

Prolific songwriter Jerry Leiber dead at 78

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Jerry Leiber, lyricist in one of the postwar era's most prolific songwriting duos, died August 22 of cardiopulmonary failure at the age of 78. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Leiber and partner Mike Stoller turned out an astonishing number of hits for some of the top recording artists of the time. Their songs captured many aspects of American life of the time, often with sly humor, and in a relaxed and youthful vernacular.

Leiber, the son of Jewish immigrants, was born April 25, 1933 in Baltimore, Maryland, and grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood, where he developed a passion for the rhythm and blues music that accompanied the migration of black workers from the South to the industrial North and Midwest. Leiber explained he was first introduced to much of this music while making deliveries for his mother's small grocery store. It was one of the few stores in the area to give credit to black customers, according to Leiber, and he was often invited into neighborhood homes to listen to the music broadcast over the radio.

Leiber's mother eventually sold the store and the family relocated to Los Angeles in 1945. In 1950, while still in high school, Leiber met Mike Stoller, a New York transplant and another R&B convert. The two began collaborating on songs and had their first substantial R&B hit in 1952 with "Hound Dog," which they wrote for "Big Mama" Thornton. The song, with substantial changes, would become a huge hit for Elvis Presley in 1956. Leiber and Stoller would go on to write a plethora of songs for Presley, including "Treat Me Nice" and "Jailhouse Rock."

After "Hound Dog," an amazing string of hits kept coming. Among them were such classics as "Smokey Joe's Cafe," "Kansas City," "Love Potion #9," "Spanish Harlem" and the immortal "Stand By Me," co-

written and performed by Ben E. King. First recorded primarily by African-American R&B artists, Leiber and Stoller songs would eventually be performed by predominately white mainstream pop musicians as well. The duo's music exploded through such false distinctions as "black music" and "white music." Edith Piaf even recorded a French version of "Black Denim Trousers and Motorcycle Boots," which was retitled "L'Homme a la Moto."

Following their initial success, Leiber and Stoller returned to New York and, under contract to Atlantic Records, became fixtures in the songwriting boom centered in and around the famed Brill Building in Manhattan (Broadway at 49th Street), which at one point housed 120 independent music businesses. During the 1950s and 1960s, the building was home to a slew of prominent young songwriting teams including Gerry Goffin and Carole King, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, and Ellie Greenwich and Jeff Barry. Neil Diamond and Phil Spector also wrote and produced in the building's offices and studios. The Brill Building writers, along with their Motown counterparts in Detroit, produced some of the most enduring pop music of the period.

Mike Stoller once wrote of Leiber, "His verbal vocabulary was all over the place—black, Jewish, theatrical, comical. He would paint pictures with words." Leiber definitely excelled at producing vivid and lively narratives of American life, particularly the lives of working class youth. His flair for amusing depictions of teenage life and popular culture were best revealed in the dozens of songs that he and Stoller wrote for the Coasters, among them "Yakety Yak," and "Charlie Brown."

At times, Leiber mixed humor with social

commentary in subtle—and not-so-subtle—ways. In one of the Coasters’ lesser-known recordings, “Shoppin’ for Clothes,” the protagonist goes to a department store to get a new suit and encounters a salesman:

“I see for the business man you feature the natural shoulder,
That retail, wholesale indeed,
It’s got the custom cuffs and the walking short,
He said ‘And I’m gonna let you have it at a steal.’”

And for the playboy you have the latest in tweed,
With the cut-away flap over twice,
It’s a box-back, two button western model.
He said, ‘Now ain’t that nice.’”

Our antihero’s hopes are frustrated, however, when the salesman does a credit check:

“Now you go back there and you get that paper and let me sign on the dotted line,
And I’ll make sure I get all my payments in right on time,
Hey wait a minute buddy, let me go back there and do a little checking on you,
Then the man come back, he said, ‘I’m sorry my man but your credit didn’t go through.’”

In “What About Us?,” in which “two poor hung-up souls girls won’t touch with ten-foot poles” bemoan their fate and compare themselves to a rich man, Leiber wrote:

“He’s got a house made of glass,
Got his own swimming pool (what a gas),
We’ve got a one-room shack,
Five by six by the railroad track, well

What about us? What about us?
Don’t wanna cause no fuss, but what about us?”

Social commentary popped up in Leiber songs recorded by other artists as well. “Framed,” a 1954 recording by the Robins, still resonates:

“I denied the charges of robbin’ the liquor store,
Denied the charges of carryin’ a .44,

Denied the charges of vagrancy too,
But when the judge came down, poured whiskey on my head,
Turned around to the jury and said,
‘Convict this man, he is drunk,’
What could I do?”

Although the British Invasion and the emergence of the singer-songwriter would lessen Leiber and Stoller’s influence, it was never extinguished. In fact, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other British groups recorded covers of hits that Leiber wrote either with Stoller or with others. The Rolling Stones recorded an excellent version of “Down Home Girl,” which Leiber co-wrote with Artie Butler, and the Beatles did a version of “Kansas City.”

Leiber and Stoller continued to write and produce into the 1970s. In 1995, a revue featuring their songs, *Smokey Joe’s Cafe*, had a long run on Broadway and was nominated for seven Tony Awards.

For a generation that grew up with the sounds of classic R&B, rock ‘n’ roll and country music on their radios, the hip street slang, down-to-earth wit and catchy rhythms of writers like Jerry Leiber exerted a lasting influence. Their best music continues to find new and appreciative audiences. The songs of Leiber and Stoller will be remembered and rerecorded for years to come.

A short but very entertaining interview with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller conducted by Terry Gross can be heard at:

http://podcastdownload.npr.org/anon.npr-podcasts/podcast/13/139983693/npr_139983693.mp3?_kip_ipx=339381398-1314800656



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