The role of soul: Stax Records and the civil rights movement in Memphis, Tennessee

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The role of soul: Stax Records and the civil rights movement in Memphis, Tennessee

by

Jason Danielson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

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In the spring of 2003, a young history education major played keyboard in a blues band called Magic Mike and the Blue Side. The band received the good fortune of winning the Iowa Blues Challenge, and was thrilled to discover that part of their winnings included opening for B. B. King the next night in Des Moines. The young man – who was primarily a jazz musician – became enthralled with the depth of expression from the King of the Blues and his amazing band, though he was not aware at the time that King had grown up in Memphis, Tennessee, where he would travel with Magic Mike in January of 2004 to participate in the International Blues Challenge.

When the band of friends made the twelve hour drive from northern Iowa to western Tennessee, they knew they would visit a city rich in American music history and hear some of the finest blues musicians in the world, but this young pianist and future high school history teacher had no idea of the degree to which this trip would eventually change his life. The day after visiting Sun studios, posing for pictures like the Million Dollar Quartet, and playing their first set on Beale Street, Magic Mike and the Blue Side visited the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. For a twenty-three-year-old, recently married and full of confidence in his musical abilities and newly developing historical understanding, it was an eye-opening experience. This was music and history come alive in a way he had never imagined, and he could not get enough. The young man immediately bought Rob Bowman’s masterpiece, *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, and fell in love with the music and the people of Stax Records.

This young white teacher from Des Moines, Iowa, made sure that all of his students knew the value of black popular music. He spent far more time than the curriculum recommended
having students study black history and analyze black music. He showed *Wattstax* at the end of the year, carefully watching the door for administrators during Richard Pryor’s scenes, which were simply too important to the overall film to censor. He developed presentations that he shared with other teachers about how the music spoke to the African American experience, particularly the civil rights movement, and he took special pride in his argument that Southern Stax represented the proud black nationalist voice of Malcolm X while Northern Motown chased the integrationist dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr. And then, in his thirties, he finally started to really learn.

Upon entering graduate school, the not-so-young, overconfident white history teacher/musician from Des Moines read and did history like he never had before. He learned about spectrums and anti-essentialism, about competing academic theories among historians of various specialties, and about the ever-growing literature on his favorite topics, civil rights and African American music. He learned that Memphis and Stax offered an enormous opportunity for his academic growth, and he learned that it was a city filled with rich history, beautiful music, amazing food, and some of the kindest, smartest, and most helpful people he would ever meet. Most importantly, he learned that he had a great deal to learn, and he continues to learn that lesson every day. This work serves as the story of what he has learned thus far.

If ever there was a true labor of love, it was researching and writing this thesis. It has been a dream come true to combine music and history, visit Memphis, work with some of the greatest historians and musicians I could imagine, and write about some of the greatest music and most inspiring activists of the twentieth century. To work on a graduate degree while teaching full-time and raising children sometimes felt like an impossible task, but the difficult
work remained inspiring and exciting because the work I do and the family I come home to provided support, understanding, joy, and motivation that has meant the world to me.

I owe my MA in History, literally and figuratively, to the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation. The guidance and financial support they have provided made this work possible, and the academic and personal inspiration from the regular Madison Memos, the 2012 Summer Institute at Georgetown University, and the ongoing correspondence with Foundation people and Fellows across the country has been incredible. In particular, I extend my sincere thanks to Lewis Larsen for having the faith to make me a Fellow in 2011 and continuing to support my work, and to Herman Belz for his unmatched knowledge of the Constitution and uncanny ability to pull out the very best from his students. While I have enormous gratitude for the many friendships I developed at the Summer Institute, I am particularly grateful to my favorite Fellows, Ashely Heyer for convincing me to write a thesis, and Joe Sangillo for making me aware of just how difficult it would be.

I find it difficult to truly express how much it has meant to me to work with the history department at Iowa State University. To Brian Behnken, my major professor and civil rights guru, I offer my highest thanks for your guidance and my highest praise for your ongoing contribution to the field of civil rights history. You are a true credit to your profession, and I hope I have made you proud. To Isaac Gottesman, your education history course was a breath of fresh air and an inspiration to several areas of my work, and your expertise as a member of my committee is of enormous value to me. Tunde Adeleke, one of my great regrets is that my schedule never allowed me to study with you personally, but your work is of the highest caliber, and I am grateful to you for lending your knowledge and experience to my committee. During my coursework at Iowa State, I was also incredibly fortunate to learn how to write history from
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg and to be exposed to feminist history and theory as well as the weird and wonderful world of postmodernism by Jana Byars, and I thank them for that. I am also grateful to Seth Hedquist, my comrade in both music and history and one of the most valued friends in my life, for making music with me, eating pancakes with me, teaching cool kids with me, and especially for reading my thesis before our professors got a hold of it.

I made the ten-hour drive to Memphis twice and corresponded countless times with amazing people from this amazing city, and I could not have asked for a better experience. Levon Williams and Deanie Parker from the Stax Museum and world-class trumpeter Wayne Jackson provided wonderful stories, kind words, and incredibly valuable information and analysis for which I will always be grateful. Ed Frank and his staff at Special Collections at the University of Memphis demonstrated the highest level of professionalism, generosity, wisdom, and kindness, and I can only hope that this humble offering serves as a partial tribute to the incredible assistance they provided. Wayne Dowdy was an absolute inspiration through his written contributions to Memphis history, and his generosity and brilliance at the Memphis and Shelby County Room meant the world to me. Charles Hughes wrote a brilliant book on Southern soul music and went out of his way to introduce me to one of the greatest Stax minds in the business, and then Robert Gordon gave me more than I could ever dream of through his books, emails, and contacts. Finally, to the city of Memphis, for offering true Southern hospitality and a beautiful place to do research, I offer my everlasting thanks for the music on Beale Street and the food at Payne’s, Four Way, Central, Gus’s, and Pete and Sam’s. I also hope that I have done a small part to honor the remarkable lives of the native and transplanted Memphians throughout these pages. Your legacy is one of which your city should be proud.
On a personal note, there are too many people to name individually who have provided love, support, and wisdom throughout my work on this project. Jon Baskerville’s African American history course changed my life, and his historical methods course continues to guide my work today. The fact that I was also able to play a few gigs with him and call him my friend makes him even more a part of my endeavors today, and I hope I have honored his memory in these pages. Rob Bowman’s work on Stax taught me the greatness of this little company and laid the foundation for all of us who followed, and I thank him for inspiring and assisting me without even knowing it. Mike Cramer, Bob Dunn, and Delayne Stallman were cool enough to let me join one of the most satisfying and exciting bands I have ever been a part of, and our performances at the Rum Boogie, lessons at Sun and Stax, and antics on Beale will forever remain some of my fondest memories. To my students at Hoover High School, I offer my sincerest thanks for participating in lively discussions, calling out my bad jokes, sharing your wit and wisdom, and teasing me about how long I took to get my MA. To my parents, Ron and Kathie Danielson, and my family and friends, all that is good about me I owe to you, and all that still needs work is no fault of yours. Thank you for helping me become the man I am today.

Finally, more than anything or anyone else in this world, I offer my thanks, my love, and what is soon to be my increased free time to my wife Sara, my children here on earth, Carter, Max, and Isaac, and my children in heaven and in my heart, Aiden and Samuel. Your patience, understanding, support, inspiration, motivation, joy, wisdom, and humor have blessed and sustained me more than mere words could ever adequately express. I love you and dedicate this work and my life to you, regretting only that nothing I could ever write or perform could truly demonstrate how much you really mean to me.
ABSTRACT

Scholarship of the civil rights movement developed academically constructed categories, creating binary understandings of the movement that did not capture the true nuance and complexity of specific circumstances. Music offers a lens through which to view the movement holistically, breaking down the essentialist binary interpretations through postmodern analysis of lyrics and music in its historical context. This work applies that approach to the music of Stax Records in the context of the civil rights movement in Memphis, Tennessee.

Much of the scholarship of the civil rights movement tended to establish four essentialist understandings, a method binary of integrationism versus nationalism, a gender binary of masculinity versus feminism, a theological binary of sacred versus secular activism, and a federalism binary of national versus state power. Stax Records created a decidedly black brand of Southern soul music at an integrated company during the height of the civil rights movement in Memphis and across the United States, providing a powerful example of the limits of either/or understandings of the movement. The artists and producers at Stax, alongside the civil rights leaders and grassroots activists in Memphis, demonstrated the complex nature of the movement in Memphis, which belied clearly defined categories of understanding.

This work begins with an overview of civil rights, Memphis, and soul music scholarship to establish understanding of the binaries which will be challenged, followed by chapters on each of the four essentialist binaries. The subsequent chapters discuss aspects of the Memphis civil rights movement and Stax Records history that challenge each binary, followed by musical analysis of selected recordings to demonstrate how Stax provided both a reflection of an impetus toward social and political change.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF SOUL

Using Music to Challenge Essentialist Binaries and Better Understand the Civil Rights Movement

Few moments in American history compare to the complexity of issues, fascinating characters, and ambiguity of outcomes contained in the civil rights movement. Its origins in slavery, racism, violence, and segregation bred a uniquely American experience which now offers a fertile ground for a wide range of historical scholarship. Despite a broad assortment of valuable research on this era, however, the historiography of the civil rights movement has also developed categorical divisions in order for scholars to make sense of the various aspects of the era, thus creating several binaries of interpretation of the movement that contributed to an essentialist understanding of the struggles. Four key essentialist binaries have emerged in recent years: integrationism versus nationalism, or the method binary; manhood versus feminism, or the gender binary; religion versus secularism, or the theological binary; and national power versus states’ rights, or the federalist binary. The reality for most black Americans rarely fits into such academically constructed limits.

To organize an academic dialogue of the civil rights movement while recognizing the fact that most black Americans blurred the lines created by such organization necessitates a new framework for understanding the movement without the barriers of either-or categorization. One possible framework lies in the popular music of the time. Soul music and its role in the civil rights movement demonstrates the problematic nature of binary understandings as well as the
value of popular culture in understanding what the civil rights movement meant to artists, activists, and ordinary citizens.

Popular music is frequently misunderstood in its historical context. Some, such as LeRoi Jones, saw it as inconsequential because of its focus on profit and seemingly innocuous lyrics, while others like Craig Werner sometimes overstate its role in black expression and protest messages.¹ In truth, music in general, and soul music in particular, serves as a dynamic topic of study for the civil rights movement because it was so many things to so many people. Soul music meant economic empowerment, black creative expression, an integrated creative endeavor, articulation of civil rights goals, and entertainment. What is more, soul meant any combination of these ideas to any number of people at any given point in time. Music served as more than a mirror for the civil rights movement; as the frequent accompaniment to personal and political interactions in the black community, it often became the impetus for action. Music functioned as a primary expression of moderation and assertiveness, of nonviolent religious activism and modern nationalist militarism, of gender inequality for women and masculine reclamation for men. Because of its power to stir the body, mind, and spirit of black and white Americans through the 1960s, and because of its refusal to fall within the either-or binaries of method, gender, theology, or politics, soul music offers the historian the opportunity to break down the constructed binaries of the civil rights movement and seek a deeper, truer understanding of the movement and the people who created it.

