

The Lyrics of Leiber and Stoller: A Cultural Analysis

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Popular music lost one of its seminal members when songwriter, Jerry Leiber, succumbed to cardio-pulmonary failure in August of 2011. Often in popular music, it is the singer who receives the accolades, while the songwriter, if not part of the band, is positioned in a subordinate role in receiving popularity from both critics and the general population. This has happened numerous times since the advent of popular music, which by historical standards was established in the decade of the 1950s by such musicians as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly. It was during this decade that two white Jewish songwriters, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, changed the cultural landscape of popular music by writing for such artists as The Coasters, The Drifters, and Ben E. King. Himes details their importance, when arguing that "Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller are probably the top rock and roll songwriters of all time, They certainly rank right up there, for they have given us such enduring standards as "Kansas City," "Hound Dog," "Love Potion #9" and countless others" (7). Indeed, Leiber and Stoller were significant forces in that wide artistic genre of popular music.

They were responsible for writing the first hit for Elvis Presley, "Hounddog." However, this would not be their most important role as songwriters. Their most significant contribution was employing their songwriting capabilities to highlight the talents of Black bands and musicians. Both The Drifters and Coasters were successfully assisted by this talented songwriting team, and both were commercially viable in this

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decade because of the songwriting talents of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

Not only were these two songwriters extremely talented, but their love and knowledge of the Black culture, which included their use of humor, enabled their songs to sound authentic when performed by Black musicians or groups. This was an anomaly during a time period when many white musicians were stealing the musical styles of black musicians (Szwed). Leiber and Stoller did not take part in this process. They established themselves as authentic songwriters of popular music. Certainly, they were not totally responsible for racial crossover music in America, but they were seen as catalysts in writing music that seemed authentic and true to the sound and culture of Black musicians. For instance, in 1961, Lavern Baker's "Saved," written by Leiber and Stoller, reached number seventeen on the R & B charts and number thirty-seven on the pop charts (Deffaa). Reed acknowledges the importance of this song when she states, "Saved" is an important symbol, representing the dynamics of race, religion, and class in Black popular music. It symbolizes that cyclical process in much Black music since the 1930s, whereby African American cultural themes are shaped into songs by white songwriters and handed back to black artists for authentic interpretation" (2). Reed informs the reader of the genuine capabilities of this songwriting team in constructing their songs from their love and knowledge of the Black culture and community.

This article will highlight Leiber and Stoller's roles as cultural contributors to the music of the 1950s. The main emphasis will be on their ability as white songwriters to construct songs from a Black perspective for Black musicians that sounded unique and employed a Black comedic writing style, which enabled white audiences to see a different culture and its discursive musical styles. Therefore, using the band The Coasters, and their songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller, I will attempt to show through their lyrics that humor played a significant role in enabling a

Black band to be accepted by white audiences. In order to show their significance as cultural contributors from the standpoint of race and provide a comprehensive overview of Leiber and Stoller, it will be paramount to discuss some of the following points. First, I will discuss Black music in a white world. In essence, how did bands cross over during the decade of the 1950s? Second, I will examine thoroughly the cultures of Leiber and Stoller, which will provide an insightful analysis into the construction of their lyrics. Third, I will analyze the importance of humor employed by Leiber and Stoller as a form of identification to serve as a link between Black and white audiences. Many other bands associated with the songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller could have been used in this study, but the Coasters, with their comedic musical style, seem to resonate most with what this study is attempting to uncover. Therefore, the lyrics of Leiber and Stoller will be studied as situated in the songs of the Coasters

Music Scene of the 1950s

For the fan of modern day pop music, it is probably difficult to think of a time when African American groups or singers were not played on mainstream radio. Perusing *Billboard Magazine*, listening to popular radio, or watching MTV, would provide one previously unfamiliar with modern day music with the impact of African American music on the current cultural landscape. Rap music, music formed in African American communities, is by far the highest selling music of the late 20th and early 21st century. History will emphasize how white kids have emulated the style of Black kids in both musical style and dress (Graham). In fact, African American musicians have been a mainstay in the homes of white Americans from about the end of the 1950s to the present. However, in the early 1950s, it was not common for Blacks to be played on white mainstream radio stations.

Crossover music, especially Black music, was not accepted during the time frame of the 1950s. But this pattern would begin to change in 1954. According to Propes,

In the middle of March 1954, the Chords, a black six-man R&B vocal group from the Morrisania district of the Bronx, recorded their reworking of an old jailhouse song called "Sh-boom". A month later "Sh-boom" was the fourth release on the Cat label, a short-lived subsidiary of Atlantic Records. On 3 July, having climbed to number eight on Billboards national Rhythm and Blues singles chart, "Sh-boom" suddenly appeared on that journal's traditionally white best seller list. (6)

The above quotation signifies the crossover from the Black market into the mainstream pop charts.

