

THE GOOD LUCK CHARMS

They wrote and produced some of the most iconic hits of the rock'n'roll era. Seven decades after they met, we look back on the stunning back catalogue of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

WORDS BY NEIL CROSSLEY

On the evening of 25 July 1956, a luxurious Italian ocean liner called the Andrea Doria was approaching the coast of Nantucket, Massachusetts, bound for New York City. Among the ship's 1,134 passengers was a 23-year-old songwriter from Los Angeles called Mike Stoller, who was returning from a three-month trip to Europe with his wife.

At around 11pm, in heavy fog, the starboard side of the Andrea Doria was struck by the bow of a 524-foot long eastbound Swedish liner, called the Stockholm. A total of 51 people lost their lives in one of the worst maritime disasters of the 20th century. Stoller and his wife found their way into a lifeboat before being picked up by a freighter called the Cape Ann.

When the Cape Ann eventually steamed into New York's harbour, there waiting to greet Stoller at the dock was his songwriting partner, Jerome 'Jerry' Leiber.

"Hey, you're alive," yelled Leiber. "I guess so," grinned Stoller. "Hey Mike," continued Leiber excitedly, "we have a smash hit. It's *Hound Dog*." "Big Mama Thornton's record?" asked Stoller. "No, some white kid called Elvis Presley," replied Leiber. Just 24 hours after his near-death experience, the somewhat shellshocked Stoller looked at his partner and enquired "Elvis who?"

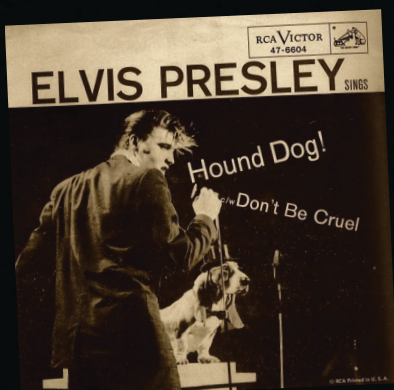
As career highlights go, it was a pivotal moment. Leiber and Stoller had already established themselves as songwriters and producers in the R&B marketplace, but Presley's recording of

