

**CALIFORNIA JAZZ FOUNDATION  
Honors Corky Hale and Mike Stoller  
“A Marriage Made in Heaven”**

by T.C. Coffey



**Mike Stoller and Corky Hale**

Popescu, Ruth Price and Arturo Sandoval. It's a first-cabin night of music, tributes, celebrities, a three-course dinner and an auction.

In the space of three short years, the California Jazz Foundation's annual "Give the Band a Hand" gala celebration has become one of the most anticipated jazz events in Southern California. This year's gala is Saturday, April 25, at the L.A. Hotel Downtown. Corky Hale and Mike Stoller are the guests of honor for the program, appropriately titled "A Marriage Made in Heaven." Singer Steve Tyrell headlines the evening, with an appearance by actress/singer Sally Kellerman. The event is chaired by Artie Butler, Lainie Kazan, Marcus Miller, Catalina

Though it's an evening of music, food and fun, "Give the Band a Hand" is an evening that helps struggling musicians get their lives back on track. The organization is a tax-exempt, non-profit 501( C ) ( 3 ) group that provides monetary and material support to California jazz musicians in need. To date, the CJF has helped 175 instrumentalists and singers with everything from rent, car payments and medical bills to financial counseling. It's no exaggeration to say that in some instances, the CJF has saved lives.

Aside from yearly memberships and donations, the CJF Gala fundraiser is its main source of revenue. Each year, the evening acknowledges deserving figures in and around the music—such as Catalina Popescu, proprietor of Catalina's, and the Jazz Bakery's Ruth Price—with a one-of-a-kind award. The Nica—named for the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, the famed New York City jazz patron of an untold number of jazz musicians—is the CJF's yearly award.

Nica awardees Hale and Stoller have had fabulous musical careers, largely independent of each other. But as grand as their career achievements have been, they're matched only by their spirit of generosity.

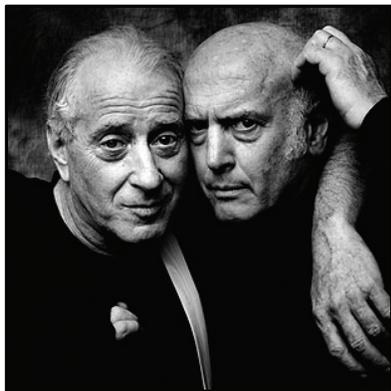
As a boy in New York, Mike Stoller had standard piano lessons but was on fire with a passion for boogie-woogie. Lessons with stride piano master James P. Johnson gave him valuable hands-on training. His family moved to Los Angeles and before he was out of Roosevelt High, Stoller was playing with Chet Baker in the Blas Vasquez Band.

Lester Sill, record promo man and all-around music facilitator, directed fledgling lyricist Jerry Leiber to Stoller. They quickly meshed because each was in love with black music. Leiber had the ability to write clever words that told stories in the black vernacular; Stoller's fidelity to rhythm and blues gave their songs authentic structure. Their "Hound Dog," "Riot in Cell Block #9," "Ruby Baby," "Love Potion

Number Nine,” and “Kansas City” were so firmly-rooted in the black experience that they sounded like the work of veteran black songwriters.

When they wrote for the Coasters, Leiber & Stoller had a vocal group with versatile dramatic abilities. Leiber wrote musical playlets, casting the singers as characters. Jerry & Mike shared the experience of listening to radio mysteries as boys, and they had a rich vein of material to mine. From the beginning, they produced their own sessions, and Stoller’s arrangements made resourceful use of local jazzmen like guitarist Barney Kessel and tenor saxophonist Gil Bernal.

“Smokey Joe’s Café,” “Searchin’,” “Down in Mexico,” “Yakety-Yak,” “Charlie Brown,” “Young Blood,” “Girls, Girls, Girls,” “Three Cool Cats,” “Poison Ivy,” and “Little Egypt”—all by the Coasters--gave a voice to the often illicit interior world of the American teenager in song form. They wrote the lives of a generation.



**Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber**

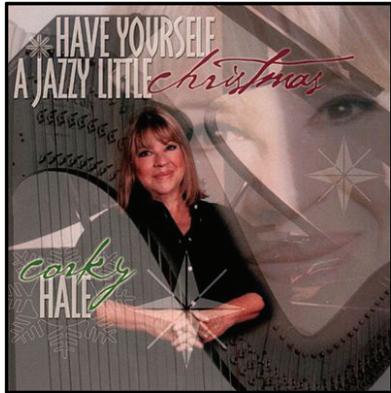
They moved to New York and entered into a production deal with Atlantic Records. The Coasters were still their account but Leiber & Stoller also wrote and produced for the LaVern Baker, Big Joe Turner, and Ruth Brown. Their production on “This Magic Moment” by the Drifters was the first use of strings for a rhythm and blues record. Their formidable track record for hits and innovative production made them a template for developing writing teams of Gerry Goffin & Carol King, Barry Mann & Cynthia Weil, and Jeff Barry & Ellie Greenwich.