Hall asserts, "Race has been central to social organization as it offers a process of giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system that is the basis for the symbolic order we call culture" (236). It must also be noted that this was during the time of *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, which attempted to rectify the current status quo that was still in agreement that separate public school facilities for Black and white children was something that should still be enforced. Not only was *Brown* seen as a crossover, but also music was attempting to alleviate racial problems by allowing the Black culture access into white homes via the medium of popular music. In a sense, Black music was also acting as a change agent in American race relations during this decade. Ward, Stokes, & Tucker say, "Although it was not the first R&B record to penetrate the white pop charts, the crossover of "Sh-boom" nonetheless signaled the start of a new era in American popular music in which young whites increasingly turned to black music and its derivatives for their entertainment" (2). Black and white bands or

musicians did not play together during this time period. Even their music unions were segregated (Szwed).

Black music, or what we could define as Black rock and roll, was extolled by such artists as Little Richard and Chuck Berry. Music was usually distributed from a racial frame of reference. For example, there were labels devoted to Black musicians and their music (Szwed). Both Richard and Berry give the reader a template to begin assessing the popularity of crossover acts in the early 1950s. Not only did these two musicians become successful recording artists, but their brand of music spawned the white rock and roll sounds of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. All four of the above musicians played a seminal role in the construction of rock and roll and the crossover appeal of race music during this important decade. Historically speaking, music has been a way for Black musicians to express themselves to a white audience without fear of persecution or oppression (Cummings & Roy).

The Chords success and other Black bands/musicians that followed allowed some to believe that music somehow acted as a benevolent force to bind together the races. The crossover by the Chords into white mainstream radio charts in July 1954 was not the only Black record to make an impact on the charts. Such bands as The Crows, The Dominoes, Lloyd Price, and Faye Adams also charted well on white mainstream radio stations. (Ward et al.). This type of popularity would erode some of the racist programming taking place during this time period. According to the *Billboard* chart dated January 28, 1955, the following information provides the growing popularity of Black music during this time period:

By the end of 1954, income from r&b records and tours constituted a \$25 million branch of the industry. A growing, if still relatively small, contingent of young white fans had combined with the black audience to double the market share claimed by r&b from 5 percent to 10 percent of the total industry gross. (56)

Not only could the majority of white record producers and owners of radio stations not ignore the popularity of Black music, but these bands and music were beginning to add a commercial dimension to why this type of music should be distributed to white mainstream audiences. From the years 1955-1958, Black Rhythm and Blues music continued to have a growing appeal for the American buying public (Billboard). In the early 1950s, this would have seemed like an arduous task for mainstream white Americans to accept Black music on their airwaves and in their houses. However, it became a major paradigm shift as it changed the genre of popular music. According to Charles Hamm, "At no point in the two hundred year history of popular song in America had there been such a drastic and dramatic change in such a brief time period" (391). The major goal of both the Black musicians and white recording companies was to break down the walls of segregation and reach a white buying audience. Some record labels saw inner city Black neighborhoods as a wonderful context for Black popular production, especially music. (Jackson). The musicians were successful in negating some of the stereotypes by allowing music to play an integral role in bridging some racial ideologies between Black music and their white listening audience. At the time, Black musicians were struggling to be employed. Therefore, by employing more Black musicians they were given the chance to be played on white mainstream radio.

It should be noted that capitalism cannot be neglected when discussing this topic. Money certainly played a role in the decision making process of white-owned radio stations that would reap maximum profits from the music of Black musicians. Not only did the music have an impact on the economic functions of the recording industry, but it was also used by its white consumers as a pedagogical tool to learn about life outside of their racial frames of reference. One might assume that the South would seem averse to accepting the music of Blacks; however, in reality, this couldn't be further from the truth. According to Ward et al.:

In the early to mid 1950s, southern working class white male youths managed to make the R&B they found on the radio, in jukeboxes, and in black clubs on the wrong side of town into integral part of their lives with- haircuts and lurid suits notwithstanding generally conformed to the social, religious, sexual and racial orthodoxies of the contemporary white South. (38)

Ward et. al. point to the growing crossover success of Black music during this time period. It certainly was not repairing all of the racial wounds of the past, but at least it was enabling some Black musicians the opportunity for greater appeal to diverse American audiences. Relying on evidence provided by Billboard's best seller chart, between the years of 1957 and 1964 recordings by Black musicians accounted for 204 hits (Billboard). Statistically speaking, it is an impressive paradigm shift, since the first crossover hit was only three years removed from the year 1957. This time period was by far the greatest advancement of racially integrated music in the history of American popular music. Groia expands on the notion of music's racial divide by supplying interviews with important Black musicians of this time period:

In 1956, the Platters argued that rock and roll was doing a lot for race relations. It's giving the kids a chance to meet rock and roll artists and this is helping them find out that many of the stories that they hear are not true. Over 30 years later Harry Weigner, the group's bass singer, still insisted that the music had helped to undermine venerable white racial stereotypes. Because of our music, white kids ventured into black areas. In the late 1950s, Herbie Cox of the Cleftones really believed that disk jockeys and record distributors were doing more for integration than Brown *versus the Topeka Board of Education*. (128)

Music was creating a sense of connectedness between some racial segments of American society. In addition not only were whites learning about Black culture, but for the first time in their careers, Black musicians were playing their music to white audiences. Therefore, the timing of the songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller would play an integral role in showing the comedic side of Black musicians and their culture. The next section will show their unique ability to immerse themselves in the culture and write from the perspective that would stay authentic to the sounds and words of Black musicians.