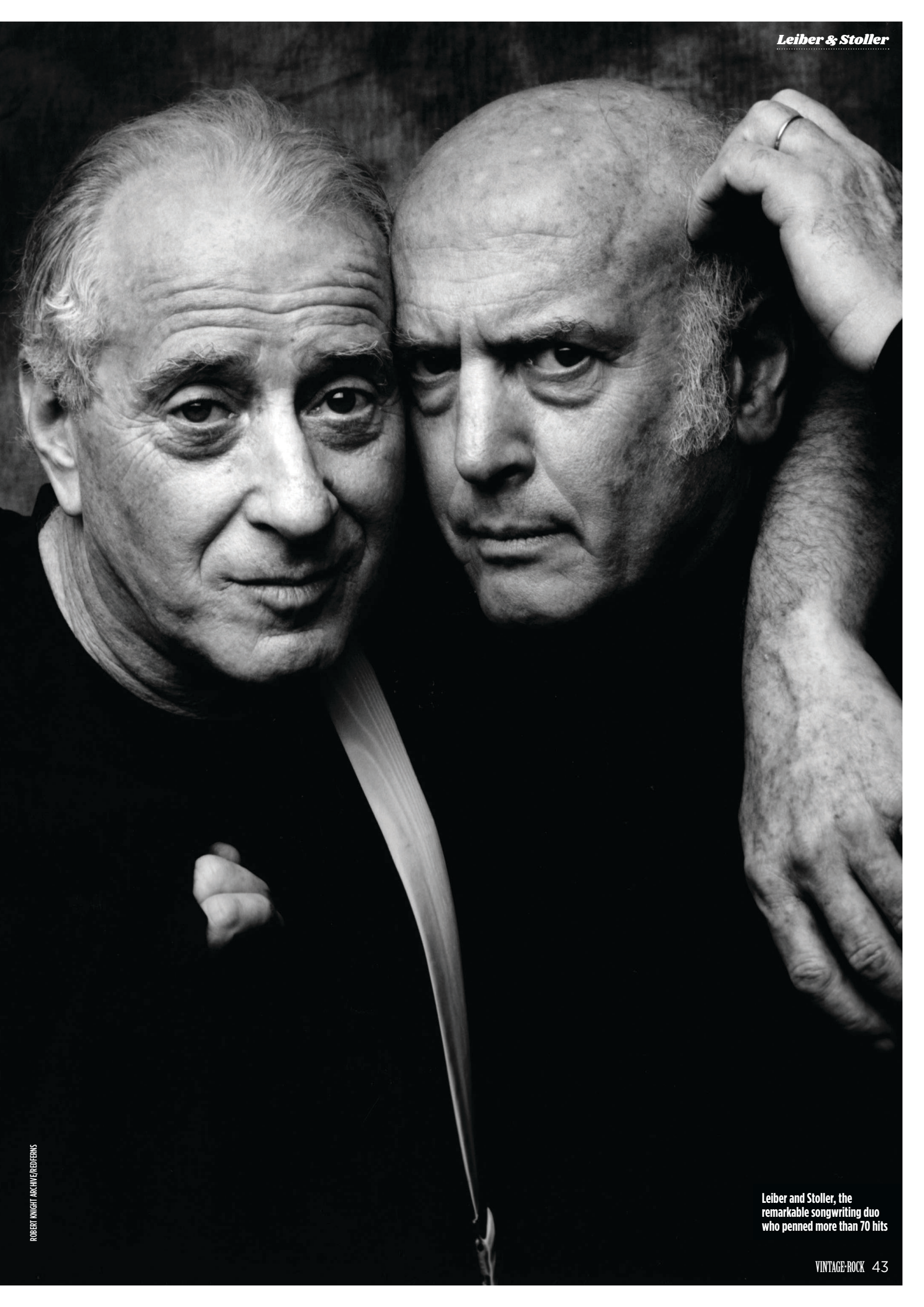
Hound Dog would catapult them into the mainstream.

Throughout the 50s and early 60s, Leiber (lyrics) and Stoller (music) wrote or co-wrote more than 70 chart hits for artists such as Presley, The Coasters, Ben E. King and The Drifters, and forged a reputation as a songwriting and production team without equal.

Their songs and sound would go on to define the 50s and shape the rock landscape of the early 60s. Seventy years since they started writing together, their influence and legacy remain undimmed.

BORN INTO MIDDLE class Jewish families, Leiber and Michael 'Mike' Stoller were both brought into the world on the East Coast in 1933, Leiber on Long Island and Stoller in Baltimore, Maryland. But by 1950, when they met, both had moved to Los Angeles. After finishing high school, Stoller earned a living playing piano, while Leiber worked in a record store.





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Leiber and Stoller, the remarkable songwriting duo who penned more than 70 hits

END OF THE LINE

Leiber and Stoller wrote 20 songs for Elvis and it was a relationship built on mutual admiration and respect. But unrealistic demands from Presley's manager Colonel Tom Parker (shown right) brought the relationship to an end.

In January 1958, Elvis was desperate to return to the studio with the duo, offering to reschedule the 15 January session if need be. Leiber was in New York recovering from pneumonia when he got a call from Parker asking him and Stoller to return to LA to begin work.

He also enquired whether the pair had found time to look at the contract for Elvis's new film soundtrack he had sent over. When Leiber took the contract out of its manila envelope all he saw was a blank page.

"Nothing was written on it except two lines at the bottom where Mike and I were supposed to sign our names," he said in Ken Sharp's book *Elvis Presley: Writing For The King*. Leiber thought Parker had simply made a mistake and immediately phoned his office. "There's no mistake," Parker said, "just sign it. Don't worry. We'll fill in the details later."

Leiber immediately phoned Stoller. Despite



the huge financial and creative benefits of working for Presley, Leiber was deeply offended by Parker's treatment.

"I told Mike I don't want to work with this jerk anymore. I asked him 'How do you feel about this?'. Now Mike is very measured and modest with very good manners. He paused for a moment and said, 'Jer... tell him to f**k himself'."

