

Doc Pomus

Doc Pomus with his song writing partner, Mort Shuman was along with other key songsmiths like Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller one of the architects of the rock and roll and rhythm and blues sounds of the late 50s and early 60s which dominated in that period between the decline of rock and roll and the coming of The Beatles.

Pomus was, like Leiber and Stoller steeped in African American blues, jazz and rhythm and blues but unlike his contemporaries he actually lived the life of a blues singer during the late 40s and early 50s, releasing a dozen mainly self penned 78s on various record labels who provided ethnic musical styles to those huge audiences neglected by the major national record labels.

This collection is the first to celebrate and combine his activities as a performer and a composer, combining his own blues recordings with his compositions for pop artists to present a unique overview of his sensational career and exemplary talents.

THE MAN

Jerome Salon Felder, as Doc Pomus was christened, was born on June 27th 1925 into a middle-class Jewish family in New York's Brooklyn area. At the age of six he was stricken with Polio, which at the time had no known cure, the vaccine not arriving until many years later. As a result he was bedridden for some time and eventually only able to walk with crutches and a brace. Music became his major interest during this period and he began to collect jazz records until hearing the great blues singer Big Joe Turner. He told many interviewers over the years how his life changed after hearing the singer in 1941, all he then wanted to do was sing and write the blues.

Whilst studying at Brooklyn College he began to frequent the many Black clubs around New York and was eventually hired as a singer by Frankie Newton and invented the name Doc Pomus to avoid embarrassing his parents, "White kids didn't sing blues with Negroes", he later said. He performed in various clubs and we are able to present some examples of his live work on disc one. This eventually attracted the attention of record companies and he recorded several singles for independent labels and later for Coral Records, an imprint of the major Decca label. On hearing these recordings it is hard to imagine that any of the songs potential buyers, either as discs or as jukebox spins, would have had any idea that this was a Jewish boy in his early 20s so powerful and authentic did his voice sound.

Concurrent with his performing and recording he began to hone his song writing skills and sold his first song in 1946 to blues star, Gatemouth Moore. This rare recording produced by one of the founders of Atlantic Records, Herb Abramson, opens our second disc devoted to the songs of Doc Pomus. By 1952 he was concentrating more on song writing managing to get songs recorded by Lil Green and eventually his hero Big Joe Turner who was by now signed to Atlantic Records, beginning with the hit "Still In Love".

Turner's success with Pomus' songs led the label to ask for more songs for their other artists and swiftly he was established as a major supplier of songs. In 1956 when working at the Club Musicale and living in the Stratford Arms Hotel he wrote his first classic, a reflection of his own living circumstances, "Lonely Avenue" gave Ray Charles a major hit and has been subsequently recorded by scores of artists.

By 1956 Doc had tired of the blues life and had become enamoured with the new sounds of doo-wop and especially Frankie Lyman And The Teenagers but at 30 was a little too old to write for the new teen market. Enter 17 year-old, Mort Shuman, who was dating Doc's much younger cousin who was able to advise Doc on all the complexities of then teenage life and musical tastes. With Pomus usually writing the lyrics and Shuman providing the melody the duo crafted a collection of songs like "Save The Last Dance For Me", "Teenager In Love", "This Magic Moment" and "Sweets For My Sweet"

which spoke eloquently of teenage life in the late 50s. After their initial success with songs for Dion, The Drifters and later their lead singer, Ben E. King, they were hired to provide songs for Elvis Presley which they continued to do throughout the 60s.

Many of these classics are featured on Disc 2 along with some examples of the songs written during their brief stay in Britain during 1959 for artists like Joe Brown. With the rise of the singer songwriters in the early 70s songwriters like Pomus began to find their work increasingly sidelined. After Shuman moved to Europe Pomus began to write with several emerging talents like Lou Reed, Willy Deville and Doctor John. Artists like B.B. King, Irma Thomas and Charlie Rich, recorded many of these songs. His work from this period is considered by many to be amongst his finest. Doc Pomus died in 1991 of lung cancer at the age of 65 leaving one of the most powerful legacies of American popular music still recorded and performed in the 21st Century.