Expert Spectators

To understand the importance of culture, one must understand the values, mores, and traditions that are clear indicators of the culture or community under study. In fact, numerous musicians of the past and present have enhanced our knowledge of cultures, communities, and specific time frames that are an important part of the American landscape. For example, Robbie Robertson's album, *Storyville*, released in 1991, was a sort of historical ethnography of a bordello district in New Orleans in the 1920s. Robertson provided in this album specific characters, the flavor of this culture, and an enhanced understanding of the natives residing in this cultural community in New Orleans. In addition, Paul Simon's album, *Graceland*, incorporated African musicians and their unique and innovative traditions that are inherent in the history of popular music.

Current popular music has a plethora of examples in which culture is referenced by either solo acts or groups. This is certainly evident in the genre of popular music known as rap music. I could employ many examples, but one of the most unique examples is the white rapper Eminem. Being a white rapper is an anomaly in rap music. Fraley said, "Eminem, a White MC, has achieved a level of success unmatched in the world of hip-hop. Conscious of his race, Eminem stresses that he is not to

be placed in the White rapper category but should be respected for his skills” (37). However, not only has Eminem achieved mass success with both white and Black audiences, he has received critical praise from music critics. Eminem's 2002 release, *The Eminem Show*, discusses his plight of growing up in a trailer court in Detroit, Michigan. One can argue that Eminem’s addresses with characters from his neighborhood, as they live out their existences, and experience racial and class discrimination.

Numerous other musicians who could have been discussed, but this gives the reader a clear indicator that some musicians attempt to write from the perspective of the cultural insider. In the above examples, the researchers (musicians) of these songs were able to exhibit through their lyrics a cultural voice sometimes not heard by mainstream audiences. I am not arguing that musicians are researchers; instead, I am advocating that these individuals function in the same manner as researchers who study and perform modes of ethnographic research.

Both Leiber and Stoller can be described as experts, because they immersed themselves in the history and culture of Black musicians. Rosenfield states, "One characteristic of a critic, then, is his interest in observing and discussing instances of discourse, be they essays, speeches, performances, or advertisements from the vantage of the spectator" (10). Under these circumstances, both Leiber and Stoller showed an appreciation of Black culture and music, which contributed to an enhanced understanding of one part of this culture. According to Ward et al, they expound on the importance of this songwriting team to the time period of the 1950s:

Leiber and Stoller dawned on the music scene at a time of stylistic rumblings and movement into a new territory of popular music, a time when the authentic American Rhythm and Blues of the black world was beginning to be embraced by the general music-buying public, a time when the phenomenon of crossover became apparent with the daily programming assistance of legendary disc jockeys

like Alan Freed, a Cleveland on-air personality who is said to have coined the phrase, rock and roll. (32)

Their timing and exemplary songwriting skills were certainly seen as a catalyst that had an impact on race albums in the United States. Their goal was to write songs that highlighted the strengths of their recording artists. These strengths included, but were not limited to, their voices, humor, production, and technique. Palmer asserts, "When they began writing together, Leiber and Stoller were concerned above all with sounding authentic, which to them meant exclusively black" (19).

Authenticity to the Black culture encapsulated many things to this talented songwriting team. Songs such as "Charlie Brown," "Young Blood," and "Yakety Yak" as performed by The Drifters highlight the comedic style through lyrical content and vocal performance. Leiber and Stoller delighted in attempting to understand the culture they were representing. Ward et al. evidences this when they quote Stoller saying, "I wouldn't say that we were the only Caucasians interested in the blues, but generally speaking it was unusual for the teenage white kids to be involved, knowledgeable, and interested in black music" (87).

Both of these songwriters' interest in the culture and music of the Black frame of reference and their own background experiences enabled them to grasp a better understanding of the culture they were attempting to emulate through such variables as language and instrumentation. It was their interpretation of the Black experience which enabled these songwriters to construct these interesting and relevant lyrics. According to Palmer:

In essence, Leiber and Stoller are conceptual artists whose medium is popular records. It is their influences-black Rhythm and Blues, ghetto humor, Broadway, the legitimate theater, classical music, Latin rhythms, jazz-which are diverse. And even this cultural

smorgasbord is readily comprehensible once one understands who they are and where they came from. (13)

For example, Leiber's mother ran a grocery store in a primarily Black ghetto in Baltimore, and Stoller grew up listening to Mexican-Americans and Blacks performing songs on the street corners and local clubs. Leiber, in an interview with Palmer, explains his own experience with the Black community when he states:

My mother was the only one who extended credit to black people, Leiber remembers. Most of their homes didn't have electricity; they used kerosene lamps. I was very welcome, and I loved to make that trip to their homes. They always made a big fuss over me. A radio was always playing. Those radios were like magic boxes to me; they played music I never heard anywhere else. Sometimes they played Southern country music but mainly they played rhythm and blues. (67)