Leiber called Parker and said he had thought about their conversation. "He said, 'Good, what time are you gonna get here?'. I said 'Tom, I spoke to Mike about the contract, and he told me to tell you to go f**k yourself'. I hung up the phone and never spoke to him again."

feel to Thornton's performance and *Hound Dog* became a hit, but it was *Riot In Cell Block No.9*, recorded by The Robins in 1954, that would really make people sit up and take notice of Leiber and Stoller.

The track was their first to use a Muddy Waters-style stop-time riff and Leiber's evocative lyrics set the scene. "On July 2, 1953/ I was serving time for armed robbery/ Four 'o'clock in the morning I was laying back in my cell/ I heard the whistle blow, then I hear somebody yell/ 'There's a riot going on'."

In the studio, Leiber and Stoller added a siren and machine gun sound effects to the intro. They also took the decision to replace The Robins' lead singer with Richard Berry, an old friend of Leiber's. Berry's deep laconic drawl and the group's slow, slinky groove created an infectious swagger of a sound.

BY 1956, LEIBER and Stoller had become the 'go-to' writing team. But despite their achievements, they were still focusing on R&B, which was essentially a segregated market. The pair were keen to write songs that all young people would hear. Their aspirations would be realised on 2 July 1956, when Elvis Presley walked into a session at RCA Studios in New York and made a last-minute addition to the running order, *Hound Dog*.

Elvis was inspired to cover the song after hearing a Las Vegas lounge act called Freddie Bell And The Bellboys perform it in April 1956. Theirs was a much rockier version and this was the template that Elvis followed. Lyrically, too, it was radically different from Big Mama Thornton's take. Leiber's original lyrics were about a freeloading gigolo. By contrast, "they made it sound like it was written about a dog," said Stoller.

Despite such concerns, the version of the track that was recorded at RCA Victor Studios was an electric, searing performance. It took 31 attempts for Elvis – along with Scotty Moore on guitar, bassist Bill Black, drummer DJ Fontana and vocal quartet The Jordanaires – to get the vocal performance Elvis wanted. *Hound Dog* was released on 13 July 1956 and by September had become the No.1 most played song on jukeboxes across the US.

Leiber and Stoller had a national pop hit, a blues-inspired song that had 'crossed over' to the mainstream. When Presley's publishers, Hill and Range, asked them for other songs for Elvis, they submitted

Leiber recalled being driven by an "uncontrollable compulsion" to write songs, but he couldn't write music. When a drummer friend told him about a gifted piano player called Mike Stoller, Leiber phoned him and was invited round. The pair bonded over their love of the blues and began writing in earnest on an upright piano at Stoller's house.

"Jerry would start singing a line, and sometimes the line matched the notes I was playing and sometimes it didn't," Stoller recalled in *Hound Dog: The Leiber And Stoller Autobiography*. "Often we'd fight. Fighting was part of the creative process. Jerry was as stubborn as me. We often heard things differently. But after pushing and pulling, we'd usually wind up with something that surprised and delighted us both. A good song."

