

S

ome Cats Know: An Interview with Jerry Leiber

Charlotte Stoudt:

When did you first become aware of rhythm-and-blues music?

Jerry Leiber:

I was raised in Baltimore; my mother ran a basement grocery store, on the border of what was considered the black “ghetto.”

As a child, I delivered soft coal in the winter and ice in the summer to black families and I remember hearing R & B on the radio in their kitchens. Baltimore, you know, is essentially a Southern town, and in 1939, when I was a kid, it was still heavily segregated. When I was eleven, we moved to California, and I remember being astounded by the mix of ethnicity: blacks, Asians, Mexicans.... As a teenager, I worked nights as a bus boy in a restaurant. There was a Filipino short-order cook who always had the radio on real low—that was the biggest “dose” of R & B I had; also, I began to recall those sounds and voices that I had heard in Baltimore.

CS: Is it true you were “discovered” in a record store when you were seventeen?

JL: I had a job at Norty’s Records—I

worked there from 3 to 6 every day after school—and I was already writing songs. I wrote with a drummer in high school, but he never showed up for our sessions, so I was looking for someone else. Lester Sill, the national sales manager from Modern Records, turned up one afternoon; he was checking on sales. He came up to me and said, “How are we doing with Jimmy Witherspoon?” I said not so good—we were selling a lot more records for Jewish holidays. Lester asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him I was writing songs. He said, “Sing me one.” I said, “You’re kidding.” He wasn’t kidding—so I sang him eight bars of something. He said it was good and that I should get the music down on paper and come by Modern Records some afternoon. This was right around the time I met Mike Stoller, so everything fell into place.

CS: A lot of records you and Mike Stoller wrote—especially for the Coasters—are known as “playlets,” since they tell a kind of story. Was that a result of the time you spent in the theater?

JL: I did apprentice at the Circle Theater—a highly respectable venue run by Charlie Chaplin where people like Kirk Douglas and Jerry Epstein performed. They did great work: Odets, O’Neill, Saroyan. For two summers I did everything from sweeping up to painting sets. But I was too young for any of the parts, and it was ultimately disappointing. I had thought I wanted to be a stage actor—but the thought of doing the same story every night, saying the same thing—I couldn’t tolerate that. I was thinking more of the movies.... But the real influence on my songwriting was closer to home. My sister Helen married a songwriter, and *his* father was a songwriter—Lew Porter, who’d written “Yea Yea Yea Little Fox” and was supposed to have written “By the Sea” before selling it to someone else. He used to pile me in his car and take me around RKO studios. That’s what

really got my imagination going.

CS: Your “playlets” for the Coasters are fascinating because you take on so many points of view—sometimes you’re a woman, sometimes a gangster type, sometimes a middle-class teenager.

JL: A little schizophrenia goes a long way.... No, if you want to know the truth, songs like “Little Egypt,” “Searchin’,” and “Along Came Jones” are based on radio. I was a child of the era of radio dramas, and the medium was a real influence.

CS: How do you get ideas for songs?

JL: They come in a strangely abstract way... some people are influenced by a line they see or a billboard. For me, once a statement’s been made by someone else, there’s nothing left for me to say. I’m not interested in someone else’s already-complete thought. There are two exceptions, though, in terms of my songwriting. One is “I’m A Woman.” My mother is responsible for this one—she was a braggart and a hard worker. She’d get up at 5 a.m. and keep her store open until midnight. Those are long hours! When other people complained about their backs or some illness or something, she would say, “I can get up in the morning and work all day...what is this crap! These people are lazy.... When I lived in Poland I had to drive a horse and wagon thirty-five to forty miles a day to get ale for my parent’s tavern. I went because everyone else was afraid of bandits.” She was tough. So that song is my tribute to her.

CS: Any other secret songwriting sources?

JL: In 1966, Mike and I began to be interested in writing more serious pop songs. At the time I’d been reading a lot of Thomas Mann. I was struck by a short story of his called “Disillusionment,” and I was intrigued by the idea of translating the idea into a song. It took me a long time to figure out the lyrics, and it took Mike a long, long

time to figure out the music. The song became Peggy Lee’s “Is That All There Is?”

CS: It’s pretty bleak for a pop song.

JL: Yes, but there’s a toughness, an irony, that gives the song the feel of a morbid joke.

CS: What are you up to these days?

JL: Mike and I are writing a musical. As for the title, I’m sworn to secrecy. But musically it’s eclectic—there are songs reminiscent of gospel, there are 30s and 40s swing songs, tap dances, and a few bittersweet romantic ballads.

CS: What’s the best thing about working with Mike Stoller?

JL: Well, when you’ve been working with someone for nearly fifty years.... he’s just extremely talented and extremely intelligent. I’ve worked with some good people—the Reverend Mr. Black, Phil Spector—but Mike is so superior to anyone. It’s so gratifying to collaborate with someone that smart.

CS: What do you think is the cultural legacy of the songs of Leiber and Stoller?

JL: You know, I let other people decide that. People who are creative just *do* it. I leave it to the critics and the historians to judge my work—they tell *me* what we’ve achieved.



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