In addition, the Stollers lived in a neighborhood in New York that was predominately Mexican American. Some of these Latin influences certainly were evident in the later recordings of The Drifters in such songs as "Spanish Harlem," "Save the Last Dance for Me," and "Under the Boardwalk." These are just a few examples of the Latin influence in their music that was derived by living in close proxemics to Mexican Americans. It would seem to be a cumbersome task for a white songwriting team to write from either the perspective of Black or Mexican musicians, but the team of Leiber and Stoller were ready for this arduous process. Stoller, in an interview with Fricke, explains his love for the Black culture when he states, "I felt black. I was, as far as I was concerned. And I wanted to be black for lots of reasons. They were better musicians, they were better athletes, they were not uptight about sex, and they knew how to enjoy life better than most people" (100). Passion for

the Black culture enabled both of these songwriters to maneuver their words to adhere to the sound and authenticity of Black musicians. Some research explains Whiteness as negative and some whites feel some negativity towards their race (Shome, 2000). This is the template that Leiber and Stoller seemed to emulate. Their passion for the Black culture is further articulated by Palmer when he asserts:

More and more, Leiber and Stoller dropped out of conventional white society and began to identify themselves with the black subculture. They moved through a night world populated by jazzman, black hipsters, and other stylish, creative, economically marginal types. We found ourselves writing for black artists," Leiber says, "because those were the voices and rhythms we loved. By the fall of 1950, when both Mike and I were in City College, we had black girlfriends and were into a black lifestyle. (29)

Even though they were not Black, their ability to immerse themselves in parts of the culture under study enabled them to have somewhat of an insider's perspective on the overall values, norms, and mores of this culture. This will be evidenced later in this analysis by delving into the writing style of Leiber and Stoller. Black communication is more assertive than White communication style (Kochman). There are also different social rules that are embedded in the patterns of communication (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau). Research purports that Black communication style is more direct (Kochman). Hughes and Baldwin assert, "The use of Black slang may call attention to itself, causing it be seen as loud and noisy" (45). In addition, it escalates stereotypes of comic Blacks and the portrayal of Blacks as comedians (Hall). The above characteristics are not exhaustive, but indicative of some of the characteristics of Black communication styles.

The above studies indicate the importance of race in communication situations. Conversely, it can be argued that these communication characteristics can be linked to the study of popular music. I don't believe that any ethnographer can ever be part of the culture under study. However, in the case of Leiber and Stoller, it seemed that their access to parts of the Black culture provided them with the knowledge to write music from the Black frame of reference. According to Jackson, "The real and primary concern is the extent to which underprivileged or subjugated groups are able to gain agency by moving from margin to center, from object to subject, and from Other to I." (10). Even though Leiber and Stoller were not part of an underprivileged group, they acted as catalysts to get these minority groups played on white mainstream radio stations. Their astute ability and passion for making this type of music was evident in the true blues fashion they were attempting to capture and emulate. Not only was this a unique arrangement, meaning white songwriters writing for Black musicians, but their songwriting skills were lucrative to Leiber and Stoller, The Coasters, and the record company.

Leiber and Stoller created an attention switching activity in the genre of rock and roll by enabling Black musicians and performers to have the opportunity to be heard on white mainstream radio stations. They were not the first, but they may have been the most successful. These songwriters were able to achieve this feat because of their expert knowledge and understanding of the Black culture and its important musical components and variables. According to Rosenfield, "What matters is exceptional understanding. Accordingly, critical posture refers to the capacity a person has to act as an expert commentator, and the critic, if he is nothing else, must be the one who is capable of filling the shoes" (18). Leiber and Stoller would be defined as expert spectators of the Black culture, especially in the area of popular music and sound. This knowledge assisted them in creating a unique sound that emulated, but did not steal from the culture of the Black musician. Unlike other cultural producers

before them, many of them white, Leiber and Stoller did not emulate the ideologies of past participants in the writing and production of Black performance to White audiences. Patton says, "Like a cultural consumer, a contemporary colonist holds the antiquated model of an anthropologist; one finds the other, studies like the other, reports on the other, and takes what they want from the other while furthering white hegemony." (156). They were a paradox to past practices in the music industry. In an interview with Fricke in 1990, Stoller asserts his goal when writing songs: "What we wanted to do was try as good as we could at writing blues, for blues singers. Which meant exclusively black performers, writing in the black vernacular" (98). The Black groups they represented successfully were the Drifters and the Coasters. Both of these bands employed the talents of this songwriting team, which gave the rest of America the opportunity to be invited into their discursive cultures.

It is evident that both songwriters wanted to highlight the talents of Black musicians. In addition, they wanted to correct the exigence of racism, prejudice, and oppression that were redundant themes in a recording industry dominated by Caucasians. Bitzer explains the importance of changing an old ideology:

A rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations which presents an exigence that can be completely removed if discourse introduced into the situation can influence audience thought or action so as to bring about positive modification of the exigence (24).