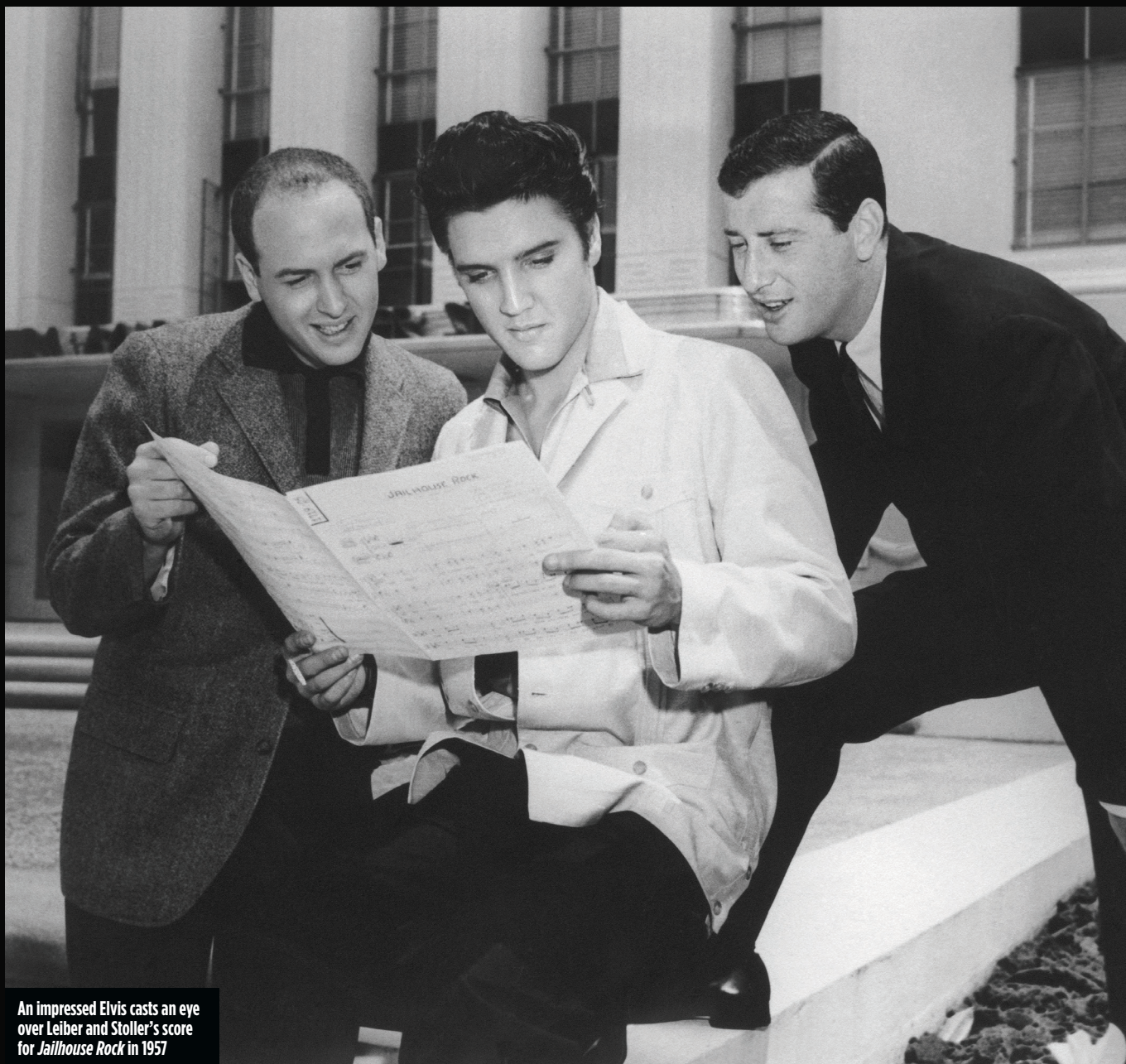
Leiber was impressed by Stoller's musical fluency. Stoller was bowled over by Leiber's talent for writing witty and irreverent lyrics. "He could paint pictures with words," said Stoller. "Not only that, he was fast."

THE PAIR ENLISTED the help of friend and mentor Lester Sill, who was impressed by their material and introduced them to the R&B label, Modern. The label set them to work writing for vocal group The Robins. In early 1951, a Leiber and Stoller song called *That's What The Good Book Says* by Bobby Nunn and The Robins was released, followed rapidly by a second Leiber and Stoller effort, *Real Ugly Woman*, performed by Jimmy Witherspoon.

"Spoon sang it like he meant it," Stoller later recalled, "he drained the thing dry. It was raw, funny, traditional and original. It was everything Mike and I could have hoped for."

By 1952, the pair had hit a rich seam of songwriting. This was the year they penned *Kansas City*, which would become a chart-topper for Wilbert Harrison, and go on to be covered by more than 300 artists, including The Beatles.

