Tablet

Book Reviews

WHEN FEMINISTS WERE ZIONISTS

A new generation of women is being misled into assuming an ideological tension between feminism and Zionism

By Gil Troy
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Betty Friedan, 1975. *(David Montgomery/Getty Images)*

In June 1975, weeks after Saigon fell, Betty Friedan led a large delegation of American feminists to Mexico City for an International Woman's Year World Conference hosted by the United Nations. The feminist trailblazer—whose legacy is in the spotlight on International Women's Day today, 50 years after the publication of her book *The Feminine Mystique*—traveled south "relatively naïve," she would recall, hoping "to help advance the worldwide movement of women to equality." Instead, she endured what she called "one of the most painful experiences in my life."

The conference's anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zionism shocked Freidan—and diverted

attention from the feminist agenda. Men, political spouses, or "female flunkies," she noted, dominated most official delegations. Few of the delegates seemed interested in women's issues. American feminists were mocked as spoiled bourgeois elites raising marginal concerns to avoid confronting more pressing issues of racism, imperialism, colonialism, and poverty. A thuggish atmosphere intimidated the American feminists, especially in the parallel NGO, or non-governmental organization, conference. At critical moments "microphones were turned off" and speakers shouted down. Friedan recalled in notes found in her papers, which formed the basis of her famous article "Scary Doings in Mexico City": "the way they were making it impossible for women to speak—on the most innocent, straightforward of women's concerns, seemed fascist—like to me, the menace of the goosestep." Friedan saw the Israeli prime minister's wife, Leah Rabin, booed and boycotted, and she watched, horrified, as the "Declaration on the Equality of Women" became one of the first international documents to label Zionism as a form of racism.

When Third World and Communist delegates moved to link the Ten-Year Plan of Action for Women to the abolition of "imperialism, neocolonialism, racism, apartheid, and Zionism," some feminist voices finally broke the silence. One European woman delegate told Friedan: "That is clear anti-Semitism, and we will have no part of it." "If Zionism is to be included in the final declaration, we cannot understand why sexism was not included," T.W.M. Tirika-tene-Sullivan, heading the New Zealand delegation, shouted. Lacking a two-thirds majority, the Arab and Communist delegates forced through a procedural change requiring only a majority vote to approve a declaration so that the anti-Zionist plank could pass.

Under attack, "followed by gunmen and advised to get out of town," and ultimately hustled out of the hall by three large women from Detroit who were concerned about her physical safety, Friedan had her consciousness raised in a new way. She had been criticizing American society for years. Regarding Judaism and Israel, she had been ambivalent, saying her "own background was not that religious."

Following the conference, Friedan viewed these democracies' flaws in perspective. America was at least acknowledging sexism as a problem. Upon her return to the United States, she also dedicated herself to the Zionist cause, advocating Jewish self-defense in confronting vicious, obsessive lies about Israel.

The Mexico City experience integrated Friedan's two embattled identities. She later celebrated the "new strength and authenticity of women as Jews, and Jews as women, which feminism has brought

that enables them to combat the use of feminism itself as an anti-Semitic political tool.˝ She linked this struggle to "part of the larger never-ending battle for human freedom and evolution. Women as Jews, Jews as women, have learned in their gut, 'if I am not for myself, who will be for me (and who can I truly be for). If I am only for myself, who am I?' "

Back home in New York, when the United Nations considered expelling Israel that fall of 1975, Friedan mobilized against the move in order, as she put it, to "save the U.N." She noted that, having risen from the "ashes of the Holocaust," the United Nations was now sacrificing its credibility in targeting one country. Many of the Asian and African delegates agreed with Friedan and vetoed the move, unwilling to risk their new status as member states by questioning Israel's right to belong.

The Soviets and the Palestinians then turned to their fallback position: having the General Assembly label Zionism racism. The Soviets hoped to humiliate the United States, six months after South Vietnam fell. And beyond their terror attacks and diplomatic grandstands, the Palestinians were fighting an ideological war. They framed their local narrative, Edward Said explained, as part of "the universal political struggle against colonialism and imperialism."

Proclaiming that "all human rights are indivisible," Friedan's Ad Hoc Committee of Women for Human Rights objected to the racist label being "applied solely to the national self-determination of the Jewish people." Politicians including Bella Abzug, Helen Gahagan Douglas, Margaret Heckler, Elizabeth Holzman, and Pat Schroeder; celebrities including Lauren Bacall, Beverly Sills, and Joanne Woodward; writers including Nora Ephron, Margaret Mead, Adrienne Rich, and Barbara Tuchman; Joan Ganz Cooney of *Sesame Street*; La Donna Harris, the American Indian activist; and the feminist Gloria Steinem, among others, joined Friedan's committee.

Despite Friedan's efforts, and despite the eloquence of U.N. Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan's opposition to "this infamous act," General Assembly Resolution 3379, which labeled Zionism as a form of racism, passed on Nov. 10, 1975. The next day, Friedan made a surprise appearance at an anti-3379 protest, where she identified herself "as a woman, as an American, and as a Jew." She proclaimed: "All my life I have fought for justice, but I have never been a Zionist until today."

Subsequently in an American Jewish Congress Symposium called "Woman as Jew, Jew as Woman," Friedan would root her feminism in her Judaism. She often wondered, "Why me?"—what prompted her to confront sexism? Eventually, she traced "this passion against injustice" to the values she absorbed and the mild anti-Semitism she experienced "as a Jew growing up in Peoria, Illinois."

Friedan's Jewish transformation was mostly public and political. Letty Cottin Pogrebin experienced a more personal awakening. Pogrebin wrote in her 1991 memoir, *Deborah, Golda and Me*, that although Israelis were targeted, "I knew the arrow also was meant for me."

She realized that "to feminists who hate Israel, I was not a woman, I was a *Jewish* woman." Launching a deeper Jewish journey, Pogrebin wondered: "Why be a Jew for them if I am not a Jew for myself?" Many Jews reported experiencing an identity reawakening following the public trauma of the "Zionism is racism" resolution. Like Pogrebin, and Theodor Herzl, many discovered that anti-Semitism can make the Jew, but it is more satisfying for the Jew to make the Jew.

Yet many feminists, Jewish and not, felt that solidarity with international women's conferences was more important to the movement than the fate of the Jews. Pogrebin confronted feminist anti-Zionism in her controversial June 1982 *Ms.* Magazine article "Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement." There Pogebrin defended Zionism as an experiment in realistic nationalism. "If we can understand

There Pogebrin defended Zionism as an experiment in realistic nationalism. "If we can understand why history entitles lesbians to separatism, or minorities and women to affirmative action, we can understand why history entitles Jews to 'preferential' safe space," she wrote. "To me, Zionism is simply an affirmative action plan on a national scale. Just as legal remedies are justified in reparation for racism and sexism, the Law of Return to Israel is justified, if not by Jewish religious and ethnic claims, then by the intransigence of worldwide anti-Semitism." Pogrebin echoed the radical thinker Andrea Dworkin's vision: "In the world I'm working for, nation states will not exist. But in the world I live in, I want there to be an Israel."

Globally, the battle only got nastier, and weirder. U.N. organizations and conferences worked diplomatically to "add Zionism to all the nasty 'isms' " the world wanted "eliminated," lamented the Israeli diplomat Tamar Eshel, who represented Israel at the U.N.'s International Women's Conference in Copenhagen in July 1980. A huge portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's Islamist anti-feminist leader, decorated the conference headquarters, inside of which attacks on Israel, Jews, and America intensified. Most Third World delegates decided sexism was a Western problem, because only Western women complained about it.

