THE COASTERS

After recording "Hound Dog," Leiber and Stoller launched their own Spark record label with industry veteran Lester Sill, and began focusing their attention on a Los Angeles group called the Robins who had been working under the tutelage of bandleader Johnny Otis. Their 1954 recording of "**Riot in Cell Block #9**" introduced Leiber and Stoller's story-song style of writing they called "**playlets**": tongue-in-cheek mini-dramas full of wit and insight, in this case revolving around a prison riot, complete with police sirens and tommy guns, a mock-menacing lead vocal and a gleefully anarchic chorus of "there's a riot goin' on!"[i] The music sounds like a *Dragnet* send-up and the lyrics read like a TV crime thriller told through the eyes of a hard-boiled narrator, rife with details and condensed to two-and-a-half minutes. The wailing saxophone and hard-driving R&B band accompaniment lifts the song out of the realm of "mere novelty," while the jive talk and prison setting give it a hint of social realism.

The Robins' Spark recordings caught the attention of Atlantic Records' Jerry Wexler: "They were making great R&B records, very idiomatic records. Not only did the records have intelligent production, they were in tune, had a good beat and were properly balanced. And the songs also had great penetration, social understanding—their music had real roots."[ii] Atlantic bought the Spark masters, signed the Robins to their Atco subsidiary in 1956 and offered Leiber and Stoller a generous contract that left them free to work with other labels and groups. Atlantic re-released one of the last Spark recordings, "Smokey Joe's Cafe," and the Robins had a national hit on the R&B charts.

The move to Atlantic caused some dissension within the band, which ended with two members and the group manager leaving, taking the "Robins" name with them. Lead tenor Carl Gardner remained, along with bass singer Bobby Nunn; second tenor Leon Hughes and baritone Billy Guy were added and the group christened themselves "the Coasters" in tribute to their West Coast home. The Coasters scored a succession of R&B hits before finally breaking into the pop charts in 1957 with "Searchin'" and "Young Blood." "Young Blood" is a slice of urban life that mixes streetcorner R&B and pop tunefulness and utilizes the full range of contrasting voices and the comic touches that made the Coasters the clown princes of rock & roll.

In "**Searchin'**," lead singer Billy Guy is bent on pursuing his dream girl with the tenacity of Sherlock Holmes, Sam Spade, Sgt. Friday, Charlie Chan, Boston Blackie, a Northwest Mountie and Bulldog Drummond all put together, even if he has to swim a river or climb a mountain—even if she's "hiding up on Blueberry Hill." The song lopes along with a novelty-esque honky-tonk feel from the instrumental backing and a constant refrain of "gonna find her" that clashes incessantly against Guy's lyrics and adds to the comically plodding feel of the song. With the inclusion of figures from popular novels, television and radio shows, Leiber and Stoller placed rock & roll firmly in the noble tradition of American popular culture. Indeed, the Coasters' playlets were like regular installments of a situation comedy, with entertaining plots and a colorful cast of characters.

"**Along Came Jones**" is a comic send-up of the predictability of TV Westerns, starring a generic hero who always arrives in the nick of time to save the damsel in distress from the evil villain. The innocuous novelty number was first conceived with a more satirical subtext, though the original lyrics were rewritten with the sensibilities of pop radio stations in mind. Jerry Leiber: "It *was* a satire on Western movies on

television, and there was a picture with Gary Cooper called "Along Came Jones." But originally it was written much more heavy-handed than it came out. The original joke in it was that here are four black cats singing about a hero—a white cowboy—who keeps saving people. Originally, the refrain was different: it had to do with 'Ain't he some kind of special cat/He was wearin' white boots/And he was a-wearin' a white hat, riding a white horse.' Everything was white."[iii]

"Yakety Yak"

With the arrival of rock & roll and the emergence of the "teenager" as a distinct social class, the subtext of most of Leiber and Stoller's material—the "us" against "them"— changed from a racial to a generational conflict, still set in a disarmingly humorous vein. The Coasters and Leiber and Stoller kicked off their teen vignettes with 1958's "**Yakety Yak,**" the group's only #1 pop hit and the first pop #1 for Atlantic Records. "Yakety Yak" chronicles the endless struggle with nagging parents in terms that any teenager can understand:

Take out the papers and the trash
Or you don't get no spendin' cash
If you don't scrub that kitchen floor
You ain't gonna rock & roll no more
Yakety Yak—Don't talk back!