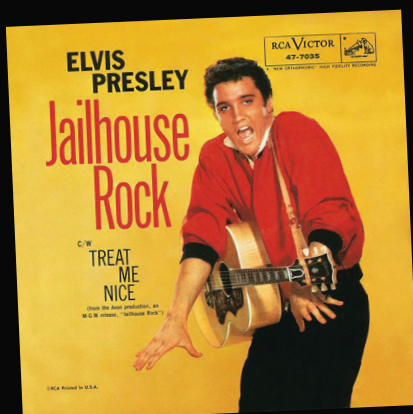
It was also the year they would write *Hound Dog*, for Texan blues singer Big Mama Thornton. There is a raw, unbridled



An impressed Elvis casts an eye over Leiber and Stoller's score for *Jailhouse Rock* in 1957

a sentimental ballad called *Love Me*. It was classic Elvis, a sentimental ballad on which he used his rich baritone croon to huge effect. "Treat me like a fool/ treat me mean and cruel/ But love me".

IN 1957, ELVIS'S publisher invited Leiber & Stoller to New York to write the soundtrack for the forthcoming MGM musical drama *Jailhouse Rock*. Within four hours, they'd written the title track plus *I Want To Be Free*, *Treat Me Nice* and *(You're So Square) Baby*



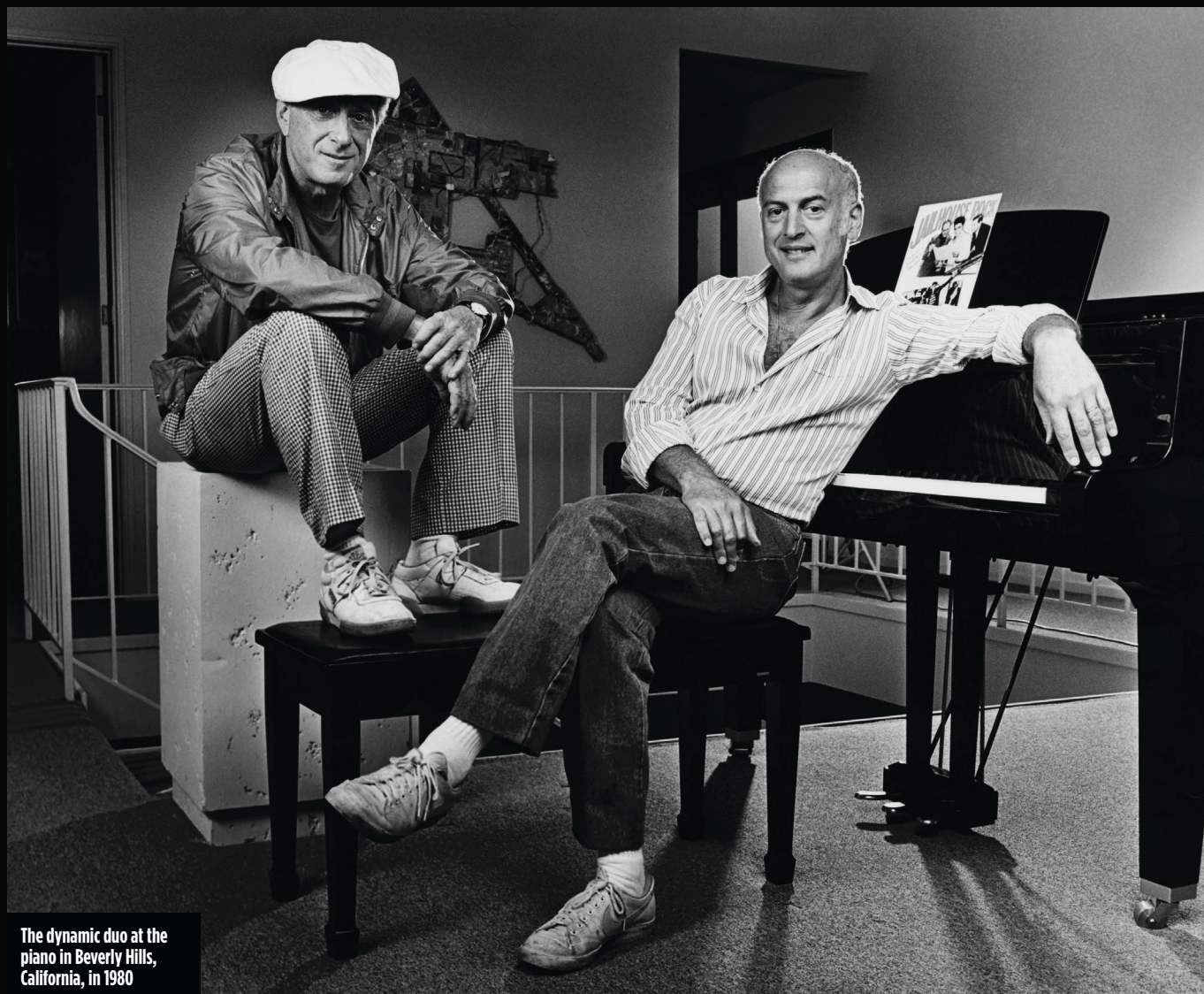
LEIBER AND STOLLER HAD A NATIONAL HIT, A BLUES-INSPIRED SONG THAT CROSSED OVER TO THE MAINSTREAM