Co-chairing the American delegation was Sarah Weddington, a special assistant to President Jimmy Carter, and the winning lawyer in the Supreme Court abortion case *Roe v. Wade.* Disgusted by what she saw unfolding in front of her, she had her own Moynihan moment—echoing the now-former U.N. ambassador's courage and eloquence—and demanded that the women's conference address women's needs. "To equate Zionism with colonialism and imperialism," she objected, "is in a sense to state that the destruction of Israel is a prerequisite for peace."

Yet Weddington's arguments were largely ignored by the other delegates, who were more interested in creating a common global agenda of the oppressed. Anti-Zionism was emerging as an identity marker, the glue uniting a broad, diverse, often contradictory left-wing movement. "The real test of our fabled 'Jewish power' is how powerless Jews were in Copenhagen," the radical writer Ellen Willis of the *Village Voice* glumly reported. A liberal "Diaspora Jew" uninterested in Jewish nationalism, Willis strongly opposed Israel's control of the West Bank. Still, she slammed radical leftists' collective blind-spot regarding the anti-Semitic impulses triggering their anti-Israel obsession. Eventually, she proclaimed: "I'm an anti-anti-Zionist."

Friedan (center) at the Women's Press Conference in Bucharest, 1974. (*United Nations*)

Meanwhile, American feminists tried liberating the international women's movement from its anti-Zionist obsession. Some activists, disgusted by Mexico City and Copenhagen, spent years preparing for the July 1985 International Women's Conference, in Nairobi, Kenya. Applying feminist methods, Pogrebin and Abzug convened Black-Jewish Women's dialogue groups and tried establishing Palestinian-Jewish dialogues. Emerging from what she called "virtual feminist retirement," Betty

Friedan mobilized Jewish women worldwide to tap the "strength that comes from authentic assertion of one's own identity, as Jew or woman."

Women at Nairobi wanted to avoid the politicized ranting about Zionism and talk, Friedan noted, "as feminists about their common women's problems." In the middle of yet another dreary debate about Zionism and racism, a French woman began chanting: "The women of the world are watching and waiting." Others joined in, until the PLO and the Iranian delegates finally relented. Representatives of 157 countries, many teary-eyed, many singing the conference's unofficial theme song "We are the World, We are the Women," unanimously adopted a final document with, Betty Friedan exulted, "every reference to Zionism gone." The first major international movement to declare Zionism to be racism, the women's movement now became the first to denounce that lie. Six years later, in 1991, the General Assembly repealed its infamous resolution.

Yet, despite the heroic leadership of Friedan and her sisters, what Moynihan called "The Big Red Lie," which insists that the national conflict between Israelis and Palestinians must be viewed through the distorting, inflammatory anti-Zionist lens of racism, still persists. Despite her victory in Nairobi, Friedan would be devastated to see that the libel she opposed with such courage and strength is now increasingly accepted by leading American feminists like Judith Butler and Alice Walker, who would rather identify with the warped gender politics of Hezbollah and Hamas than with the history and heroes of their own movement.

Adapted from Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight against Zionism as Racism*, by Gil Troy, with permission of Oxford University Press, all rights reserved.*

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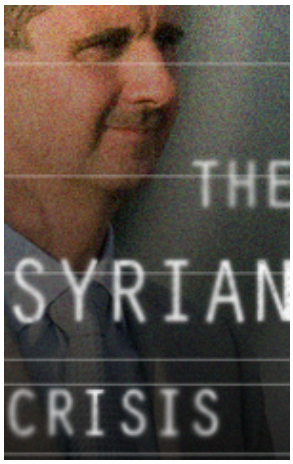
Gil Troy, a professor of history at McGill University in Montreal, is the author of eight books on American history, including Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism.

U.S. President Barack Obama walks to the Oval Office of the White House September 10, 2013 in Washington, DC. *(Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images)*

America's settled policy of standing by while half a million Syrians have been killed, millions have become refugees, and large swaths of their country have been reduced to rubble is not a simple "mistake," as critics like Nicholas D. Kristof and Roger Cohen have lately claimed. Nor is it the product of any deeper-seated American impotence or of Vladimir Putin's more recent aggressions. Rather, it is a byproduct of America's overriding desire to clinch a nuclear deal with Iran, which was meant to allow America to permanently remove itself from a war footing with that country and to shed its old allies and entanglements in the Middle East, which might also draw us into war. By allowing Iran and its allies to kill Syrians with impunity, America could demonstrate the corresponding firmness of its resolve to let Iran protect what President Barack Obama called its "equities" in Syria, which are every bit as important to Iran as pallets of cash.

And just like it sold its Iran policy through a public "echo chamber" of paid "experts" from organizations like Ploughshares and quote-seeking journalists and bloggers, some of whom also cashed White House-friendly nonprofit checks, the White House deliberately constructed an "echo chamber" to forward its Syria policy. The difference between the two "echo chambers" is that, absent any wider debate or the need for congressional approval, the Syria version was much more narrowly targeted at policy wonks and foreign-affairs writers, and the arguments it echoed were entirely deceptive in their larger thrust—the point of the Iran Deal was, in fact, to do a deal with Iran—rather

than simply incomplete or false in their specifics.



America's Syria policy can, therefore, be best understood not in the terms most familiar to Mideast analysts, such as "getting Assad to step aside" or "supporting the moderate opposition" or "paving the way to a peaceful transition and elections." Rather, it is a strategic-communications campaign tightly run from the White House, whose purpose was and is to serve as a smokescreen for an entirely coherent and purposeful policy that comes directly from the president himself, but which he and his aides did not wish to publicly own. The goal of the president and his closest aides is to convince the Iranians that we would meet our commitments to them while confusing and obscuring the real reasons behind the president's set decision of nonintervention in Syria from American legislators and the public alike.

Recently, portions of the strategic-communications façade erected by the administration have started to crumble, allowing interested analysts and members of the public to see the administration's actual policy more clearly. In a recent interview, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jay Solomon revealed that in 2013, Iran told President Obama that if he were to strike the regime of Bashar Assad following the latter's chemical-weapons attack, the Iranians would collapse the talks over their nuclear program. Obama canceled the strike, of course, and later reassured Iran that the United States would not touch Assad. Solomon's reporting confirms a critical fact about Obama's Iran and Syria policies: They are one and the same. Or, stated differently, Syria is part of the price for the president's deal with Iran.

The White House reaction to Solomon's assertion was a predictably swift denial. After all, the Obama administration would not want to associate the president's signature foreign-policy initiative with the indiscriminate slaughter of half a million people and the worst refugee crisis of the new century. In doing so, it followed a well-worn playbook: At key junctures over the previous five years, the administration put out various talking points in the press, often sourced to anonymous officials, whose lines were then validated by allies and surrogates, including officials who had left government and resumed their positions in the think-tank world. As previously, the president's objective was to manage domestic and allied pressure to intervene when his unmovable position was to avoid such an engagement at all costs, and always with an eye on the prize he sought in Tehran.

To be fair, Obama showed his cards on Syria literally from day one of the uprising against Assad. Unlike his nonnegotiable demand that longtime U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's former president, step down immediately—not today, but "yesterday"—Obama very visibly and deliberately refused to call for Assad's removal from power. In the White House, this call was contemptuously dubbed the "magic words," and the belief was that saying those words would raise expectations of an active U.S.

policy to see it through. This view—espoused by officials such as Steven Simon, then-National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and Africa—one of the linchpins of the White House communications strategy both from inside and then outside the White House, was put out in the media through favored surrogates, like George Washington University's Marc Lynch, who reiterated the White House's case and derided critics of the president's refusal to utter the "magic words."