Soul music, like the civil rights movement for which it provided the soundtrack, did not exist as a national phenomenon, but as a series of local and regional developments. One could

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choose to conduct a study of soul as it related to civil rights in any number of key cities, including Detroit, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, or Los Angeles, but the first place to begin this work is Memphis, Tennessee. Located at the northern end of the Mississippi Delta, this crossroads of American geography and culture fostered a wealth of musical innovation. Memphis stood as a unique location for both civil rights and music history. As a local civil rights venue, the city served as the quintessential example of the southern urban phenomenon of urbanization and tradition; Memphians struggled with competing desires for modernization and tradition, and witnessed both intentional and unintentional blending of high and low class cultures as well as black and white societies.\(^2\) As one of the most important sites in American music history, local Memphians as well as migrants from Mississippi, Florida, Chicago, or Detroit shaped a legacy blending Delta blues, southern gospel, and rural country into a now-legendary lineage of rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and southern soul.\(^3\) While Memphis served as home to a number of outstanding studios that created a variety of popular music, Stax Records stood above the rest as the most visible, cohesive, and successful company throughout the 1960s.\(^4\) Therefore, Stax’s (and Memphis’) important role in both civil rights and music


history makes it a useful and fascinating location to begin the work of integrating music into the civil rights conversation as a way of breaking down scholarly binaries, and a way of facilitating a more holistic – and realistic – examination of this pivotal era in American history.

“Share What You Got”: An Overview of the Civil Rights Historiography

The civil rights movement, despite its relatively recent history, has provided fertile ground for a broad and valuable range of scholarship in the decades since its inception. Studies as early as the 1980s laid the foundation for understanding the political, cultural, and geographical aspects of the movement, providing impetus for future focus on the movement as a series of local and regional developments. The shift from viewing the civil rights movement as a national phenomenon to understanding the local and regional nuances of the period proved an important development in the historiography. Such studies include an ever-growing body of work that tends to illuminate important differences in southern, northern, and western approaches to the movement, including important cultural developments unique to specific geographic locations. In recent years, civil rights historians launched new thematic areas of study that have

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greatly enriched the field of study, including such topics as gender, culture, specific leaders, and religion.\textsuperscript{7}

Two 1982 books by John W. Cell and David R. Goldfield laid the groundwork for understanding the civil rights movement in the American South in the broader context of southern culture and segregation. Cell argued that segregation, rather than being a product of irrational traditionalism, in fact resulted from a sophisticated response to modernization and a compromise with more extreme forms of white supremacy.\textsuperscript{8} Goldfield’s \textit{Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers} complemented \textit{The Highest Stage of White Supremacy} in supporting an understanding of segregation as a phenomenon emerging from rural cultures negotiating with growing urban environments and the inevitable resultant racial interactions.\textsuperscript{9} When Cell briefly discussed the three precursors to the post-\textit{Brown} direct action movement, he offered a prophetic analysis of the futility of any singular approach:

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\textsuperscript{8} Cell \textit{The Highest Stage of White Supremacy}, x, 18-19.

\textsuperscript{9} Cell \textit{The Highest Stage of White Supremacy}, 105-106; Goldfield, \textit{Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers}, 7, 147-148.
None of the strategies that had been suggested so far had succeeded, [Du Bois] included. His “talented tenth,” the educated elite, had been insufficiently concerned with the plight of the masses. Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of black capitalism had been equally unrealistic…Marcus Garvey’s movement had demonstrated how to build a mass following…But the wholesale emigration of some ten million poor people was totally impractical…10

Cell’s brief statement on the impracticality of one-dimensional approaches prefaced problems faced by movement activists during the period as well as the issue of singular or binary interpretations of the movement by historians.

Two other vital contributions to the emerging civil rights scholarship, Aldon D. Morris’s *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* and William L. Van De Burg’s *New Day in Babylon*, provided significant foundational work on the civil rights movement. In their insightful studies, three important elements emerged that influenced subsequent scholarship: First, Morris articulated the value of “local movement centers,” thereby opening the field to the necessary work of examining communities, states, and regions for their unique contributions to the movement.11 Second, Van De Burg initiated the conversation over two important elements previously neglected in serious studies: the role of Black Power, and the value of culture in understanding the movement.12 Third, and most importantly for this work, the authors established two of the four binaries that continued to thread their way through future studies of the movement. Morris’s examination of nonviolent direct action compared to Van De Burg’s study on the Black Power movement inadvertently established a dominant theme of either-or conversations in the civil rights literature that followed.13 Additionally, while feminism and masculinity stood as opposing conversations throughout the movement, Van De Burg offered

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10 Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy*, 274.
one of the first analyses of the problem of gender politics in the Black Power movement within a larger study of the era.\textsuperscript{14}

Once Morris opened the door to local and regional study of the civil rights movement, historians initiated a stream of meaningful studies of specific geographic areas and their experiences and contributions to the period. Taken together, such studies provided several overarching themes that proved useful to the body of civil rights literature and to the present study of Stax Records and the civil rights movement in Memphis and the United States. First, multiple works addressed the myth of “good race relations;” while particular locales attempted to prove their relative civility to outsiders, closer examination revealed deep seated problems between ethno-racial groups and less moderation among white leaders than originally claimed. Second, several works demonstrated the importance of specific local phenomena to specific locations; while all cities or states had their own unique features, some had specific institutions or populations that proved overwhelmingly crucial in understanding the direction of those local movements. Third, the body of local and regional histories developed the academically constructed binaries that have proven simultaneously crucial to understanding the movement and limiting in seeing the full picture.

Racism, segregation, and white resistance to change represented common experiences throughout the South, but some cities, such as Greensboro, North Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia, and Memphis, Tennessee, maintained reputations of better race relations due to black civility and moderate white leadership. The very existence of important direct action movements, voter registration campaigns, cultural expression, and other forms of black resistance, however, belied

\textsuperscript{14} Van De Burg, \textit{New Day in Babylon}, 296-298.
the peaceful and satisfactory nature of biracial societies in these cities. Furthermore, northerners regularly invoked the injustices of the South as a means of deflecting criticism of their own race problems during the civil rights movement. Several key histories challenged this assertion, demonstrating the unique challenges associated with the struggle for equality outside the South, such as housing discrimination, de facto segregation, and fierce white resentment and resistance when confronted with demands for improvement.

Some locations found themselves so absorbed by a single element that local studies necessarily emphasized them as crucial to the local activism of the time. Most closely connected to this work on Stax, Suzanne E. Smith’s *Dancing in the Street* placed Motown at the center of Detroit’s experience. While other scholars wrote about Motown or Detroit, Smith blended the two, providing a compelling argument that this work seeks to continue: Specifically, according to Smith, the politics of Detroit intricately interacted with the cultural and economic work of Motown, and vice versa, and generally, the music of the civil rights era played a distinctive role as both reflection of and motivator toward civil rights action. Additionally, the existence of powerful personalities or populations in certain places affected the direction of the movement in ways that scholars could not ignore. These mirrored southern soul music’s power in Memphis, and therefore proved an important consideration in the previous scholarship leading to this study.

Thematic studies comprise the most recent trend in the civil rights historiography, with several authors, demonstrating both inadvertent adherence to the established binaries and promising challenges to essentialist dichotomies. Broad overviews, such as Goldfield’s *Black,
White, and Southern and Adam Fairclough’s Better Day Coming told the civil rights story within its long context, with Fairclough doing a better job avoiding the binary line of thinking by moving beyond integration-nationalism options and illuminating the reliance of various groups on each other. Theologian James Cone offered a refreshing challenge to the method binary in his comparative exploration of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, brilliantly turning the tables on the either-or philosophy using the two most visible symbols of the binary. Gender, perhaps the most contentious binary, found continued debates among scholars’ competing interpretations of manhood and feminism in the movement, with both sides offering compelling evidence that further challenges the validity of an either-or dialectic to the civil rights conversation. Generally the most valuable work thus far tended to eschew essentialist binaries in favor of a more nuanced approach, which this study hopes to continue through an examination of Stax.

Perhaps the most pervasive and unfortunate of the dichotomies unwittingly established in the body of civil rights literature, the method binary placed integrationism and nationalism at opposite ends of a spectrum. While often a useful categorical framework for better understanding different leadership approaches, closer studies of the grassroots activists (and most Stax musicians certainly showed signs of activism) belied such simple either-or discrepancies. The typical civil rights activist in Memphis, whether at the NAACP meetings or in the recording studio at 926 East McLemore Avenue, demonstrated passionate pragmatism in his or her quest for equal rights and equal opportunities. Such nuance challenged Chafe’s conception of Black

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19 Goldfield, Black, White, and Southern, 2, 189-190; Fairclough, Better Day Coming, xiii, 296-297, 313.
20 Cone, Malcolm & Martin & America, 3, 63, 165-166, 246-247, 303-304.
21 Langston, “Black Civil Rights, Feminism, and Power,” 158-159, 161; Murray, Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege, 4, 13; Estes, I Am a Man!, 7-8, 40, 74-75, 155; McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street, 7, 39, 87, 198-199.
Power as simply working outside the “progressive mystique,” or Smith’s assertion that Black Power existed as self-defense philosophies that did not emerge until after the mid-1960s violence and social upheavals.  

The theological binary sprang in some respects from the method binary, as scholars often associated Christianity and the black church with moderate integrationism while tying Black Muslims and younger, less religious activists to militant nationalism. While Morris, Dittmer, and Chappell disagreed over the centrality of religion in the black freedom movement, their analyses of the nonviolent direct action and grassroots political activism of the movement placed the protagonists firmly under the influence of the black church in the theological spectrum. Chafe and Jones hinted at the blurred lines between sacred and secular and the difficulty of an either-or philosophy; Jones’ portrait of Father James Groppi showed a white Catholic priest encouraging militant black power in the youth of his Milwaukee congregation, while Chafe’s depiction of Greensboro activists challenged assertions of the centrality of religion for young activists. As I will show, the sacred-secular dichotomy proved impossible to defend in light of soul music, which demanded postmodern, anti-essentialist understanding of music, lyrics, and culture that was neither sacred nor secular, and simultaneously both.

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23 Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 244-245; Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 140. In fact, Smith’s own understanding of the Motown culture of high class spoke to the complex nature of integrationism and nationalism. Berry Gordy’s expectation that his black artists be schooled in etiquette and dressed to impress actually served to increase profits for an independent black-run economic enterprise. Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 47-48.


The gender binary encompassed some of the most contentious debates among civil rights scholars, just as gender issues proved highly contentious in the civil rights movement itself. Scholars clearly acknowledged the visible leadership roles overwhelmingly taken by men in the movement and the importance of women at the grassroots and behind the scenes, but often this was where agreement on gender issues ceased. While Self observed urban planning in Oakland that relied on safe gender role assignments, Estes and Simon Wendt offered interpretations of black men attempting to regain masculinity taken by white men and black women. Danielle McGuire offered an especially powerful defense of black feminism as central to the movement, challenging masculinist notions of leadership and activism. More recent studies of Memphis also highlighted the role of northern and southern white women in the black freedom struggle of that city, albeit in roles rightly downplayed in comparison to their black counterparts. Such concerns over gender owed their existence in no small part to centuries-old concerns of “race mixing,” which in itself sometimes challenged the concept of a masculine-feminine binary. Of course, as with the other binaries, Stax artists, writers, and staff, in tandem with the Memphis movement generally, proved the falsehood of separating analyses of the civil rights movement into either-or gender considerations.

