

# “Stand by Me”—Ben E. King (1961)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Amanda Rodgers (guest post)\*



*Ben E. King*



*Original 45rpm*



*Leiber and Stoller*

It started with a simple chord progression, one that had appeared in hundreds of soul and doo-wop songs already but that was used here with such effective grace that it came to be known as the “‘Stand By Me’ changes.” That chord progression inspired the iconic bass line that begins the song, accompanied only by a triangle and a brush scraped lightly across the base of a snare drum. And when Ben E. King’s passionate, gospel-flavored tenor joined that simple introduction, the world sat up and took notice.

Of course, this is none other than the timeless “Stand By Me,” a song that has touched millions of people’s hearts since it was recorded and released in 1961. A seamless combination of gospel and doo-wop, a love song, a protest anthem, a declaration of enduring friendship, a worship song --this incredible composition is all of these and more.

In 1960, King was already a star. His band, the Drifters, had recently scored their first number-one hit with “Save the Last Dance for Me,” thanks in part to King’s heavenly tenor voice. However, due to a contract dispute, King left the Drifters just as they were picking up momentum. After he convinced Jerry Wexler at Atlantic Records to let him have a shot at a solo career, Wexler put King in touch with none other than Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller. This would prove to be a decision that would change music history.

After meeting in Los Angeles in 1950, when they were still teenagers, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller had teamed up to become one of the most successful and renowned duos in musical history. They scored their first hit in 1952 with “Hard Times,” but their big breakthrough was “Hound Dog.” First recorded by Big Mama Thornton and made famous by Elvis Presley, the smash hit cemented the names of Leiber and Stoller in pop music history. By the time they teamed up with Ben E. King, the pair had scored several more hits, including classics such as “Yakkety Yak” by the Coasters, “Jailhouse Rock” by Elvis Presley, and “Love Potion No. 9” by the Clovers. Enormously successful and in high demand, Leiber and Stoller found steady employment with Atlantic Records, where they wrote and produced many more classic songs for the industry’s top recording artists.

King's very first recording session with Atlantic, produced by Leiber and Stoller, turned out "Spanish Harlem," a song that Leiber had written with producer Phil Spector. King's recording would later be included in "Rolling Stone's" list of the "500 Greatest Songs of All Time" and would be covered by dozens of other artists in the years to come.

Unaware that they had already struck gold, the trio used their remaining time in the studio to work on a song that King had composed during his tenure with the Drifters, who foolishly turned it down. He was inspired by Rev. Charles Albert Tindley's gospel hymn "Stand By Me Father," which in turn had drawn inspiration from the Bible, specifically Psalm 46:

*Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;*

*Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*

King had a strong background in church music and was sure he could adapt this gospel classic to a secular context to express his love for his then-partner, Betty Nelson. With the help of Leiber and Stoller, who came up with an instrumental arrangement to complement King's lyrics, he ended up with one of the most enduring pop songs of all time.

Despite Jerry Wexler's misgivings, largely due to the expensive studio overtime, not to mention the orchestra he hadn't budgeted for, the song was an instant hit. Its deeply emotional lyrics, expressing enduring and timeless love and devotion, combined with a simple but powerful arrangement, resonated with listeners worldwide and ensured that the song would not be quickly forgotten. In fact, those strings that had upset Wexler due to the expense were the icing on the cake, the final ingredient the song needed to take it from good to great.

Listeners immediately connected with the heartfelt love in the lyrics, a beautifully universal message that could be applied to romantic love, deep friendship, the bonds of humanity, or even to God. Besides having been played at countless weddings, "Stand By Me" was also used as a protest song, sung by Civil Rights activists in the 1960s. It's also been included in worship services as a song of praise and thanksgiving to the Christian God and His enduring love.

Ben E. King's beautiful composition, inspired by a gospel tune that was inspired by the Bible, in turn inspired literally hundreds of other artists. "Stand By Me" has been covered by over 400 other musicians, including John Lennon, Maurice White, and Florence + the Machine, who each rearranged the classic song into something new while retaining its powerful message. And when Rob Reiner adapted Stephen King's short story "The Body" into a feature film, he chose to use "Stand By Me" as a representation of the powerful friendships depicted in his movie--sending the song back into the top ten in the process, over 20 years after it was first released.

It isn't just music fans who recognize the greatness of this song. In fact, when BMI announced its list of the top 100 songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ranked by television and radio play, "Stand By Me" made it to fourth place. It was also given the Towering Song Award by the Songwriters'

Hall of Fame. And, of course, it was chosen by the Library of Congress for its National Recording Registry in 2014, shortly before King's death.

“Stand By Me” is the rare pop song that almost immediately becomes a timeless classic. The instantly recognizable introduction, sweet and gentle string accompaniment, and passionate delivery of a powerful expression of love all contribute to the magnificent whole. King, Leiber, and Stoller created magic that day in the Atlantic Records studio and made a song that can never be forgotten.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.