If Obama purposefully took the Iranian regime's side during the 2009 protests so as not to upset the prospect of rapprochement, he similarly wasn't about to commit the United States against Iran's longest-standing strategic ally, Assad. However, by 2012, criticism of the administration's policy had

longest-standing strategic ally, Assad. However, by 2012, criticism of the administration's policy had grown more vocal, and calls rose to give military support to the Syrian opposition, a proposition the president was always opposed to. As this was a fixed position for Obama, the task before the White House was, therefore, one of public relations—to quiet the calls for supporting the opposition, outside and also within the administration, without doing anything that would actually upset Assad and his patrons in Iran.

Messaging, as always, was of paramount importance to the White House. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported in early 2013, "White House national security meetings on Syria [in 2012] focused on what participants called 'strategic messaging,' how administration policy should be presented to the public." To that end, the administration started putting out targeted talking points. The administration laid down its now-infamous mantra: There is no military solution in Syria.

One of the initial go-to lines was that the administration wanted to avoid further "militarization" of the situation. "We do not believe that militarization, further militarization of the situation in Syria at this point is the right course of action," said then-White House press secretary Jay Carney. "We believe that it would lead to greater chaos, greater carnage."

Again, White House surrogates faithfully disseminated its talking points and policy preferences. In an article in February of 2012, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius quoted an unnamed senior official who derided the rebel Free Syrian Army, then regurgitated the administration's view that "shoveling weapons to this disorganized opposition now is likely only to increase civilian deaths." Marc Lynch likewise repeated the administration's position, often using its own stock lines verbatim, in several articles for *Foreign Policy* and in a paper for the Center for a New American Security.

Assad's fall was inevitable, the administration contended. His days were numbered, and his departure, as Obama put it, was "not a question of if, it's when." As such, it wasn't necessary to take military action against Assad. The White House cited intelligence indicating that Assad could be killed by his own people, "eliminating the need for riskier measures to support the rebel campaign." "There are people around Assad who are beginning to hedge their bets," asserted then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. There might be a coup in Syria, she predicted. "We saw this happen in other settings last year; I think it is going to happen in Syria." Obama's close aide Denis McDonough instructed the administration committee charged with Syria policy instead to "focus mostly on post-Assad planning," because the dictator's fall was simply a matter of time.

In fact, by summer 2012, when the White House was already running its secret talks with Iran in Oman, the Syria "small group"—the study group led by Simon, which had called on Obama to review military contingencies—had been shut down.

To shore up the noninterventionist position it had already guaranteed the Iranians, the White House introduced the enduring fixture of its Syria policy: bringing in Russia as a principal partner. The move coincided with the creation of the Friends of Syria group—intended to bypass Russian obstructionism at the U.N. Security Council. Obama then undercut this group of U.S. allies by instead drawing closer to Russia.

Working to accelerate Assad's fall, the White House messaged, "could undercut U.S. efforts to persuade Russia to halt military aid to the Syrian regime." Marc Lynch echoed the line in his CNAS paper: "It would also be very difficult to stop Russia, Iran, or others from supplying fresh arms and aid to Assad once the opposition's backers are openly doing so." Meanwhile, the *Washington Post*'s David

to Assad since the opposition's backers are openly doing so." Meanwhile, the Washington Post's David Ignatius seconded the administration's move "to make Moscow part of the solution," and give "Russian leader Vladimir Putin a role in brokering the transition." If people wanted a solution to the Syrian problem, the White House argued, they should go and talk to the Russians. "So the question shouldn't be how to turn up the heat on Assad," Ignatius wrote. Rather, U.S. regional allies should do "the heavy-lifting," and go to Moscow. Having established the principle of nonintervention and set the role of Russia as principal interlocutor for the region, the White House set the contours of America's actual Syria policy, which endure unchanged to this day.

The partnership with Russia became a public fact in 2013. Following Assad's chemical-weapons strikes, Obama reached a deal with Putin that allowed the U.S. president to continue his policy of nonintervention against Assad. At this point, White House messaging made a 180-degree shift. Obama's decision, administration officials readily acknowledged, meant Assad—who, a year before, they said was about to fall at the hands of the people or as the result of a coup—now had "considerable staying power." It was, therefore, too bad, other administration officials said, that "the window of opportunity for strengthening the moderate opposition may have closed."

Instead, administration officials started telling reporters on background that no outside support would have mattered, anyway, as the gap between America and the Syrian regime and its allies was simply too big to ever have been bridged. The president himself would publicly voice this position, declaring the notion that supporting the rebels—"former doctors, farmers, and pharmacists," as the president disparagingly referred to them—would have made a difference against a regime backed by Russia and Iran, has "always been a fantasy." To suggest otherwise, the president said, was "horseshit."

Like the assertions of 2012, these claims, presented as serious assessments of the situation on the ground in Syria, were simply part of a White House messaging campaign, whose purpose was to support a policy that was already set—but which the public was judged not to be ready for. That the arguments the administration was making were paradoxical and contradictory didn't matter, so long as the point was the same: America wouldn't and couldn't intervene against Assad. Naturally, surrogates like Lynch echoed the administration's arguments, even when they changed, and also felt at home in the contradictions of their positions. "There's no way to know for sure" whether U.S. support in 2012 would have made a difference, Lynch would later write. In fact, he asserted, things would've played out exactly as they have, with the only difference that the United States would've been in the middle of the fighting.

By the end of 2013, the White House began to mainstream its open disregard for even the pretense of removing Assad, thereby circling back to its initial position in 2011. Unnamed senior administration officials were cited as talking privately about Assad "staying for the foreseeable future" and "voic[ing] regret about the decision, in August 2011, to call for him to step aside." In early 2014, Frank Wisner of The Iran Project and Leslie Gelb, both veterans of the realist foreign-policy establishment, were chosen to carry this White House message to members of the Council on Foreign Relations and other thumb-sucking senior types. The president and officials at the White House, Wisner and Gelb wrote, realized "it was too quick off the mark and too absolute" in calling for Assad's departure. "Perhaps now," they added, "administration officials are prepared to entertain a transitional working arrangement with Assad." The new focus for U.S. policy, the authors wrote, should be on combating Sunni terrorism and on providing humanitarian aid to Syrians. Amazingly, much like the expert advice not to intervene militarily in 2012, what Wisner and Gelb were "recommending" was the actual substance of White House policy, which the communications effort had formerly been designed to obscure.

obscure.

The form of Wisner and Gelb's article became the preferred genre for the White House's Syria echo chamber: the striptease. Hand-picked experts offer fresh policy advice to the president. The authors demonstrate their independence by criticizing the supposed current policy and propose a new course of action. Within weeks, the new course of action is acknowledged as policy, thus flattering the importance of the experts. Only, what the experts suggested was already the policy—and what they were "criticizing"—was the fan that the messaging campaign had manufactured to obscure, for a time, what the White House was actually doing in Syria.

The success of this dance was great enough that many more proposals for "new" policy, all recycling the White House's latest set of talking points, were floated, each with the aim of revealing another few inches of actual policy. Simon, who was now out of government, put forward a "new plan for Syria," in which he called for "containing extremist violence" and "reducing the number of noncombatant deaths." One month later, Lynch published another paper with CNAS, in which he reproduced all the key White House talking points used to describe its policy to this day, debuting terminology, like "de-escalation" and "protecting Iranian equities," which was then promptly adopted by the White House.