28 Dittmer, Local People, 30-31; Tuck, Beyond Atlanta, 248-249
30 McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street, 7, 39, 51, 87; Langston, “Black Civil Rights, Feminism, and Power,” 159.
31 Murray, Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege, 208-209, 224; Little, You Must Be from the North, 5-9, 152-153.
32 Van De Burg, New Day in Babylon, 296-298; Dittmer, Local People, 263; McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street, 21, 51, 121-122, 174-175.
33 While this topic will be addressed in detail in future chapters, important Stax employees include Carla Thomas, Isaac Hayes, Deanie Parker, and Bettye Crutcher; important Memphis activists include Vasco and Maxine Smith and Benjamin and Julia Hooks.
While the federalism binary represented the least contentious of the four binaries, symbolically it played an important role in analyses of the civil rights movement, particularly because while politicians and movement leaders squabbled over national, state, and local power concerns, civil rights activists proved more concerned with ending institutional racism than appropriate levels of government. The Brown decisions of 1954 and 1955 played a monumental role in facilitating the nonviolent direct action movement of the mainstream civil rights movement because all levels of government failed to act on the Supreme Court’s decisions.34 Conflicts continued throughout the 1960s, such as when the Kennedy administration refused to do more than referee the Freedom Rides and the ongoing violent white responses to the black freedom movement in places such as Mississippi.35 Because of emerging cooperative federalism, fluctuations in power and influence, and the ingenuity of civil rights leaders at the grassroots and political levels, even this binary poses a challenge through the civil rights lens and must be seen as more complex than any essentialist dichotomy would allow.36 Once again, the music of Stax records in the context of the Memphis civil rights movement belied the existence of an either-or paradigm in the federalist debate. The songs expressed a longing for freedom and equality that cared little about who helped so long as the black struggle brought results.37 Stax’s own local roots and troubled relationships with national record companies often paralleled the

35 Dittmer, Local People, 93-94.

\section*{“I’m Going Home”: The Historiography of Memphis Civil Rights}

Memphis, Tennessee, represented one of the most important cities in civil rights and music history, earning it a valuable body of existing research from which to begin a study of Stax Records and its role in understanding the movement. Several broad overviews have introduced some of the key players whose names are now synonymous with Memphis history, including J.E. Walker and the Universal Life Insurance Company; lawyers and politicians like Russell Sugarmon, Ben Hooks, and A.W. Willis, Jr.; Vasco and Maxine Smith and the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Hollis Price and LeMoyne-Owen College; Blair T. Hunt and Booker T. Washington High School; Mayors Edmund Orgill and Henry Loeb; and the many lawyers, businesspeople, educators, and musicians who gave the Memphis movement a noticeably middle-class influence, which may have contributed to its appearance as moderate in approach.\footnote{Lester C. Lamon, \textit{Blacks in Tennessee 1791-1970} (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, published in cooperation with The Tennessee Historical Commission, 1981), 98-99, 104; Cynthia G. Fleming, “‘We Shall Overcome’: Tennessee and the Civil Rights Movement,” from \textit{Tennessee Historical Quarterly} 54, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 230-245 (Nashville, Tennessee: Tennessee Historical Society, 1995), 236-237, 242-244; Bond and Sherman, 90-91, 138-139; Carole Stanford Bucy, “Tennessee in the Twentieth Century,” from \textit{Tennessee Historical Quarterly} 69, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 262-273 (Nashville, Tennessee: Tennessee Historical Society, 2010), 268-269.} While Memphis appeared a moderate city with comparatively good race relations, Memphis historians have persuasively shown a more complicated picture of race relations and civil rights struggles. The roots of this river town, with its geographical and racial crossroads, history of racial alienation, and legacy of political machine bossism and urban plantation mentality, belied its image as a peaceful, racially
moderate southern city. Similar to Chafe’s Greensboro, North Carolina, scholars attacked the notion of civility in Memphis race relations with consistency and power, noting deep-seated race problems due to extreme examples of white supremacy in the press, radio and television, and censorship at the movies, even noting the persistence of racism in advertisements and local businesses.

The largest body of work on Memphis consists of political history, which offers no shortage of fascinating anecdotes and characters from the period. Black lawyers, and eventually black politicians, played a central role in the Memphis movement, where the local NAACP proved stronger than activist organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, making it unique in some ways from other southern milieus. Memphis shared political similarities with other cities as well, most importantly the common narrative of black activism spurred by early national promise, regularly resisted by local white leadership, and eventually forced into bittersweet token gains coupled with continued de facto segregation and economic inequality. Mayoral politics presented a particularly striking example of the ebb and

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flow of black hopes in the 1950s and 1960s, with Edmund Orgill’s moderate racial policies and controversial attempts at bridging the racial divide in Memphis met with the backlash of Henry Loeb, perhaps most famous as the face of white resistance to the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968 that led to riots and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.  

Recent studies on the civil rights movement in Memphis examined specific thematic issues and contributed greatly to the growing body of scholarship generally and to this work in particular. Education, a generally underestimated field of historical study despite a couple of excellent articles on Memphis schools, offered an especially valuable lens through which to consider the civil rights movement and the musical history of Memphis. Much work remains to be done on the role of education in Memphis’ civil rights story; while many authors gave adequate attention to the black schools, educators, and key alumni, Booker T. Washington High School in particular warrants considerably more exploration, especially in relation to this study of Stax’s role in the civil rights movement.

Gail S. Murray and Kimberly K. Little made vitally important contributions to the important conversation on gender in the civil rights movement. Both works, in focusing on white women’s role in the Memphis movement, demonstrated measured and powerful examination of the intersection of race and gender that facilitated important movement away

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from the essentialist male-female and black-white dichotomies of the struggle. As shall be demonstrated in future chapters, white and black women’s contributions to the Memphis civil rights movement mirrored that of black and white men and women at Stax, whose products provided incredible examples of the power of breaking down racial and gender barriers in creative and economic endeavors.

Perhaps one of the most valuable models for future study of the Memphis civil rights movement was Michael K. Honey’s 2007 book on the sanitation strike. His well-researched, in-depth examination of this key moment in local and national history provided a work of stunning breadth and value. In taking a single event and providing context and multiple perspectives, especially from the economic angle, Honey’s book presented a framework for local and thematic history that could be applied to any number of events or themes during this period. This valuable work failed to go unnoticed in Robert Gordon’s recent and equally valuable history of Stax, on which this work hopes to continue to build.

“Soul Dressing”: An Overview of Soul Music Scholarship in American and Memphis History

A work such as this owes a great deal to the impressive body of work amassed on soul music, and on black music generally. Several authors from the fields of music and musicology, history, and journalism contributed significant research and analysis that laid the groundwork for this work, both in breaking down walls in scholarly analysis through music, and in the role of Stax Records in the civil rights movement specifically. This range of scholarly work included

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47 Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege*, 205, 211-213, 224; Little, *You Must Be from the North*, 5-9, 17, 32, 76, 100, 141, 152-153.
several key categories: (1) the “primary sources”: classic works on soul music specifically and black music generally that were written during the period 1960-1975; (2) the “first secondary sources”: landmark early journalistic works that built a context for understanding soul music; (3) studies that opened the door for understanding music as social and political protest; (4) recent works on specific topics related to the study of soul as a vehicle in the movement; and (5) specifically musicological studies that contributed to a cross-curricular dialogue about black music.

Any conversation involving black music in the 1960s and 1970s must begin with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Charles Keil. Jones’s work demonstrated a clear preference for blues and avant-garde jazz as the truest expression of the black experience, but his understanding of African Americans as “blues people” exerted enormous influence over black artists and activists at the time and in the decades of scholarship that followed.51 Despite some flaws in his analysis, such as dismissing the more popular strands of black music in the 1960s and failing to acknowledge the role of white culture in influencing black music, *Blues People* laid the foundation for decades of valuable dialogue about the development of African American music and its role in American culture.52 Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues* followed *Blues People*, and while his book focused primarily on the transition of blues from the country to the city, he provided several important insights to the growth of soul music and the role of black music in the black community. Keil viewed black urban culture, and its product, the blues, as a “battle of the sexes,” a view that contributed important understanding to the complex notions of gender and


sexuality in the civil rights movement and in soul music. Additionally, Keil began the conversation responsible for decades of research and literature that influenced this work, namely, that entertainment remained central to understanding black culture, and that the performers, composers, and producers responsible for black popular music also served as activists illuminating the black freedom struggle and calling the black community to action.

In the years following the foundational work of *Blues People* and *Urban Blues*, several authors provided both journalistic and sociological examinations of black popular music, including the first significant works on soul. Phyl Garland offered a valuable study of the music, including a crucial chapter on Stax Records where she actually sat down with Al Jackson and Albert King and recorded their insights on music and race. Charlie Gillett wrote a history of rock and roll as the primary sound of urban life, relegating the vibrant soul music scene of Memphis to a few short comments and falsely claimed Chicago as the primary rival to Detroit in the 1960s. Among the most well-known and frequently cited works of the period, Arnold Shaw’s *The World of Soul* proved a valuable overview of the range of soul styles and artists in 1970, but in retrospect seemed limited to a surface overview of the music. His understanding of soul as a hybrid of blues and gospel styles with white and black collaboration, however, stood the test of time and rightly influenced all legitimate work on soul in the decades to follow. Near the end of the civil rights era (and perhaps not coincidentally, the end of Stax Records), Michael Haralambos offered a useful study of the transition from blues to soul in the period. His understanding of the blues as expression of negative experience and soul as expression of ideal

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and hope proved somewhat narrow and essentialist in the context of ongoing scholarly dialogue, but his general notion of black popular music’s evolution and white society’s delayed appreciation of it offered a useful understanding of the arch of soul music history.58

Several important analyses of black music from the late 1960s and early 1970s offered valuable insights into the thinking of the period. David Ritz’s 1970 article, “Happy Song,” discussed the lack of social message in black music compared to the radicalism of the age.59 Ritz’s important analysis offered one of the first critiques of Jones and Keil, which influenced later understanding of the problematic nature of focusing on older musical styles and failing to acknowledge the interaction of black and white agents in the creation and consumption of soul music.60 James Cone’s The Spirituals and the Blues understood black religion and black music as expressions of activism and revolution proved powerfully influential in understanding later black styles such as soul.61 April Reilly’s 1973 article on the role of technology in black popular music proved useful to understanding the importance of the studio for creative endeavors in the 1960s and 1970s, which certainly proved true for Stax Records and their innovations on McLemore Avenue.62

The 1980s witnessed three essential volumes for the study of soul music. Two came from music journalists and proved equally useful to scholars and popular audiences (much like the music they discussed), and the third provided a more academic exploration of the downfall of

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black popular music. Gerri Hirshey offered the first important book, *Nowhere to Run*, which focused heavily on the primal, physical aspects of black popular music and paid special attention to some of her favorite artists (many of whom worked for Motown). Perhaps the most important early book on southern soul, and certainly the foundation for all that followed, Peter Guralnick’s *Sweet Soul Music* set the standard for understanding the intersection of race, gender, politics, and culture in the soul music of the 1960s and 1970s. Guralnick explored not only Stax, but the importance of Memphis in general, and understood soul as a uniquely southern phenomenon, with northern companies like Motown providing a very different version of rhythm and blues in the era. Finally, Nelson George’s *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, published in 1988, examined the decline of classic rhythm and blues; George criticized white control, civil rights integrationist goals, and the growth of conglomerates in the music industry as the primary reasons for this development.

