

New York, 1960: Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller and Morton Feldman dismantle a pop song

by Simon Obert

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In his book, *The Grammar of Fantasy*, the Italian children's book author, journalist and educator Gianni Rodari outlines a whole range of techniques, strategies and measures for inventing stories or even just sparking the imagination in the first place. One of these tools, which he calls the “fantastic binomial,” is to allow two things that normally have nothing to do with each other to coincide.¹ If the two things mutually impact one another, then an improbable constellation of this kind can result in a tension that, in a way, forms the fantastical nucleus of a story.

The fact that constellations such as these can have an effect in fictional stories is undeniable – literature is full of them, just a few striking examples being, the man who wakes up as a beetle, the knight who battles windmills, and the donkey who spits pieces of gold. Yet they are just as capable of casting their spell when things do not even have to be brought together, but are drawn from history. Precisely because the improbability of such a constellation carries within itself its own historically documented confirmation – it has already taken place! – a situation of this kind brings with it a “nevertheless it did happen” that challenges common patterns of perception and categories of order by running counter to them.

One such constellation came about in New York at the end of 1960 and the beginning of 1961 when three musicians – whom one would hardly think of bringing together in one context because they belonged to such different musical worlds – were involved in a joint project: Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller and Morton Feldman! These three coming together seems so bizarre at first glance that one instinctively asks oneself: What on earth brought Leiber and Stoller together with Feldman?

Jerry Leiber (1933–2011) and Mike Stoller (b. 1933) are one of the most successful songwriter/producer duos in popular music.² In the 1950s and early 60s, they wrote one hit after another, including songs that have now become classics, such as *Kansas City* (1952),

¹ Gianni Rodari, *Grammatica della fantasia: Introduzione dell'arte di inventare storie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), Chapter 4, “Il binomia fantastico,” 17–21.

² On Leiber and Stoller, see their joint autobiography, co-authored with David Ritz, *Hound Dog: The Leiber and Stoller Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); see also Robert Palmer, *Baby, That Was Rock & Roll: The Legendary Leiber & Stoller* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

Hound Dog (1953), *Riot in Cell Block #9* (1954), *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *King Creole* (1958), *There Goes My Baby* (1959), *Stand by Me* (1961), and *On Broadway* (1963).³ The list of names of the artists they wrote for, or who recorded their songs, reads like a who's who of rhythm 'n' blues, rock 'n' roll and pop: Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, the Coasters, the Drifters, Elvis Presley, and Ben E. King, to name just a few. And when the Beatles and the Rolling Stones started their careers in the early 1960s, it was only natural that they would also record Leiber/Stoller songs. However, just naming the songs and the performers does not do justice to Leiber and Stoller's importance. This is just as much due to their productions. For one thing, in the mid-1950s, due to their reputation, they were among the first, being "independent producers," who were not employed by a record label, but rather worked on its behalf, which gave them more freedom. Secondly, their productions contributed to crossover, the blurring of boundaries between genres, which in 1950s and 60s America also affected racial segregation in that the records they produced reached via retail and radio a mixed audience that was not separated by skin colour.⁴ For example, *There Goes My Baby* recorded by the vocal group of colour the Drifters – written and produced in 1959 for Atlantic Records – is one of the first R&B songs with a string arrangement, a sound that back then was only associated with classical music or (white) pop music. Consequently, the executives at Atlantic were sceptical about the production and initially did not want to release the recording. Its success was to prove them wrong: the song reached number 2 in the pop charts and number 1 in the R&B charts, and is now considered one of the trailblazers of soul music.

There is nothing that seems to connect this world to Feldman. He had made a name for himself in avant-garde artistic circles as a member of the so-called New York School of Composers (alongside Earle Brown, John Cage and Christian Wolff) with his quiet, sometimes almost static and generally restrained music. In his scores from the 1950s, and with the help of graphical forms of notation especially, he explored specific aspects of indetermination: initially, until around 1954, the indeterminacy of pitches, which, to a certain extent, he left to the players to fix, for example in his series of *Projections*, and from 1957 onwards, in works with fixed pitches but whose durations were only given as an approximation, for example, as in *Ixion* (1958) or *Atlantis* (1959) for chamber ensemble.