Just finish cleanin' up your room
Let's see that dust fly with that broom
Get all that garbage out of sight
Or you don't go out Friday night
Yakety Yak—Don't talk back!

You just put on your coat and hat
And walk yourself to the laundromat
And when you finish doin' that
Bring in the dog and put out the cat
Yakety Yak—Don't Talk Back!

Don't you give me no dirty looks
Your father's hip, he knows what cooks
Just tell your hoodlum friends outside
You ain't got time to take a ride
Yakety Yak—Don't Talk Back![iv]

"Yakety Yak" is a great illustration of Jerry Leiber's wit, eye for detail and deceptively simple lyrics. His laundry list of teenage complaints transcends social and racial barriers and focuses on the true enemy: parents. Mike Stoller's piano, banjo and brushed drum accompaniment gives "Yakety Yak" a comic, novelty tone and Dixieland flavor. Stops and starts break up the beat and the stern "don't talk back" from the Voice of Authority (an effect echoed a few months later in Eddie Cochran's "Summertime Blues"). The stop-starts and nagging title refrain, embellished by a clucking saxophone

solo, form an effective musical picture of badgering parents and the frustrated quest for a good time.

“Why is Everybody Always Picking On Me?”

With "Yakety Yak" the Coasters and Leiber and Stoller moved their operations from Los Angeles to Atlantic's New York studios, where they could take advantage of Atlantic's stellar house band, most notably saxophonist **King Curtis**, whose stuttering "yakety sax" solos became a regular feature of the Coasters' songs. The move to New York also brought about another change in the group line-up, with Cornell Gunter replacing Leon Hughes and Will "Dub" Jones taking over the comic bass role, which he used to great effect on "Yakety Yak" and its sequel, "**Charlie Brown**," where he supplies poor Charlie's bewildered refrain of "Why is everybody always pickin' on me?" Here we follow the victimized teenager to school, where his problems with authority continue unabated. A well-meaning but chronic troublemaker, Charlie Brown does manage to gain his classmates' grudging admiration along the way to his Fall. After all, it's hard to not admire a guy who smokes in the auditorium, gambles in the gym, writes on the walls and calls the English teacher "Daddy-o."

Leiber and Stoller's work as producers was as important as their contributions as songwriters. The comic flavor of the Coasters' recordings inspired sound effects, studio "tricks" (such as the sped-up "chipmunk" voices and exaggerated echo on "Charlie Brown") and clever arrangements that were an integral part of the song, rather than a mere backing for the voices. The voices, too, were arranged in a unique way, with lots of unison singing juxtaposed with elaborate harmonies, and with a distinct style and range assigned to each voice to emphasize the different "characters" in the playlets. Leiber and Stoller's inventive productions were far ahead of their time and, along with Buddy Holly's studio experiments, pointed toward the sixties view of the studio itself as a creative tool. Atlantic Record's open atmosphere, first-rate musicians and commitment to quality records made it an ideal working environment for the creative pair.

Leiber and Stoller kept turning out pop and R&B hits for the Coasters through the late fifties, including the wonderful Latin-tinged "**Poison Ivy**," which pivots around a band halt and a single, inexplicably perfect guitar note. The lyrics have a delightful, teasing sexuality: "Poison Ivy" is a woman who comes creepin' while you're sleepin', though the Coasters warn that "you can look but you'd better not touch." (The song inspired some creative interpretations—does she really have VD?) In any case, Leiber and Stoller offer a remedy in one of rock's greatest couplets: "You're gonna need an ocean of Calamine lotion.”

The Coasters scored their last pop hit in 1961 with "Little Egypt." The group went through an unending series of personnel shifts (former Cadillacs frontman Earl Carroll joined in 1961) and continued working sporadically with Leiber and Stoller through the sixties and into the seventies. They made a minor comeback in 1971 with a revival of the Clover's 1959 hit, "Love Potion #9" (which was also written by Leiber and Stoller). Various incarnations of the Coasters remain popular attractions on the rock revival circuit, where the fun and humor of their songs and stage act epitomize the spirit of vocal group rock & roll.

[i]The lead vocals were sung by Richard Berry, who did not join in the group's Coasters incarnation , but did later write and record the original "Louie Louie."
[ii]Palmer, p. 23.
[iii]Shannon and Javna, "Behind the Hits," p. 121.
[iv]"Yakety Yak," by Leiber and Stoller, Copyright c 1958 by Tiger Music, Inc.