THE SONGS

After the initial recordings by Gatemouth Moore, Big Joe Turner and Ray Charles songs were supplied to other Atlantic artists including Bobby Darin, Lavern Baker and Ruth Brown. After Doc partnered with Mort Shuman one of their first collaborations was for Atlantic's star, Clyde McPhatter on "My Island Of Dreams". The song is a far cry from Doc's earlier blues based, adult orientated lyrics but it did bring them to the attention of record companies looking for songs for singers not much older than the audiences they entertained. Enter Chancellor Records of Philadelphia home to the manufactured teen idol.

The epitome of this new movement in US pop music was Fabian Forte a handsome teenager who was signed to the label on a recommendation by their major star, Frankie Avalon. Fabian had no singing talent whatsoever and was signed to the label simply because of his looks. At least he got some good songs from Doc and Mort and three of them are included. "I'm A Man" was originally written for Elvis who had rejected it. The also provided Avalon with songs and another Philly pop star on a different label, Bobby Rydell. Fabian's song "Turn Me Loose" was famously performed on British TV's "Oh Boy" show by Cliff Richard and the shows producer Jack Good became very interested in Pomus/Shuman whose songs were regularly covered by UK artists like Marty Wilde, Craig Douglas, Adam Faith and Billy Fury. As well as his TV production, Good was also a freelance record producer and consultant to Decca Records.

In November of 1959 Jack Good invited the duo to London to participate in a special edition of his new TV show, "Boy Meets Girl" which would consist entirely of Pomus and Shuman songs. Mort Shuman actually performed, "I'm A Man" and "Turn Me Loose" on the show. In his capacity as Decca consultant Good also asked them to bring some songs. This they did without hesitation resulting in a flurry of recordings of songs that have not often appeared elsewhere. Joe Brown released a single with both sides written by them and Little Tony enjoyed his only UK hit with "Too Good". Little Tony was Italy's top teen idol at the time and had been brought to Britain by Jack Good after being tipped off about him by Italian star, Marino Marini. Both Doc and Mort received a lot of publicity from Britain's active music press and were feted as celebrities in their own right. This is not too surprising considering that 3 versions of "Teenager In Love" had breached the UK top 30.

Back in the USA their relationship with Atlantic was still going strong after Leiber & Stoller asked them for songs for The Drifters. Leiber and Stoller also produced The Coasters and their 1957 hit "Youngblood" had been written by Doc for the group but extensively rewritten by Mike and Jerry and the respect that the three of held each other in was to be a major asset to The Drifters.

This group of Drifters was totally different to the one that had given Atlantic hits in the early fifties after manager George Treadwell had fired the entire original group over a pay dispute in 1958. Treadwell simply hired another group to take over. They were "The Five Crowns" who featured the brilliant vocals of Ben E. King and even better for the group they had already recorded and released a Pomus Shuman song as The Five Crowns and Pomus in particular was enamoured with Ben's vocals.

Pomus and Shuman provided the group with some of their greatest hits like "Save The Last Dance For Me" another personal lyric from Doc, which actually relates to his own inability to dance and was written to his wife, who he often accompanied to dances but was only to manage the last one (with her assistance). This information on the song origin was of course not known for many, many years after. Long considered one of pop's all-time greatest recordings it was also The Drifters' biggest hit and has lost none of its charm over the past 50 years. The melody that Shuman wrote was inspired by his new-found love of Latin music and the song began a string of hits for The Drifters and more importantly their newly solo lead singer Ben E. King which heavily featured Latin rhythms.

King got some great songs from the duo including "Ecstasy" and "First Taste Of Love" which Doc actually wrote with the young Phil Spector who was working at Atlantic at the time, rather than Mort. But The Drifters were not ignored as the Latin-tinged "Sweets For My Sweet" proves. Although a big hit for the group it was a bigger hit some years later at the height of the British Invasion when Liverpool group The Searchers took it to No. 1 virtually all over the world.

In 1960 Elvis finally got hooked on Pomus Shuman songs beginning with "A Mess Of Blues" which was the b-side of "It's Now Or Never" in the US but a single in its own right in the UK. "Surrender" was an adaptation of the Italian song "Torna A Sorrento" with new English lyrics from Doc. Our Elvis selection and the CD end with the classic "His Latest Flame" but not before an example of the work of the finest of all Elvis impersonators the late great Ral Donner with "So Close To Heaven".

Their work with Elvis peaked with 1964's "Viva Las Vegas" after "Save The Last Dance For Me" probably their most famous composition. Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman continued to write until the late 60s before the rise of the singer-songwriters began to erode the popularity of professional songwriters for a decade or more.