



Born in Brooklyn in 1932, Blackwell initially set his sights on a career as a performer. A talented pianist and singer, he won Amateur Night at the Apollo in 1952, which led to a deal with legendary record man Joe Davis, who encouraged the young Blackwell to write his own songs. That the singer had the talent for it was borne out by his first release, the self-composed “Daddy Rolling Stone,” which later became a hit for Jamaican Derek Martin.

His breakthrough came on Christmas Eve 1955, when he sold half a dozen demos for \$150, including a rudimentary recording of “Don’t Be Cruel,” for which he played drums on a cardboard box. After making its way through a series of midtown-Manhattan publishers, the demo finally reached the ears of Elvis Presley, at the end of a long New York studio session recording “Hound Dog” in the summer of 1956, and was rehearsed, arranged, and recorded that same night. Initially released as the B-side to “Hound Dog,” “Don’t Be Cruel,” with its unhurried blend of country and rhythm & blues – significantly, the two musical forms on which Blackwell had been raised – soon became an equally enormous hit, spending several weeks at the top of the charts. Sun Records’ Sam Phillips, no fan of Presley’s recordings since his star had moved to RCA, pulled off the road the first time he heard it on the radio: “I thought, ‘They have finally found this man’s ability,’” Phillips later said.

The success of “Don’t Be Cruel” that summer almost threatened to overshadow another hit Blackwell had composed (with Eddie Cooley): Little Willie John’s recording of the sultry “Fever,” which later scored even bigger in Peggy Lee’s immortal version. Elvis Presley also had a smash with the song, as he did with Blackwell’s “All Shook Up” in 1957. It was no surprise that Jerry Lee Lewis came calling for Blackwell, who (with Jack Hammer), turned out the Killer’s

signature song “Great Balls of Fire” with evident ease. As Peter Guralnick noted of Blackwell’s lyrics, “They were so apt at getting across a sentiment that immediately clicked not just with the audience it reached, but with the singer.”

Refreshingly unconstrained in his writing style, Blackwell turned out hits for Dee Clark (“Hey Little Girl”) and Jimmy Jones (“Handy Man”), while maintaining his own performing career on the fringes of mainstream success. It was a mark of the respect he commanded that after he suffered a stroke in 1991, such varied stars as Deborah Harry, Kris Kristofferson, Ronnie Spector, and Dave Edmunds rallied to record a tribute album, *Brace Yourself!* Blackwell died in Nashville in 2002. Though his was never a household name, he had no regrets. “I wrote my songs,” he said. “I got my money, and I boogied.”

Mort Shuman

More than anyone else, Mort Shuman signaled the new tide of songwriters in the 1950s: a generation of Jewish kids, primarily raised in the Yiddish neighborhoods of South Brooklyn, who applied their hereditary musical talent to their love of the new rock & roll, hawked the results around the Brill and music buildings in midtown Manhattan, and in the process, rewrote the American songbook.

The only child of immigrants from Warsaw, Mortimer Shuman attended New York’s “Rock & Roll High School,” Abraham Lincoln in Brighton Beach, where, according to fellow student Neil Sedaka, he was “the lead in many plays, he sang well,” and was “very popular, very outgoing.” Graduating in 1954, Shuman entered City College and, in his own words, started to “dress black, talk black, walk black, and eat black.” The following year, he began dating the cousin of Doc Pomus, the white blues singer more than a decade his elder who had been crippled by polio as a child in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg. Shuman aspired to blackness; Pomus had long been living it, with compositions recorded already by Ray Charles and Big Joe Turner on Atlantic. (Pomus was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1992.)

Shuman and Pomus bonded over late-night sessions around the latter’s record collection. “Doc was into urban blues, and I was into ‘tenement music,’” said Shuman, citing



Mort Shuman (left) with songwriting partner Doc Pomus

a euphemism for street-harmony singing. As they began writing together, they melded these interests into a populist rhythm & blues – so populist that when brought to publishers Hill and Range by fellow Brooklynite Otis Blackwell, the pair was farmed out to write hits for Philadelphia teen idols Fabian (“I’m a Man”), Bobby Rydell (“I Dig Girls”), and Frankie Avalon (“Two Fools”).

