

Save the Last Dance for Me

Written by bluelover

Wednesday, 01 February 2017 22:24 -

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“Save the Last Dance for Me” by the Drifters was a joint enterprise by the two greatest songwriting teams of the early rock era: it was written by Pomus and Shuman, and produced by Lieber and Stoller. No wonder it was a massive hit in 1960 in the US and UK. And it certainly didn't hurt having Ben E King – later most famous for “Stand By Me” – singing lead. The Drifters had already used strings on their records, most famously on “There Goes My Baby,” the first fully-orchestrated rock hit, but not like this – the soaring, swirling violins underline the yearning in King's gravelly, sad, yet sweeping vocals.

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One night, Pomus found a wedding invitation in a hatbox, and back came his most vivid memory from his wedding: watching his brother Raoul dance with his new wife while Doc, who had polio, sat in his wheelchair. His wife, Willi Burke, however, was a Broadway actress and dancer. Inspired, he stayed up all night writing the words to this song on the back of the invitation. The song gives his perspective of telling his wife to have fun dancing, but reminds her who will be taking her home and *“in whose arms you're gonna be.”*



Willi Burke and Doc Pomus Wedding

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Mort Shuman had played him a soaring Latin melody that afternoon, and he wanted the words to sound like a poem translated into English - something along the lines of Pablo Neruda. By the second verse, a hint of jealousy and vulnerability creeps in with the lyrics, *"If he asks if you're all alone, can he take you home, you must tell him no."*

Pomus ended his night of songwriting by writing down the words that would become the title: **"Save The Last Dance For Me."**



Save The Last Dance For Me, single 1960

Together, Pomus and Shuman wrote the words and music to such hits as "Little Sister," "Suspicion," "Can't Get Used to Losing You," "Surrender," "Viva Las Vegas," and many more. After securing their own office in the Brill Building, the team continued to crank out hit after hit; Presley alone ended up recording more than 20 of their songs throughout his career, including items like "Mess of Blues." In addition, Pomus and Shuman also wrote songs for Fabian ("Turn Me Loose" and "I'm a Man"), Bobby Darin ("Plain Jane") and Dion, for whom they wrote "Teenager in Love."



Mort Shuman and Doc Pomus

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Perhaps no group in the history of Rock is more protean than The Drifters. Founded in 1953 by the late, great Clyde McPhatter as a Rhythm'n'Blues outfit, they quickly changed personnel and style to become a bunch of Doo-Woppers, before metamorphosing once again to appeal to the Rock'n'Roll market. A complicated set of circumstances put Benjamin Nelson, aka Ben E. King, in the lead spot of The Drifters, a group that started many years earlier. All the former personnel were fired and a new lineup emerged from the old Five Crowns with King as lead tenor. Leiber and Stoller produced the session that gave us this classic beauty - complete with a full-blown orchestra, previously unheard of in rock 'n' roll.



The Drifters, Ben E King left

But there is a melancholy undertone – the girl in the song is a flirt and the singer is begging her to be faithful to him at the last. But he doesn't sound too hopeful. The tune, the vocals, the narrative, the arrangement – all are perfect. It is the perfect pop song.



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Lieber and Stoller

When Rolling Stone compiled the votes of nearly 200 music-industry heavyweights to create its 2004 list of the “500 Greatest Songs Of All Time,” The Drifters’ 1960 R&B ballad “Save The Last Dance For Me” secured spot #182. In the accompanying commentary, the magazine asserted the song “*made the end of the party sound like the essence of true romance.*”



“Save The Last Dance For Me” was the only number-one hit for The Drifters—even “Under The Boardwalk” only reached number four—and to this day, it’s a mainstay on wedding playlists. But in the harsh reality of life off the dance floor, lyricist Pomus and his dancing bride Burke divorced about five years after “Save the Last Dance For Me” sashayed to the top of the charts. Perhaps they should have seen it coming.



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Save The Last Dance For Me, lyrics

*You can dance every dance with the guy who gives you the eye
Let him hold you tight
You can smile every smile for the man who held your hand
'Neath the pale moonlight
Chorus: But Don't forget who's taking you home
And in whose arms you're gonna be
So darling, save the last dance for me
Oh I know that the music is fine like sparkling wine
Go and have your fun
Laugh and sing but while we're apart
Don't give your heart to anyone
Chorus: But Don't forget who's taking you home
And in whose arms you're gonna be
So darling, save the last dance for me
Baby don't you know I love you so
Can't you feel it when we touch
I will never never let you go
I love you oh so much
You can dance, go and carry on
Till the night is gone
and it's time to go
If he asks if you're all alone
can he take you home
You must tell him no
Chorus: Cause Don't forget who's taking you home
And in whose arms you're gonna be
So darling, save the last dance for me*



Last Dance, Painted by Amanda Jackson