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REMEMBERING LEIBER & STOLLER

Billy Edd Wheeler

When I got an email from Mick Patrick saying he was a friend of Peter Stoller's, who gave him my address, I was intrigued. The only Stoller I had ever known was Mike, of the famous Leiber and Stoller songwriting and producing team. Peter had to be Mike's son. Sure enough, he was.

Mick said Ace Records of London was issuing a CD called The Leiber & Stoller Story, Vol. 3, and he wanted to know if I would write something for the liner notes. I said, sure, it would be an honor. Also, since Leiber and Stoller played such a critical role in my songwriting career, I would use the assignment as a warm-up to my book of memoirs. Here's what I wrote for Mick.

Quite by accident, I met Norman Gimbel in Harold Levanthal's office in New York City in 1960. I was looking for work as a folk singer while attending Yale's School of Drama as a playwriting student. When Norman came out of Harold's office, he noticed me off to the side with my guitar, walked over and held out his hand: "Hi, I'm Norman Gimbel." When I told him my name, he said, "Billy Edd Wheeler. Wow. My wife's in love with you." Startled, I said, "How's that?" "She passed by Monitor Records' store one day and saw your album in the window," Norman said. "She bought it and brought it home." Knowing how few copies the album had sold, I marveled at the coincidence. Norman went on to tell me he was a lyricist. I'd never heard of him, but when he named some of his titles, I was impressed. He told me he'd listened to my LP said I was a natural songwriter, but went on to say that I would never make any money at it. Naturally, I wanted to know why, so he gently pointed out that some of my songs rambled, had too many themes, and needed shaping. When I asked how I could get better—maybe even make some money at it—he thought for a moment and said, "Tell you what. On your next trip down from New Haven I'll introduce you to two friends of mine who are the best, the most successful songwriters in the world. O.K.?"

I'd never heard of the Brill Building or the legendary Leiber-Stoller duo, but by the time I met Jerry and Mike, and Norman had filled me in on their hits and artist roster, I was nervous as a cat in a room full of rockers. The walls of the hallway to their office glistened with gold records, adding to my jitters. But Jerry and Mike were very cordial and gave me their full attention when I played them a few of my folk-sounding original songs. Their response was essentially like Norman's: the songs showed promise but were not commercial. I should start listening to songs more critically. What's the theme? How is it introduced and developed, and how does it end? Best of all, they said that when I moved to the city and thought I had a good idea, I could give them a call. If they liked it, I could bring it in. Norman, ever the gregarious catalyst, hosted me out of the office and told me not to be disappointed. Actually, I wasn't. Everything Jerry and Mike had told me made sense, and it sank in. I had some homework to do. And some thinking.

These were the days when story songs were popular—"Big John," "Ringo" and other westerns—so I started writing a song about a gunfighter. But halfway into the song I realized that I didn't know a roan from a gelding. The west wasn't my turf. Then I saw a photo of a preacher on horseback, a mountain preacher, and the idea struck me for "The Rev. Mr. Black." The same intro for the gunfighter worked for the preacher: "He rode easy in the saddle, he was tall and lean / And first you thought nothing but a streak of mean / Could make a man look so downright strong / But one look in his eyes and you knew you were wrong." When I called Jerry and started reciting the lyrics, he seemed somewhat interested. When I got to the refrain he started snapping his fingers, saying, "Yeah, baby. Uh-huh. Yeah, bring that one in." The song was about eight or ten minutes long, so Jerry and Mike dug in and helped me rewrite it, honing it down to 3½ minutes. That was a real lesson. Shortening the song made it stronger, more focused. They knew the Kingston Trio was recording in California, so they put their song-plugger on a plane, and he got the song on their session. John Stewart sang it just like my demo. Leiber-Stoller put me on a draw at \$100, and suddenly I was rich!

