

ONE § Leiber and Stoller, the Coasters, and the “Dramatic AABA” Form

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THE HISTORY OF ROCK AND ROLL is filled with stories: everybody who was involved in any way, it sometimes seems, has a story to tell about some important figure or event in rock’s past. There is little debate among popular music scholars that Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller played a crucial role in the early history of rock and roll. They were among the most important songwriters in the first decade of rock and also pioneered and developed the idea of the independent record producer.¹ They were involved in rhythm and blues in the early 1950s before the style crossed over onto the pop charts, writing songs and running the independent label Spark out of Los Angeles. They enjoyed regional success with acts such as Big Mama Thornton and the Robins, the second of which would be the precursor to the Coasters. Working for Atlantic Records, they figured into rock’s explosion later in the decade, writing songs for Elvis Presley and others, and helped develop the new style of sweet soul in the early 1960s, a style that enjoyed considerable commercial success until the advent of the British invasion in early 1964.

Leiber and Stoller like to tell stories, and a favorite has to do with their first major success. While the details tend to change somewhat as the years go by, the gist of it goes something like this: Leiber calls Stoller and says, “Hey, we’ve got a hit record.” Stoller says, “Great, what song?” Leiber says, “Hound Dog.” Stoller says, “Hound Dog, the Big Mama Thornton record?” and Leiber says, “No, a version by some kid named Elvis Presley.” Stoller says, “Elvis who?!”² Of course, Leiber and Stoller

went on to write several more tunes for Elvis, mostly for his movies (“Jailhouse Rock” is the classic among these), and the sense that they had the “hit maker’s touch” did much to establish their reputation and credibility in the burgeoning field of youth music. In the period between 1954 and 1964, Leiber and Stoller penned songs for a host of artists besides Presley, including the Coasters, the Drifters, Ray Charles, and Ruth Brown, and produced records for the Coasters, the Drifters, and Ben E. King, among others.³

In the midst of such broad success in pop songwriting and producing, Leiber and Stoller’s most interesting work may well be the records they made with the Coasters. In fact, their partnership with the Coasters provides rich ground on which one can see many musical and cultural trends of the 1950s and even the 1960s coming together. Perhaps most obviously, we have two white men writing songs about African-American culture for a black doo-wop group or, as Jerry Leiber has described it, “a white kid’s take on a black kid’s take of white society.”⁴ The Coasters’ lead singer, Carl Gardner, has remarked on how puzzled he was that these two white guys could get it right about black culture so much of the time:

Leiber and Stoller were writing black music, and these were two Jewish kids [who] knew my culture better than I knew my culture. And I said, “How do they do that?” You know, and I wondered and I thought about it: “How do they know what we do?” ’Cause every song they wrote was in our culture.⁵

Regarding the nature of their working relationship with the group, Leiber and Stoller give a lot of credit to the Coasters, who had the right to reject or modify ideas that the songwriters brought to them and whose theatrically influenced performances vividly brought the songs to life. Jerry Leiber remarks, “When we hit on something that was really in the ballpark—which was, like, theater, fun, universal—they were the best.”⁶ As scholars have noted for many years, race plays a central role in the history of rock and roll; the partnership of Leiber and Stoller and the Coasters further underscores the notion that the meeting of black and white cultures in the 1950s could be a complicated and multifaceted exchange. Indeed, this topic could serve as the focus of an extended study of Coasters music considered from cultural and social perspectives, which could provide much insight into the nature of such collaborative endeavors.⁷ The present chapter, however, will not focus on this dimen-

sion of Coasters records, at least not overtly; instead, it will survey the formal structure of these tracks, zeroing in on a formal type that I call the "dramatic AABA form," an exceptional form within rock music that arose, it will be argued, as a direct consequence of the short, often comical tracks Leiber and Stoller wrote for the Coasters, tracks they called "playlets." In order to better understand the playlet, and the various formal solutions Leiber and Stoller employed to realize it in a series of records, it will be useful to establish a bit more historical context.

What Is the Secret of Your Success? Leiber and Stoller, the Coasters, and Hit Singles

Jerry Leiber was born in Baltimore (1933) and Mike Stoller on Long Island (1933), but both relocated to Los Angeles in the late 1940s as youngsters. Leiber had an inclination toward the theater, hanging around the Hollywood studios whenever he could, while Stoller had studied piano and musical composition formally (his first composition teacher had been film composer Arthur Lange); despite these differences, they both loved rhythm and blues (R & B) fervently and felt themselves drawn to African-American culture and music. They had their first success as songwriters in the Los Angeles rhythm and blues scene of the early 1950s, pitching their songs to local singers such as Big Mama Thornton and working with established musicians such as Johnny Otis. The duo soon became associated with record promoter Lester Sill, and with Sill they formed a small independent label called Spark Records. It was during these early years that Leiber and Stoller first met members of a black vocal group called the Robins, the group that would later become the Coasters. It was also at about this time that they began to expand their role in the record business beyond the confines of songwriting, acting as producers in the studio with Leiber coaching the singers and Stoller handling the arrangements and often playing piano on the tracks. In establishing their own label, they gained greater freedom than they might otherwise have had, and their use of this freedom would have significant consequences for the future of rock and roll.