More recent works continued to build on the dialogue in meaningful ways, including modifying previous scholarship, understanding the roots of black popular music, and examining race and activism in soul music. Taken together, this scholarship offers enormous promise for the ongoing study of black popular music and its role in social and political life. Such studies included considerations of black popular music as sacred expression, the role of urban black singing in blurring racial lines and focusing instead on geographic location and record sales, and challenging George’s assertion that rhythm and blues ever actually “died.”

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musicological studies informed the scholarship of black popular music as well. These important works included the problem of black entrepreneurship in popular music, challenges to traditional notions of genre that adversely affected African American musicians, the African roots of blues and the problematic nature of western harmonic analysis of such music, and the use of rhythm to make social or political statements. Following on the heels of the landmark early works and the musicological studies, recent scholars opened the doors for exploration of the direct relationship between black popular music and sociopolitical protest. Mary Ellison, Brian Ward, Craig Werner, Michael Awkward, and Rickey Vincent all contributed meaningful and fascinating books that enriched the field and helped lay the groundwork for this study.

Finally, the most important works on history to inform this study included the scholarship on Memphis music history. Widely acknowledged for its pivotal role in popular music and

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southern culture, there fortunately exists no shortage of quality work on this topic, with a surprisingly broad range of topics already considered. Certainly the most important works, both of which continue to stand as the ultimate in Stax history, came from Rob Bowman and Robert Gordon. Bowman dedicated years to meticulously researching and reporting on the history and musicology of Stax, and his work paved the way for any meaningful study of the company and its legacy that followed. Bowman profiled an unlikely success story in a city of complex racial and cultural composition that rose to international prominence through a new blend of gospel, blues, and country before falling to the changing times and economic difficulties. Building on Bowman’s monumental work, Robert Gordon recently provided further examination of the Stax story, this time incorporating more of the local political and social context. His book, *Respect Yourself*, demonstrated that more work remained (and still remains) on this fascinating and important company and its complicated place in Memphis and American history.

Additional works on Memphis included a variety of perspectives on its importance in music history, its place as a geographical and cultural crossroads, and the importance of the area not just for Stax but for a number of successful companies in the era. Much of Memphis’ music history focused on Beale Street, where black Memphians went to work, shop, eat, and be entertained. For much of the city’s history, this important cultural landmark provided a center for the development of Memphis music, the nation’s first radio station with all-black programming, and a place where white and black Memphis musicians and producers took the various influences of the Delta and created something entirely unique. As home to the Church

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of God in Christ and a southern city filled with churches, Memphis played a key role in the southern phenomenon of gospel-inspired soul music. This style received further modification through the often-forgotten influence of white southern country music, which mixed with the blues to create a special style different from anywhere else in the world.73 Roy Brewer provided an important article about the role of strings in the Memphis studios, who remained forgotten for a long time when compared to their counterparts in Detroit or Philadelphia; Gordon built on this important facet as well, with both authors noting the unique features of Memphis studios which challenged orchestral musicians to expand stylistically and improvise.74 Additionally, Memphis and nearby Muscle Shoals, Alabama, served as home to several other important studios for black and white southern music, including Hi, Sun, American, and Fame.75

“My Inspiration”: Stax Records and the Role of Soul in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement, Memphis history, and black popular music all represent complicated interwoven threads. The story that evolved from the intersection of these three concepts is what this study seeks to tell. Additionally, I shall demonstrate the problematic nature of essentialism and the ways in which music helps to break down the either-or binaries of integration versus nationalism, masculinity versus feminism, religion versus secularism, and federal versus state arguments common in the ongoing dialogue about civil rights history. The

music of Stax Records and its unique place in Memphis and American history serves as an ideal platform from which to launch this study for several reasons. First, Stax produced music that represented an African American holistic vision that blurred lines between entertainment and message, sacred and secular, or personal and communal. Second, Stax incorporated a diverse family of musicians, producers, and staff that included black and white people, Memphians and outsiders, men and women, and multiple generations with various approaches to religion and spirituality. Third, the rise and fall of Stax Records largely mirrored the rise and fall of the grassroots-driven direct action protest movement that began with the Greensboro sit-ins and continued through the turbulent mid-1970s. Finally, Stax served as a legitimate case study of the civil rights movement because both existed as local and national phenomena, and both faced challenges in addressing both audiences.

While this work is largely a work of history rather than musicology or theory, it necessarily relies on a theoretical framework to draw connections between the civil rights movement, Memphis history, and the music of Stax Records. Music is not just art, but is also cultural expression and a reflection of and motivator for society. Rather than provide a purely chronological study of Stax or Memphis, this work is organized topically. Each chapter seeks to break down a specific binary associated with civil rights history by demonstrating the more complicated nature of Stax and Memphis, thereby opening the door for a more holistic, if not entirely postmodern, approach to the field. Chapter one examines the apparent dichotomy of

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nonviolent integrationism and militant nationalism. Through musical examples at Stax and local examples of the Memphis freedom movement, I shall argue that individuals and groups were far more pragmatic and driven than any single ideological framework allowed. Chapter two examines the conflict between the attempts to reclaim black masculinity and the intersectionality for black women in civil rights and feminism. Stax and Memphis provided a wealth of examples in the soul music produced and the civil rights movement in the city where men and women worked together, albeit sometimes in a complicated nature, resulting in products that were neither masculinist nor feminist and yet sometimes both simultaneously. Chapter three challenges the conception of separate religious and secular approaches to the civil rights movement. Here the role of Christianity and key activists in Memphis, as well as the importance of the public school system (especially Booker T. Washington High School in the Soulsville neighborhood) helped to develop an understanding of civil rights activism and soul music as blurring lines between the sacred and the secular. Finally, the fourth chapter addresses the conflicts over federalism, and the notion of conflicts between the states and the national government over civil rights advances. While Stax produced little overtly political music, the cultural codes of the music and lyrics, combined with the external activism of Stax artists and local civil rights workers, provided the foundation for the argument that the federal system created a complicated narrative for the movement in which movement leaders used any and all levels of government to achieve their goals.

Stax Records produced some of the finest music of the 1960s and 1970s, and stood out as the leader in southern soul despite the existence of multiple companies and countless artists vying for the soul market. The people involved in the creation of this body of work, and the community from which it came, offered valuable evidence for further study of the civil rights
movement through a local and artistic lens. Taken alongside local history, the Stax-Memphis story offers a fascinating case study for the local and multi-faceted nature of the civil rights movement.
CHAPTER 2

BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER

Stax Records and the Memphis Civil Rights Movement as Integrated Nationalism

Booker T. Jones grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and attended Booker T. Washington High School in what became known as the Soulsville neighborhood on the south side of town. As a middle class African American, he represented much of that community at mid-century. A natural musician, Jones took full advantage of the quality music program at his school, learning multiple instruments while nurturing his deeply ingrained value for education. Beginning primarily on piano and saxophone because he had been warned to avoid Pentecostal churches and was pushed away from clubs, Jones later discovered the Hammond organ, for which he would be best known in his music career.¹

Steve Cropper, two years older than Jones, attended Messick High School and absorbed a wide variety of musical influences, including black and white gospel, country, and rhythm and blues. Although he first worked with a white band obsessed with black music, his contribution to music in later years primarily focused on providing country-influenced guitar sounds that gave his soul music a notably southern feel. Through his friend and musical colleague, Packy Axton, Cropper met a motivated aspiring record producer named Jim Stewart, who with his sister Estelle Axton, created the now-legendary label known as Stax Records.²

After Steve Cropper helped establish the Stax Records studios on East McLemore in south Memphis, Booker T. Jones (still finishing at Booker T. Washington High School) became a fixture at the studio, first as a saxophone player but eventually playing piano and organ. Jones and Cropper, one black and one white, young and unknown in the early 1960s, must have been considered an unlikely pair to lay the foundation for the southern soul sound. Yet, within a few years, these two would forge a lifelong friendship that changed the course of music history and race relations.3

Stax’s development in Memphis, Tennessee, was no mere coincidence. Memphis spent much of the twentieth century touting “good race relations,” a mythical civility comparable Greensboro, North Carolina, or Atlanta, Georgia, belied in the daily experiences of segregation, police brutality, and vast economic inequality between blacks and whites.4 Like in other parts of the country, however, one area that often formed a bridge in the post-World War II racial divide was music. Young white Americans fell in love with the black popular music that became known first as race music, then as rhythm and blues, and eventually as soul. Those adventurous enough in cities like Memphis took to Beale Street, the center of black life in that city, to experience this exciting music in person.5 While Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton were not the

first company owners to integrate, what they did in Memphis in the early 1960s evolved into the ultimate symbol of racial integration, which created records frequently associated with black nationalism.6

This chapter seeks to examine the ways Stax and Memphis challenged the academically-created binary of integrationism and nationalism by analyzing how the company and the city defied essentialist categories in their respective quests for commercial success and black civil rights. The biracial history of the company itself, especially in the context of a biracial local civil rights movement, demonstrated the lack of any particular method or approach to making music or fighting for equal rights. Additionally, when exploring various strands integrationist and nationalist methods, such as seemingly conflicting notions like civil rights and economic empowerment or integration and self-determination, both the Memphis movement and Stax Records eluded any either-or categories of interpretation. The chapter ends with a musical analysis of several key Stax artists to illustrate the product of these musician-activists. Placing musicological analysis in social and historical context, in most cases without explicit agreement from the creators, obviously offers itself to increased scrutiny to the subjective nature of the work, but postmodern theory applied carefully demonstrates the validity and utility of this endeavor for this particular project.7

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“I Had a Dream”: How Stax and Memphis Defied the Integration-Nationalism Binary

Booker T. Jones and Steve Cropper led Booker T. and the MGs, the Stax house band through the company’s early years and one of the best instrumental soul bands of the era. Although Lewis Steinberg originally played bass, the best known bassist for the band was Donald “Duck” Dunn, a white man, and the slightly older and more experienced Al Jackson, Jr., a black man, drove the band from the drums. The band developed a legendary reputation for their personal style, their definitive playing behind Stax’s stable of artists through the 1960s, and the fact that they were half black and half white in a decidedly segregated city. Yet for all the hopeful integrationism inherent in such a scenario, Stax produced a catalogue of music seen by some today as highly nationalistic, if not for any overt messages (which it lacked), than because the soul it produced developed a reputation as unapologetically black in an era of black consciousness. In particular, popular music fans and scholars of the field alike compared Stax to Motown, the most successful African American label of the civil rights era, which in contrast seemed whitewashed for commercial success and safely produced for perfection. The true story proved much more complex than simple either-or comparisons of the two black music giants of the 1960s and 1970s; while the companies produced two distinctly separate styles, neither proved entirely integrationist nor nationalist. Motown remained entirely black-run, beginning with the authoritarian control of Berry Gordy, Jr., and continuing through the singers, backup musicians, and producers, yet its music appealed to young white audiences on a scale