I Don't Care. Leiber populated the lyrics of *Jailhouse Rock* with a wild array of real-life characters, such as Shifty Henry, a well-known LA musician, and The Purple Gang, a criminal mob at large in the 1920s in Detroit.

Elvis requested that they attend the recording sessions for the soundtrack

on 30 April and 3 May, at Radio Recorders Annex on Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles. This was the first time they met Presley and they were surprised by how shy and insecure he could be.

The pair were also deeply impressed by the King's appreciation of the blues. "His blues knowledge was almost encyclopedic," said Leiber in 2009's *Hound Dog: The Leiber and Stoller Autobiography*. "Mike and I were blown away. In fact, the conversation got so enthusiastic that Mike and Elvis sat down at the piano and started playing four-handed blues. He definitely felt our passion for



The dynamic duo at the piano in Beverly Hills, California, in 1980

the real roots material and shared that passion with all his heart.”

BY THIS POINT in their careers, Leiber and Stoller had moved instinctively into production. When they attended the *Jailhouse Rock* sessions, producer Steve Sholes gave them free rein. “He came up to me and said, ‘Hey, Jer, you guys know more about this rock’n’roll stuff than I do,” recalled Leiber in Ken Sharp’s book *Elvis Presley: Writing For The King*. “Why don’t you just take over? So we did.”

Presley’s vocal performance is stunning, with a rasp from repeated vocal takes only adding to the gritty intensity, all heightened by rich, slapback echo. The D# to E intro chords, followed by two cracks of snare from DJ Fontana, drive the dynamics of the track.

Presley soon warmed to Leiber and Stoller’s relaxed production style. They, in turn, were impressed by his work ethic. “It pleased me no end that even when I thought we had a perfect vocal take,

Elvis would want to do another – and then another,” said Leiber. “Each one would be better. He was digging deep and coming up with great new ammunition.”

Elvis was soon telling everyone that Leiber and Stoller were his “good luck charms”. They would go on to contribute three songs for Presley’s 1958 film, *King Creole*, including the title track and strident, swaggering composition *Trouble*. The pair also contributed *Don’t* after Presley asked them to write him “a real pretty ballad”. Elvis loved the song, which would become his eleventh US No.1, in spring 1958. “Whenever I record,” Elvis told Leiber and Stoller, “I want you guys in the studio. You’re the guys who make the magic.”

But despite such success, Leiber and Stoller incurred the wrath of Presley’s infamous manager Colonel Tom Parker because the song hadn’t been submitted via the publishing company and himself. Relations with Parker soured. In January 1958, he asked them to work on Elvis’s next

film soundtrack and provide signatures for a contract that they hadn’t even seen. Leiber and Stoller were deeply offended and forced to end their fruitful working relationship with Elvis [see boxout].