Leiber and Stoller began to enjoy a series of West Coast R & B hits, especially with the Robins, but they were not successful in getting these records distributed nationally, a perennial problem for a small label in those days. These singles would ultimately stall on the charts. The brother of Atlantic Records owner Ahmet Ertegun, Nesuhi Ertegun, was based on the West Coast, charged with keeping an eye out for regional

hits that Atlantic could license for national distribution.⁸ Nesuhi tipped off Atlantic's Jerry Wexler, and this led to Atlantic re-releasing the Robins' "Smokey Joe's Café" in late 1955.⁹ As a Spark record, "Smokey Joe's Café" had hit number 122 on the national R & B charts, but as an Atlantic release it went to number 10 nationally and even placed as high as number 79 on the pop charts as well. Wexler had Atlantic buy Spark, with the larger label taking over the rights to the catalog; he then signed Leiber and Stoller to Atlantic as independent producers. The duo no longer had to worry about running a label; Wexler had given them a license to write and produce records. This new arrangement did not sit well with all of the Robins, however, and the group split up, with lead singer Carl Gardner and bass Bobby Nunn forming the Coasters (short for West Coasters) together with Billy Guy and Leon Hughes. Initially Leiber and Stoller recorded Coasters records at Master Recorders in Los Angeles, using many of the same studio musicians as before (including the master jazz guitarist Barney Kessel), but after the double-sided success of "Searchin'" and "Young Blood"—both of which hit number 1 on the R & B charts and broke into the Top 10 on the pop charts—they relocated to New York. The New York sessions, with Atlantic's Tom Dowd now behind the mixing board, produced a string of hit records starting with "Yakety Yak" in 1958, which topped both the pop and R & B charts and introduced the trademark sax playing of King Curtis. The follow-up singles "Charlie Brown" and "Poison Ivy" did almost as well in 1959, although subsequent records tended to cross over less forcefully with the exception of 1961's "Little Egypt," which hit number 23 on the pop charts and number 16 on the R & B charts.

How Do They Do That? Playlets, Form, and the Dramatic AABA

Not all of the Coasters sides recorded with Leiber and Stoller were playlets. The Robins had enjoyed a number 1 R & B hit in 1950 with "Double Crossing Blues," and it is thus easy to understand why the Coasters were unwilling to completely break with the R & B vocal group tradition.¹⁰ Consequently, there are several Coasters tracks that seem to have little to do with their better-known playlet records. Having acknowledged such exceptions, however, it is fair to say that the Coasters are mostly remembered for the playlets. The term was coined by Leiber and Stoller, and they think of playlets as songs that act out a story in the manner of a radio play, often using a wide range of musical styles and sometimes even sound effects to enhance the drama and story, which is almost

always humorous. The first playlet was "Riot in Cell Block #9," recorded by the Robins in 1954 and inspired by the radio drama *Gangbusters*. As its title suggests, the song tells the story of a prison uprising, sketching a colorful set of characters along the way and reinforcing the narrative with sirens and gunshots, presumably taken from standard sound effects recordings of the day. Given Leiber's interest in acting, Stoller's interest in film scores and concert music, and the gifts for comedic performance possessed by the Robins and Coasters, the playlet seems to have been almost inevitable. While Leiber and Stoller most often refer to the radio play as a model, in live performances (many of which survive on film) there was also a certain amount of Broadway and Hollywood performance practice in these songs, especially "Along Came Jones" and "What Is the Secret of Your Success?"

Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the different formal types that can be found among Coasters singles. The figure lists over twenty sides that range from 1954 to 1961, starting with some of the Robins songs and containing all the Coasters hits written by Leiber and Stoller.¹¹ Simple verse forms are listed first; these are songs that simply repeat a single verse structure over and over again, often with new lyrics but with no chorus. Simple verse forms often include a refrain, either at the beginning or end of the verse, serving as a kind of "minichorus" and often containing the song's hook.¹² In "Yakety Yak," for instance, the refrain is "yakety yak, don't talk back," placed at the end of each verse. The simple verse-chorus form is similar to simple verse except that now there is a chorus, although this chorus is sung over the same music as the verse. For those unfamiliar with the two songs listed in the example, consider Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," which uses the same twelve-bar blues progression throughout as the harmonic structure of both verses and choruses. When the music supporting the chorus is not the same as in the verses, the resulting form is a contrasting verse-chorus form. Those unfamiliar with the songs listed in figure 1.1 might consider the Ronettes' "Be My Baby" or the Beatles' "Penny Lane," both of which have very clear choruses that contrast strongly with the verses.

