

NEWSLETTER

An Entertainment Industry Organization



Only in America

The Drifters in the Midst of the Civil Rights Era

Randy Poe

The President's Corner

Dan Butler

Our January meeting was a great success on many levels. "Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll: Great Rock Managers Tell Tales from the Road" inspired the laughs and crazy stories we expected, but supermanagers Peter Asher, Doc McGhee and Andy Gould, as well as Harold Owens of MusiCares, each delivered inspiration of a much more meaningful nature.

Harold told personal tales of his past addict days and the redemption he has found in helping artists get clean and try to stay clean.

Doc told stories about the darkest days of working for Mötley Crüe that had the audience at first in stitches, then disturbed into uneasy silence. They put to rest the old notion, still widely held it seems, that drugs make people more creative.

Peter brought home the point that there is a fine line between genius and madness. Great late rockers like Jimi, Janis and Jimi weren't great because they took drugs; they were creative despite the drugs, which put them in far-too-early graves.

Drugs don't kill everyone, as the near supernatural Keith Richards has proven. Even when not fatal to the artist, as Andy pointed out, drug problems have caused band breakups that are fatal to the music, cheating us all out of future classics they might have written and played.

The evening definitely ended on an upbeat note (which I wasn't sure we

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The songwriting talents of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller are indisputable. A tip-of-the-iceberg list of their credits as a team includes "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock," "Love Potion # 9," "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," "Poison Ivy," "Kansas City," "I'm A Woman," "Searchin'," "Treat Me Nice," "Love Me," "Is That All There Is?," and many of the Drifters' recordings, including "Ruby Baby," "Drip Drop," "There Goes My Baby," and "Fools Fall In Love."

Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil have also had a long string of hits as a twosome; among the many are "Blame It On The Bossa Nova," "We Gotta Get Out Of This Place," "He's Sure The Boy I Love," "(You're My) Soul And Inspiration," "Here You Come Again," and "Just Once."

But when all four writers came together, as they did on a couple of occasions for the Drifters, the results were truly astounding.

One such collaboration was the now-classic, much-covered "On Broadway." Another effort by this quartet of legendary writers resulted in the controversial, original recording of "Only In America."

The year 1963 marked the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. JFK was in the White House; George Wallace was the newly-elected governor of Alabama; and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were the two most important symbols of hope among America's black community – a community that rightly believed the good intentions of the Emancipation Proclamation had yet to be embraced by America at large.

Before the year was out, King would make his famous "I Have A Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial; Wallace would stand in the doorway of the University of Alabama, unsuccessfully attempting to prevent the entrance of that school's first black students; and JFK would be assassinated.

On April 12th of that same year, Leiber & Stoller took the Drifters into Atlantic's recording studio in Manhattan to cut four sides: "Rat Race," "If You Don't Come Back," "I'll Take You Home," and "Only In America."

Jerry Leiber explains the songwriters' relationship with the Drifters, and the events that led up to this particular session:

"Before we started producing the Drifters, the Coasters had been 'our group.' Mike and I wrote almost everything we produced for them.

"But the Drifters were completely different. We sort of inherited them from Ahmet [Ertegun] and [Jerry] Wexler. When Ahmet and Jerry first began producing the Drifters, they were a straight R&B act. But after various personnel changes, they had evolved into a 'sweet soul' group.

"Writing 'sweet soul' songs was not necessarily our bag. Our bag at that time was writing radio comedy plays for the Coasters – gags set to music. So when we were given an assignment by Ahmet or Jerry to produce sides for the Drifters, we would – more often than not – assign the writing to the hot writers of the day: Doc [Pomus] and Morty [Shuman]; Goffin & King; Bacharach & David; and, of course, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil."

"One of the songs that Barry and Cynthia brought us was an early version of 'Only In America,'" says Mike Stoller. "In its original form, it was an obvious protest. The lyrics, as I recall them, were about sitting at the back of the bus."

Not wanting to turn the Drifters into a soul version of the Weavers, Leiber & Stoller imbued the Mann & Weil song with the more subtle kind of antiracism they had so successfully slipped into many of the Coasters recordings. (Such was the case with the Coasters' hysterical "Along Came Jones" – in which an African-American man switches from one TV channel to another, only to discover the hero of every show is always the same Caucasian cowboy.)

"We thought Barry and Cynthia's song was good," says Leiber. But it was too straight a protest song. I thought it needed to be a bit more playful and comic...."

"...And a lot more ironic," adds Mike.

Irony was certainly in full force when the session took place. On the very day the Drifters were recording "Only In America" in New York City, Martin Luther King, Jr. was being arrested and placed in solitary confinement in a Birmingham jail a thousand miles away.

When Leiber & Stoller took the finished recording to Jerry Wexler for his nod of approval, the reaction wasn't exactly what they were expecting.

After hearing the Drifters' lead vocalist sing about becoming a millionaire or possibly growing up to be President in the "land of opportunity," the Atlantic exec was not amused. "Wexler looked at us and said, 'Are you guys nuts? They'll lynch us!'" recalls Leiber.

Although disappointed with Jerry Wexler's reaction, L&S knew that the track was a good one, even if the song wasn't ready to be thrust upon the public at large – at least not by the Drifters.

"We had a deal with United Artists at the time which allowed us to sell them masters," says Leiber. "Wexler was more than happy to let another label buy this master, which

he had no intention of putting out."

Jerry and Mike turned to Jay & The Americans – an act with which they had scored a Top 10 hit, "She Cried," the previous year. Jay and the gang were a squeaky-clean, extremely white bunch whose past and future hits would include "Come A Little Bit Closer," "Let's Lock The Door (And Throw Away The Key)," and "Cara, Mia." The biggest hit of their career would come in 1969 with, ironically, a cover of the Drifters' "This Magic Moment."

Using the original master of "Only In America," Leiber & Stoller replaced the Drifters' vocals with the voices of Jay Black, Sandy Yaguda, Kenny Vance, and Howie Kane.

Jay & The Americans' single of "Only In America" was a Top 25 hit on the pop charts. "And then I bumped into Barry Mann," says Leiber. "He said, 'Hey man, how could you do that to our song?' I said, 'Atlantic was never going to release the Drifters' version, so we changed it from a powerful protest into patriotic pap.'"

More than four decades have passed since the day the Drifters recorded "Only In America." In places such as Birmingham, Alabama, major changes have taken place: The schools have long since been integrated; all races drink from the same water fountain; and an African-American now serves as the city's mayor.

But 43 years later, in much of the U.S., it would seem that things haven't changed nearly enough. In 2006, the irony of the Drifters' recording of "Only In America" still remains abundantly apparent.

Randy Poe is the President of Leiber & Stoller Music Publishing. He has written the liner notes to over 100 albums, and is a recipient of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor award for his book Music Publishing: A Songwriter's Guide. His most recent work, Squeeze My Lemon: A Collection of Classic Blues Lyrics, features a foreword by B.B. King. Poe is a past President of the CCC.

President's Corner (continued)

would find during some of the riffs along the way), when we heard tales of survivors coming back from the brink and getting their lives and their grooves back.

Tonight's panel will take the audience on a musical journey in honor of Black History Month. Co-moderators and CCC Board members Cheryl Dickerson and James Leach will lead what promises to be a spectacular panel. George Clinton, Leon Ware, S-Class and Trevor Lawrence, Jr. (along with a possible mystery guest or two) will discuss how great music from the doo-wop era continues to resonate in today's hip-hop sounds.

I would like to extend a special thanks to past CCC President Randy Poe of Leiber & Stoller for contributing the article for this month's newsletter, which I know you will enjoy. All the best!

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