Both Simon and Lynch floated the idea of promoting local cease-fires—now a mainstay of the White House's declared policy—as the way to go in Syria. Again, they were not so much promoting views that were original to them but promoting a pre-existing conceit, whose actual sponsor, Robert Malley, was appointed in February 2014 as a senior director at the National Security Council, where he worked alongside Phillip Gordon, who came in the year before as coordinator for Middle East policy.

By following in Malley's footprints, it is easy to see where specific ideas came from, and the corrupted nature of the policy debates that were used by the White House to promote its set agenda. For example, Malley met in Washington with journalist Nir Rosen, who has a close relationship with the Assad regime. Following his meeting with Malley, Rosen authored an unpublished pro-Assad report making the case for local cease-fires—which have been an instrument of warfare for the regime camp. Malley distributed Rosen's report, which, naturally, was also leaked to David Ignatius. Simon's and Lynch's pieces floated the approach favored by Malley and the White House in much cleaner form and venues than the tarnished Rosen.

It was all very useful, and chummy, and everyone scratched everyone else's back, until the ISIS crisis blew up and disrupted the Syria messaging campaign by making the administration, which decided it could dismiss the latest jihadi faction as "the JV squad," look feckless. As it happened, ISIS would turn out to have its benefits as a messaging device. It, too, could be used as part of the fan-dance.

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The emergence of ISIS presented an opportunity for the White House to advance the president's vision of a regional realignment. Under the rubric of a new war on Sunni jihadism, the president elevated Russia and Iran to senior partners, and privileged their position, while shelving all discussion about Assad. What had been secret and a cause for strenuous denials was now palatable state policy, which the White House could therefore publicly own.

Hence, Simon, reflecting the direction of White House policy in the guise of fresh advice, proclaimed the United States should start discussing Syria with Iran in order to have "the best chance of long-term success." Similarly, Marc Lynch proposed the White House adopt "an alternative Iran-centric approach, one built upon seeking a working accord with Iran rooted in common interests in …

stabilizing Iraq and Syria, and fighting jihadist groups." In addition, like Wisner, Gelb, and Simon had all written earlier, Lynch echoed the White House by calling for sacrificing the "goal of 'near-term' regime change" in Syria.

Following the White House's standard operating procedure, anonymous administration officials had already been leaking all these talking points to the press during the course of 2014. For instance, in July of that year, it was reported that administration officials were proposing setting aside the removal of Assad from power. "Anyone calling for regime change in Syria is, frankly, blind to the past decade," one unnamed senior official told *The Daily Beast*. Other officials were "suggesting that Iran could be a partner in a postwar Syria." When Lynch spoke of "us[ing] the ISIS crisis to create a sustainable regional accord," he was therefore merely putting his own name to statements that the White House had already publicly vetted.

Formalizing Tehran's place at the table in Syria, as Obama had promised the regime, would have to wait for the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Once that was achieved, Russia understood the door was open to intervene directly in Syria. A couple of months after the deal was concluded, the Russians set up their military base in Syria.

Obama's Syria policy once again came under criticism following the Kremlin's move. The president looked weak in the face of Russian assertiveness on behalf of its ally. The White House's initial messaging was therefore to paint the Russian intervention as an idiotic decision that would inevitably backfire on Moscow. Putin's intervention reflected weakness, not strength, the president maintained. As such, the preferred White House talking point was that Russia was only getting itself trapped in a quagmire. "An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire, and it won't work," Obama said in early October.

These lines were quickly put out in friendly media outlets. The Brookings Institution's Jeremy Shapiro, who had worked for Philip Gordon at the State Department before the latter moved to the White House, enthusiastically regurgitated the administration's approved talking points in an interview with *Vox* also in early October. Shapiro repeated the claim that the Russian intervention was "incredibly stupid stuff," a "serious mistake," and, naturally, that it would get Moscow into a "quagmire." The Russians, Shapiro declared, were "banking on this idea that they're going to bring us around" on Syria. But, he asserted, "I don't think they are."

As the White House pushed these talking points about how dumb Putin was, it also continued to stress the president's unshakable principle of nonintervention. "We're not going to make Syria into a proxy war between the United States and Russia," Obama made clear. "This is not some superpower chessboard contest." Anyone suggesting military options, the president continued, was simply "offering up half-baked ideas" and "a bunch of mumbo-jumbo."

Philip Gordon, now also out of government, was a notable conduit for the main talking points: de-escalation, cease-fires, humanitarian aid, and shelving the question of Assad. "The White House," one senior administration official—the point man for Syria at the time, and now, is Robert Malley—told Bloomberg View in early October, "thinks we can de-escalate the conflict while keeping Assad in power." Gordon, Malley's recent colleague at the NSC, and now a freshly minted fellow at the Council

power." Gordon, Malley's recent colleague at the NSC, and now a freshly minted fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, then laid out this White House position in an essay and a paper for the CFR, which fall into the familiar genre of validating current policy in the guise of "rethinking" it. He also echoed the White House's direction of bringing Iran formally to the Syria table as a major stakeholder. More aid to the rebels, he opined, would only add to the violence and would harm prospects of a deal with Russia. Escalating the war, Gordon wrote, wouldn't succeed. In fact, it was counterproductive. However much we escalate, the Russians would only counter-escalate. When would the bloodshed ever cease?

Through Gordon, the White House laid out where it wanted to go, and where it is today: a bilateral process with the Russians, cutting out all those annoying U.S. allies pushing us to escalate and insisting on Assad's departure. Hence, Steven Simon, now also a freshly-minted objective policy expert and not an NSC operative, would express "satisfaction" at the presence in Syria "of a powerful military player" like Russia, which he described as "really the only tacit partner" of the United States. The Russian presence, Simon wrote in a *Foreign Affairs* essay that October, makes it "no longer feasible for the United States to establish a safe haven or no-fly zone"—steps the administration had strongly opposed years before the Russians were anywhere near Syria. Critics of Obama's policy who were calling for any consideration of military action, the message went, could take a hike.

None of this is conjecture. Partnership with Russia is what the White House has sought after since late 2015 and throughout 2016—with Malley as the point man, negotiating directly with the Kremlin's special envoy. By early 2016, Shapiro, who had parroted the White House's misguiding spin on the incredible stupidity of the Russians' intervention, was now saying the Russians actually held all the cards in Syria, and the only option for the U.S. is to work with them, on their terms. What's more, echoing Malley, Shapiro laid out the White House position on the need to finally take military action—against the group then known as Jabhat al-Nusra, and to push (meaning, to threaten) the opposition and its backers to stop all cooperation with it, if the killing was to stop in Aleppo. This was, in fact, the deal that Malley negotiated for the White House, and which Secretary of State John Kerry announced several days ago.

For five-and-a-half years, Obama has maintained an unwavering position against intervention on the side of Assad's enemies in order to set the stage for a U.S. realignment in the Middle East. To shield this ambition from view, and therefore from criticism, the White House launched an elaborate spin campaign whose purpose was to deflect and manage domestic and allied criticism while the president pursued his objective. In partnership with Russia, Obama has directly shaped the course of the Syrian war while single-mindedly working to actualize his vision of a new American alliance with Russia and Iran that will allow America to take a permanent vacation from the Middle East. While the end result of this effort may not be what Obama and his closest advisers hope, his actions are clear, and their consequences now appear to be locked in, no matter who comes after him in the White House.

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Tony Badran is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He tweets @AcrossTheBay.