Bitzer's notion of exigence can be applied to the recording industry during the decade of the 1950s. In sum, the exigence of unequal opportunities for Black musicians needed to be reversed to empower the talents of Black musicians. Consequently, Leiber and Stoller were able to influence American record producers, programmers, and top forty radio stations that Black music could be lucrative and influence the popularity of rock and

roll and its listening audience. By establishing a sense of ethos within the musical community by writing hit songs for such artists as The Coasters, The Drifters, and Ben E. King, Leiber and Stoller were able to help overcome the problem of unequal airplay and opportunities for Black musicians. In this instance, they were able to provide mainstream society a glimpse into the Black culture and its rich musical traditions.

Songwriting skills of Leiber and Stoller

As astute songwriters of popular music, it was essential for Leiber and Stoller's lyrics to resonate with their buying audience. This diverse audience would include both white and Black audience members; therefore, it was important that their music identified with the teenage population. Ward et al. quote Leiber in an interview when he discusses their songwriting skills: "If we were amused, if we really liked what we did, we had a pretty good darn shot at having a hit, because we were our own audience and we were on some level or another, typical of the people who bought our records" (88). Focusing on the notion of identification developed by Kenneth Burke, it is evident that Leiber and Stoller, through their songwriting skills, were forming identification between the Coasters and their audience. Burke says, "You persuade a man insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (49). Leiber and Stoller were able to persuade their audience members because their lyrics, especially the ones written for the Coasters, spoke to their audiences' hopes, sexual pleasures, fears, pain, and rebellious behaviors. In this sense, the identification was one that showed empathy toward their audience members, yet in the process, attempted to socialize them on the taboo subjects often times rejected by mainstream society in the 1950s. Booth shows the relationship between the singer and the audience when he says, "The singer's words are sung for us in that he says something that is also said somehow in

extension by us, and we are drawn into the state, the pose, the attitudes, the self offered by the song” (243). The skills of this songwriting team and their lyrics were magnetic to its listeners, and in turn, enabled them to act as active participants in the meaning and musical variables of their songs established for the Coasters. Palmer shows the importance of their lyrics:

Leiber and Stoller could make us laugh at our loneliness ("Searchin"), at our sexual frustrations ("Love Potion #9"), at our rebellious goofing off ("Charlie Brown"), at our bossy parents ("Yakety Yak"). These songs were dramatic events, which a character and problems were established and then comically elaborated on, as when the boy had gone looking for the love potion and described swallowing it. (7)

Not only were Leiber and Stoller attempting to construct songs that adhered to the true Black tradition, but they were also implementing humor in the hope it would be accepted by the white mainstream buying audience. Their first hit, "Saved," by Lavern Baker in 1961, pointed to their knowledge of the Black culture by constructing a song that adhered to some of the traditions of this community. The first tradition was worship and religion. Second, they employed the use of humor that was part of the Black Church and culture (Reed). This isn't to say that these were the only variables present in the culture. However, it shows a part of the Black community that Leiber and Stoller were attempting to highlight throughout their songwriting. Some would say that Leiber and Stoller were escalating the already negative stereotypes of the Black culture. This would include the use of humor, which required Blacks to continue their use of minstrelsy to provide humorous personas to their white audiences. According to Reed:

Minstrelsy provides a highly picturesque account of the way whites perceived and interpreted blacks and their culture from the mid nineteenth century as the late 1930s. However, that minstrelsy had multiple meanings, poking fun not only at blacks, but at a variety of both marginal and aristocratic types in antebellum America. (26)

Blackface minstrelsy has been seen as a damaging contributor to the negative stereotypes of Black performers. Blackface minstrelsy made Blacks seen like jokers to the white audience (Patton). In fact, Lott says, "The phenomenon of ministerly itself was an admission of fascination with blacks and black culture" (97). Since humor is a paramount ingredient in this study, blackface minstrelsy sometimes escalated racism and purported some of the stereotypes held by media organizations. Exposure to the above stereotypes assists in reinforcing the already racist ideologies held by white mainstream America.(Peffley, Hurwitz & Sniderman; Tan, Fujiika, & Tan). It is the above style that assisted Leiber and Stoller and their use of humor to make recording superstars of the Coasters. Therefore, in some instances, they were playing on the stereotype of the Black as a form of a jokester. But, they were using a part of the Black community that would be productive to the Black cause of allowing Black musicians to be played on white mainstream radio stations. In addition, some Black humor can be seen as a critique of white America (Barksdale). This is not an anomaly; it is something that has been employed throughout time by Black musicians. Reed says, "In order to have theatrical careers, many Blacks assumed the denigrating antics of minstrelsy, portraying what whites considered the most amusing behaviors and characteristics of the black culture" (4). It was with this knowledge that Leiber and Stoller would begin their successful writing career for the Coasters.

