THE DRIFTERS AND “UPTOWN R&B”

"Uptown R&B" was the most inventive and significant manifestation of the trend at the end of the fifties toward softened beats and elaborate arrangements. The highly-produced and polished sound of "Since I Don't Have You," "I Only Have Eyes for You" and other sophisticated vocal group recordings took doo-wop's emphasis on the Song over the Singer a step further and emphasized the *Record* above the Song—declared the Record an entity in itself (not merely a recorded performance), and established the producers as the true creative forces in the studio. As perfected in Leiber and Stoller's productions for the Drifters, Uptown R&B embraced the new trends towards elaborate productions without sacrificing R&B's direct emotion and rhythmic vitality. Leiber and Stoller's productions reflected their "voice" more than that of the artists whose names appeared on the record label, beginning a process that climaxed with the early sixties recordings of Phil Spector, who served an "apprenticeship" with Leiber and Stoller before heading off on his own and completing the picture of the all-powerful Producer.

Through their work with the Coasters, Leiber and Stoller established the concept of songwriters and producers as "auteurs" who left their personal stamp on a body of work and created a sustained musical vision over a period of time and a series of record releases. The comic style of the Coasters recordings lent itself to novel productions that enhanced the plot and narrative of the songs. When Leiber and Stoller turned their attention to more "serious" productions for the Drifters, they crafted a high-tech production style that enhanced the drama, romance and urban realism of the Drifters' songs. (It is interesting to note that Leiber and Stoller didn't feel comfortable writing in the sweeping, romantic style that best fit the Drifters; the songs they produced for the group were written by others and were very different from Leiber and Stoller's humorous "playlet" style.)

The Drifters at Atlantic

The "Drifters" who produced sixteen Top Forty pop hits between 1959 and 1964 were a completely different group from the original Drifters fronted by ex-Dominoes lead **Clyde McPhatter**. After McPhatter's induction into the army in 1954, the group went through a series of personnel changes and a number of lead singers—the most notable of which was **Johnny Moore**, who sang lead on "Ruby Baby," "Fools Fall in Love" and other R&B hits from the mid-fifties, then returned again as lead singer nearly a decade later. In 1958, personal frictions and declining popularity led manager George Treadwell to fire the entire group and replace them with a new set of "Drifters" pulled from a local New York group called the Five Crowns. The new group featured lead singer Benjamin Nelson, who adopted the name Ben E. King and revived the gospel influences that had been Clyde McPhatter's trademark. The "new" Drifters also picked up the old group's habit of changing members periodically: along with a constantly shifting group of background singers, the 1959-64 era Drifters featured the talents of three great lead singers: Ben E. King, Rudy Lewis and Johnny Moore.

The Ben E. King Era

"There Goes My Baby" was the first hit for the new incarnation of the Drifters. Written by Ben E. King and recorded in March 1959, "There Goes My Baby" is often referred to as "the first rock record with strings," though it was actually preceded by string-laden recordings by Buddy Holly, the Skyliners, the Moonglows and others. It *was*, however, the first to lift the strings beyond the syrupy, generic "heavenly violins" sound and treat them as a vital part of an integrated arrangement, rather than merely as "sweetener." "Integrated arrangement" is stretching things a bit in this case, though: "There Goes My Baby" is a confused mess of clashing notes and rhythms that somehow holds together in spite of itself. (Jerry Leiber has often remarked that it sounds like two radio stations playing at once.) The doo-wopish walrus bass and chanted syllables that open the song sound familiar enough, but the rest of the record is a bizarre and mesmerizing free-for-all.

Leiber and Stoller used a distinctive stop-start Brazilian rhythm called a "**baion**" for the basic beat of "There Goes My Baby" and many subsequent Drifters productions. The baion is articulated by the bass and "drums" (timpani) and forms a murky, rhythmic rumbling beneath the more regular, on-the-beat rhythmic feel of the strings. While the strings' rhythm fights it out with the baion, their notes seem to clash with the voices, as if no one can quite agree on what key or tempo the song is in or where it's supposed to be going. To make matters even more interesting, the tympani are out of tune, clashing with everyone. The song is based on the standard I-vi-IV-V doo-wop progression, though no one seems too clear about that either, and the mind-numbing amount of echo added to everything creates an impressionistic atmosphere in which chords, notes and rhythms seem merely evoked or implied.

The lyrics seem impressionistic as well: Ben E. King's plaintive lead vocal rides atop the glorious musical mess, pining for his woman and reeling from the shock of her leaving, too upset to try to rhyme his words or follow any kind of logical song form. All he can do is grieve and wonder: "Where is she bound?" "What can I do?" "Why did she leave me?" "Did she really love me?" "Where is my baby? I want my baby." "There

Goes My baby" is a free-form expression of anguish that the confused musical background serves to intensify: like the music, the self-tormenting singer seems ready to come unglued. His sorrow is unrelieved as the song fades and the mantra-like title refrain returns, behind King's moans, to freeze the moment in time like a snapshot of his woman walking away.