What brought these three musicians together? It was a film. In the summer of 1960, Feldman was commissioned to write the music for *Something Wild*.⁵ The film, in which Carroll Baker plays the lead role and which was directed by her then-husband Jack Garfein, is about Mary Ann Robinson, a young woman in New York who is raped at the start and is left reeling by this event. She moves from her home to a small apartment and accepts a job, but cannot make friends in her new environment and tries to commit suicide. When she tries to throw

³ About some of these songs, see John Covach, "Leiber and Stoller, the Coasters, and the 'Dramatic AABA' Form," in: *Sounding out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, ed. Mark Spicer and John Covach (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010) 1–17.

⁴ See, David Fricke, "Leiber & Stoller," *Rolling Stone*, No. 576, 19 April 1990: 97–100.

⁵ The earliest tangible evidence of this is a note in the American music industry's trade magazine, *Billboard*, which says: "Morton Feldman will pen the score for the picture 'Something Wild.'" Bob Rolonz, "Music as Written," *Billboard*, 25 July 1960: 29; as well as a letter from John Cage to David Tudor from 27 July 1960, in which he reports: "Morty is doing a Hollywood film." *The Selected Letters of John Cage*, ed. Laura Kuhn (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2016) 232.

herself off the Manhattan Bridge, she is saved by a man who takes her home with him. Although he, too, harasses her, she stays with him. The film is shaped by the existential disorientation of the main character, hence the chaotic depiction of New York with its overcrowded subways and densely populated streets. Neon advertising signs and skyscrapers provide the perfect scenery. In fact, the film looks more like a neo-realist European production than an American Hollywood film.⁶

Feldman has on several occasions talked about what happened while working on the music; for example, in 1984 in Frankfurt he said: “I once did a Hollywood movie, but I was fired. And I’ll tell you why I was fired. The director’s wife was the star and the story opens up. She’s coming from choral practice [...] and then she walks through Central Park in the *finster*. [...] So, and then she is raped. [...] So I wrote the rape music. And the rape music was a string quartet playing just an E-major. Just a celesta with one finger playing against a chord *sehr schön* in the orchestration, beautiful and she is being raped. And it’s his wife [...]. ‘My wife is being raped and you write celesta music?’ he said. ‘I want something like papa papa papa.’ Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony, that’s what he wanted. And I was fired.”⁷ When it comes to the music described, Feldman’s memory is accurate: his estate contains sketches and a fair copy of the score of *Mary Ann’s Theme*, which is in E major and arranged for celeste and string quartet (as well as horn). Feldman’s casual characterisation as “very beautiful” likely refers to the calm air of the music, which is due to the static harmony and the swaying rhythm in crotchets, and which, overall, is reminiscent of some of Erik Satie’s pieces.⁸ Yet, as is so often the case with anecdotes – which is the form in which Feldman recounts the tale – they are reduced to what the person telling the story takes to be the characteristic feature. Another story may supplement (though by no means complete) the picture of what happened in relation to this project in 1960/61 in New York.

Garfein and the film’s producer, George Justin, had not only commissioned Feldman for the film music, but also Leiber and Stoller for the title music. At the time, the two were likely to have been considered guarantees of a hit, as, in previous years, they had very successfully contributed title music and songs to two films with Elvis Presley: *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958).⁹ Since Feldman and Stoller were friends, they joined forces and worked

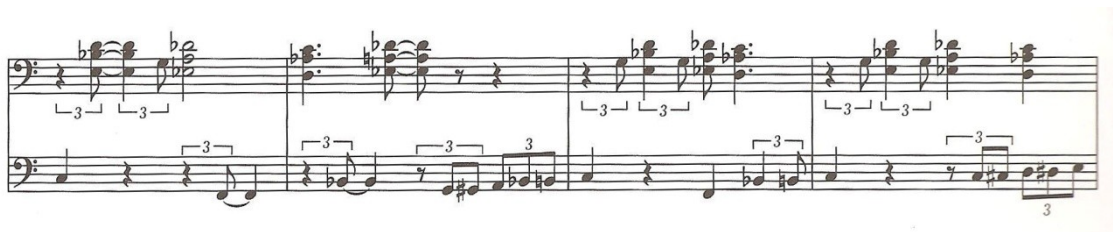
⁶ It is often said that *Something Wild* is a Hollywood production. However, the film was produced in New York by the independent company Prometheus Enterprises Inc. (owned by Garfein and Baker), though the pre-financing came from United Artists, who also distributed the film. The predicate “Hollywood” may also derive from the fact that the lead roles were played by two Hollywood stars of the time: Baker and Ralph Meeker.