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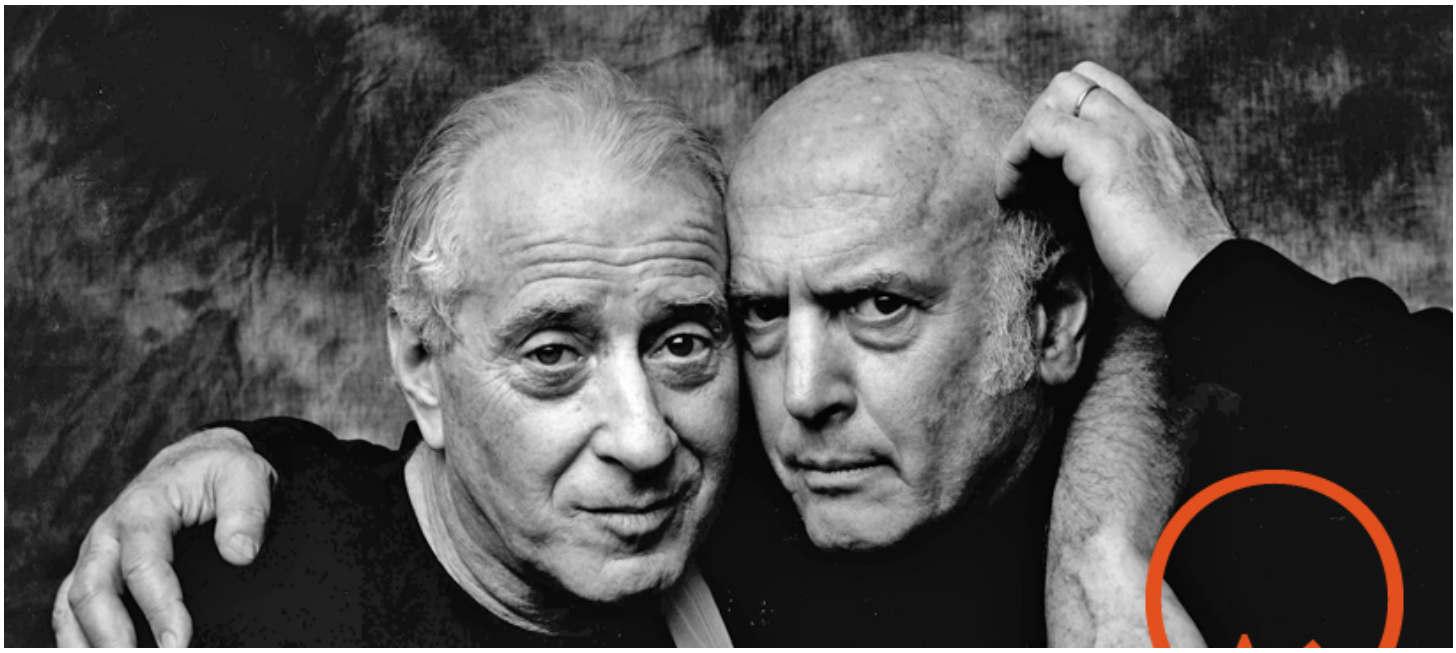

Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller *(Photo by Robert Knight Archive/Redferns)*

A willingness to venture outside of one's cultural backyard is not always the moral equivalent of the horrors that Cortés inflicted on the Aztecs. It can also be an act of love or the way that a great poem or a song is born. While it is true that such thoughts can sound retrograde or even dangerous in an age when terms like "appropriation" and "theft" are commonly used to describe the hybrid creations that made American popular culture so wildly appealing to hundreds of millions of other inhabitants of the planet, crossing lines of race, class, religion, gender, and national origin, don't fear. Very few artists who are any good believe in simple-minded notions of "authenticity."

The songwriting team of Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber were responsible as much or more than anyone else on the planet for the "crossover" of the rhythm and blues music invented by African-Americans into the mainstream of American popular song. They wrote "Kansas City," which was a hit for Wilbert Harrison and then again for James Brown;"Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock," which helped make Elvis Presley famous; "Yakety Yak," "Charlie Brown," and "Poison Ivy" for the Coasters; "Searchin'," which was a hit for the Coasters and then for the Hollies; "Young Blood," which was a hit for the Coasters and then Bad Company. They co-wrote and/or produced great songs by the Drifters like "There Goes My Baby" and Ben E. King's "Stand By Me." They wrote "Ruby Baby," which was recorded by the Drifters, Dion, and Donald Fagen of Steely Dan. They wrote "Spanish Harlem," which was recorded by Ben E. King and Aretha Franklin. They wrote "I Keep Forgettin,'" which was repurposed by Michael McDonald and then became Warren G. and Nate Dogg's "Regulate."

Talking to Mike Stoller for two hours in a hotel lobby about songwriting, music, African-American musicians and Jewish songwriters was a thrill, as well as a welcome reminder of the wild hybrid spirit that helped make 20th century Americans a great people, and which characterize the uniqueness of their popular art, from music to painting to literature to dance to cartoons to stand-up comedy. What follows is a lightly edited version of our conversation.

I've been having some bad feelings about America going to shit lately, so I started listening to music on AM radio. What I concluded was that Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber wrote all of this incredible music that became part of America's DNA. My next thought was that you were still alive and living somewhere in L.A., and maybe talking to you would make me feel better.

I'm alive, more or less. And I'm honored.

So, why didn't you like Elvis Presley's version of "Hound Dog," which is a rhythm-and-blues song you wrote together with Jerry Leiber?

Well, a few reasons. First of all, it was a woman's song, lyrically.

You wrote it for Big Mama Thornton.

Johnny Otis called me up. And we had been writing songs for Little Esther, who was with his band. And he said, "Are you familiar with Willie Mae Thornton?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, then you'd better get Jerry and come on over to my house," which wasn't that far away from where I lived.

Which at that time was where?

Well, it was just east of Crenshaw, just south of Pico. We originally lived much further east. When was 16, I moved to L.A. with my folks, and we lived east of Alvarado. At any rate, so I was living on South Norton Avenue, and I had a car by that time. I guess we were 18 by then—19 even, maybe. I picked Jerry up and we went to Johnny's house, where he had a kind of a rehearsal space in an alley adjacent to his house. And that's where we first heard her sing, and she knocked us out. I was actually inspired by her physical presence. And we drove back to my house and then turned around, wrote the song, and then turned around, and rode it back to Big Mama. But, of course, the whole feel of that insinuating rhythm and everything was from her, and then, of course, her delivery, which was very powerful.

Had you heard anything like that before you saw her?

Well, not quite, not quite. And on the way, you know, we rehearsed it that day. First, she didn't want to look at it. But Johnny came running over and he said, "Mama, you want a hit, don't you? These boys write hits."

[Laughter]

Well, we hadn't really had any big hits; we had one chart record,"Hard Times," with Charles Brown. So he was thinking kind of futuristically, I guess.

He couldn't have been more right.

She didn't want to listen to a couple of white guys, white teenagers, telling her what to do. Anyway on the way to the studio the following day, we said, "You know, she oughta growl it." So then it was, "Well, who's going to tell her?"

I can imagine how enthusiastic she was.

We mentioned it, and she said, "Don't be telling me how to sing blues, white boy." However, of course, it stuck in her head, and boom! It was a fabulous performance. She was really sensational.

Where, where did that feel for rhythm and blues come from? I mean, Doc Pomus was a blues singer himself, and he sang in the clubs and he led his own version of that life. But L.A. wasn't Chicago, or even New York.

Well, first of all, Jerry's from Baltimore. His father passed away when he was like 6 years old, and his mother owned a little shop on the cusp of a black neighborhood, with mostly people who had come up from the Deep South. For wartime jobs and so on, you know in factories. And she would extend credit. Jerry would go over with a soft tone and courtesy in his voice. So he was welcome, because he was polite, and he was bringing the fire. He heard their radios and probably a few singers with a good beat-up guitar or whatever.