It was only when they penned the endearing “A Teenager in Love,” and it was pointed to Dion and the Belmonts as a guaranteed hit, that the pair established credibility to match their commercial appeal, along with commissions to match their talents. Shuman’s musical arrangements, which reflected time spent at the Palladium Ballroom, doing the mambo and cha-cha-cha, provided the perfect foundation for Pomus’s crafted lyrics on some of the greatest hits for the Drifters (“This Magic Moment,” “Save the Last Dance for Me”) and Elvis Presley, for whom they wrote “Surrender,” “Suspicion,” “Viva Las Vegas,” and the indelible “(Marie’s the Name) His Latest Flame.”

Described by legendary publisher Freddy Bienstock as “a free spirit” who “couldn’t be tied down to Doc,” Shuman headed to Europe in the mid-sixties, following up his big hit for Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas (“Little Children”) by cowriting for the Hollies and the Small Faces. And then, while vacationing in St. Tropez, Shuman heard the great French chanteur Jacques Brel and “saw the light.” As he later explained, “The only time I’d heard such virility in a voice was in black singers.” Shuman set about translating Brel’s dissolute lyrics into English, with the composer’s consent, before launching *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, at New York’s Village Gate in 1968 – with himself, the former high school lead, in a starring role. His translations were quickly recorded by Scott Walker, David Bowie, and Dionne Warwick.

After a successful seven-year run, Shuman decamped to France for good, where he became one of the country’s most celebrated performers and songwriters. He was in the process of launching a new musical in London’s West End, appropriately entitled *Save the Last Dance for Me*, when he passed away in 1991 at the age of 54.

Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich

Through the 1960s, the songs of Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich stood as the epitome of pop. They eschewed the (relative) social commentary and Broadway arrangements of their fellow married writing couples (Goffin and King, Mann and Weil) for topics that suited their own personalities: deliriously dizzy pronouncements of love, loyalty, lust, and – on those rare occasions when their artists, almost entirely female-fronted, needed a change of tact – loss, too. The tunes were, typically, similarly upbeat, and none the worse for it. Not only did Barry and Greenwich write some of the most blatantly commercial songs of that decade, but some of the most enduring, too.

Both Jewish, both born in Brooklyn, they nonetheless had markedly different upbringings. Jeff Barry (né Adelberg, born 1938) spent his in a one-room apartment with his mother, sister, and grandfather, a donated turntable, and some big-band 78s that hinted at a greater world beyond his impoverished Flatbush neighborhood. Ellie Greenwich (born 1940)



found herself, at the age of 11, moved from inner Brooklyn to the new suburbs of Levittown, Long Island, where she tuned into rock & roll radio, formed a vocal group at high school, started writing songs, and signed to RCA at age 17.

Though her solo recordings didn’t chart, Greenwich soon hooked up with Leiber and Stoller’s publishing company at the Brill Building, was assigned a writing partner, and delivered Phil Spector one of his first hits, “(Today I Met) The Boy I’m Gonna Marry.” In her own life that guy turned out to be Jeff Barry, who had parlayed his love of country music and a sole connection in the music business into a successful writing career; with the Top Ten “Tell Laura I Love Her” already under his belt (“I feel that I got lucky really early, and without much adversity,” he explains modestly), he, too, was signed to Leiber and Stoller’s Trio Music.

The couple’s subsequent writing partnership with Phil Spector defined the Wall of Sound: nine consecutive A sides for Spector’s Philles label included “Be My Baby,” “Da Doo Ron Ron,” “Then He Kissed Me,” and “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home).” In the midst of the girl-group era, they even scored their own hits as the Raindrops, Barry’s remarkably deep voice and phonetic syllables forming a distinct foundation for Ellie (and her sister) to sing excitedly about “The Kind of Boy You Can’t Forget,” among others.

For Greenwich, it was a dream adventure: “I was young, it was exciting, and I cried when I heard my songs on the radio.” And it got better. Leiber and Stoller established Red Bird Records in early 1964, brought Greenwich and Barry in as partners, and enjoyed an immediate Number One with their “Chapel of Love” by the Dixie Cups. When Greenwich took a meeting with a Long Island acquaintance, George Morton,