9 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 67-69.

never before observed, and Gordy and others maintained close relationships with mainstream integrationist civil rights leaders. Stax, meanwhile, began under the more egalitarian leadership of the white country aficionado Jim Stewart, and while the solo artists remained black, the rest of the company was mixed until the later Al Bell years, but the grittier southern sound, influenced by gospel, the blues, and country, appealed largely to an African American audience.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps the most important reason for the blurred lines between music styles and their tenuous connections to civil rights methods can be explained by Stax’s location on the south side of Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Memphis maintained an image of “good race relations” in the decades leading to the civil rights movement. In 1960 a biracial committee worked together to commemorate the role of W.C. Handy in music history, providing a statue and a park in the Beale Street neighborhood and a scholarship in his name at the request of longtime black Republican leader and friend of Handy, George W. Lee. The committee included Frank Ahlgren of the \textit{Commercial Appeal}; Mayor Edmund Orgill; white owner of the all-black radio station WDIA, Bert Ferguson, and one of his best-known black DJs, A.C. Williams; civil rights activists Hollis Price and Jesse Turner; and Booker T. Washington principal and local pastor Blair T. Hunt.\textsuperscript{12} In correspondences throughout the era, Mayor Edmund Orgill and his constituents frequently made reference to the positive atmosphere in Memphis, specifically using the phrase “good race relations” to describe the racial climate of the city. In 1956, when Orgill, a controversial moderate who officially supported segregation, proposed appointing an African American to the John Gaston Hospital

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] H. Dudley Castile, letter to Sam Hollis, 10 February 1960 (University of Memphis, Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection: Edmund Orgill Papers, MSS 87, Box 16, Folder VI); George W. Lee, “The Legend of W. C. Handy – ‘Father of the Blues,’” pamphlet printed by the W.C. Handy Memorial Fund Committee (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder VI).
\end{footnotes}
board of directors, a flurry of correspondence from all sides weighed in on the issue, all defending their positions as part of maintaining the good race relations of Memphis. However, the seeming civility of Memphians, much like in other southern cities, proved a myth upheld by local leaders that went against the reality of segregation, police brutality, and opposition to even the slightest gains in black equality. While African American activists began lobbying for improvements in the late 1950s, white citizens and racist organizations throughout the 1950s and 1960s continued efforts to uphold the oppressive tradition known as the “plantation mentality.”

As the African American population and sympathetic white activists resisted the plantation mentality more directly through the 1960s, Stax Records started to gain attention. The company’s unlikely success received worthy attention beginning in the 1980s and continuing through several impeccably researched and fascinating volumes from Peter Guralnick, Rob

13 V.G. Hollingsworth, letter to Mayor Edmund Orgill, 26 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); J.F. Bigger, letter to Edmund Orgill, 28 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Edmund Orgill, letter to Mrs. Hubert F. Fisher, Sr., 3 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); E.B. Brown, letter to Edmund Orgill, 9 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A).

14 Archival evidence of Memphis black activism includes: Binghamton Civic League (O.Z. Evers, president; T.R. Fugh, Vice President, Eliehue Stanback, Chairman of the Board), letter to Edmund Orgill, 9 November 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); L. Alex Wilson (editor, Tri-State Defender), letter to Edmund Orgill, 22 November 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Shelby County Democratic Club, “Instructions for Poll Workers on Election Day” and “Instructions for Canvassers,” 2 August 1962 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Russell B. Sugarmon Jr. Papers, MSS 108, Box 1, Folder 3); Clark Porteous, “Memphis Provides More and Better Jobs for Negroes,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 20 May 1963, p. 17 (University of Memphis, Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection: Lucius E. Burch Jr. Papers, MSS 126, Box 46: Memphis Committee on Community Relations Vo. I); Maxine A. Smith (Memphis Chapter, NAACP), Letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); Jesse H. Turner (Memphis Chapter, NAACP), letter to Edmund Orgill, 26 August 1976 (Orgill Papers, Box 40, Folder 18). Archival evidence for white reaction to black activism includes: Resolution opposing Brown and requesting closing public facilities rather than integrate, 16 November 1955 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); “How the Negro Got Here (A little bit of fun – but a whole lot of TRUTH),” pamphlet from 1958 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder XIV); Frank L. Britton, editor, “Joan Fontaine and her NEGRO Screen Lover,” American Nationalist (Orgill Papers, Box 16, unmarked folder); “Are you aware that a planned negro invasion has happened to an ALL-WHITE Memphis Community?,” leaflet printed by Glenview Community (Orgill Papers, Box 16, unmarked folder); “It Has Happened Here in Memphis: Behind the Plot to Sovietize the South,” pamphlet from Glenview Peaceful Pickets, 1958 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, unmarked folder); R.B. Sugarmon, Jr., Attorney, and A.W. Willis, Jr., Attorney, letters to Wade H. Sides, Jr. (President, Front Street Theatre, Memphis) and President, Actors’ Equity Association, 24 November 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 2, Folder 15). Scholarly work on black-white relations and the plantation mentality includes: Chafe, Civilities and Civil Rights, 4-10; David R. Goldfield, Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980 (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 4-5, 7, 166-168; Dowdy, “The White Rose Mammy,” 308-309; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 2, 87, 214-215.
Bowman, and Robert Gordon, and needs only brief summary here. Jim Stewart began his music career as a country fiddler, eventually attempting to open a recording studio. After getting things started with the help of his sister, Estelle Axton, and the physical and musical contributions of a group of young white boys (first known as the Royal Spades, then as the Mar-Keys, and including the now-legendary Steve Cropper), Stewart’s Satellite Record Company earned modest success with a black group known as the Vel-Tones. He was soon approached by local black celebrity Rufus Thomas, famous throughout Memphis as a DJ on WDIA and a performer and emcee for local talent shows, who in an act of impressive African American agency for the early 1960s brought his daughter Carla to Stewart to record. The underdog studio, located in the black middle class neighborhood on East McLemore, received major attention from the Mar-Keys’s “Last Night,” an astonishing feat for a predominately white band playing decidedly black-sounding music, and earned further attention with Carla Thomas’s “Gee Whiz.” Eventually, the pieces of the MGs fit together as a house band and successful instrumental group in their own right, and songwriters Isaac Hayes and David Porter joined from the north Manassas and south Booker T. Washington neighborhoods, respectively, and the studio became one of the biggest-selling companies of the middle and late 1960s into the early 1970s. The company experienced significant changes after 1968, which included the leadership of African American Al Bell, the inclusion of young south Memphis players in the Bar-Kays as the new house band, and the meteoric rise of Isaac Hayes as a solo artist. The company also fell victim to financial problems and a changing market in the mid-1970s, officially ending the era of the southern soul giant.15

Deanie Parker, one of the most important figures on the production team at Stax beginning in 1963, described the company as an oasis, where race played no part and “where the emphasis was not on the color of your skin, but on the content of your character.” She cited Estelle Axton, Jim Stewart, and Steve Cropper, all white, as among her favorite people with whom to work on production, distribution, marketing, and songwriting. This suggested a strong integrationist ethic, where black and white coexisted to create the best possible product.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the music produced at Stax, the production and distribution methods, and Parker’s own work in the marketing department hinted at some nationalist tendencies, particularly in the areas of encouraging the soul ethic, growing black business in the black community, and raising black consciousness through popular music at the height of the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{17} While Parker remembered Stax as an “oasis” of racial harmony, citing that even disagreements only occurred because it was a “family,” real quarrels existed at the company, sometimes resulting in people leaving the company.\textsuperscript{18} Within the framework of the method binary, such words and actions seemed contradictory, but Parker’s work in fact demonstrated the consistency of purpose common among Stax Records, Memphis, Tennessee, and the United States African Americans who strove for success in the civil rights era.

Memphians, both black and white, applied a pragmatic approach that left no door closed in their quest for civil rights, whether that was militant or deferential, law-abiding or challenging the status quo. The Shelby County Democratic club, for example, remained within the realm of

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\textsuperscript{16} Deanie Parker, phone interview by author (facilitated by Levon Williams), Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 18 June 2013.
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electoral politics, although their decision to run black candidates in the 1960s despite the historic success of George W. Lee as a black Republican leader demonstrated a more progressive attitude and foretold of the major realignment that had begun in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{19} Black schools in Memphis followed the path of other segregated institutions across the south, instilling pride, a desire for justice, and a strong work ethic in their students.\textsuperscript{20} While the district tended to overwhelmingly focus on developing trades in the black schools, Booker T. Washington in particular stood out as a building heavily involved in intellectual pursuits and civil rights activism, and many students remained in the neighborhood to continue their academic and personal growth at LeMoyne (later LeMoyne-Owen) College. Some of the most notable alumni of either or both institutions included Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry, Memphis Mayor W.W. Herenton, Federal Communications Commissioner and NAACP President Ben Hooks, historian C. Eric Lincoln, and local NAACP chairman Jesse Turner.\textsuperscript{21}

These local neighborhood kids grew up in turbulent times, and forged identities for themselves as business and community leaders, civil rights activists, and music stars at Stax

\textsuperscript{19} “The Shelby County Democratic Club Presents a Forum on ‘Where the Negro Stands in the August 2nd Election’ on WDIA Radio Station,” 31 July 1962 and 1 August 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); “Z. Alexander Looby for Justice of the Supreme Court of Tennessee,” August 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); Reverend Alexander Gladney, General Chairman, Shelby County Democratic Club, form letter to Memphis pastors, 19 July 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3).


\textsuperscript{21} Two pamphlets printed by the Memphis and Shelby County Schools, “Trade and Industrial Education: A Golden Harvest of Learning Opportunities,” and “Directory of Vocational Programs in Memphis City Schools,” demonstrated that the trade programs existed overwhelmingly in black schools, especially Booker T. Washington High School (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); “Three Decades: A Tribute to Dr. Hollis F. Price, President Emeritus of LeMoyne-Owen College,” 10 September 1980 (LeMoyne Owen College, Dr. Hollis F. Price Library: Hollis F. Price Folder).
Records. Along the way, no form of activism proved out of bounds, further demonstrating the lack of validity to an integrationist-nationalist binary. In the 1950s, they lobbied local government in coordination with moderate mayor Edmund Orgill and sympathetic white journalist Edward Meeman of the *Press-Scimitar* to place an African American on a hospital board and to begin following the *Brown* decision by integrating schools and public facilities.22

Following on the heels of the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960, Memphians led their own sit-in campaign, most notably targeting the public libraries. While this alienated some of the white establishment, these activists made it clear that the new decade called for increased militancy.23 Perhaps most impressive was the creation of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, a biracial organization formed in 1958 that became especially active through the 1960s. Originally formed to foster gradual, nonviolent desegregation, the MCCR eventually took on issues of poverty in the schools and equal access to employment. Thus Memphis, a southern city, served as home to an integrated organization seeking goals later espoused by Black Power advocates across the country.24

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22 Ed Meeman, letter to Edmund Orgill, 15 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); Edmund Orgill, letter to Frank Ahlgren (editor of the *Commercial Appeal*), 25 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); E.L. Washburn (president of the 26th Ward Civic Club), letter to Edmund Orgill, 25 June 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); Edward J. Meeman, “To My Negro Friends,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 29 October 1962, p. 6 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Edward Meeman Papers, MVP 2207, MS 85, Box 2, Folder 5).