The Coasters and Leiber and Stoller

In 1957, when Atlantic Records signed the songwriting team of Leiber and Stoller, they were looking for a band that would showcase their songwriting talents (Ward et al.). The answer to the quest appeared to be the Robins; the group had already recorded two Leiber and Stoller songs on the Spark label. The songs "Smokey Joe's Café" and "Riot in Cell Block no. 9." However, the band's manager didn't want the band to record for Atlantic, so Leiber and Stoller talked the lead singer and bass player into becoming members of the newfound band the Coasters. The band's name was derived from them recording on the West Coast, unlike most of the other vocal groups who recorded in New York City (Deffa). Because the band had already recorded the above songs of Leiber and Stoller, it would seem appropriate these songwriters would become a catalyst in the initial success of the Coasters. Not only did Leiber and Stoller employ comedy in their lyrical content, but also the Coasters were a band that used comedy through implementation of their delivery style and musical accommodations. According to Deffa:

Show business hasn't ever seen a vocal group quite like the Coasters. They are set apart, first of all, by their being a comedy team. There isn't another group that ranks in the top ten of Cash Box's annual survey of disc jockeys to determine the "Most Programmed Vocal Group" whose basic appeal rests on humor. Nothing in the world is more difficult to achieve than a long-term career in the record field by being funny. (35)

The above quotation is important because it informs one of the successes of this band and, most importantly, it describes humor as their success strategy. Humor can assist in producing laughter and smiling (Cann, Zapata, & Davis). Leiber and Stoller's love of Black culture, especially the ingredient of humor, and their employment of the Coasters as the deliverer

of the message, would lead to success for both the songwriters and the band. Even though some may argue that Leiber and Stoller played upon the stereotypes of the Black culture as comedians, it is evident that their understanding of the use of humor in this culture played a role that may have placated white audiences. According to Timmerman, Gussman, & King, "While there is a possibility of reaffirming the stereotypes in the process, there is also the promise and possibility of creating a perspective that while not eliminating the stereotypes of their history, does hold out hope for moving beyond them" (171). Since this research topic lends some significance to blackface minstrelsy, which established Blacks as buffoons in the white imagination, it seems important to note that Leiber and Stoller were trying to negate this practice through their production techniques for the Coasters. In the end, it allowed Blacks to share one part of their culture with the American people. Humor, in this instance, would be seen as a division that would exploit positively the Black musician and allow white audiences the opportunity to be exploited by the very system they embraced. It is said that music can be viewed as an appropriate mode of communication that allows the oppressed group to critique mainstream society. In sum, the group being castigated does not recognize the message by the oppressor as one that critiques and makes fun of the hegemonic group in power (Kaemer).

The theme of humor was evident in the songs performed by the Coasters. For example, such songs as "Searchin," "Poison Ivy," "Along Came Jones," "Yakety Yak," and "Charlie Brown" all had comedic forms of communication both in the lyrical content and musical style. Meyer says, "Not only is humor pleasant; its recurring presence suggests that communicators believe it to be persuasive" (310). It can either be employed as a form of inclusiveness or insulation. Leiber and Stoller used it for the purpose of selling their product to the American people. In this sense, inclusiveness played a role in establishing identification by employing humor, so a white audience would accept the actions of the

musical and performance style of the Coasters. Meyer says, “That because identification and clarification through humor engender agreement with the norm or issues involved, they tend to unify communicators” (323). This unification would be displayed between the band and its listening audience.

The two mainstays of the band were lead singer Carl Gardner and bassist Bobby Nunn. It was Nunn who would be the comic singer of the band. His baritone style during the refrains resonated comically with both white and Black audiences. The band displayed their performance style in 1957, when they recorded the Leiber and Stoller penned "Searchin". The song reached number one on the charts in May of 1957 (Rees and Crampton,). This is the band's first million selling album. In the song, the singer is searching for his girlfriend who has literally run away from the relationship and him. The lyrics include the following:

Oh, yes, I been searchin' Searchin every which a way

But I am like a Northwest Mountie

You know I will bring her in some day

Well, now if I have to swim a river, you know I will

And if I have to climb a mountain, you know I will

And if she is hidin' up on Blueberry Hill

Am I gonna find her, child, you know I will

Both the lyrics of Leiber and Stoller and the singing style of the Coasters make this a unique recording for this time period. Ward, et al. say the song is about a "singer who is searching for his girlfriend, vowing to track her down with the tenacity of a Northwest Mountie or a Bulldog Drummond,

as the group executes a fiendishly tricky vocal arrangement built around the chant of "Gonna Find her" (152). Not only are the lyrics humorous in nature, but the sounds of the piano and the employment of the voice also make this an inviting song from a listener's perspective. Employing the song "Searchin," both Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters were showing through humor how the topic of a "broken heart" would make someone perform a task that would be out of character for that person. According to Meyer:

An audience highly sympathetic to and quite familiar with the topic of humor may experience identification with the user of humor. Humor in this case serves to strengthen the commonality and shared meaning perceived between communicators. One valuable function humor serves is to build support by identifying communicators with their audiences, enhancing speaker credibility (317).

