.

Stoller, who grew up in Queens, New York, picked up the basics of blues and boogie-woogie at age seven from the black kids with whom he attended summer camp; he later studied with the great stride pianist and composer James P. Johnson. At fourteen, Mike was digging the nascent be-bop scene on New York's famed Fifty-second Street, soaking up the sounds of Bird and Diz. In 1949, his family relocated to Los Angeles, moving into a small apartment in a largely Chicano section of Hollywood. Mike took up classical theory and composition while continuing to sit in with pickup dance bands and jazz combos.

Lester Sill, then head of sales for Modern Records, gave Leiber and Stoller their first break in 1951 when he had their song "That's What the Good Book Says" recorded by a black vocal group called the Robins. A year later, the team got a call from bandleader Johnny Otis, who needed a song for blues diva Big Mama Thornton. They came up with "Hound Dog," which they helped Otis produce.

In 1953, Leiber, Stoller and Sill formed Spark Records and went back to work with the Robins on a song called "Riot in Cell Block #9." The basic riff came from Muddy Waters's "Hoochie Coochie Man," but as Robert Palmer noted in his 1978 book *Baby, That Is Rock & Roll: The Legendary Leiber & Stoller*, "Everything else about [the record] was years ahead of its time. 'Riot' created its own category, the Leiber-Stoller playlet . . . a kind of three-minute audio

dream with music that would still be the freshest sound on the airwaves years later."

More Robins sides followed on Spark, including "Framed" and "Smokey Joe's Cafe." Atlantic Records soon signed Leiber and Stoller to one of the industry's first independent production deals. Their first Atlantic successes were with the Coasters, a group featuring two former members of the Robins. In 1957, the first Coasters smash appeared, "Searchin'," backed with "Young Blood"; it both broke the group and established Leiber and Stoller as major producers. In a sea of doo-wop sound-alikes, Coasters hits like "Charlie Brown," "Yakety Yak" and "Poison Ivy" stood out, a seamless blend of rich black vocal harmony, Mike Stoller's melodies and arrangements and Jerry Leiber's flair for pop-culture references and black and teenage slang.

In 1956, Elvis Presley's Number One version of "Hound Dog" seemed to sum up the spirit of the entire rock and roll era in three electrifying minutes. Soon, Leiber and Stoller were turning out one Presley song after another, including the title tunes for his films King Creole, Loving You and Jailhouse Rock. All were written to order, and the team had little control over the outcome of Elvis's recording sessions (although Stoller played piano on several of the songs). But if the work was not as satisfying as their own R&B productions, Presley's sweeping success brought Leiber and Stoller's music to a wider audience than they'd ever dreamed possible.

In 1959, Leiber and Stoller had one of their biggest hits with their production of the Drifters' "There Goes My Baby," featuring Ben E. King on lead vocal. With its majestic string arrangement and innovative rhythm, "There Goes My Baby" was one of the most influential R&B records of all time, not the least for its immediate crossover appeal. The Drifters' hot streak continued with Leiber-Stoller

productions of top-drawer material from Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Gerry Goffin and Carole King, and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil: "This Magic Moment," "Save the Last Dance for Me," "Up on the Roof," "On Broadway." (Phil Spector, a young assistant of Leiber and Stoller, also worked on many of these records.)

Red Bird Records was Leiber and Stoller's final and most successful attempt at running their own record label. Their unerring ear for talent brought newcomers like Ellie Greenwich, Jeff Barry, Shadow Morton and Richard Perry into the Red Bird nest. The company's very first release, "Chapel of Love," by the Dixie Cups, shot to Number One in the spring of 1964. Of Red Bird's first thirty singles, eighteen made the charts, and eleven made the Top Forty. This enviable rate of commercial success was equaled by the quality of the music, including such girl-group classics as the Shangri-Las' "Leader of the Pack" and "Remember (Walkin' in the Sand)."

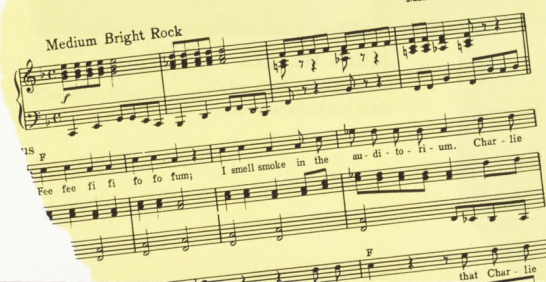
Leiber and Stoller made a graceful transition into the album-rock era. As producers, they worked equally well with bands like Stealers Wheel and Procol Harum and song stylists like Peggy Lee ("Is That All There Is?") and Leslie Uggams. In 1986, Ben E. King returned to the Top Ten with "Stand by Me," the song he wrote and recorded with Leiber and Stoller twenty-five years before.

"Leiber and Stoller can't be fully understood or appreciated simply as rock and roll tunesmiths," wrote Robert Palmer in 1980. "It's best . . . to think of them as American artists — makers of songs, makers of records, shapers of our environments, our dreams, our imagination. Only America could have produced them, and through the many exceptional voices they've worked with, it's America that they sing."



Charlie Brown

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