The British rock bands of the mid ‘60s liberally interpreted the Leiber & Stoller songs, selling them to a new generation of American listeners. But songs for teenagers no longer held a great deal of interest for Jerry and Mike. They turned their hands to writing adult songs, most notably for Peggy Lee. Her *Mirrors* album (’66) contained the Kurt Weill-influenced “Is That All There Is?” Ruth Price, for one, holds it as her favorite album of all time. The great lyricist Johnny Mercer congratulated Leiber & Stoller that they had finally written a good song!

Hale was a child piano prodigy in her native Illinois. She added flute and cello by the time she was twelve. Two years at the Chicago Music Conservatory preceded her move to study at U.C.L.A. The 17-year old never set foot in a classroom; after a week in town she was playing in Freddy Martin’s Orchestra at the Coconut Grove. She made her television bow at age 19 and spent the next three years playing on Liberace’s TV show and tours.

In 1955, Corky was in Las Vegas with the Jerry Gray Orchestra. At the first rehearsal, Billie Holiday walked in, agitated that her accompanist was nowhere in sight. Gray offered Hale’s services to run over Billie’s charts. Though greeted with a cold stare, Corky’s playing won Holiday over instantly. At the conclusion, she threw her arms around Corky’s neck and proclaimed: “You’re my little girl!” Not only did Hale

play for Billie onstage, she followed her to L.A.'s Jazz City for a week-long stand. An appearance on Channel 7's "Stars of Jazz" TV show immortalized that brief musical interlude.



As a session player, Corky is one of the few musicians to enjoy a prolific career on both coasts. Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Nat 'King' Cole, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Torme and Judy Collins are just a few of the singers she's recorded with.

It wasn't all hard work. In the recent documentary *This is Gary McFarland*, Corky can be glimpsed in a staged recording session playing the Fresca jingle in 1966. By the end of the TV commercial the whole orchestra is covered in faux snow!

As a singer Hale was heard with the orchestras of Gray, Ray Anthony and Harry James.

While Mike's writing career was in repose, Corky retained her performing profile. She soloed with Barbra Streisand at Central Park and the Hollywood Bowl, was seen on Bjork's MTV special, and played with George Michael at the Royal Albert Hall in London and RFK Stadium in Washington D.C. She was heard around town in well-considered shows at the Westwood Marquis, Catalina's, The Gardenia, Lunaria, the Moonlight Tango Café, and Hale also served as musical director for lyricist Hal David. When Leiber & Stoller had a private audience with President Bill Clinton in 1993, it was by no means her first time at the Oval Office; Corky had played the White House 25 years earlier with Tony Bennett. She made her Carnegie Hall debut in 2007 as a soloist with the New York Pops Orchestra.

Though her first appearance on film was in Liberace's *Sincerely Yours* ('55), Corky's soundtrack work includes *Godspell* ('73). In addition to the Liberace show, she appeared on the little screen many times: with Bennett on *The Tonight Show*, in Peter Allen and Craig Zadan's *Friday Night and Saturday Morning* revue show ('79-'82), and Lena Zavaroni's *Lena* variety program ('80-'82). She will be seen in *Hired Guns*, this year's forthcoming film documentary on studio musicians.

*Smokey Joe's Café*, the longest-running musical revue in Broadway history, has committed the Leiber & Stoller canon to the stage.

Corky and Mike have used their capital to fund numerous civil rights concerns. The Dorothy Hecht Health Center (named for Corky's mother) in L.A., the Stoller-Filer Health Center in Compton and several Planned Parenthood centers are just a few of the entities they've funded. Their donations to the Southern Poverty Law Center were rewarded with the dedication of the Mike Stoller and Corky Hale-Stoller Civil Rights Memorial Theatre in Montgomery, Alabama.

For the gala, CJF board member, musical director and guitarist Greg Porée coordinates the evening's musicians and music. Past galas have featured spectacular musical sets by the Arturo Sandoval Big Band, among other groups. Last year's CJF gala inaugurated an annual feature: a short tribute video to the lives and careers of the Nica recipients, produced by the ubiquitous SoCal jazz impresario Merle Kriebich. Broadcaster LeRoy Downs returns as master of ceremonies and basketball icon Elgin Baylor will introduce his dear friends Corky and Mike.

The L.A. Hotel Downtown will be the place to be on April 25<sup>th</sup>.

*The California Jazz Foundation's "Give the Band a Hand" Gala, April 25, at the L.A. Hotel Downtown, 333 S. Figueroa St., L.A., information:*  
[www.californiajazzfoundation.org](http://www.californiajazzfoundation.org)

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