The concealment of sex was overtly present in this song. In fact, this was still a taboo topic in the decade of the 1950s. It is through the concept of humor that sex can be sold to the American buying audiences. Certainly, most if not all people can identify and empathize with the character in the song attempting to unite with a relational partner. Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters emulated this type of comedic style throughout the duration of this song. In sum, humor is associated with a variety of positive outcomes (Cann et al). Interestingly enough, Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters employed this style on the B-side to their song "Searchin" by constructing the comedic and sexual song "Youngblood." The song reaches the Top 10, hitting the charts at #8. Not only were the lyrics interesting, but Leiber and Stoller's use of musical style at this time was ingenious to the genre known as popular music. According to Palmer:

In "YoungBlood," Jerry and Mike introduced a device, which was central to many subsequent Coasters records. There were breaks in which the instruments dropped out and the singers repeated a line one by one in rapid succession. "Looka there," each Coaster marveled as the "Young Blood" or underage girl walked by, with bass Bobby Nunn finishing off the sequence in a lascivious bumpkin's voice. The effect proved irresistible. (23)

Not only was the musical style unique, but Leiber and Stoller, through their lyrical geniuses, show the urgency of this individual attempting to form a relationship with a girl younger than him, and his adamant stance in establishing a relationship with this girl and receiving opposition from her parents, especially her dad. Sex and interpersonal relationships were not openly discussed in this decade. In addition, race was another variable that many people had an aversion toward discussing in the 1950s. Therefore, the song needed to be worded in such a way that it did not offend parents or its buying audience. Ward et al. explain why it resonated so well with its teenage population:

In simple, direct language, it describes him meeting her, being tongue tied when he tries to talk to her, and finally encountering her father, who tells him to get lost. The last verse finds the singer tossing and turning till sunrise; and the song ends with the words "can't get you out of my mind" swooping up to a surprising and beautiful major chord resolution that seems to imply a subtle and wonderful surprise, that the story will have a happy ending anyway (152).

Sex as a topic can be both divisive and productive. Additionally, humor that addresses sex can easily backfire. In this case, the song was perfect for the situation. The first caption of the song finds Leiber and Stoller's

lyrics being put onto record by the Coasters as informing their audience about this individual seeing her for the first time:

I saw her standing on the corner

A yellow ribbon in her hair

I couldn't keep myself from shouting

Look a there look a there look a there

Young Blood

I can't get you out of my mind

Not only do the lyrics reference sexual relationships, but musically with the use of the baritone voice, it sounds comedic in general. The song included comedy, sex, and innocence and seemed to capture the experience of teenagers during this time period. Just like "Searchin," "Youngblood" also used the theme of relationships to identify with their younger audience. Sex or sexual relationships that were performed in music by any artist were not commonplace topics heard in popular music at this time. In addition, it would be an even more arduous task for Black musicians to be delivering this type of message. Surprise, of course, is a key ingredient in humor from the incongruity perspective (Shurcliff). Therefore, it was the job of Leiber and Stoller to present this topic in a comedic fashion that did not cause dissonance with its buying audience, especially the white population. They performed this task by using comedy in their lyrical style. Humor from this perspective would rely on incongruity theory, which infers that people laugh at what surprises them (Berger, Deckers, & Divine, & McGhee,). In addition, Meyer speaks of humor under this template:

An accepted pattern is violated, or a difference is noted-close enough to the norm to be non-threatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable. It is this difference, neither too shocking nor too mundane, that provokes humor in the mind of the receiver, according to the incongruity theory (313).

The song "Youngblood" seems to fit into the above criteria. First, it deviates from the norm of the music of the 1950s by mentioning the topics of sex and lust. Sex in the case of the song isn't overtly present, but it is implied through the communication style of comedy as performed by the Coasters. Second, the song is not too threatening in a sexual way. In addition, by using humor in this instance, Leiber and Stoller are able to use part of the African American heritage of humor without causing discomfort for their white audience members, who still had stereotypes and reservations about Black culture and its musicians. It can also be seen as a form of rebellion from the Black community. For instance, Black humor was viewed as an early form of Black power and a critique of white America (Barkdale). Singing proved to be a powerful tool for shaping a new image of African Americans for themselves and the larger world (Wyatt).

The year 1958 was a breakthrough year for both Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters. During this time period, "Yakety Yak" reached number one in July 1958. Rees and Crampton say the song "takes the form of a white kid's view (Stoller) of a black person's conception of white society" (200). This makes it interesting for several reasons. First, it is a critique delivered by white songwriters that deem themselves as experts of the Black culture. In this sense, experts (Leiber and Stoller) would write a critique that would be delivered by Black performers to a white audience about mainstream culture and ideologies. These include whites already oppressing Blacks and their voices. The way for the voice to be heard was through music. Ward, et al. state, "Leiber and Stoller hooked up with the Coasters again to make yet another teenage classic of social commentary,

yet another record that would set parents and school authorities against rock and roll: "Yakety Yak". Its hero was a poor kid bedeviled by his parents" (181). But did the song also include some racial overtures? The answer would be a resounding yes.

