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A **Jerry Leiber**-Mike Stoller song is like a picture postcard from the big city. The language is shaped from street-wise soul, and the music beats to an urban pulse. Back in the early days of rock 'n' roll, **Leiber** and Stoller created metropolitan vistas in compositions such as "Spanish Harlem," "On Broadway" and "Riot in Cell Block No. 9."

The **Leiber**-Stoller songbook is a natural for theater. Their songs take listeners to places they've never been. Attenuated drama exists between the streetlights and shadows.

"Baby, That's Rock 'n' Roll: the Songs of **Leiber** and Stoller," which makes its world premiere in a June pre-Broadway engagement at the Royal George Theatre in Chicago, salutes the legendary musical partners.

"I'm so scattered, I wrote in detail to clarify my vision," lyricist **Leiber** said, explaining his vivid style. His music-writing partner Stoller was on the extension during the recent interview from New York.

"Everything's a composition," **Leiber** said. "Do you ever notice how the people who are articulate and see real well do abstract things you can't make out?"

Indeed, a **Leiber**-Stoller song need not be subject to complex analysis.

The songwriters, who were inducted in 1987 to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, wrote many of their best-known hits - "Hound Dog," "Yakety Yak" and "Kansas City" - in less than 15 minutes. They composed the title track for the Elvis Presley film "Jailhouse Rock" and contributed three songs to "King Creole," regarded as the King's best soundtrack recording.

Their muse was as innocent as it was important to the development of rock 'n' roll:

They introduced blues rhythms to pop melodies.

Formerly titled "D.W. Washburn's All-Dancin', All Singing' Black & White, Jive- - - Rock 'n' Roll Revue," the "Baby, That's Rock 'n' Roll" musical is written around D.W. Washburn, a fictional former rock 'n' roller who leads a tour of the musical high spots such as "Smokey Joe's Cafe" (a 1955 **Leiber** and Stoller hit for the Robins) of his youth.

"D.W. Washburn" was a **Leiber**-Stoller tune first recorded by the Coasters in 1968, but became a minor hit for the Monkees after they recorded it with a vaudevillian slant. The "D.W. Washburn" title was dropped for assorted reasons, the most basic one being it wouldn't fit on a marquee.

The roughly 40 songs in the show celebrate the roots of **Leiber** and Stoller. Both were born in 1933, and shared a passion for black musical idioms. Today, they both reside in Los Angeles.

Stoller's first exposure to music was at age 7, when he attended an interracial summer camp. "That's where I first heard boogie-woogie played on piano," he said. "A big African-American kid played on an old upright piano in a barn. I'd stand at a distance, listen and watch what the singers were doing. When he abandoned the piano to go out and do something else, I'd sneak up to it and try to do with my fingers what I'd seen him do. It was magical to me."

Because of his intense love of blues and jazz, Stoller was less than enthusiastic in 1950 when he first linked up with **Leiber**. "I figured it wasn't the kind of music I liked," he said. "But when **Jerry** showed me what he had written, and it was in the 12-bar blues construction, that kind of did it for us. We decided to work together."

Stoller's affection for boogie-woogie, Fats Waller-inspired stride piano and jazz easily matched **Leiber**'s keen sense of of urban language.

**Leiber** recalled, "My mother had a little grocery store on the perimeter of the black ghetto in Baltimore. Hers was the only store for a number of miles that extended credit to black families. I used to deliver coal and kerosene when I was 9 or 10 years old. I was a very welcome character in the black neighborhoods. Most white people were not, but I was because of my mother. So the language, the rhythm and the color were developed in my early years. I wasn't really conscious of any difference, but it came out later."

**Leiber** had wanted to become an actor. At age 12, he moved to California and joined the Circle Theater, which was founded by film actors Charlie Chaplin and Constance Collier.

"I sold tickets, swept floors and sold Coca-Cola for two or three summers," he said. "When I turned 16, I looked at the scene and figured it was not for me. I couldn't get up every night and say the same words."

At the same time, **Leiber** heard the jump blues of Amos Milburn and Charles Brown on Los Angeles radio. He began to think about becoming a lyricist.

The first [Leiber](#) and Stoller song performed and recorded was the Jimmy Witherspoon single "Real Ugly Woman" in 1950. Their names were misspelled on the label. Three years later, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton recorded [Leiber](#) and Stoller's "Hound Dog," but it wasn't until Elvis Presley recorded the same song in 1956 that they broke through as a songwriting team.

"Elvis, Jimmy Witherspoon and Charles Brown left the biggest impressions on us," Stoller said.

[Leiber](#) added, "And the Coasters (who were preceded by the Robins). They were the most fun we ever had. They were the *most-ers*."

Things jelled when [Leiber](#) and Stoller moved from Los Angeles to New York. The burgeoning theater scene influenced their decision to relocate. "The changes were like B flat to E flat to F," Stoller said.

"It was exciting," [Leiber](#) said. "Although we had done well in Los Angeles - we moved in 1956 . . ."

Stoller countered, ". . . 1957."

[Leiber](#) said with a sigh, "The man will not stop contradicting me as long as I live, and maybe even later. . . ."

Stoller cut in, "He's easily contradictable."

Perhaps unknowingly, [Leiber](#) and Stoller were demonstrating the method behind their prolific output. Push and pull, give and take. Quickly. Minimal surrender.

One is yakety. The other is yak.

"Our good songs were written in five minutes, and the lousy ones took six months," [Leiber](#) said. "They're sort of like crippled pets."

"We'll look at a song in the trunk and wonder why Frank Sinatra didn't sing it. And I'll turn to Mike, or he'll turn to me and we'll realize that it just wasn't any good. It seemed good at the time."

"And sometimes we got in trouble when we were not writing rhythm and blues and blues styles and got into the 'popular' songwriting, like Jules Stein and Sammy ('I'll Be Seeing You') Fein. If we tried to write that kind of song, it was because we admired that kind of songwriting."

Stoller interrupted, "How come you picked on two composers?"

[Leiber](#) said, "I was going to say Cole Porter, but you cut me off. But for some reason or other, it wasn't just that the songs weren't quite there, which maybe they weren't. But I also think the times weren't there."

Times caught up with [Leiber](#) and Stoller in the late 1960s, a lesser-known part of their career. They wrote the hit "Jackson" for Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazelwood, which has since become a Johnny Cash-June Carter Cash standard. They wrote "Is That All There Is" for Peggy Lee. In 1973, they produced the strange Stealers Wheel hit "Stuck in the Middle With You."

"All that was a natural evolution for us," Stoller said. "It had nothing to do with trying to keep up with the times. If anything, songs like 'Is That All There Is' are either way behind or way ahead."

"They're certainly not down the middle of the market. We were writing to entertain ourselves, which is what we always did."

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