"**This Magic Moment**" was written for the Drifters in 1960 by the team of Doc Pomus and Mort Schuman. The song opens with a flamboyant flourish from the violins (quite a contrast to the raucous saxophones of traditional R&B) and features a now thoroughly integrated mix of instruments and voices and a cohesive baion rhythmic undercurrent. In the song's most dramatic moment, the orchestra and other auxiliary instruments and voices drop out, leaving Ben E. King suddenly alone ("sweeter than wine...") with a simple guitar and bass accompaniment that seems to transport the song into a folk music coffee house until the background voices return and the music swells upward again. Pomus and Schuman also wrote the Drifters' biggest hit, "Save the Last Dance for Me," for which Pomus wrote an intentional awkwardness into the words in order to create the effect of a literal English translation of a Spanish song, in tribute to the pervading Latin flavor of the Drifters' records.

"Save the Last Dance for Me" was the last Drifters record to feature Ben E. King. He embarked on a successful solo career in 1960 with "Spanish Harlem," written by Jerry Leiber and Phil Spector and produced by Leiber and Stoller in a style very similar to their Drifters work, with a baion rhythm and a Latin feel appropriate for the song's setting. King had his biggest hit in 1961 with the ever-popular "**Stand By Me**," a secular re-write of the Soul Stirrers' "Stand By Me Father." The immediately recognizable bass figure that opens the song is doubled by the strings to form a stark backdrop to King's "testifying" lead vocal. In the tradition of the Clyde McPhatter and Ray Charles' gospel borrowings, King sings to the Woman with the same devotional feel reserved for the Lord in the gospel original (and the line between "R&B" and gospel-based "soul" is effectively crossed).

The Rudy Lewis Era

The Drifters continued on as Atlantic's biggest selling act with new lead singer Rudy Lewis, who proved himself an able replacement for King with "Some Kind of Wonderful" and "Up on the Roof," which were both written by Brill Building luminaries Gerry Goffin and Carole King. Like most of the group's hits, "**Up on the Roof**" is set in the city and reflects an urban sensibility in its lyrics and in the classy sound of its high-tech "uptown" production. Recorded in 1962, "Up On the Roof" takes a romantic view of a plain city rooftop and transforms it into a private paradise far removed from the troubles of the world below. The song's elegant lyrics are complemented by an equally elegant production that blends strings, brass, marimbas, various percussion instruments and a full battery of guitars, bass and drums into a seamless orchestral arrangement.

The Drifters moved further uptown in 1963 with "**On Broadway**," a more mainstream production featuring Rudy Lewis lamenting the tough times and broken dreams on Broadway, then defiantly reaffirming the dream anyway ("I won't quit till I'm a star"). The syncopated beat, the hypnotic, seesawing chords and the intricate melody of the song created a jazzy feel that reached beyond the teen audience and inspired numerous cover versions in a wide range of styles. The Drifters' original features a very

strange guitar solo, played by Phil Spector, that cuts through the lush string sound to keep the song rooted in rock & roll.

Johnny Moore Returns

The Drifters had their last hit in 1964 with "**Under the Boardwalk**." By that time, Leiber and Stoller were devoting themselves to their new Red Bird record label and the production duties for the Drifters were handled by veteran producer and songwriter **Bert Berns**. Berns continued the Drifters' tradition of sophisticated productions with an undercurrent of Latin rhythms and a soulful feel.[i] The Drifters gave one of their most moving and emotional performances on "Under the Boardwalk," inspired and heartbroken by the sudden death of Rudy Lewis on the morning of the recording session. Group veteran Johnny Moore stepped in to sing lead in Lewis' place and delivered a supremely melancholy performance that belies the song's upbeat lyrics.

Moore continued as the lead singer through a series of minor hits in the mid-sixties before the group settled into the nightclub and oldies circuit. The 1964 British Invasion and Atlantic's shift to gritty, southern soul music brought an end to the era of Uptown R&B, though not before the Drifters' influence was felt on Motown, "Philly Soul" and other northern, pop-oriented soul styles.

Leiber and Stoller concentrated on girl groups (particularly the Shangri-Las and the Dixie Cups) with their Red Bird label, then gradually lost interest as a new type of sixties rock and soul took over. They sold their shares of the labels in 1966 and charted a more mainstream direction with "Is That All There Is," a hit for Peggy Lee. They remained at least casually connected to the rock world for some time, though, producing records for Stealer's Wheel ("Stuck in the Middle With You"), Procol Harum and others.

The witty songs and inventive productions of Leiber and Stoller's glory days lent an artful dignity to the process of recording and helped turn a piece of wax into something noble. As they were fond of saying, "We didn't write songs, we wrote *records*."

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[i] Berns was already a Latin music aficionado, albeit with a decidedly "garage band" slant: several of the songs he wrote, including "Twist and Shout" and "Hang On Sloopy," used and popularized what he called a "Latin American" or "La Bamba" chord progression.