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## In the beginning (of rock 'n' roll) were Leiber and Stoller

By MORDECAI SPECKTOR  
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One of the most remarkable partnerships in popular music started in Los Angeles on an afternoon in 1950, when two Jewish teenagers — Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller — met, discovered they shared an interest in blues music, and started writing songs.

The pair went on to write dozens of pop songs during the 1950s and 1960s that were recorded by everybody from Ray Charles to The Beatles to Edith Piaf. If they didn't help shape the zeitgeist, they at least gave it a danceable soundtrack.

The names Leiber and Stoller might not elicit immediate recognition, but who hasn't heard their songs on the radio? The song list includes "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock," "Yakety Yak," "Poison Ivy," "Kansas City," "On Broadway," "Stand By Me."

A theatrical adaptation of their musical oeuvre, "Smokey Joe's Cafe — The Songs of Leiber and Stoller," opened on Broadway last year — and the show's national tour begins this weekend in Minneapolis with previews Friday and Saturday at The Historic State Theatre. The show will run through Aug. 31.

The kick-off of the U.S. national tour is a big deal, and Mike Stoller said, during a telephone interview with the AJW from his home in Los



Jerry Leiber (l) and Mike Stoller (r) wrote the songs that defined rock'n'roll.

Angeles, he's going to be here for it.

When they were both 17 years old, the two Jews enraptured with black music began to churn out songs — sometimes 10 a day — in a creative process Stoller characterized as "a spontaneous combustion kind of thing: notes, words, phrases, rhythms, everything just in a mad kind of frenzy."

Their respective roles soon became more defined. "Basically, Jerry's the word guy and I'm the music guy," Stoller explained. "But we edit each other, we always have, we contribute to each other."

The duo met with quick success, and, inspired by the massive physical presence and classic blues voice of Willie Mae "Big Mama"

Thornton, they wrote a song for her — "Hound Dog" — that she recorded in 1953. Three years later Elvis Presley covered the tune, sold some 5 million records and gave Leiber and Stoller their first No. 1 hit.

Gene Auberbach, who published Presley's music, courted the songwriters, and they ended up writing tunes for three Presley movies — "Loving You," "Jailhouse Rock" and "King Creole."

During a telephone interview from his home in Venice, Calif., Jerry Leiber discussed how he and Mike Stoller came to dominate the pop charts for a decade.

Eventually setting up shop in New York's Brill Building, the partners

were writing hits for Elvis Presley, producing artists like The Coasters, Ben E. King and The Drifters for Atlantic, and developing a stable of young songwriters.

"Burt Bacharach and Hal David were with us," Leiber recalled. "Phil Spector... Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich were with us."

Leiber added that he and Stoller also worked with the songwriting teams of Jerry Goffin and Carole King, and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil.

Asked about the fact that Jews are so disproportionately represented in the ranks of America's great songwriters, Leiber replied, "I'll tell ya, the Jews are the best songwriters in the world." He started laughing, then added, "and soldiers."

Although not wanting to "sound chauvinistic," Leiber did mention that all the great songwriters he has met over the last 45 years will testify — "This is not gossip, as they say down at the meat market, *emes*," Leiber affirmed — that "Irving Berlin was the greatest songwriter of all time, in a category of his own."

The Jewish tunesmithing gene apparently continues in the Leiber line, with son Oliver Leiber, who lived and worked for a time in Minneapolis.

"He's a very good musician," Jerry Leiber remarked. "He wrote three No. 1 hits for Paula Abdul."