

Jackson film festival uses cinema to promote, preserve Jewish culture

By Cori Bolger
cbolger@clarionledger.com

Special to The Clarion-Ledger - October 29, 2005

In 1956, songwriter Mike Stoller exchanged his first sizable royalty check for a three-month European vacation.

One year earlier, African-American singer Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton recorded Hound Dog, a song Stoller co-wrote with a friend, Jerry Leiber.

Life was good for the Jewish kid from Long Island, N.Y., despite a scary diversion on the way home. Stoller's ship collided with the S.S. Stockholm and sank into the Atlantic Ocean. But, when he arrived at the dock on a freighter, he found Leiber waiting with welcome news.

"He said, 'We've got a smash hit.' I said, 'You're kidding. Hound Dog? Big Mama Thornton?'" Stoller, 72, recalled during a phone conversation from Los Angeles.

"He said, 'No, some white kid named Elvis Presley.'"

Presley's version of Hound Dog, with its snarling vocals and rockabilly jive, officially established rock 'n' roll as a formidable force and made music history.

With its success, the writing careers of Leiber and Stoller took off. The pair today are considered the defining song creators in pop music culture, along with other Jewish songwriters, including Carole King, Neil Sedaka and Burt Bacharach.

They all got their start — or reached their career peak — at the Brill Building, located at the hub of Tin Pan Alley on Broadway in Manhattan.



Filmmakers Peter Jones and Morgan Neville captured the magic of the people and place that dominated mid-century American music — including Leiber and Stoller — in the 2001 film, *Hitmakers: The Teens Who Stole Pop Music*.

The A&E channel documentary is one of five films to be screened during the fifth annual Jackson Jewish Film Festival to be held Friday through Nov. 8.

"(The film) was meant to draw attention to the Jewish songwriters who wrote and performed that music," Jones said. "They were the ones who had been listening to the records, usually of black musicians, and started writing songs inspired by that. They had a hold on the black experience and gospel.

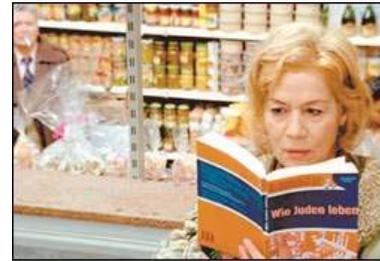
"The crazy irony is that you had Jews reaching out to middle America with songs inspired by African-American culture."

Along with Jones' documentary, this year's festival will showcase dramas and comedies that tackle a variety of subjects.

"We look for good stories that move us or stories that really paint a true story about how it is to be Jewish now, or then, and the advances that have happened socially," said Ellen Alexander, the festival's publicity chairwoman.

The films will be screened publicly at the Recital Hall at Millsaps College in Jackson and at a private student screening at St. Andrew's North Campus in Ridgeland.

They include: *Monsieur Batignole*, a light-hearted film set in Paris during the German occupation; *All I've Got*, a moving drama about the road not taken and what might have been; *Go For Zucker*, a feature film about family and tradition; and a private showing of *Marion's Triumph: Surviving History's Nightmare*.



The subject of the last film, Marion Blumenthal Lazan, will speak to students at St. Andrew's Episcopal School about her experiences.

The festival is part of Jewish Cinema South, a project of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life. Based in Jackson, the institute preserves and promotes Jewish culture throughout 12 Southern states.

Film festivals in the JCS series will be held in Mobile and Montgomery and Blacksburg, Va., at the same time. According to the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, there are more than 60 Jewish film festivals held annually throughout the country.

"We want to promote positive connections to Judaism," Alexander said. "The whole point is to educate and make it feel universal."

Jones, who lives in Los Angeles, considers *Hitmakers: The Teens Who Stole Pop Music* one of the more "upbeat" stories about the Jewish experience that exists today.

"When I've introduced the film, people say, 'Oh my God, we've been waiting for this for years because we knew about the Brill Building,'" Jones said. "But as far as the broader audience goes, (they're surprised). They say, 'You've got to be kidding me. This is a great story.'"

Audience members typically enjoy singing along with the movie's soundtrack, Jones said, which includes famous singles written by young Jewish songwriters, such as *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?*, *Teenager in Love*, *Save the Last Dance for Me*, *Walk on By*, *Splish Splash* and *Under the Boardwalk*.

Jackson jazz vocalist Lisa Palmer, her sister Nina Mabry and friend Josh Weiner plan to perform a medley of the hits following Tuesday's screening of the film.

Palmer, who attends Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, was amazed by her connection to the long list of pop hits and the Brill Building.

"Jews have always been very productive in the arts," she said. "It's sort of a pride that you don't really talk about, but know. You feel this connection to these people that you didn't know you had."