When did you first hear the blues?

I went to summer camp as a kid, starting at 6 or 7 years old, and it was an interracial summer camp in New Jersey, near Hackettstown. It was totally interracial, the counselors as well as the kids. I heard a black teenager playing boogie-woogie piano in the barn, which was our recreation hall. It was during the day and he thought he was alone but I was there watching. And I was mesmerized. When he left, I tried to make my fingers move the way I saw his fingers moving. And by the time I was 8 or 9, I was a pretty good boogie-woogie piano player.

And then I would buy, you know, the 10-inch 78-rpm records at Woolworth's of boogie-woogie piano players. And on the other side, there was always a vocal, which was probably the A-side of the record, but I thought it was the other way around.

I remember once being in a recording studio with members of the rap group the Wu-Tang Clan back in the 1990s and one of the artists in that group was riffing about the history of white people stealing black people's music, and the example he gave was Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog," which he said that Elvis stole from a black performer. And I looked at him I said, "True, but the song was written by two Jewish guys." And he looked at me funny, like he was mad at me, but also like at the same time he was wondering if that could possibly be true.

Well, you're influenced, always, of course. When *Smokey Joe's Cafe* was just starting rehearsals in New York, and Jerry and I came in, and three of the guys who played the kind of Coasters role met us, and they were shocked. Because they always thought we were black. Funny names, but black. So we were flattered because as we started, of course, we wanted to be black. Because that was the coolest thing to be.

Jews are a variety of white person in America now, but they weren't white back in the 1940s and '50s.

Certainly not in Canada. I remember that they were not referred to as white.

I once sat on a piano bench with Stevie Wonder for an hour, and when I'd bring up a song he'd be like, "Oh, like this?" And he'd play the part on the piano. I asked him about the intro to a song I loved on *Inner Visions* and I asked him, "Where did that come from?" And he said, "It came from the radio. I was a little blind kid. And so I used to sit by the window and listen to the radio all day long, to the sounds of the voices speaking different languages, and all the different kinds of music."

A lot of our stuff came from the radio. Not so much actual music, but we were influenced by the 15-minute radio programs, you know, to do things like "Riot in Cellblock No. 9."

Yeah, the "found sound," that's what he was talking about, too.

And you know, the little comedy things like "Searchin'" are full of references to radio shows, like *Bulldog Drummond* and all of that.

Speaking of the radio, I heard a terrific interview once with Ben E. King on public radio in Boston, and obviously he talked about you and Jerry a lot, and with great love. He said something very interesting that I thought you'd probably be able to put a finer point on for me. He said Leiber and Stoller could just make this suit of clothes out of sound that fit me so perfectly, like you guys were his Jewish tailors.

At one point he was talking about the Atlantic sound and he was saying, "Well, what they did was, they translated the treble sound from gospel and rhythm and blues into strings and into the popular music vernacular. And then when Motown came along, they took what Leiber and Stoller did and they brought it down to the bass."

Jamerson's bass playing for Motown, yes. Where the strings came from was I started making a kind of a Rimsky-Korsakov kind of phrase when we were rehearsing "There Goes My Baby," and Jerry said, "that sounds like violins." And I said, "Well, hey, why not? Let's try it." So that record had four fiddles and one cello, that's all. I grabbed Stanley Applebaum, who is a wonderful orchestrator. And he added some stuff as well.

'Don't be telling me how to sing blues, white boy.'

When we played the record for Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegün, Wexler almost had a fit. He said, "You're throwing our money down the toilet." Ahmet, the diplomat, said, "Boys, you know we know you can make good records, we know the Coasters. But you know you can't hit a home run every time you get to bat." So they sat on the record and then they finally released it, probably as a B-side to a song called "Baltimore" or something, I don't remember. And anyway, in those days, the DJs got records and they listened to them, and so it just took off, you know.

What was it about Ben E. King's voice that made it such a necessary part of those lasting songs?

He was just such a mature stylist for a young guy, you know? I mean we were young. But most of the guys in these R&B groups, you know they didn't have that kind of maturity. He was young, but—

He sounded like he knew everything that could go wrong in the world and what happens to you inside.

He was as worldly as Arthur Price, you know? And I just loved his voice.

Do you remember the session when you guys recorded "Stand By Me?"

Sure.

Tell me about it.

It started in a rehearsal. We had taken an office on the fifth floor of a brownstone on West 57th Street. Ground floor was a corset shop, and on the fifth floor, we had a skylight and a roof. And then we bought some furniture at one of those places that's all used school furniture and desks and chairs. And we had a piano. Just prior to that, we had worked out of his house, my house, the offices of Atlantic Records, or Hill & Range Songs, or wherever we were. And if we were in the studio, we'd use it to start writing if we had a piano handy. Anyway, we were in our new office, which we had for about nine months or so. And Jerry and Benny were playing around with a song, working on the lyrics. And I came in, and Benny was singing. And I was sussing out the chords. And then I came up with that bass pattern—

pattern.

"Stand By Me" must be one of the four or five most overplayed songs on the planet, but it still gives me chills every single time I hear it. I'm sure that bass line will be one of the last things I will remember before I die.

Jerry said, "Ah! Now we've got a hit." Anyway, I called Stanley Applebaum, I played him the bass pattern and I said, I think this goes all the way. Because the chord progression's the same, it never changes. And I said in the middle, I said, I want you to write some Borodin. And he did!

And the decision to open it that way, that stark, easy opening that builds, is—

Oh yeah, with the bass and guitar.

Yeah.

And then, because we loved Brazilian stuff, as much of it as we knew at the time, we had the triangle and the weird little tsk-tsk thing. And it just all worked. Then the fiddles picked up the bass pattern after a while. I mean it just kept building on that pattern and it was great, you know? We did four songs on that session, one of the other ones was "Spanish Harlem."

Jesus.

And then, of course, again we went an hour overtime. And Atlantic was furious. Now we're overtime, with strings. Again, we were throwing their money away. But they had two very big hits out of that session.

On the subject of people who believed you were throwing people's money away, your dealings with Colonel Parker.

Well, that was not about money.

That was about control.

Absolute control. Because we had written, it's funny, it was in this hotel that Jerry and I wrote "Jailhouse Rock" and three of the songs that went into the movie, in about five hours. We had a two-bedroom suite, and we'd come in from California to be near Atlantic and to be near Hill and Wang, and to go to the theater and to hang out and to go to nightclubs. Anyway, we were locked in the room upstairs—but you've probably heard some of these stories before.

I love hearing them.

Anyway, he had come in and said, "Where's my songs?" and Jerry said, "Oh, you'll have them." He said, "I know," he said, "because I'm not leaving until I have them." And because we hadn't started even looking at the script so we were locked in, he pushed his chair, over in front of the door for the way out, and he said,"I'm going to take a nap." And about four or five hours later, we got our freedom and we had finished those songs.

Colonel Parker didn't like the idea that Elvis was becoming dependent on you for material?

No, it wasn't that—it was almost the opposite. I'll tell you what happened. We became Elvis's good-luck charms, and he told us that. When they were doing the filming, they told Jerry to come and be the piano player in the movie. He said, "I don't play the piano." [Elvis] said, "It doesn't matter, you look like a piano player."

The day he was to report for costume fitting—which was a Hawaiian shirt, I think—Jerry had an impacted wisdom tooth. He said, "You go. They won't know the difference." The only thing was, when I got there, they told me I'd have to shave my beard off.