The AABA form is a favorite among Tin Pan Alley composers, and the most conventional version of this form runs thirty-two measures in length, with four eight-bar phrases making up the four sections.¹³ The AABA form consists of two verses, a bridge, and a verse (note that there is no chorus).¹⁴ As in the simple verse form, a refrain is often found in the verses of AABA forms, especially in songs composed during the Brill Building days, and that refrain is often where the hook is located. Early

Simple verse (often with refrain)

Riot in Cell Block #9 (Robins), Framed (Robins), Yakety Yak, What Is the Secret of Your Success?, The Shadow Knows, Turtle Dovin* (refrain or chorus?)

Simple verse-chorus

One Kiss (Robins), Keep On Rolling

Contrasting verse-chorus

Wrap It Up (Robins), One Kiss Led To Another, Searchin', Along Came Jones, Run Red Run, [Turtle Dovin*]

AABA

Whadaya Want? (Robins), Charlie Brown, Sorry But I'm Going To Have To Pass, Three Cool Cats, This Is Rock and Roll, Young Blood* (refrain or chorus?)

Compound AABA (incipient)

Poison Ivy, What About Us, [Young Blood*]

Dramatic AABA

Smoky Joe's Café (Robins), Down in Mexico, Little Egypt

Figure 1.1. Formal types in Coasters/Leiber and Stoller songs

Beatles hits are overwhelmingly AABA forms, and noting this form is one way we can document the influence of American Brill Building pop on early Lennon-McCartney songs.¹⁵ If a song has a chorus, that chorus is always the focus of the tune, but when a chorus is not present, as is the case with an AABA song, the focus is on the verses. The bridge in an AABA form is often so subordinate that it serves only as a way to get away from the verse and allow it to be reintroduced as fresh; consequently, many listeners cannot easily remember the bridges of AABA songs. Many who know the song, for instance, can easily recall the verses to “Charlie Brown,” but most will have at least some difficulty recalling the bridge.

In the Coasters tracks listed under compound AABA in figure 1.1, each verse contains a refrain that resists being subordinated within the verse and seems to approach being a self-standing chorus. Full-fledged compound AABA forms employ a clear verse and chorus for each of the A sections, with contrasting music constituting the B section. Examples can be found in the 1960s—the Phil Spector/Righteous Brothers track “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” is a good example—and the form became almost the default form of choice in much 1970s rock. In these Coasters tracks, however, one can see the AABA form beginning to pull away from the simpler thirty-two-bar model, mostly under the force of a refrain that seems to have outgrown its role within the structural

confines of the verse. But the verses of these songs are not yet clearly compound AABA, so the term *incipient* is used to mark this distinction.

Figure 1.1 shows that the Coasters sides employ all of the typical forms associated with popular music. A few of the tracks—"Smokey Joe's Café," "Down in Mexico," and "Little Egypt"—employ a novel formal type not found elsewhere in rock (or if it can be found it is certainly not common). This novel form I call the "dramatic AABA" in part because it seems to arise out of the dramatic requirements of the playlet idea. As mentioned earlier, not all Coasters songs are playlets; it should be noted in addition that not all playlets employ dramatic AABA form. It will become clear, however, that the dramatic AABA form, when it is present, is employed in the service of the unfolding narrative of the song concerned and its structure presents an interesting twist on the well-worn AABA design. Perhaps most significant, the dramatic AABA form elevates the bridge section to greater prominence than it has in other AABA forms. A bridge section (or B section) is usually subordinate to the verses (or A sections), and even in a compound AABA the bridge (B) is subordinate to the verse-chorus pairs (A). But in a dramatic AABA form, the bridge emerges as the narrative climax of the song: the first two A sections develop the story, the bridge (B) is the culmination, and the last A section serves as a kind of epilogue. The dramatic AABA form thus inverts the relationship of the A sections to the bridge (B); rather than being a section that simply serves to provide contrast in order to make the return of the A section seem fresh, the bridge becomes the most important section in the tune. In order to see this more clearly, let us take a closer look at two instances of the dramatic AABA form, beginning with "Down in Mexico" from 1956.