"Jackson" came to me when I read the script for Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. I was too broke to see the play on

Broadway. You know, the way the man and woman go at each other. When I played it for Jerry, he said, "Your first verses suck," or words to that effect. "Throw them away and start the song with your last verse, 'We got married in a fever, hotter than a pepper sprout.'" When I protested to Jerry that I couldn't start the song with the climax, he said, "Oh, yes you can." So I rewrote the song and thanks to Jerry's editing and help, it worked. I recorded the song on my first Kapp Records album, with Joan Sommer, an old friend from Berea, Kentucky, singing the woman's part. Johnny Cash learned the song from that album, *A New Bag of Songs*, produced by Jerry and Mike.

On "The Rev. Mr. Black" and "Jackson," they took 25 percent of the writer's share. At that time I knew nothing about publishing, but they went out of their way to explain the writer's split. They said, "Before we dug in and helped, you had 100 percent of a song that didn't work. Now you have 75 percent of one that does work." It made good sense to me. They deserved a piece.

What I liked about writing with Jerry and Mike, already legends, was that they treated me as an equal. They were class acts. As a case in point, they were working on a song called, "The Man Who Robbed the Bank at Santa Fe / And Got Away," and were stalled. They asked me to help them finish it. I listened to the song and said, "You've got no girl in the song. It needs a woman, a love interest." So we rewrote the song and titled it: "The Girl Who Loved the Man Who Robbed the Bank at Santa Fe / And Got Away." It was a chart record for Hank Snow.

One other song worth mentioning is "High Flyin' Bird." It's my most recorded song—over fifty artists have recorded it. Jerry added a great line to it. The chorus went, "But Lord, look at me here / Tired as can be here." When I sang it to Jerry, as quick as a flash he said, "But Lord, look at me here, rooted like a tree here." He didn't take anything for adding that line, but to me it was a GREAT line, very important to the song.

It was fascinating watching Jerry and Mike work. Mike was the music man, but he also contributed lyrics, just as Jerry suggested melody riffs to Mike. And rhythms. I knew I was in the presence of super talents, working with them. Jerry's mind was like heat lightning, flashing from idea to idea. They were New York guys, something new

to me, sophisticated and hip, streetwise. But they were sensitive too. I don't mean overly effusive or candy-ass. I mean aware of each other's feelings and mine, but in a frank, no bullshit, sort of way. Complex talents oozing with class. Gentlemen even when they argued or disagreed.

My fondest memories of writing solo with Jerry were when he invited me to his place on Central Park West after hours. My wife Mary and I were not exactly plush, living in a one-room apartment in Brooklyn Heights, so when Jerry said, "There's some supper left—you hungry?" You kidding? I was always hungry. Another thing about Jerry, he wouldn't let me write lines down too soon. We'd come up with a line and I'd say, "That's it. That's perfect." But he'd say, "Wait a minute. Maybe . . ." And he would go back to previous lines, in his head, rewrite one of them and then come back to the line I said was perfect and improve it. Finally, I would be allowed to scribble the lines down on my yellow pad. Even then, we kept changing them and polishing them. What a songwriting lesson for a West Virginia hillbilly! From picking coal in the hills to picking Jerry Leiber's brain on 49th and Broadway.

Another thrill in writing with Jerry and Mike was seeing celebrities, their acts, coming in and out of their Brill Building office. I wrote a song called "Blistered," and when we demoed it, Mike came up with a great piano lick. But we needed some vocal backup. The Coasters were hanging around, so Mike enlisted them to sing with me. And while we had them, we also did a demo of the song Jerry and I had written at his Central Park West place, one called "After Taxes." The Coasters would sing: "Mmmm, federal tax," and I would respond with, "There goes that bracelet for her arm." They'd sing: "Mmmm, state income tax," and I'd respond, "There goes that new fence for my farm," etc. Johnny Cash cut both of those songs.

Norman Gimbel advanced my songwriting career by leap years. Jerry and Mike advanced it by light years! They were, as "Aunt" Jennie Wilson used to say, "The berries above the persimmons!"