Haha.

Because it was a scene-stealer. So I was on the set with Elvis during the filming, and one day we were sitting around near the end of the day, he said, "Mike, write me a real pretty ballad will you?" I said, "Sure." So I called Jerry and we wrote the song "Don't."

Mm-hhm.

On a Saturday. And on Sunday, we took Young Jesse, who sat in on "Searchin'" and "Young Blood" because one of the first Coasters was in prison at the time, and got him to sing it. We made a demo, and I handed it to Elvis. That was what caused a furor.

Ah. You didn't go through management.

Through Freddy Bienstock, yes. That caused all kinds of repercussions. Because they were afraid if Elvis heard something he liked, he would do it. And they didn't want to give him anything until they had the publishing rights.

On another occasion, the Colonel wanted to have Jerry and me come out to record. And Jerry said, "I just got out of the hospital, you know, I'm not supposed to fly." And he said, "Awwww, come on Jerry. Those doctors are full of shit. You come on out. Elvis is going to record, he wants you guys in the studio!" So Jerry says, "Well, let me talk to Mike." And he called me and he said, "What should we do? I mean it's writing for Elvis, it's like we can sell anything." Which wasn't 100 percent true, but. … And I said, "Tell him to go fuck himself." Which he did. He told him, "Mike said, 'Go fuck yourself.' "

And for some reason, he didn't take that too kindly.

Yeah. But the main thing for us was there was an opportunity that came my way. It came through this guy, Charles Feldman, who was a producer and an agent. And he had just bought the rights to "A Walk on the Wild Side" by Nelson Algren.

Mm-hhm.

And he wanted Jerry and me to write the songs. Make a musical out of it. And he had Budd Schulberg to write the script and Elia Kazan to direct it. Actually, it was very sad, because Elvis had always aspired to be like Brando.

Right.

Yeah, he would have given his left nut to do that. And we presented this to the publishers. And the publisher said, "Let me speak to the Colonel. Would you mind waiting outside?" And we were sitting there figuring out how we were going to be rewarded for bringing in this dream project, for him and

also for us.

Finally, 20 minutes later, we were called in and Gene with a Viennese accent, he says, "Boys, ze Colonel said if you ever try to interfere in the career of Elvis Presley, you will never work again anywhere." And at that point, we just stopped. We were so disappointed.

It's a sad thing—

It was very sad.

Because he never had that acting career and then he recorded so much junk.

Well, not all of it.

Well, some of it.

He continued to do some of our songs that other people had already done that may not have been big hits. Like "Girls, Girls, Girls" and "Bossa Nova, Baby."

Yeah. Yeah.

And some of the stuff he did on his [TV] special, "Saved," and so on and so forth. He liked our songs. And I must admit, even though we were disappointed at first with Elvis's version of "Hound Dog" because it was so vastly different and it lacked what Big Mama's record had, as I've said before, after it sold 7 million singles, we began to see the good in Elvis's version.

Some virtue, yeah. Now in Graceland, there's a case with Elvis' chai necklace in it. Did he ever display any particular interest in Jews, or in the fact that you were Jewish?

Not particularly, no. But I knew that he had been a shabbos goy for somebody in the neighborhood, in the housing project where he lived in Memphis. And, of course, he got all his clothes at a Jewish tailor's place.

Now in the 1950s, the two of you would you be in the same room at a Manhattan cocktail party with Leonard Bernstein, or were you guys seen as from some other world? "Ah, that's popular music"?

It wasn't even considered popular music. It was considered R&B. It wasn't pop, it wasn't Perry Como, Eddie Fisher, even though we probably had a record by each of them through the music publishers. It wasn't Patti Page. We had a little record label—

The Doc Pomus song, "Save the Last Dance for Me."

Yeah. We introduced it.

It's one of the most heartbreaking songs.

Yes, of course, knowing Doc.

Tell me, I've heard a bunch of different stories about that song and how it was written. What do you remember about it?

They brought it in. I don't know if we made any minor changes. But we laid out the arrangement, you

know, we always did that.

One story I heard was that he wrote it two years later on his wedding invitation. It was a song about watching his wife dance with another man at their wedding because he couldn't dance, because he was a cripple.

That's what I had heard. I knew his wife. She was kind of an attractive blonde. When I first met Doc he was on crutches and he had the metal braces on his legs. I knew who he was because I had heard him as I was growing up in New York. On *Symphony Sid* he would announce this commercial for Alley's Pants Shop. He said, "and that was Doc Pomus singing." So the first thing I'd heard was this jingle he was singing, "Alley, Alley, Alley, you're so good to me." But then I met him at Atlantic's offices. And you know, we just got very friendly.

What was he like?

He was a sweetheart.

Was he funny? Was he shy? Was he outgoing? Was he sad?

I think he was outgoing. He was never seen sad. I don't ever remember him sad. And as the song goes, you know, there was nothing sad about the song. It was, "Don't forget, you're going home with me."

Right.

It was lovely. I mean, and it's heartbreaking.

When he went into his gambling phase—

Yeah, I never played in any of those games, which is weird because I'm an avid poker player. Not necessarily a good one, but I'm an avid one. I knew he had a game at his house and it was a way to make money.

He was good enough to make his living as a card shark?

I don't know that he was a shark, people had to pay to play and he got that money. I never saw him playing. I was never at one of those games but I knew that he was running a game.

Did Ahmet Ertegun ever play cards?

Not that I know of. No, he drank. Oh boy—he drank his dinner and his lunch. I played with Jule Styne once. I don't know if he was a good poker player. He was a hell of a good songwriter.

In addition to rhythm and blues, did you listen to Ira Gershwin and Cole Porter, or were you like, "That's just a different kind of music."

No, no. When I grew up, in my house, WQXR was on all the time. My mother kept that on all day long. You know that's what I grew up with—that and boogie-woogie, which I found on my own.

Where was she from that classical music meant something to her?

Actually, she and her brothers and sisters were all born in Pittsburgh. But I don't think she ever knew her mother, who passed away right after she was born. And her father took all the children—she was

her mother, who passed away right after she was born. And her father took all the children—she was the youngest of five—to Vienna, which is where he was from. And then he hired a governess and more or less abandoned them. And then he moved back to Pittsburgh and lived by himself.

That's a horrible story.

Yeah, it is. And then they were all shipped back at the outbreak of WWI; Travelers Aid found the father and made him take them in. Then, a few years after that, they moved to New York, the five of them, by themselves. And they lived right near the Gershwins and they were friendly. My mom went out with George a few times and she was also in one of his shows.

Wow, that's funny.

Yeah. She was in *Funny Face*, she was in the main chorus. And so and she knew Ira also and she went to school with Frankie, who was the sister, Frances Gershwin.

That's a thing I never knew about you, that there was a direct connection to the Gershwins. It makes sense.

Oh yeah. That's why, Jerry used to say, there was a picture of George, a framed photo, in our office. George had drawn a staff and some music and "that certain feeling" and he signed it to my mom. And as Jerry says, "It always hung very heavily over my piano."

It better be that good, or else.

I think that was what my aunt used to say: "Well, if he turns into a George Gershwin, OK, but otherwise … ."

It's all a waste. Now, just to pick up that Doc Pomus thread, at some point the young Lou Reed, who was just out of electroshock treatment and Syracuse University, was trailing around behind Doc Pomus and learning how to write songs. Did you ever see him?

No. I heard of Lou Reed after he became famous.

Right.

But I was never involved with Lou Reed or any of the Warhol people. I didn't work with them.

Phil Spector hung around you at the beginning, though.