23 “The Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee 1960,” scrapbook of article clippings from March 1960 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis & Shelby County Room: Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection, Box IV, Folder 1); Edmund Orgill, letter to Jesse Turner opposing boycotts and sit-ins, 31 August 1976 (Orgill Papers, Box 40, Folder 15).

24 Lucius E. Burch, Jr., letter to Dr. W.B. Selah encouraging strength in civil rights struggle, 8 January 1963 (Burch Papers, Box 46, Vol. I); Lester A. Rosen, acting secretary, Minutes of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, 1 November 1966 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Dr. Hollis Price, presiding, MCCR Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Bert Ferguson, Executive Vice-President and General Manager of WDIA, “A WDIA Editorial: Three Good Goals for Community Relations Committee,” broadcast 14 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Harold J. Whalum, recorder, Minutes of MCCR Meeting, 16 January 1968 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A); Maxine Smith, temporary chair of Memphis Alliance of Community Organizations, letter to MACO Steering Committee, May 1969 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box V, Folder 14); Van De Burg, *New Day in Babylon*, 112-113; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, New Jersey, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 218, 231.
“Hold On, I’m Comin’”: Civil Rights, Economic Empowerment, Integration, Self-Determination

Civil rights leaders and musicians in Memphis in the 1960s consistently acted in ways that eluded clear categorization. While scholars have compared ideas of civil rights and economic empowerment, or integration or self-determination, African Americans in Memphis in clearly desired each of these, and refused to reduce their struggle to any singular concept. The stories of Stax Records and the Memphis civil rights struggle rejected such either-or dichotomies in favor of a pragmatic approach toward the goals of commercial success and black equality.

Two key Stax-Memphis comparisons exemplified this pragmatic, all-of-the-above approach:

First, the leadership of the Universal Life Insurance Company and the NAACP in Memphis’ African American community and the management at Stax Records, first under Jim Stewart and later under Al Bell, demonstrated that both Stax and Memphis maintained firmness in purpose and flexibility in methods in order to achieve their goals. Second, the 1968 sanitation strike and the 1972 West Coast festival known as Wattstax exemplified the ability of Memphis activists and Stax Records to blend seemingly disparate goals of integrationism and nationalism.

The Universal Life Insurance Company, led by Dr. J.E. Walker, served the black community of Memphis and represented a highly successful black enterprise in the segregated city. Success at Universal led to Walker to open the black-run Tri-State Bank at roughly the same time the Memphis black population grew and broke away from the local political machine,

demanded black police officers, and increased black capitalism in the city.\(^26\) While Universal served as an example of the black nationalist ethic of economic independence and Black Power, its leadership demonstrated highly integrationist tendencies from the mid-1950s through the 1960s. For example, when Mayor Edmund Orgill attempted in 1955 to place an African American on the John Gaston Hospital board, he chose Dr. Walker. Despite excellent qualifications to help oversee a hospital with eighty-five percent black clientele, Orgill and Walker faced a firestorm and the nomination was eventually withdrawn.\(^27\) Employees of Universal Life Insurance, however, persisted in the fight for civil rights, particularly through membership in the Memphis chapter of the NAACP, which remained active in supporting integrated buses, integrated public facilities and schools, and eventually participating in the MCCR for economic empowerment of the African American community.\(^28\)

Scholars provided several reasons explaining the NAACP’s activism in Memphis. According to David Tucker, while black leaders through most of the 1950s maintained a


\(^27\) Allan Asher, letter to Edmund Orgill, 28 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); Norman Isenberg, letter to Edmund Orgill, 29 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); Mrs. C.N. Oswalt, letter to Edmund Orgill, 6 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); E.B. Brown, letter to Edmund Orgill, 9 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civil Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 82-86; G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusade for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 22-23.

tradition of local coalition politics and gradual legal reforms (methods frequently attributed to the NAACP and criticized by new direct action groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the new generation of leadership at the dawn of the new decade demanded a more progressive approach. Russell Sugarmon, Ben Hooks, and A.W. Willis became the leaders of the 1960s and beyond, and they worked within the well-established framework of the NAACP in Memphis with leaders such as Vasco and Maxine Smith. Additionally, these new, energetic leaders represented some of Memphis’ best-educated African Americans; they attended schools such as Harvard and DePaul, and many of them started at the Soulsville neighborhood institutions of black pride and black education, Booker T. Washington High School and LeMoyne (or LeMoyne-Owen) College. Their ability to function not only within the NAACP, but also in the MCCR and through local and national organizations associated with civil rights and the War on Poverty made Memphis unique among its SCLC- and SNCC-dominated peers.29

While the African American leadership of Memphis experienced a changing of the guard from the late 1950s into the early 1960s, the young white entrepreneur Jim Stewart sought his place in the music industry. The legacy he created at Stax Records seemed to defy logic, but in the context of both a southern cultural crossroads for black and white innovations in music, as well as that of a segregated city with a unique transition from machine politics to moderate coalition becoming slowly more assertive, the birth of Stax becomes more understandable in Memphis than anywhere else.30 Stewart’s leadership at Stax built a soul music empire, and his

leadership, followed by that of his black friend Al Bell in the late 1960s, provided a fascinating comparison to the local black civil rights leadership in Memphis throughout this era.

The leading Stax historians, Rob Bowman and Robert Gordon, largely attributed Jim Stewart’s first successes in 1960 and 1961 to luck and black agency. Stewart fortuitously recorded a black vocal group known as the Veltones, whose “Fool in Love” brought him to WDIA, the local Memphis station that had recently broken new ground with all-black programming. It was there that he encountered Rufus Thomas, who in an act of courage and agency, came to Stewart’s newly-located Satellite Studios on McLemore Avenue with his daughter Carla, starting Stewart’s fledgling company on the path toward an incredible lineup of black solo artists performing with his mixed house band.  

Stewart’s location on McLemore proved fortuitous as well; his studio became the focal point of a thriving black middle class neighborhood. The studio sat across the street from the Big D grocery store where future songwriter David Porter worked, and the record store Stewart’s sister Estelle Axton ran next door developed into the most popular spot for young people from a neighborhood that included Booker T. Washington High School, home to children of black doctors, lawyers, and teachers, as well as a very highly respected music staff who provided vital early training for future Stax stars.


31 Bowman, Soulsville, U.S.A., 9-10; Gordon, Respect Yourself, 11-12, 31-32.
As a producer and executive, Jim Stewart proved adept at knowing when to stick with what worked best and when to reach out to new voices to innovate. He largely avoided stereo recording, acknowledging the largely young, black audience who bought singles and listened to the radio, both of which worked best with mono. Stax scholar Rob Bowman noted several key features of Stewart’s work as a producer that helped create the Stax sound: In addition to his preference for mono recording, he tended to place vocalists lower in the overall mix than most companies at the time, apparently a source of tension with parent company Atlantic Records. He frequently vetoed songwriting decisions that included minor chords, saying they were out of place in the type of rhythm and blues they were trying to produce. And he typically ended vocal songs by fading out rather than ending abruptly, which Bowman claimed led to catharsis as parameters were stretched in this format. Stewart, a white southern producer, understood that sales to young black audiences represented his best chance for success, and throughout his time in the studio, especially behind the board in the early and mid-1960s, he sought to develop a sound that spoke to black America using a black stable of singers with a mixed house band.

Jim Stewart certainly maintained no activist tendencies, but as a southern white man he broke with the standard trope of white racism in southern society. His willingness to hire and promote the likes of Rufus and Carla Thomas in his early days, and the entire roster of African American stars throughout the company’s existence, demonstrated a little-understood but extremely important prototype of southern musicians and producers. Most southern musicians, in the years prior to the civil rights era and continuing throughout the tumultuous period, lived their musical lives judging their peers according to the content of their playing rather than the color of their skin – without even explicitly acknowledging that this was the case. For example,

white trumpeter Wayne Jackson, who spent much of his career at Stax and beyond with black saxophonist Andrew Love as part of the Memphis Horns, argued that “race was not a consideration,” and that the only criteria for being part of the “music fraternity” required that one could play well.35 Historians continue to argue about whether such attitudes constituted activism, but the fact remains that Jim Stewart facilitated a community of black and white people in 1960s Memphis, Tennessee, where people worked together in what they considered a “family atmosphere” and a “party,” and created some of the most exciting and successful music in the nation.36

One of Jim Stewart’s boldest career moves involved hiring Al Bell, who he eventually promoted to take over Stax in the early 1970s. Bell took Stax in an entirely new direction without abandoning what had made the company a hit, and Stewart seemed to understand intuitively that Bell, as an African American with radio success, northern connections, and a strong civil rights background, presented an enormous opportunity for the company to grow in the late 1960s into the 1970s.37 In much the same way that young black leadership in Memphis’ civil rights movement carried the torch through the NAACP from paternalism to direct action, Jim Stewart’s gradual release of control to Al Bell demonstrated immense respect and understanding of what had to be done for both the company and its larger role in American society during turbulent racial times. Here again, Memphis provided a unique location from which to observe the overlapping layers of music, activism, and social and political developments; while Stewart and Bell negotiated the new directions of Stax music and

35 Wayne Jackson (with wife Amy Jackson), phone interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 14 February 2015.
36 Parker interview, Jackson interview.
promotion, Memphis witnessed African Americans running for office through the mid-1960s, even gaining support from whites such as Bert Ferguson, who himself made history in his decision to turn WDIA radio into an all-black-programming station, thereby boosting the careers of Stax artists.38 Additionally, Robert Gordon pointed out that Stewart’s conservative nature and Bell’s progressive vision combined in the studio to facilitate a dynamic production relationship that served to create exciting new soul music. This type of relationship, often crossing racial lines, carried into various composing and production teams, including that of Steve Cropper, Eddie Floyd, and Wayne Jackson working late nights on new songs at the Lorraine Motel.39

Like any family, especially a biracial family in 1960s Memphis, Stax experienced complications and conflicts. Despite the fond memories of family and lack of outward recognition of color in making music together, the later Stax years exhibited strained relationships. For many, it was less a black-and-white issue than a local-and-national issue: Stax found most of its early success using Memphians or people from nearby, and Al Bell brought in outsiders like Don Davis with Motown experience and the Staples Singers from Chicago; additionally, his vision of expanding the Stax product included using other studios in the area and moving beyond the singular sound Stewart had maintained in the early years.40 The Stax artists offered a variety of interpretations of the conflicts and challenges within the company.

