

LEIBER & STOLLER AT ATLANTIC RECORDS

Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller formed the great songwriting and production team of the fifties: a Rodgers and Hart for the rock & roll era who updated Tin Pan Alley and paved the way for the Brill Building writers and Phil Spector productions of the early sixties. Leiber and Stoller wrote hits for a wide range of artists in a wide range of styles, but are best known for their songs for Elvis Presley ("Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock," "Loving You," "Love Me," "Treat Me Nice") and their songwriting and production efforts for two Atlantic groups: the Coasters and the Drifters, Atlantic Record's biggest selling acts of the fifties and early sixties. While their Presley hits naturally took on the star's aura and personality, their work at Atlantic bore a more personal stamp and were more a reflection of *their* artistic vision than of that of the singers. Their recordings with the **Coasters** and the **Drifters** can hardly be called "doo-wop" in any strict sense of the term: the carefully crafted arrangements and productions placed the Coasters on a wholly different level from the streetcorner "one-shots" and made a new term—"Uptown R&B"—necessary for describing the Drifters' music.

Leiber and Stoller (both born in 1933) began writing together as teenagers in Los Angeles and had a string of R&B successes to their credit by the time they were 21, including Little Willie Littlefield's "K. C. Lovin'" (later famous as "Kansas City") and Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton's original recording of "Hound Dog," a song they wrote and produced with Johnny Otis. The pair shared a love for rhythm & blues and a streetwise knowledge of black culture that set them apart from their peers. They were among the first white writers to compose "authentic" rhythm & blues and, in the process, they helped expand R&B's range by incorporating a pop-style emphasis on melody and song construction.

Leiber and Stoller combined the songwriting (Leiber wrote the words, Stoller the music), arranging, producing and A&R roles usually assigned to different people within the traditional Tin Pan Alley hierarchy. They further revolutionized the music business by establishing themselves as independent producers not tied to a single record label and fully in command of their material from the original song conception to the completed recording, a move they felt was necessary after several frustrating experiences with producers who did not share their vision or talent. (Mike Stoller: "We found that if we wrote a piece that was to be played as a Texas shuffle, for example, it would more than likely end up sounding like some Mickey Mouse swing record if we weren't there to supervise. And so we became record producers in self-defense."ⁱ)

ⁱRobert Palmer, "Baby That Was Rock & Roll," (New York: Harvest, 1978)