Yeah. Well, our mentor when we were 17, who had been a record salesperson for Modern Records, was Lester Sill, and we started a record company with him and a publishing company. And then we moved to New York and it was like 6 million miles away so we kind of separated our interests. But Lester called, and he said, "He's really talented and he wants to hang with you guys." So we sent him a ticket. And then he lived in our offices for a while—

And what was that like, having Phil Spector living in your office?

Jerry let him stay in his apartment.

Was he a respectful kid?

No. He was kind of snide and nasty right from the get-go. And he wanted to write a song with Jerry.

Right.

Begging, begging. And so finally, we were all going to meet, the three of us, and write a song together. And my wife at the time, my first wife said, "You've got kids here, you haven't had dinner with your children in weeks." So I said, "I'll come later," you know. But when I called they had finished the song. So I said, "I'm not a writer on 'Spanish Harlem.'"

However, when they played it for Jerry Wexler in the waiting room, I created the essential part of the arrangement, which was the marimba part.

Now that's a weird thing, someone wanting to write with your partner. How did you guys handle that?

Yeah, I figured I should have a piece of the song because I created an element of the song that I've never heard it done without, even Aretha's version. It was a bone of contention for years.

Isn't it a little bit like, "Can I take your girl out on a date?"

Oh, no, no, no. I wrote some songs with other people and he wrote other songs with other people. Jerry wrote songs with Billy Edd Wheeler and I wrote some songs with Bert Berns. It wasn't stressful.

No, I just felt that I had contributed an essential element to that particular song.

Now, the Gerry Goffin and Carole King partnership. Did you spend much time with them?

They used to come to the Brill Building. Because even though they were known as the Brill, they were at 1650 Broadway, along with Barry [Mann] and Cynthia [Weil] and the rest of those people.

Were you, I mean the feel that I get when I read that stuff is that you guys were already established, you were a little—

Kind of, as producers. And they [Gerry Goffin and his then-wife, Carole King] would come to play songs for us that they hoped we would do and we often did, with the Drifters. Yeah. So they would make the pilgrimage across the street.

Haha.

I saw Carole recently. At the BMI dinner, she came and threw her arms around me, you know, because we were very friendly. And she would sit at the piano and play, and if we liked the song then I would start playing the string line on top. And Jerry sometimes, Jerry Leiber sometimes helped Gerry Goffin out with a bridge or something.

That's sweet. And did you think of them as kids? How much younger were they? They weren't that much younger.

Sure. We were in our, well let's see. Figure in 1962 we were 29, I think Carole was 19, 18 or 19.

Right, because they all started so young.

She did, especially. The other kids were, you know, kind of like five years younger. Some were younger than that and some were closer to our age. Doc was older than we were. I think Mort Shuman was

younger.

And would you all do stuff together? Would you all get a meal or a drink, or it was all business?

It was mostly business, but yeah, I went out with Carole and Gerry. One day I was in front of the Brill Building, and they came by. And they said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I don't know, I don't have any plans at the moment." And they said, "Why don't you come to dinner with us? We're going to a Japanese restaurant." I said, "I'm not really familiar with that, but it sounds OK." I had my first taste of sushi and I loved it.

Did you see Carole once she and Gerry Goffin split and she moved out to L.A.?

Not, really no. I sat next to her at—I think it was the daughter of Barry [Mann] and Cynthia [Weil] getting married at the Beverly Hills Hotel—I was sitting next to her, and I said, "You know, I probably would have wanted to record you if you were black."

Haha.

Haha.

And she said, "Gee, thanks?"

No, no, I mean it wasn't quite like that—

I know, haha.

But it was like, I don't know, because I always loved her playing. You know? What she did was great.

You must spend your life walking through airports and hotel lobbies and restaurants and hearing songs you wrote. Do you—

I feel good when I hear them, yeah, sure. You know when *Smokey Joe's* opened on Broadway, Jerry and I had never met our audience. Because we're not performers. Benny King, the Coasters, they'd perform, and people would say aaaah! We were the boys in the back room who wrote the song or created the record or produced it.

The humor of the blues, as Jerry used to say, was akin to Yiddish humor. Like, "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all."

So the first time we really engaged with our own audience was when *Smokey Joe's* was opening on Broadway. And our pictures were in the souvenir program. We were surprised, even then, after 40-something years, some of these songs, people remembered them. Because when we wrote them and when we made the record, we figured well, we'll be lucky if they remember them six weeks or six months later. And people kept telling us, "We grew up on your music and this was the soundtrack of our lives." And, of course, it's gratifying.

The DNA of this country, the modern version of it, is a thing that you helped to shape, or at least to filigree. What can you tell me about it?

From the beginning, all of the stuff that we did was inspired by our familiarity and knowledge and love of black popular music. The blues, boogie-woogie, rhythm and blues. And people say, "You guys were

responsible for that music crossing over." That made us very proud. Since then, many more have. But if that is something that we did, then that made us very proud. Because, of course, there's all kinds of influences in American music, but I think the strongest influence is from black people.

What spoke to you in that music?

It was the rhythm, it was the rhythm. And it had a humor in it, even in the blues songs. You know, the humor, as Jerry used to say, was akin to Yiddish humor. Like, "If it wasn't for bad luck I wouldn't have no luck at all."

You can imagine an old Jewish guy saying that, too.

Yeah.

Did you feel that being Jewish gave you the ability to connect with the humor or the sadness or whatever it was that you felt in that music?

I didn't really think of it that way, you know. I was always proud to be Jewish, but I knew very little about my heritage in that regard. I never went to Hebrew school, I wasn't bar mitzvahed, my father wasn't bar mitzvahed. Jerry, of course, his first language was Yiddish.

When you looked at the lives of the young black performers in groups like the Drifters, did you see their lives as similar to the life that you had when you were a kid? How close or distant did you feel from their experience?

With the Coasters, and the Drifters to a great extent, yeah, they all came from families that were, we would say, deprived. Because they were black. And living under different conditions—conditions that affected white people too, certainly. Billy Guy became a junkie. Rudy Louis died of an overdose. It happened to a lot of white kids too from different neighborhoods. But you know we shared a lot of things. And you know I was very close to Carl Gardner. We were in touch for a long time, you know, and with Carl's wife, who became his widow. And I was very close to Ben. We'd see each other, and we'd call each other a lot.

I saw Jimmy Page last week eating breakfast in L.A. I sat 8 feet away from him for an hour, which is probably as close as I will ever get. What did you think of those British guys who became gods by playing blues riffs on their electric guitars?

It was never my cup of tea. I guess I'm not really a rock fan. I loved the Beatles, though.

Did you ever spend time with Paul McCartney?

Yeah.

Because I would imagine the two of you—

We were friendly and when [Jerry and I] had a lawyer here in New York, it was Eastman. And when we were given the Ivor Novello Award in London, it was presented to us by Paul and George Martin. We were friendly. I wouldn't say we were intimate pals, but we were friendly.

It's easy for me to imagine you hearing and appreciating what he did, and Paul listening very closely to your work with Jerry and modeling a lot of what he wrote on that approach, both musically and lyrically.

Yeah, I think their demo for whatever their record company was, has like four of our songs on it.

There's a great version of the Dion hit that you had—

"Ruby Baby."

Yeah, "Ruby Baby." Donald Fagen did that cover.

I loved it.

You loved it?

Yeah, I loved it. I thought that was an incredible version of that song.

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David Samuels, Tablet Magazine's literary editor, is a contributing editor at Harper's Magazine *and a longtime contributor to* The Atlantic *and* The New Yorker.

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