38 Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., letter to “Frank” inviting to Shelby County Democratic Club reception (held at Universal Life Insurance Company), 24 October 1966 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 3, Folder 2); Bob Bourne (Administration of Justice, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights), letter to Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., Esq., 7 May 1963 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 3, Folder 10); Bert Ferguson, “Three Good Goals for Community Relations Committee,” WDIA editorial broadcast 14 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Ferguson, “Riots Rarely Happen in Neighborhoods Where People Care,” WDIA editorial broadcast 16 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Maxine Smith (Executive Secretary, Memphis NAACP), letter to War on Poverty Committee discussing race discrimination in Memphis programs to receive federal funds, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F).
While Deanie Parker acknowledged that disagreements were part of being a family and “we didn’t allow that to interfere with what we were here to do,” Wayne Jackson recalled “a party,” where “Otis was the star of it, and believe me, it was fun.” Yet the conflicts existed, such as an argument on tour between Steve Cropper and Al Bell that to this day no parties involved wish to discuss but which ended in Cropper losing some control and Bell being promoted within the company. Such disagreements certainly were not unique to Stax; within the Memphis community, despite efforts by black activists and sympathetic whites to improve the social, political, and economic situation, conflicts existed and sometimes resulted in alienation. Edmund Orgill, criticized in the 1950s by whites angry at his moderate attempts at racial progress, exchanged bitter correspondence with his old friend Jesse Turner in 1976 over his disapproval of NAACP protest methods. Years later, however, Orgill urged an old white friend to donate more on behalf of civil rights activist Hollis Price, just as black and white people alike speak overwhelmingly about the positive “oasis” of Stax Records in a complicated time for Memphis and the United States.

In 1968, Memphis experienced one of its most traumatic moments when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. He came to the city as part of the ongoing sanitation workers’ strike, which started as a labor issue and quickly escalated as a civil rights issue due to the fact that the poorly-treated sanitation workers in Memphis were overwhelmingly African American. Like previous elements of the black struggle, such as

41 Parker, interview by author; Jackson, interview with author; Gordon, Respect Yourself, 190.
42 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 151-152.
43 Edmund Orgill, letter to “Jesse,” 31 August 1976 (Orgill Papers, Box 40, Folder 15).
44 Abe Plough, letter to Edmund Orgill about his donation to LeMoyne-Owen College for the Dr. Hollis F. Price Scholarship Fund, 5 January 1983 (Orgill Papers, Box 40, Folder 21); Edmund Orgill, letter to Abe Plough urging him to give more, handwritten around the margins of Plough’s letter to Orgill (Orgill Papers, Box 40, Folder 21); Parker, interview by author; Jackson, interview by author.
45 Tucker, Memphis Since Crump, 154; Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, 216-218; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 20-21, 55, 74, 80, 124.
desegregation and jobs, the sanitation workers’ strike demonstrated the complex nature of integrationism and nationalism, and peaceful protest and militant action. Likewise, Al Bell took Stax Records in entirely new directions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially with the 1972 festival known as Wattstax. The massive event, the charitable donations it generated, and the 1973 documentary film it inspired similarly demonstrated the blurred lines and pragmatism that belied any attempts at binary categorization of the movement.46

Michael Honey’s outstanding narrative of those fateful days included stories of all parts of the spectrum, proving once again that academically constructed binaries failed to account for the pragmatic, all-of-the-above approach of those in the midst of the struggle. For example, The Invaders represented perhaps the most militant, explicitly Black Power-oriented organization in Memphis, yet this younger, less organized group received far more attention from the reactive white press than recognition from the traditional black civil rights leadership of James Lawson, T.O. Jones, and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, their any-means-necessary approach to revolutionary change, despite the disapproval of organized older leadership, signaled the desperation of a movement frustrating so many who continued to experience police brutality, economic inequality, and segregation.47 According to Honey, the entire movement blended religious, economic, and political goals; brought in the central national figure in the civil rights movement at a crossroads in his own life as he struggled to move from integration to poverty and justice; and alienated various classes and generations of African Americans in Memphis, leading

47 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 257; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 231, 234-237, 487.
to continued white domination on the part of Mayor Henry Loeb and a painful decline in hope through the decade of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{48}

King’s death at the Lorraine also connected the interwoven stories of Stax and Memphis civil rights, as the motel frequently opened its doors to artists who needed a place to escape the heat, a good meal and a bed for visiting singers, and a welcome environment for an integrated company to talk strategy and write songs in a largely segregated city.\textsuperscript{49} Just as King expanded his endeavors in the late 1960s, Al Bell sought after his death to push economic empowerment and black pride through his work with Stax Records.\textsuperscript{50} Among the most visible activities in the entire history of Stax was the 1972 Wattstax festival. The festival represented every possible aspect of the integration-nationalism spectrum. The event served as a response to a community recently damaged by race riots to increase black pride, and Jesse Jackson acted as emcee, continuing a years-long relationship with Al Bell that included recording his own spoken word work and activism. The performers included the message-driven Staples Singers and black pride symbol Isaac Hayes. Schlitz sponsored the event to atone for a recent black labor dispute mediated by Jackson, and proceeds from the event went to a variety of charitable organizations, including a hospital in Watts. Finally, Stax Records increased its West Coast and national audience, thereby increasing its economic success.\textsuperscript{51} Despite the nationalist appearance of Jesse


Jackson’s raised fist and dashiki, Kim Weston’s stirring rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and Isaac Hayes’s dramatic performance of the “Theme from ‘Shaft,’” Wattstax achieved recognition typically reserved for the SCLC or the NAACP. Senator Alan Cranston from California introduced a measure before the United States Congress to officially honor the efforts made by the company on behalf of peaceful race relations and economic improvement in Watts and across the nation. In a manner befitting the new activist vision of Al Bell and Stax, the company continued to engage in further work within the Memphis community until its demise in 1975-76: On both official company and individual artist levels, Stax worked to build better housing for poor and elderly African Americans, negotiate curfews and quell the black community during racial riots, and perform and civic events and raise funds for civil rights and poverty causes throughout the civil rights era.

The sanitation strike of 1968 and the Wattstax festival of 1972 raised numerous questions about the validity of dividing black activism and black entrepreneurship in the Black Power years into categories of integrationism and nationalism. Direct action and militant protest, nonviolence and aggressive retaliation, civil rights and economic empowerment, and explicit activism and commercially-driven entertainment all coexisted and relied on each other for progress in the black struggle for freedom and financial success. Just as the biracial Stax

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membership and the black Memphis civil rights leadership demonstrated dynamic and complicated methods, the sanitation strike and Wattstax represented the problem of attempting to fit daily black endeavors into constructed essentialist binaries.

“Soul Finger”: Analysis of Stax Music in Context of the Civil Rights Movement

The most important evidence for Stax’s role in the civil rights movement and the problematic nature of essentialist binaries such as integrationism and nationalism was, of course, the music. The singers, players, composers, and producers at Stax Records created decidedly black southern soul music in an integrated environment during a tumultuous racial period in American history. They provided the soundtrack for a generation, and their music spoke to the changing times and their place in history. The musical analysis in this chapter examines five key artists in seeking to illuminate Stax’s dialogue with the method binary of integrationism and nationalism: Booker T. and the MG’s, Rufus Thomas, Sam and Dave, The Bar-Kays, and Isaac Hayes.

Booker T. Jones and Steve Cropper started in different worlds, but their convergence at Stax Records laid the foundation of the Stax sound and the soundtrack of the southern civil rights movement. Besides producing many of the Stax artists and playing on nearly all of the key recordings from Stax’s first period of 1960-1968, Booker T. and the MG’s recorded a series of successful albums on their own that provided meaningful contributions to the Stax legacy.


55 For purposes of this study, the band will be considered as the core recording unit under the name Booker T. and the MG’s: Booker T. Jones, Steve Cropper, Donald “Duck” Dunn, and Al Jackson, Jr. Dunn did not officially join the band until 1965 but played an important role before he was the official house bassist, and Jones was often replaced on piano and organ by Isaac Hayes and Cropper during his time as a student at Indiana University, but his artistic voice was still central to the Stax sound, especially with the instrumental group. Gordon, Respect Yourself, 67-69, 76-77, 91-92.
Their discography of originals and cover songs consisted of anything but a unified approach; they drew from rhythm and blues, traditional blues, jazz, and rock and roll to create a unique sound that defied categorization. Three albums from their early, middle, and waning years at Stax provide a sample of Booker T and the MG’s and their role in breaking down barriers musically and socially: *Green Onions* from 1962, *Hip Hug-Her* from 1967, and *Melting Pot* from 1971.56

The majority of Booker T. and the MG’s recordings included a combination of soulful originals, jazz standards, and rhythm and blues and pop covers of a wide range of artists such as Ray Charles, The Beatles, and various Motown artists.57 *Melting Pot*, the last album the band produced at Stax, showed a different direction by including all originals, but even this endeavor honored the band’s jazz and rhythm and blues roots with techniques like Henry Mancini-inspired vocalese sections in “L.A. Jazz Song.”58 Cover songs have long existed in popular music, both as a sign of respect to the original artist and as a way of establishing a unique identity in comparison to previous acts, and Booker T. and the MG’s fit well into both traditions.59 “More,” for instance, continued a line of performances from Frank Sinatra, who sang it as a big band swing; Andy Williams, who was accompanied by a symphony orchestra; and a rare version by The Supremes, who offered a much more tempered pop version than the MG’s.60 On *Hip Hug-Her*,

58 Henry Mancini, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s (Music from the Motion Picture Score)*, © 1961 by RCA Victor, LSP-2362; *Melting Pot*, “L.A. Jazz Song.”
Her, the MG’s played at a significantly faster tempo, and Steve Cropper’s accompaniment over the A sections represented a modified clave, providing a somewhat Latin feel against Al Jackson’s traditionally soulful beat with quarter-note rimshots reminiscent of his playing on Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness.” The result was a hybrid feel that both honored the jazz tradition and offered the Stax house band’s own take on the standard.\(^6^1\) Comparatively, the band stayed relatively true to African American songs like “I Got a Woman” by Ray Charles and “Get Ready,” composed by Smokey Robinson for The Temptations. On these already soulful songs, the MG’s applied slightly altered tempos and more improvisatory approaches to the melody, but otherwise tended to remain closer to the originals.\(^6^2\) Such adaptability demonstrated a band willing to stretch itself and ignore boundaries in order to express itself and achieve success.