⁷ Morton Feldman, “The Future of Local Music,” in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000) 157–95, at 187–88.

⁸ The music has been recorded on the CD: Morton Feldman, *Something Wild. Music for Film*, Ensemble Recherche (Vienna: Kairos, 2002) (0012292KAI); see there also the booklet notes by Peter Niklas Wilson, “Canvasses and time canvasses: Comments on Morton Feldman’s film music,” 12–14.

⁹ Possibly the commission came about because Leiber and Stoller had been producing records for the United Artists’ subsidiary, United Artists Records, since 1959.

as a pair and as a trio on the title music, which resulted in three “Montages.”¹⁰ In his combined autobiography with Leiber, Stoller reports that he had arranged a jazz theme for big band, and that Leiber wrote lyrics to go with it. Before recording it in the studio, they met with Feldman, who had an idea: “ ‘Let me take your arrangement and redistribute it into various small groups. Then you, Jerry and I will each conduct the ensembles at different tempos, all at the same time and in the same studio. What do you say, Mike?’ ‘Why not?’ Jerry was game and we were off and running. The result was annoying, frightening, and wonderfully nauseating. It would have worked phenomenally well in the film. Then came the poisonous phone call from George Justin. Jack Garfein decided that his film was a masterpiece. He threw out the Morton Feldman score and the Leiber and Stoller theme.”¹¹



Example 1. Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, title music for *Something Wild*, bars 1–4.

The title music consists of a twelve-bar theme [Example 1], which in its basic harmonic structure follows the classic blues progression (bars 1–4: I, bars 5–6: IV, bars 7–8: I, bar 9: V, bar 10: IV, bars 11–12: I), but is harmonically completely differentiated and enriched with seventh and ninth chords (bars 1–2: C⁹ F⁺⁷ | B^{b9} F⁺⁷). Even in its microstructure, it strides through harmonic steps that are common to pop music (I, IV, ^bVII, IV), but the seventh and ninth chords are formed in the three upper parts through chromatic shifts.

¹⁰ The collaboration appears to have materialised in autumn/winter 1960/61. The copyright entries for the three montages (as well as for a ‘prelude to montage 3’ by Feldman, about which nothing is known), are dated November 21, and that for the title music November 14, 1960. See, *Catalog of Copyright Entries*, Third Series 14, Part 5, No. 2: Music: July-December 1960 (Washington: Copyright Office, The Library of Congress, 1961) 1413. Feldman may have envisaged a more extensive cooperation. At one point in his sketchbook for the film music is a note (apparently referring to Mary Ann’s attempted suicide): “Suicide with Stoller.” Morton Feldman, sketchbook for *Something Wild*, p. [12] (Morton Feldman Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation).

¹¹ Leiber, Stoller, Ritz, *Hound Dog* (see note 2), 166–67. – As far as is known, Feldman himself never commented on the collaboration, though he mentioned his friendship with Leiber and Stoller at least twice: once in 1980 in an interview with Austin Clarkson (Austin Clarkson, “Conversation about Stefan Wolpe, 13 November 1980,” in: *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–1987*, ed. Chris Villars [London: Hyphen, 2006] 97–113, at 109); and again in May 1987 in one of his Middelburg lectures (Morton Feldman, *Words on Music: Lectures and Conversations / Worte über Musik: Vorträge und Gespräche*, ed. Raoul Mörchen [Cologne: MusikTexte, 2008], Vol. 2, 520).

MONTAGE #2 MIKE STOLLER + MORTON FELDMAN
 ON THE THEME FROM "SOMETHING WILD" JERRY LEIBER + MIKE STOLLER

The musical score is written on aged, yellowed paper. It features several staves for different instruments. The top section includes Flutes (I, II, III), Tenor Sax, and Baritone Sax. Below these are the Jazz Solo, Trumpets (I, II, III, IV), Trombones (I, II, III, IV), and a Bass line labeled 'BASS - Jazz-pian.'. At the bottom is a Drums line labeled 'DRUMS - Jazz'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'mf' and 'p'. There are also some handwritten annotations and a copyright notice at the bottom: '© COPYRIGHT 1960 ... TRIO MUSIC CO., INC. ... 40 WEST 57TH STREET ... NEW YORK 19, N.Y.'

Figure 1. Mike Stoller, Morton Feldman, *Montage #2* on the theme music for *Something Wild* by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, full score fair copy (Morton Feldman Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation).

