

Songwriters

BY TONY FLETCHER



Jesse Stone

Perhaps no other American popular-music composer straddled the twentieth century quite like Jesse Stone, and not only because he witnessed its every single year. Jesse Stone did more to develop the basic rock & roll sound than anybody else, said Ahmet Ertegun, and that was surely because his trajectory embodied *all* the creative black-music forms of the early twentieth century. Born in Kansas in November 1901 into a long line of musicians, Jesse Albert Stone was singing in his family's minstrel show – alongside a trained dog – at the age of just 4. By the mid-1920s, he was an accomplished piano player, ensconced on the Kansas City jazz scene, where his group the Blues Serenaders recorded a handful of enduring cuts for the preeminent Okeh Records. A decade later the talents of his orchestra (then featuring Coleman Hawkins) were recognized by Duke Ellington, who brought him to the Cotton Club in New York and put him up in at his Seventh Avenue mansion. Hired as an arranger for Chick Webb's orchestra, Stone encouraged saxophonist (and future “grandfather of rock & roll”) Louis Jordan to break out on his own; Jordan in turn not only hired Stone to write his first arrangements, but recruited Stone's group, which he renamed the Elks Rendezvous Band, to back him.

Stone's first great commercial successes came during the big band era of the 1940s, with “Sorghum Switch” for Jimmy Dorsey, and “Idaho,” recorded by Benny Goodman, Guy Lombardo, and others. But it was at Atlantic Records, which he joined in 1947, alongside its cofounder Herb Abramson, where

he truly flourished, as a house writer, arranger, and producer (and the only black man on the payroll). Bringing to bear his four decades of valuable experience, he helped veer Atlantic away from its initial obsession with jazz toward something more danceable. “The only thing that was missin' from the stuff we were recording was the rhythm,” he told Nick Tosches for the opening profile of the book *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll*; Stone claimed to have corrected that absence by creating the bass line at the heart of many an Atlantic recording.

Stone's compositions combined that inveterate swing with an impish humor, as in the debut single for Clyde McPhatter's Drifters, who took “Money Honey” to the top of the R&B charts in 1953. Stone also wrote for Atlantic legends Ray Charles (“Losing Hand”), Ruth Brown (“As Long as I'm Moving”), and LaVern Baker (“Soul on Fire”), but he truly left his mark with “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” A familiar battle cry from craps nights, and written specifically for his old Kansas City friend Big Joe Turner, “Shake, Rattle and Roll” popularized a number of ribald references to the sexual act, most famously that of “a one-eyed cat peepin' in a seafood store.” It also rocked like nothing before. Turner's version was an R&B sensation; the 1954 recording later by Bill Haley and the Comets then helped break the newly labeled “rock & roll” music among white audiences.

Stone followed up with “Flip Flop and Fly” for Turner (and Haley), “Your Cash Ain't Nothin' but Trash” for the Clovers, and “Don't Let Go,” recorded in hit fashion by Roy Hamilton and Isaac Hayes, among others. That his name remains so unfamiliar outside the music business is partially due to his frequent use of the pen name Charles (or Chuck) E. Calhoun, and also, perhaps, because he never dominated one particular style as much as that he contributed – indelibly – to any number of them.

To those who knew him, Stone was always a star. “You taught me everything I know about our craft,” wrote his former Atlantic associate Jerry Wexler. Though he retired in Florida, Stone could not stop scratching his itch. The day he was hospitalized for the last time, said his wife, the singer Evelyn McGee Stone, he began writing a new song. Stone passed away in 1999, at the ripe old age of 97.

Otis Blackwell

Otis Blackwell wrote as many as a thousand songs over his lifetime, and they're said to have sold more than 200 million copies. Certainly, he was one of the most significant songwriters of the mid-twentieth century. He was also one of the first to come of age at the point that rock & roll was supplanting pop as America's music of choice, and he found himself perfectly placed to facilitate the transition.



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