A Dance I Never Saw Before: "Down In Mexico"

In a recording session at Master Recorders in Los Angeles on 11 January 1956, the Coasters were able to record four Leiber and Stoller songs. "Turtle Dovin'" and "Down in Mexico" were released on Atlantic's Atco label in February, while "One Kiss Led to Another" and "Brazil" were released in July.¹⁶ Of these four songs, only "Down in Mexico" and "One Kiss Led to Another" can really be considered playlets. "One Kiss Led to Another" tells the story of a couple that cannot get much done but kissing despite their attempts to do otherwise, and the "Down in Mexico" story of adventure south of the border will be discussed subsequently. The lyrics to "Turtle Dovin'" do not develop a story line but rather ex-

plore various ways to describe a woman who prefers staying home with her lover to going out. “Brazil” is a somewhat traditional song, set to a Latin theme, that waxes nostalgic over happier romantic times in Brazil.¹⁷ In terms of form, “Turtle Dovin’” has a simple verse form, while the form of “Brazil” is largely episodic, even if much of the music is based on a chromatic inner-voice figure that rises from perfect fifth to augmented fifth to major sixth and back down again above the roots of E-flat and F minor chords respectively. Of the playlets recorded in this session, “One Kiss Led to Another” is a contrasting verse-chorus form while “Down in Mexico” employs the dramatic AABA. The four songs from this single session underscore the idea that not all Coasters songs are playlets and not all playlets use the dramatic AABA form.

Carl Gardner handles the lead vocals on “Down in Mexico,” backed by the other Coasters. The band for these sessions included jazz guitarist Barney Kessel and saxophonist Gil Bernal, as well as Mike Stoller on the piano. Figure 1.2 provides a formal diagram for the song and shows how “Down in Mexico” employs the dramatic AABA structure. The A sections are verses that consist of two eight-bar sections, both of which are built on a simple harmonic foundation. In the first of these sections, the harmony stays on the tonic of E-flat minor, moving to the dominant for bars seven and eight, and in the second verse section the harmony alternates between the tonic and subdominant. The lyrics for the first verse section change with each of the three verses, while the lyrics for the second section remain the same from verse to verse. The use of the same text in the second part of each verse suggests that this section might be thought of as a chorus. But in terms of the rhetoric of the song these second sections are neither the focus nor the hook of the song. Even if they are considered extended refrains—that is, “choruslike” without constituting a distinct section—one might still expect these sections to provide more of a focus point. Since such focus does not occur, this verse will be considered to be in two parts, with the second part acting as a refrain might but with none of the rhetorical effect within the form.

The lyrics in the first section of each verse move the story forward: in verse 1, we hear about a bar in Mexico run by a guy named Joe where both the food and the drinks are spicy. Gardner delivers the lead vocal as the other Coasters offer textless harmonic accompaniment and Kessel interjects bluesy guitar riffs. The second part of the verse features a change of texture, as the strummed nylon-string guitar comes to the front of the texture along with the maracas and a call-and-response arises between Gardner and the other Coasters. The lyrics tell us all about Joe,

who wears a "red bandana" and plays a "blues piana." In the second verse, our protagonist asks Joe when the fun begins, and Joe winks and says, "Man, be cool." The second section of this second verse reprises the colorful description of Joe.

The focus of the song—the point to which everything leads dramatically—is the central B section. The percussion instruments now come to the fore, beating out an insistent rhythm as a low riff leading from B \flat to E \flat is repeated every two measures. It seems clear that a floor show has begun, as a woman emerges and begins to dance for our protagonist, who is taken somewhat by surprise. Gardner delivers each line, followed by the rest of the group chanting "in Mexico." The climax of the section occurs at the end of this bridge as the accompaniment stops and Gardner sings "and then she did a dance I never saw before." It is clear from the lyrics, as well as the primitive, almost ritualistic quality of the accompaniment, that something even hotter than the drinks and chili sauce has just transpired. The last verse acts as an epilogue. In the first half the protagonist recommends the club to anyone who might be down in Mexico, while the second half reprises the vivid description of Joe. The introduction to "Down in Mexico" establishes the atmosphere of a south of the border strip club in the song to follow, with languid sax riffs from Bernal answered by moaning guitar riffs from Kessel. The ending of the song picks up on these riffs again as Gardner goes into a speaking voice to urge listeners to "get your kicks in Mexico."¹⁸

As figure 1.2 illustrates, the AABA structure of this playlet is clearly delineated. As mentioned earlier, it is the way in which the B section (bridge) of this song is elevated to the point of focus that is exceptional. The verse sections in conventional AABA forms are the focus of the song, and these often feature refrains that act as the song's hook. The chorus in the verse-chorus pair found in the A sections of compound AABA forms are typically the focus of that kind of song. In AABA and compound AABA forms, bridges typically provide contrast and do not draw significant attention to themselves. But in the dramatic AABA form found in "Down in Mexico" the bridge is the focus of the song: the first two verses provide a buildup to the bridge while the last verse provides a wind-down from the climax provided at the end of the bridge. In "Down in Mexico," the moment when the dancer does the "special dance" at the end of the bridge is the dramatic goal around which the entire song is oriented. Leiber and Stoller take a familiar song form and invert its rhetorical structure in the service of the narrative.