In *Montage #2*, the three chords of the first two bars are projected into a circulating soundscape [Figure 1]. The flutes play the three upper notes of the B^b9 chord, the saxophones are assigned the small alternating e–g figure of the C^9 chord, which also includes the d and b^b of the trumpets as well as the e of the bass trombone, and the three upper trombones (and the second trumpet) play the notes of the F^{+7} chord. Due to the different starting times and durations, with which the dynamics are also correlated, and due to the latent polymetrics (4/4

MONTAGE #3 — JERRY LEIBER + MIKE STOLLER + MORTON FELDMAN
ON THE **THEME FROM "SOMETHING WILD"** BY — JERRY LEIBER + MIKE STOLLER

I CELESTE $\text{♩} = 11$

3 TROMBONES $\text{♩} = 103$

ALTO + TENOR SAXES $\text{♩} = 66$

DRUMS $\text{♩} = 107$

VIBES $\text{♩} = 112$

BASS $\text{♩} = 161$

VII $\text{♩} = 222$

VI $\text{♩} = 100$

TENOR SAX $\text{♩} = 100$

TPT $\text{♩} = 100$

BASS BONE $\text{♩} = 100$

Tempo

TEMPI INDICATIONS ARE APPROXIMATE. IDEALLY, WITH THE EXTENSION OF MATERIAL, TEMPI SHOULD BE FAIRLY CLOSE

— BASS pizz — andante fast libre

DURATION OF REPETITIONS ARE SUGGESTED BY MEANS OF BUT ARE FREE AT DISCRETION OF CONDUCTOR.

— TIME AREA

VII DETAIL

VIII

FIN

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At first glance, *Montage #3* looks like a parody of a graphic avant-garde score [Figure 2]. However, all eight motifs (numbered with Roman numerals) can be traced back to the first two bars of the title music: the celeste (I) plays the chromatic shifts of the upper parts of the chord pattern. The solo of the three trombones (II), offset by half a bar (so, beginning with F⁺⁷), can be easily incorporated into the harmonic progression; the same applies to the melody of the two saxophones (III). The vibraphone and the bass (IV) play a variant of the chromatic shifts.¹² V–VII is not specified any further, but the “bass pizz” probably refers to the freely executable chord pattern. The tenor saxophone, trumpet and bass trombone (VI) only have to play the pitches of the first chord (bb¹–e¹–D). The trumpet, alto and baritone saxophone (VII), in turn, play the chromatic shifts. To a certain extent, VIII heralds the ending: a pedal point across four octaves on C. The structure of the sequence seems to be based on a time grid of eight sections, which results from the “time area” given for each motif (with the symbol of a filled in “X” together with the timeframe –e.g. for IV, “3–6”); however, as stated in the score, the specific implementation is left to the “discretion of the conductor.” This distribution of the individual passages, which is ordered in the macrostructure but free in the microstructure, is reminiscent of the open forms of Earle Brown or of the “controlled aleatoricism” of Witold Lutosławski (who only developed this at that time). Of course, one should not overlook the fact that the indefinite duration of the *Montages* is an essential feature of film music compositions, which, as sonic material to be used in a modular manner, often only find their tailored form in the final cut of the film.

Montage #1 has not been preserved in Feldman’s estate, but it is likely to be the page of a score that was reproduced in 1960 in the magazine *The Hasty Papers*, published by the painter and filmmaker Alfred Leslie.¹³ The instruments are grouped there in (almost) the same groups as in *Montage #3*. All have to play the two-bar chord pattern of the title music continuously, but at different tempos (♩ = 54, 81, 108 and 162, respectively, which corresponds to a ratio of 1:1.5:2:3), and they start at different times. The times at which they start are deduced from the repeated chromatic bass line g–g♯–a–a♯–b–c (see bar 2 of the title music), which is rhythmically sped up (crotchets, crotchet triplets, quavers, quaver triplets), with each newly reached c marking the point at which the next group of instruments starts.¹⁴

¹² In the stave with eleven lines, the pitches can be read this way, that the lower five lines are in the bass clef, the upper five lines in the treble clef; they are linked by a center line on which the middle C would stand (as on the upper or lower auxiliary line). So the first sound is e–a–d¹.