The first line in the song enables the listener to feel the oppression of Blacks or adolescents during this particular time frame as either white America or parents either warn Black America or their children to do their chores or they will be punished and not allowed to participate in mainstream society or listen to rock and roll music. The song provides a glimpse into this Orwellian environment:

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 'n roll no more
Yakety Yak
Don't talk back

The above lyrics can be understood differently by discursive audiences. First, without understanding the history of the song, it would be commonsense knowledge to believe the song was written about teenage rebellion. However, upon further clarification, humor is employed in the song to hide the tragedy of racism during the decade of the 1950s. Watkins says. "That prior to the 1960s blacks were less likely to control the technologies and spaces where popular music was produced: thus the degree to which they could express an explicitly political message was seriously limited during studio recording sessions" (375). Perhaps the superiority theory would be appropriate to understand why Leiber and

Stoller wrote this song. Meyer says “that people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them “ (314). Maybe if the general white population knew what Leiber and Stoller were attempting to construct in this song, it would have changed their perceptions of this song and the Coasters. But this was not the case. It was a joke that was not privileged to be known by all people involved in this communication interaction. Superiority in this instance would say that even though Blacks were being subjected to the ridicules of whites by their thoughts and actions, it was this song that showed the superiority of Leiber and Stoller, which allowed Black musicians to show dominance by being the ones that made fun of white mainstream society. Meyer states:

From superiority theory perspective, humor results, not just from something irrational or unexpected, but from seeing oneself as superior, right, or triumphant in contrast to one who is inferior, wrong or defeated. Laughing at faulty behavior can also reinforce unity among group members, as a feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed can coexist with a feeling of belonging. (315)

The song "Yakety Yak" certainly adheres to the above criteria. In this instance, were parts of Black America laughing at white mainstream culture and their ideologies? Additional lyrics of the song back up the above assertion:

Don't 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

The dirty looks may not be distributed because of social norms during this time period. However, it was this covert message that would supplant any forms of rebellion from a nonverbal frame of reference. The cornerstone of the success not only included the lyrics, but the continued fast progression of the song and the baritone style of the Coasters. Humor can be constructed that enjoyment of a funny message can be taken as a group's false sense of entitlement (Hobbs). In other words, the oppressor does not identify with the group being oppressed, but enjoys seeing an inferior group made fun of under certain situations and contexts (Banjo). Therefore, under these circumstances, the enjoyment of White stereotyping is considered to be influenced by Blacks sense of superiority and disconnect from White culture. This would be a major paradigm shift in this decade. It can be argued that Black music emphasized style over substance. However, in this case, both style and substance were combined together to form a protest song that could only be derived by the insiders of this culture, including Leiber and Stoller, the Coasters, and possibly African Americans in general.

It has been argued that Leiber and Stoller, through the implementation of humor in their lyrics and their love and knowledge of the Black culture, were able to get Black bands played on white mainstream radio. Since they were catalysts in this arena, it impelled them to write songs that were not comedic for other Black bands or musicians. These seminal songs include, but are not limited to such classics as "Kansas City" by Wilbert Harrison, "On Broadway" by the Drifters, and both "Spanish Harlem" and "Stand by Me" by Ben E. King. Therefore, it can be surmised that their earlier strategies set up success for Black performers in which they would no longer need to adhere to the established norms of humor that can be seen through today's lens as both racist and ethnocentric.

Conclusion

Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis were all important cultural contributors to the genre of popular music. All of the above artists, both Black and white, contributed some forms of their culture and musical styles to their listening audiences. This list is not exhaustive, but indicative of some of the germinal figures that assisted in transcending musical and racial boundaries during the decade of the 1950s. However, the songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller also deserves to be mentioned as pioneers in the earliest stages of popular music. Not only were they talented songwriters, but what made them an anomaly during this decade was their ability as white songwriters to construct songs for Black musicians that were authentic to the Black tradition of humor as situated in both their lyrics and musical performances. This essay serves as an argument for the importance of Leiber and Stoller's contribution to crossover music, which enabled Black musicians to be listened to by white Americans who experienced their extraordinary musical talents. Especially, in this instance, the Coasters were the band that would play a crucial role as a catalyst for social change.

The decade of the 1950s in the music industry was one of change, especially in the form of crossover music. It was the rhetorical situation that would welcome the social change. In this case, the exigency would be the unequal airtime provided for Black musicians on white mainstream radio stations. This change would assist the songwriting genius of Leiber and Stoller.

Songs performed by the Coasters, including "Yakety Yak," "Young Blood," and "Searchin," which all charted high in the U.S. The songs were exceptional; however, I would argue that it was their comedic meanings that relied on the Black and gospel tradition to discuss sex and critique white mainstream society. Overall, this research is an attempt to show how humor can be employed, both through the lyrics and musical style, to

present different messages to discursive audiences. In this instance, Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters incorporated humor to perpetuate the stereotypes of Black musicians as jokers. However, after a closer reading of the text, it was the use of these messages, which allowed Blacks to be played to the white mainstream audience that provided a sense of empowerment to a people who had been oppressed by mainstream institutions. In addition, themes of sex, rebellion, and adolescent fantasies were described comically through the lyrics and singing style of the band.

Future communication scholars should investigate how such cultural variables, including race, influence the writing style of musicians. Specifically, can someone from another race write from an authentic perspective that captures the nuances of another racial culture? In addition, will this rendering of the culture be authentic to the culture of people it is attempting to represent? Second, how does comedy play a role in promoting a covert message through a particular lyrical style? These are important areas to be explored by scholars interested in race, comedy, and popular music. Certainly, Leiber and Stoller played a significant role in acting as catalysts by creating an attention switching activity by which Black musicians, especially the Coasters, could be played in white mainstream households. This paradigm shifting activity transcended cultural and racial barriers and provided new assumptions for Black performers.

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