0:00–0:21	Intro	6 mm., 2 mm. rubato + 4 mm. in time
A 0:21–0:57	Verse 1 w/refrain	16 mm., 8 mm. verse + 8 mm. refrain
A 0:57–1:32	Verse 2 w/refrain	(same as verse 1)
B 1:32–2:06	Bridge	16 mm., eight 2 mm. phrases
A 2:06–3:13	Verse 3 w/refrain	16 mm., then vamp and fade on intro material

Figure 1.2. Formal diagram for “Down in Mexico”

Rhymes with “Row”: “Little Egypt”

Another example of the dramatic AABA form can be found in “Little Egypt,” a playlet recorded on 9 February 1961 in the Atlantic studios in New York, a little more than five years after “Down in Mexico” and on the other side of the country. By the time “Little Egypt” was recorded, the Coasters’ membership had shifted somewhat. In 1956, Gardner was joined by Leon Hughes, Billy Guy, and Bobby Nunn. By 1961, Gardner and Guy were singing with Cornell Gunter, Earl “Speedo” Carroll, and Will “Dub” Jones. At least two other songs were recorded at the same session: “Keep on Rolling” (which was the B-side to “Little Egypt”) and “Girls Girls Girls (Part II).” Neither of these is a playlet.

While “Little Egypt” is in the dramatic AABA form, “Girls Girls Girls (Part II)” is cast in a fairly conventional AABA form, with a short introduction and a partial reprise consisting only of a single A section that features a King Curtis saxophone solo.¹⁹ The form of “Keep On Rolling” is an interesting blend of the simple verse-chorus and AABA forms. It employs the standard twelve-bar blues structure throughout. The first two verses use contrasting lyrics and feature the call-and-response interjection of “keep on rolling” by the backup vocalists. The third verse forgoes the call-and-response, using fresh lyrics and creating a sense of contrast. The fourth verse employs new lyrics but returns to the texture of the first two verses. The form thus suggests something like chorus, chorus, verse, chorus, although the use of the term *chorus* in this instance is very liberal. The insertion of a somewhat contrasting verse after two choruses suggests the AABA layout. As was the case with the session that produced “Down in Mexico,” the songs recorded during these later sessions were not all of one type or design.

Figure 1.3 provides a formal diagram for “Little Egypt,” and the dramatic AABA form is clearly in evidence. After an introduction featuring a carnival barker inviting patrons to see the show, accompanied by music

0:00–0:16	Intro	4 mm., spoken intro begins and then 4 mm. follow, ending with gong
A 0:16–0:58	Verse 1 w/refrain	24 mm., 16 mm. verse + 8 mm. refrain
A 0:58–1:39	Verse 2 w/refrain	(same as verse 1)
B 1:39–1:55	Bridge	8 mm., chromatic ascent @ 1 m.
A 1:55–2:50	Verse 3 w/refrain	24 mm., same as verses 1 & 2, plus fade on refrain

Figure 1.3. Formal diagram for “Little Egypt (Ying Yang)”

that is vaguely exotic and terminated by the striking of a gong, the song proper begins.²⁰ The lyrics revisit a similar story to the one we encountered in “Down in Mexico,” but these turn out to have a few new twists. As before, the first two verses advance the story, leading to the focus of the song in the B section and a last verse that serves as an epilogue to round out the form. In this case, the second section of each verse is clearly a refrain. Harmonically, the first part of the verse moves from tonic in E major during the first four bars to subdominant in the next four and then dominant for four more bars; the refrain provides four bars of subdominant followed by four of tonic. The lyrics in the first verse describe the protagonist taking his seat as the show begins; the second verse describes the dancer’s appearance and some of the suggestive dance moves. The action heats up in the B section, where the dance drives toward its climax as the accompanying series of chords rise chromatically in parallel motion from tonic toward the dominant. The last verse provides a surprise: we learn that the dancer and the protagonist are now happily married and living a life of domestic bliss with seven kids.²¹

In terms of the use of dramatic AABA form in “Little Egypt,” the many close similarities to “Down in Mexico” can be seen clearly. The most important is the elevation of the bridge to the focal point of the song. But “Little Egypt” offers a few features we did not see in the other dramatic AABA song, perhaps the most prominent of which is the rhyme scheme that plays out in the lyrics. Leiber and Stoller structure the lyrics so that each line in all three verses rhymes with “row.” Thus, in the first verse we get “low” and “bow.” Initially there is nothing particularly noteworthy about the rhymes, but when the same rhyme continues in the second verse with “toe,” “slow,” and “show,” the listener is alerted that something special is going on. Once one expects the rhymes to continue, the lyrics not only tell a tale but also play on the listener’s expectations as he or she waits for the rhyme to align with the narrative unfolding of the

story. In the last verse, Leiber and Stoller have as much fun with the rhymes as they seem to be having with the story: we get “anymo’,” “sto’,” and “flo’,” all delivered in this abbreviated way to keep the game going.²²