¹³ Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller, Morton Feldman, “Theme and Montage from Something Wild,” *The Hasty Papers: A One-Shot Review*, ed. Alfred Leslie (New York: Alfred Leslie, 1960): 54; reprint (Austin: Host Publications, 1999) 121.

¹⁴ With this staggered entry structure, this *Montage* resembles a score page by Feldman inserted in his sketchbook for *Something Wild* (see note 10). Here, too, the entries take place one after the other, though they are heterogeneous materials which are also metrically synchronized; among other things, Feldman there layers his own theme for Mary Ann, a chord ribbon that matches that of the trombones in *Montage #2*, the title music by Leiber and Stoller, and a four-part setting (designated “Chorus”) of William Byrd’s motet *Ave Verum Corpus*. This confirms Feldman’s statement in Johannesburg in 1983 that he used a piece by Byrd in the film music, which has previously been questioned. See the transcription of Feldman’s remarks, including the comments by Chris Villars, at <https://www.cnvill.net/mfsomethingwild.pdf> (accessed 28 December 2017).

The publication of the *Montage* in Leslie's magazine could also provide an indication of how Leiber/Stoller and Feldman knew each other. Leslie must have asked Feldman in the autumn of 1960 if he could contribute a score for his magazine. Feldman declined in reply,¹⁵ and in the end it was Stoller who sent Leslie both the framework for the title music and the *Montage*. Stoller's handwritten note can be read on the page Leslie published: "This is the basic idea of the words + music for the Theme from Something Wild that Jerry and I are doing for the film. I'm also sending you a score that Morty Feldman and I made of a Montage based on the Theme. –Mike."¹⁶ As the tone of the note suggests, Leslie and Stoller knew each other. It was probably not a short-term chance acquaintance, because four years later Leslie used the Leiber/Stoller song *Brother Bill (The Last Clean Shirt)*, recorded by Charlie "Honeyman" Otis, for his film *The Last Clean Shirt*, which was a collaboration with the Beat poet Frank O'Hara. The boundaries between the cultural spheres in New York in the early 1960s were evidently by no means as sharply drawn as one tends to assume from today's perspective. Painters, composers and writers obviously had no reservations about coming into contact with rock 'n' rollers, just as the latter, by the same token, moved in their environment – and also in that of new music. Stoller took lessons from Stefan Wolpe in the early 1960s and, among other things, wrote a quartet for flute, bass clarinet, harp and cello that was performed on 11 April 1962 in the New York concert series Music in Our Time, created by violinist Max Pollikoff.¹⁷

Leiber, Stoller and Feldman must have been released from the contract in the spring of 1961.¹⁸ They were replaced by Aaron Copland, who wrote the music over the course of the year and three years later turned it into his orchestral suite *Music for a Great City*. *Something Wild* was released in cinemas in December 1961 and received mixed reviews. Financially, the film was a flop and fell largely into obscurity; only in recent years did it gain the reputation of a secret classic. However, the fact that the production of a film gave rise to an artistic collaboration between two pop composers and an avant-garde one shows the open potential of this medium. And one can only speculate about what the later reception would have been of Feldman, on the one hand, and Leiber and Stoller, on the other, if they had been able to complete the commission and the opening credits of the film had read: "Music by Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller and Morton Feldman."

¹⁵ "Dear Al, Unless a score looks beautiful like John Cage[s], I can't see the point for a 'lay' public." Morton Feldman, letter to Alfred Leslie, 6 October 1960, reproduced in the reprint of *The Hasty Papers* (see note 13), 51.

¹⁶ Leiber, Stoller, Feldman, "Theme and Montage from Something Wild" (see note 13), 121. The transcription in Example 1 is based on the theme shown there.

¹⁷ See Leiber, Stoller, Ritz, *Hound Dog* (see note 2), 152; and Ken Emerson, *Always Magic in the Air: The Bomp and Brilliance of the Brill Building Era* (London: Penguin, 2006) 59.

¹⁸ Yet as late as January 1961, *Billboard* was saying that Leiber and Stoller had written the title music for the film *Something Wild*, which was about to be released (Unknown author, "Leiber, Stoller Form Own Production Co.; Serving All," *Billboard*, 30 January 1961: 2 and 66, at 2). Only two months later the *New York Times* reported that Copland had accepted the commission for the film music (Howard Thompson, "Copland Accepts Film Assignment," *The New York Times*, 15 March 1961, C-II: 44). See also Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York: Holt, 1999) 482–97 and 652.