IN THE LATE-50s, the burgeoning Atlantic label offered Leiber and Stoller an innovative deal that would allow them to produce for other labels. This was an intensely prolific period for the pair. For The Coasters alone, they wrote 24 songs that dominated the US charts, including 1957’s *Searchin’* and the madcap, novelty hit *Yakety Yak* (1958), which both reached No.1 in the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

By now, they were moving away from the straightforward 12-bar blues structures, as evidenced on *Spanish Harlem*, a spacious, echo-swamped track which they wrote and produced for former lead singer of The Drifters, Ben E. King. The song was recorded in December 1960 and at the end of the session, with a quarter of an hour

DEFIANCE & UNITY

Stand By Me, the song co-written and recorded with Ben E. King in December 1960, would go on to become a timeless classic that highlights the production skills of Leiber, Stoller and their 'apprentice' Phil Spector.

"Ben began to sing the song a cappella. I went over to the upright piano and found the chord changes behind the melody he was singing," recalled Mike Stoller. "It was in the key of

A. Then I created a bassline. Jerry said, 'Man that's it'. We used my bass pattern for a starting point and, later, we used it as the basis for the string arrangement created by

Stanley Applebaum."

They added a Brazilian-inspired baião rhythm and upended a snare drum, scraping a brush across the wire to create one of the many hooks. King later recalled Leiber and Stoller were always looking for "that one little thing that your ear would pick up on".

In early-60s America, the song was perceived by many as a civil rights anthem, a defiant call for unity and resolve for African Americans pushing for freedom. Speaking to *Rolling Stone*, King (pictured below) recalled how he'd missed the perfect harmonies of The Drifters, and how he'd stood there "almost in tears, singing the song".



Leiber and Stoller were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987

left, Leiber and Stoller asked King if he had anything else to record. King suggested *Stand By Me*, a composition he'd been working on based on a 1905 gospel hymn by Charles Albert Tindley. At this point, Leiber and Stoller's instinctive production skills kicked in [see boxout]. The song that emerged was stirring and spiritual, with King's plaintive, heartrending baritone voice at the fore.

When it was released on 24 April 1961, it reached No.4 on the Billboard charts. It would go on to become a timeless classic, covered by more than 400 artists, most notably John Lennon on his 1975 album *Rock'n'Roll*.

THROUGHOUT THE 1960s,

Leiber and Stoller continued to work as independent producers. Their song *I'm A Woman* was a hit for Peggy Lee in 1962. The following year, a collaboration with Brill Building writers Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil resulted in the song *On Broadway*. In 1964, their song *Love Potion No.9* became a US hit for The Searchers.

In 1973, the pair achieved their last major hit production credit when they produced *Stuck In The Middle With You* for Stealers Wheel. Four years later, they produced an album for Elkie Brooks, co-writing her signature song *Pearl's A Singer* with Ralph Dino and John Sembello.

From the 80s onwards, lifetime achievement awards and accolades started to roll in on an almost annual basis.

Over the decades, the two became a dignified presence on chat shows and documentaries, icons from the golden age of songwriting.

On 22 August 2011, two years after the publication of their autobiography, *Hound Dog: The Leiber and Stoller Autobiography*, Jerry Leiber died, aged 78, in Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre, having suffered cardiopulmonary failure.

LOOKING BACK ON their achievements, Stoller highlighted the duo's enduring love for their craft. "Honestly, when Jerry and I started to write, we were writing to amuse ourselves," he said. "And we got very lucky in the sense that at some point, what we wrote also amused a lot of other people."

Seven decades on from their first meeting, Leiber and Stoller are remembered as songwriters and producers without equal, who had a profound impact on the course of American popular music.

As *Rolling Stone* magazine put it in 1990: "More than any other top writing and production team in the 1950s, Leiber and Stoller initiated mainstream white America into the sensual and spiritual intimacies of urban black culture that fuelled the birth of rock & roll. Their songwriting captured the essence and nuances of black music and language with a melodic invention, narrative ingenuity and cool hilarity that were true to the source while transcending it – heavy-duty R&B with a pop sensibility." ★