A second feature of the song underscores the good-natured fun and even corniness of the story. The group employs the “chipmunk” technique first developed by guitarist Les Paul and used most famously to create the voices of the cartoon Chipmunks. The technique involved recording a voice or instrument at half speed on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. When the tape is played back at full speed, the sound is sped up and sounds an octave higher.²³ The high voices at the end of “Little Egypt” are meant, of course, to portray the little children mentioned in the lyrics and were likely done by the Coasters themselves. These chipmunk voices sing along with the refrain and then trade licks with King Curtis’s stuttering saxophone riffs, lending a sense of silliness to the ending that defuses any shock some listeners might have had with the sexy dancing described earlier.

Comparing “Little Egypt” to “Down in Mexico” in terms of formal design and story theme, one finds a lot of similarity. But there is also something there that is emblematic of the change that came over rhythm and blues as rock and roll developed out of it. “Down in Mexico” is close enough to hokum blues generally that it would have been tough to sell on white radio if it were not for the clearly comedic element, an element that also made it tough to produce a worthwhile cover version. But while “Down in Mexico” makes no effort to cover its tracks in terms of its sexual content, “Little Egypt” becomes thoroughly domesticated both literally and figuratively. In a kind of early 1960s version of the Beatles’ later “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da,” a strong attraction born of wild nightlife results in a traditional, *Leave It to Beaver* kind of domestic bliss. Mike Stoller has remarked that even if “Little Egypt” was not as popular as the playlets “Yakety Yak” and “Charlie Brown” it was “more interesting in its construction.” He adds that the track was the “epitome of the comic playlets” but also that it was “the last word in that bag.”²⁴ While it might have been the last word for Leiber and Stoller in an aesthetic sense, it was not the historical last word. In fact, the idea of the playlet had already been taken up in teenage death-fascination records such as “Tell Laura I Love Her” and “Teen Angel.” The most notorious of these so-called splatter platters or death disks was the Shangri-Las’ “Leader of the Pack,” which pushed the boundaries of good taste while topping the charts in late 1964. While this record was not produced by Leiber and Stoller (Shadow Morton has

that dubious distinction), it was released on Red Bird, a label they established after leaving Atlantic in 1963.²⁵

The form of "Leader of the Pack" is a slightly altered version of the dramatic AABA form that appears in the Coasters records discussed earlier. The change involves the presence of three verses before the focal B section rather than two verses as was seen in "Down in Mexico" and "Little Egypt." As figure 1.4 shows, the first verse starts off quietly with a call-and-response dialogue between the lead singer and the other Shangri-Las. By the end of this verse, guitar and drums have joined the piano and the sound of a revving motorcycle engine launches the track into full swing. The next two verses unfold the story of young lovers who are separated because the cycle-riding boyfriend is "from the wrong side of the tracks" and misunderstood by adults. The story reaches its climax in the central section as young Jimmy tears off on his cycle in a rage, only to be killed in an accident. The last verse, as was seen in the Coasters examples, acts as a kind of epilogue. The song created a scandal with its use of sounds depicting the crash and the screams that accompany them, which many found offensive and even disturbing. None of this outcry did much to dampen the song's commercial success, however, although the record was banned on several radio stations. This is a legacy Leiber and Stoller likely did not envision when they were developing their playlets with the Coasters, but "Leader of the Pack" has a clear claim to the playlet lineage nonetheless.

Probably the more important legacy of the Leiber and Stoller/Coasters partnership is the musical ambition the Coasters tracks embrace. Leiber and Stoller were not alone in raising the bar when it came to clever or sophisticated rock lyrics—Chuck Berry certainly deserves part of that credit—but when it comes to stylistic eclecticism nothing really compares to the playlets. Leiber and Stoller's use of orchestral instru-

A 0:00–0:32	Verse 1 w/refrain	16 mm., begins with spoken dialogue between lead vocal and backups, ends with motorcycle sounds
A 0:32–1:02	Verse 2 w/refrain	16 mm., now with full band
A 1:02–1:32	Verse 3 w/refrain	(same as verse 2)
B 1:32–1:53	Bridge	11 mm., leads to motorcycle crash
A 1:53–2:33	Verse 4 w/refrain	16 mm., quieter and dirgelike
2:33–2:49	Ending	16 mm. and fade

Figure 1.4. Formal diagram for "Leader of the Pack"

ments in records they produced for Ben E. King and the Drifters in the early 1960s also showed an ambitious willingness to blend classical music ideas with rhythm and blues. The most oft-cited instance of this is the Drifters' "There Goes My Baby," which Atlantic's Jerry Wexler refused to release at first because he thought it sounded like a radio stuck between classical and R & B stations.²⁶ The use of tympani and strings—the latter playing classical-sounding thematic lines and not simply providing a soft background pad—pushed the boundaries of pop in its day.

