



Doc Pomus

Born Jerome Solon Felder in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn on June 27, 1925, he became "Doc Pomus" both as an identity and as a disguise. At fifteen, he fell into the blues through the message embedded in Big Joe Turner's "Piney Brown Blues"; as Doc frequently said, "It was the transformation of my life."

At eighteen he started hanging out in Greenwich Village, listening to Frankie Newton's band at George's Tavern, and when the proprietor wanted to throw him out one night for nursing a single beer the whole evening, Doc came up with the perfect alibi. "I'm a blues singer," he said. "I'm here to do a song." The song he sang, without any further ado or preparation, was, naturally, "Piney Brown Blues."

He started singing regularly—in the Village, in Brooklyn, "college student by day, professional blues singer by night." To hide his new avocation from his family, he needed a new name. That is how he became Doc Pomus.

Doc started making records for various jazz and "race" labels at 19. He was, he liked to boast, probably the only white blues singer on crutches on either coast.

He became a songwriter by the same sort of fortuitous accident that he had become a blues singer: he wrote songs for himself, and then Gatemouth Moore recorded one of his numbers for National in 1946. When Herb Abramson co-founded Atlantic with Ahmet Ertegun the following year, Doc became an Atlantic songwriter.

His breakthrough came with rock & roll: Ray Charles ("Lonely Avenue"), the Coasters ("Young Blood"), the Drifters ("This Magic Moment," "Save The Last Dance For Me"), Dion ("A Teenager In Love"), Big Joe Turner ("Still In Love"), and Elvis Presley ("Little Sister," "His Latest Flame," "Viva Las Vegas") all recorded songs written by Doc Pomus, some by Doc alone, some with a variety of co-writers (Leiber & Stoller co-wrote "Young Blood"), but most with his principal songwriting partner of the decade, Mort Shuman. The song for which they are best known, "Save The Last Dance For Me," remains one of the most enduring standards of our time.

When you think of Doc Pomus, though, you don't just think of a list of songs. Because no matter how extraordinary the songs are, the man compelled no less attention. As a kid, after having been stricken by polio at the age of six, he

dreamed of becoming the first heavyweight champion of the world on crutches. It was a perfectly understandable fantasy for a lost, lonely child, but that is in effect what he did become: if he was not the heavyweight champion in boxing, he became a champion of another sort.

He maintained his perspective. He maintained his humanity. He maintained his no-bullshit sense of compassion, his omnivorous interest in everything that was going on around him, his commitment to help everyone and anyone who needed it — without forfeiting his right to grumble about it. What was astonishing about Doc was that he denied no element of his humanness. Perhaps in that way he maintained his creativity.

In the last ten years of his life, Doc wrote some of his very greatest songs, songs that matched and in some cases surpassed the quality of his biggest hits. With songs like "From The Heart," "Blinded By Love," "There Must Be A Better World Somewhere," "Prisoner Of Life" and "The Real Me," he achieved the kind of profound simplicity that he had been striving for all of his writing life. He knew it, and was proud of it — but he also knew that it wasn't what went before that mattered, it wasn't honors or validation (though he liked those, too) that yielded satisfaction. No matter what you have achieved, no matter what recognition may come your way, he would say over and over again — and *mean it* — it was what came next that mattered, it was the next challenge, creative, personal, it didn't matter: life was living up to that challenge.

He kept writing almost up to his last breath — on a portable keyboard, with Dr. John, in his hospital room. He kept on reaching out a helping hand to others, too. Towards the end he could honestly say, "I'm doing the same stuff I always did. I'm acting the same way I always acted. The only difference is that now I talk about it. At one time I wouldn't express my opinions except to maybe my closest friends, because it wasn't cool to be that animated. Now I don't hold anything back. I really don't want to live to see a day where the space that I take up in this world is like some musty closet, some little broom closet somewhere. I want to be able to talk out — even if I'm wrong."

Doc did talk out, and he filled an enormous space. He lived and died surround by love.

— Peter Guralnick