Leiber and Stoller's work served as an example to the songwriters and producers who followed them, including Carole King and Gerry Goffin, Phil Spector, Brian Wilson, and the Beatles, demonstrating that rock music could be more than just disposable music. A line of development tracing pop and rock's increasing ambitions to musical sophistication can be followed from the Coasters' playlets to the Drifters' sweet soul, Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, Brian Wilson's ambitious surf music, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and beyond. As strange as it seems at first, the roots of the ambitious concept albums of the 1970s—albums such as Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (1973), Jethro Tull's *Thick as a Brick* (1972), or Emerson, Lake, & Palmer's *Tarkus* (1971)—can be traced back to "Riot in Cell Block #9." Ironically, the commercial successes for Leiber and Stoller were less frequent after the mid-1960s. Their songs continued to be performed by various artists, but they had less participatory influence in the new directions popular music was heading than they had experienced in rock and roll's first ten years. Their work endured even if their professional profile began to recede somewhat. One of their biggest hits of the later years was Peggy Lee's "Is That All There Is?," which went to number 11 in 1969. The duo went on to work with various musicians on various projects, producing the debut album by Stealer's Wheel in 1973, which contained the Top 10 hit "Stuck in the Middle with You." In 1994, Leiber and Stoller's songs were collected for a Broadway show called *Smokey Joe's Café*. The show debuted on Broadway in 1995 and in London the next year, and its continued success has brought the songs of Leiber and Stoller—including many Coasters songs—to the attention of a new generation.

NOTES

An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (U.S.) conference at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, 16 October 2004. Thanks to Portia Maulsby and Venise Berry for their helpful reactions to that earlier paper.

1. Historical accounts of Leiber and Stoller can be found in Robert Palmer, *Baby, That Was Rock and Roll: The Legendary Leiber and Stoller* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); and Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomb and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era* (New York: Penguin, 2005). The booklet that accompanies the two-compact-disc Coasters anthology *50 Coastin' Classics* (Rhino, 1992) contains a historical essay by Robert Palmer, as well as an interview with Leiber and Stoller by Randy Poe that features remarks from the duo on each song contained in this collection.

2. Mike Stoller tells this story in the second episode, "In the Groove," of the ten-part Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series *Rock & Roll*, produced by the television station WGBH (South Burlington, VT: WGBH, 1995); this episode was written by Vicki Bippart and Daniel McCabe. Much of Leiber and Stoller's understanding of their roles in rock history can be drawn from the interview clips found in this episode, as well as in the other ten-part rock documentary of the same year, *The History of Rock 'n' Roll* (Time-Life Video, 1995). Perhaps as a result of these documentaries being made at almost the same time, the stories Leiber and Stoller tell are often contained in both series and are generally consistent on all points at which they intersect. With regard to this particular story, Ken Emerson reports that Stoller heard the news of the Presley hit on returning to New York from a belated honeymoon trip on the *Andrea Doria* in the summer of 1957. Stoller and his wife were among the over one hundred passengers that were rescued when the ship collided with another ship off the Nantucket coast (Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air*, 1).

3. Palmer, *Baby, That Was Rock and Roll*, provides a chronological list of records produced by Leiber and Stoller, beginning with the first sessions in 1953 and extending through 1976 (128–31).

4. Jerry Wexler and David Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 134.

5. "In the Groove," approximately 5:00 and forward.

6. *Ibid.*, approximately 8:00 and forward.

7. In an essay contained in the booklet accompanying the Coasters' release *50 Coastin' Classics*, Robert Palmer offers a series of brief observations about Coasters songs, arguing that part of their charm lies in the way they gently and almost covertly criticize the social attitudes of their day. He mentions "Along Came Jones," "Run Red Run," and "Shoppin' for Clothes," among others, as songs that address issues of race. Leiber has remarked that each song tended to focus on some social issue even though this was done in a humorous and nonconfrontational manner. Ken Emerson provides an insightful and detailed discussion of this dimension of Leiber and Stoller's work with the Coasters and others in *Always Magic in the Air*, 3–12.

8. For a historical account of Atlantic Records, see Charlie Gillett, *Making Tracks: Atlantic Records and the Growth of a Multi-Billion-Dollar Industry* (New York: Dutton, 1974); and Justine Picardie and Dorothy Wade, *Atlantic and the Godfathers of Rock and Roll* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993). Gillett's book also provides an extended account of Leiber and Stoller's involvement with Atlantic (145–70).

9. Wexler and Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 133.

10. "Double Crossing Blues" debuted on the *Billboard* Rhythm and Blues Chart in February 1950, going to number 1, where it stayed for nine weeks (the

single remained on the chart for twenty-two weeks overall). The group's previous record, "If It's So Baby," debuted a week earlier and rose as high as number 10. The group did not chart again nationally until the Atco release of "Smokey Joe's Café" in late 1955.

11. The songs listed in figure 1.1 are drawn from *50 Coastin' Classics* and form a representative sample of the fifty songs contained in that anthology.

12. The formal types discussed here are explained in greater detail in my article "Form in Rock Music: A Primer," in *Engaging Music: Essays in Music Analysis*, ed. Deborah Stein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65–76.

13. In this discussion, my use of the terms *verse* and *chorus* differs significantly from their use in discussions of American popular song composed in the first half of the twentieth century. In writing on that repertory, an entire AABA form is often viewed as a chorus and the section that introduces the chorus is thought of as the verse. To distinguish this usage from the one employed here for the discussion of rock and pop in the second half of the century, I use the terms *sectional verse* and *sectional chorus* in place of *verse* and *chorus* in reference to the earlier music. See my *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock and Its History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2009), 25–28.

14. Note that "Young Blood" is marked with an asterisk in figure 1.1 and appears in the next category, compound AABA, in brackets. The verses of "Young Blood" include refrains that some might want to consider chorus sections. That interpretation is not preferred here, partly because these refrains begin on the move to IV within a twelve-bar blues framework. This standard structural design binds the verses and the refrains into one section. Those who might take these refrains as choruses will view the form as an incipient compound AABA form, as the latter form is defined subsequently. A similar situation arises with "Turtle Dovin'," where the refrains occur with the move to IV. There again simple verse is the preferred analysis with contrasting verse-chorus as an alternative.

15. I discuss the Beatles' use of AABA form in detail in my article "From Craft to Art: Formal Structure in the Music of the Beatles," in *Reading the Beatles: Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, and the Fab Four*, ed. Ken Womack and Todd F. Davis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 37–53.

16. At this time, it was standard practice to record four songs in a single three-hour session. Leiber and Stoller have remarked that "Searchin'" was done quickly at the end of one such session in February 1957 simply to have a fourth song that might be used as a B-side later. Of course, "Searchin'" became the Coasters breakthrough pop single along with "Young Blood," which was also recorded at that session (see the booklet enclosed with *50 Coastin' Classics*, especially 22–23). "Down in Mexico" debuted on the *Billboard* Rhythm and Blues Chart in late March 1956, rising to number 8, while "One Kiss Led to Another" debuted in September of that same year and hit number 11.

17. Leiber and Stoller claim that this song was written for Carl Gardner because he kept asking them for a "classy" number. One suspects that Leiber and Stoller's solution is something of a send-up of the Latin supper club number of the day, especially when the first rhyme in the lyrics is "moon" and "June" (see the booklet enclosed with *50 Coastin' Classics*).

18. Not surprisingly, the director Quentin Tarantino chose to use "Down in

Mexico" on the soundtrack for his 2007 movie *Death Proof* (one-half of the *Grindhouse* double feature), where the song serves as the perfect backdrop for the scene in which the character of Arlene, nicknamed "Butterfly" (played by Vanessa Ferlito), performs a steamy lap dance for Stuntman Mike (played by Kurt Russell).

19. The A sections of this song are built on the standard twelve-bar blues structure. There is a clever overlap between the first two A sections that reduces the length of the first A section to ten measures while the second goes to twelve measures.

20. One can only suppose that the use of the gong, as well as the lyrics "ying yang," fit with the generally "Eastern" sense of exoticism created in this song.

21. The Beatles were enthusiastic fans of the Coasters' records, and perhaps Paul McCartney had this song in mind when he wrote "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da." For the reggae influence on this song, see Mark Spicer, "Desmond Dekker and the Globalization of Jamaican Music," paper presented at the conference *New World Coming: The Sixties and the Shaping of Global Consciousness*, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 14 June 2007.

22. Continuing the speculation on the influence of this song on the Beatles, the lyrics of George Harrison's "Taxman" play this same rhyming game as the rhymes get more and more absurd. The possible taxes are on "street," "seat," "heat," and "feet."

23. Such things have been done almost effortlessly on digital equipment for almost thirty years. Using analog gear, this kind of tape manipulation requires a certain degree of technical skill and much patience.

24. See the booklet enclosed with *50 Coastin' Classics*.

25. Alan Betrock's *Girl Groups: The Story of a Sound* (New York: Delilah, 1982) offers an extended discussion of Red Bird, as well as the circumstances surrounding the writing of "Leader of the Pack" (see chapter 7 especially). The song was written by George "Shadow" Morton along with Brill Building veterans Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich.

26. Wexler and Ritz, *Rhythm and the Blues*, 136–37.