The band also employed techniques unique to them among Stax recordings. They performed most of the only songs in minor keys during the years when Jim Stewart was still in the studio, as he remained adamant that minor chords went against what he considered to be a southern “black” sound.\(^6^3\) “Green Onions,” contrary to almost everything else Stax produced in the early 1960s, maintained a decidedly minor sound, with a flatted third in the bass line and an A-flat minor chord serving as the passing chord between the gospel-influenced one-to-four motion of the F and B-flat chords.\(^6^4\) Whereas other songs, such as Sam and Dave’s “Hold On, I’m Coming” or Otis Redding’s “Love Man” got around the Stewart-mandated major focus

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\(^6^4\) *Green Onions*, “Green Onions;”
through the use of “blue notes” like the flatted seventh (a practice so common to African and
black popular music that musicologists rightly question its analysis within a western theory
framework), the MG’s explicitly applied minor tonalities when it fit their sensibilities.65

Additionally, while most Stax artists from the Stewart era maintained largely diatonic,
triad- and dominant-based chord structures, Booker T. and the MG’s were allowed the freedom
to employ more complex harmonic vocabulary in chord structures and voicings with extensions.
For example, jazz standard “Stranger on the Shore” used a flatted ninth on the dominant going
into a major-seventh tonic. “More” went even further beyond established soul boundaries,
vamping between the major tonic D-flat and a minor fifth A-flat; the A-flat minor voicing also
outlined a B-major sixth chord, thereby maneuvering comfortably between a sophisticated jazz
audience and popular southern listeners more accustomed to hearing pentatonic-based sounds.
Jones also demonstrated his advanced theory understanding by voicing the chords with ninths in
the middle, providing an interval of a second in each chord to add color.66

Booker T. and the MG’s offered a fascinating array of outstanding instrumental soul
music that defied categorization. Their very existence as a biracial band in 1960s Memphis
challenged social and musical norms of the day, but their music provided a case study in the
relationship between artistic expression and social activism in the civil rights era.67 It is essential
to remember that, at the very same time and in the very same city where these musical
innovations occurred, black activists and white allies fought tirelessly and applied a wide range

65 Gerhard Kubik, Africa and the Blues (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 123; Hans
Weisethaunet, “Is There Such Thing as the ‘Blue Note’?,” from Popular Music 20, no. 1 (January 2001), 99-116
William C. Banfield, Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy: An Interpretive History from Spirituals
to Hip Hop (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2010), 9, 101.
301-303.
of methods in the struggle for integration, economic improvement, and equality. In much the same way that civil rights leaders in Memphis and at the national level embraced a variety of methods in the black freedom struggle, Booker T. and the MG’s employed a broad spectrum of musical influences to create a wholly unique sound.

Sam Moore and Dave Prater began singing gospel music, and formed a duo in Miami, Florida, before eventually being signed by Atlantic Records’ Jerry Wexler in 1964 and loaned out to subsidiary Stax Records in Memphis. Upon hearing word that they would be sent to Memphis, the duo admitted to some hesitation; the city maintained a national reputation as southern and racist, and the two expected to be recording in New York with other Atlantic stars. Despite their initial wariness, Stax Records proved the perfect location for Sam and Dave’s meteoric rise to success. Their recordings with the MG’s, their partnership with songwriters and producers Isaac Hayes and David Porter, and their gospel-inspired stage presence on the road made Sam and Dave among the greatest stars in popular music during the 1960s. Their hit songs “Hold On, I’m Comin’,” “Soul Man,” “When Something Is Wrong with

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68 Edmund Orgill, letter to Frank Ahlgren encouraging to publicize peaceful bus integration, 25 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Bishop Cornelius Range, Sr. D.D. LL.D. (Church of God in Christ), letter to Edmund Orgill inviting to Fiftieth Jubilee Anniversary of Bishop Charles Mason, 25 October 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Rev. Alexander Gladney (General Chairman, Shelby County Democratic Club), form letter to Memphis black churches about upcoming election for candidates Russell Sugarmon, Jesse Turner, Alexander Gladney, George Holloway, and Fred Davis, 19 July 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); Hollis F. Price, “Education: Key to the Future,” in The ULICO (official publication of Universal Life Insurance Company) XI (Summer, 1962), p. 1 & 17 (Hollis F. Price Folder); Minutes from the MCCR Executive Committee Meeting discussing how to approach businesses about hiring more black employees, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Bert Ferguson, “Riots Rarely Happen in Neighborhoods Where People Care” (WDIA editorial supporting A.W. Willis during his mayoral campaign), 16 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Memorandum to Memphis Alliance of Community Organizations on five point program for improving black economic situation in Memphis, January 1968 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box V, Folder 14).
69 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 98.
My Baby,” and “I Thank You” offered valuable insight into the ways their music crossed integrationist and nationalist lines.71

“Hold On, I’m Comin’” and “Soul Man” presented overt dialogue about soul culture and fraternity. Written by the legendary songwriting duo of Isaac Hayes and David Porter, they represented the growing soul culture in the coming Black Power era of 1966-1967 in both lyrics and music.72 Lyrically, “Hold On, I’m Comin’” also stood as a powerful love song, with lines like “lean on me when times are bad,” and “reach out to me for satisfaction,” but in the mid-1960s they contained an unmistakable tone of black togetherness, especially when performed with the gritty, gospel-infused call-and-response style of Sam and Dave. (The original album cover featured the singers riding turtles, perhaps a nod to the frequent complaints of too-slow action in black civil rights.)73 Isaac Hayes acknowledged that “Soul Man” was directly inspired by the racial violence of 1967. Lines like “got what I got the hard way” illuminated his thinking about unrest in places like Watts and Detroit, where he saw on the news that black-owned businesses were often spared by writing “soul” on them like the Passover story of the Bible.74

Musically, both songs followed the Hayes-Porter-Sam-Dave formula: they remained primarily triad-based harmonically, relying on horn lines to provide the blue notes. They avoided minor chords, but provided harmonic variety by moving from the tonic to the flat seventh (as in A-flat major to G-flat major on the interlude of “Hold On, I’m Comin’”) or using flat third and flat fifth on the bridge (as in E-flat major and B-flat major in the key of G on the bridge of “Soul Man”). They also included the country-influenced guitar of Steve Cropper, the aggressive timekeeping

72 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 133-135.
73 Sam and Dave, Hold On, I’m Comin’; Bowman, “The Stax Sound,” 304.
of Al Jackson, Jr. on drums and the signature unison and octave horn lines of Wayne Jackson (who actually felt “Soul Man” was pandering and corny) and Andrew Love.\textsuperscript{75} “When Something Is Wrong with My Baby” came from an unhappy period in David Porter’s personal life, and represented his aspirations for the kind of love that united two people.\textsuperscript{76} Placed in the context of the civil rights movement, it takes on a sentiment of togetherness and familial care that transcends its pop love song façade.\textsuperscript{77} While the musical setting of a 12/8 gospel feel with standard I-VI-IV-V harmonies (and a rare F minor chord on the bridge, offset by a surprising Bb-flat major to give it a ii-V feel) establishes a definite black feel, lyrics like “we stand as one and that makes it better” and “if she’s got problems I got to help solve them” could not escape the overwhelming communal drive toward black freedom in 1966, nor would it fit prescribed categories like integrationism or nationalism.\textsuperscript{78} The same can be said about “I Thank You” from 1968. The driving beat over a single E-flat chord provided a sense of purpose, and the way the duo continued to say “thank you” for performing unnecessary acts of kindness demonstrated gratitude and an opportunity to help those in need.\textsuperscript{79}

If Booker T. and the MG’s and the Memphis Horns defined the first Jim Stewart-dominated phase of Stax Records through 1968, Isaac Hayes and the Bar-Kays made Stax what it

\textsuperscript{76} Bowman, Soulsville, U.S.A., 114.
\textsuperscript{77} Ryan, “Can I Get a Witness?,” 43; Banfield, Cultural Codes, 9, 55-56, 156; Vincent, Party Music, xiv-xv, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{79} I Thank You, “I Thank You.”
was the in the Al Bell years. Isaac Hayes was a regular fixture at the company well before Al Bell’s ascendance after 1968, but he remained in the role of songwriter and producer under Stewart. When he began developing his own style as a performer, he did so in tandem with the young group of Booker T. Washington students and recent graduates known as the Bar-Kays, who received training from the Stax house players and developed into regular studio and touring musicians themselves as the Stax catalogue grew. The Bar-Kays’ repertoire from earlier and later years included two songs worth considering in the integrationism-nationalism dialogue, “Soul Finger” and “Son of Shaft.” The latter was inspired by Hayes’s smash success, “Theme from Shaft,” which along with “Soulsville” from the same album demonstrated his role as artist and activist in the civil rights movement.

In 1967, the young Bar-Kays went into the studio at McLemore Avenue to record “Soul Finger,” a funky, upbeat song indicative of their camaraderie and youth. The title and only lyrics, sung by local youth coerced into entering the studio to make party noise by David Porter’s promise of bottles of Coca-Cola, proved all that was necessary to make the song’s point: pointing a finger, raising a fist, or making or dancing to black music in 1967 meant black consciousness and hipness. Unlike previous examples, “Soul Finger” ignored prior Stax conventions and

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placed the dominant seventh at the focal point of the melody, signaling a bolder, unapologetically black direction in the future of the company. The Bar-Kays, however, were not black nationalists; they cited the slightly older Mar-Keys and Booker T. and the MG’s, both mixed groups (and in the Mar-Keys’ case, sometimes entirely white) as key influences on their music.

When Isaac Hayes joined forces with the Bar-Kays in 1971 to develop the soundtrack for the motion picture Shaft, he made music history. Sitting in the studio directing the players to match his vision for the preliminary footage of lead character John Shaft moving through New York City, Hayes found inspiration in the wah-wah guitar, matched by sixteenth notes on the hi-hat, and built a now-legendary soundtrack on that foundation. The final product created the sound of the 1970s: an orchestra spontaneously arranged by Hayes himself highlighted a funky, brooding vamp over the guitar’s octave Gs, eventually settling into the repeating chord changes of F major seven and E minor seven, and a brief lyric emphasizing a vision of urban black manhood that combined street toughness, sex appeal, and pride.

Hayes’s music was unique among Stax recordings, just as he was unique among Stax artists. While many of them lived in the middle class neighborhood in southern Memphis, Hayes came from extreme poverty and went to the north-side black school, Manassas, which turned out an equally impressive array of musical talent but much more in the realm of jazz than southern soul. The Bar-Kays followed

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84 Soul Finger, “Soul Finger.”
88 Addie D. Jones, Portrait of a Ghetto School (New York: Vantage Press, 1973), 140-142, 148-149; “Celebrating 100 years of the Tiger: saluting Manassas High School, 1899-1999” (Special Collections, University of Memphis: Mississippi Valley Collection, MVC LD 7501 M3745 M252X 1999 MLK), 11, 21; Bowman, Soulsville, U.S.A., 51-
on Hayes’s success with “Son of Shaft,” demonstrating again the balance between honoring tradition and finding a personal voice by applying the wah-wah guitar G, but turning the song significantly grittier and more youthful by focusing on a G minor feel, including the jazz-influenced Dorian mode and the blues-oriented flatted fifth.89

In addition to his enormous career at Stax, both as a writer and producer in the 1960s and as an performer in the 1970s, Isaac Hayes performed more charity work and local and national community activism than most of the Stax team. He sought to provide low-cost housing for the poor and elderly, helped quell violence and negotiate curfews with city leadership during black uprisings, performed at Wattstax to raise money for local and national organizations related to the Watts uprisings, and was honored by numerous organizations including city governments, civil rights groups, and the Academy Awards (for Shaft).90 Hayes’s philanthropic and activist work, like his music, defied artificial categories; while he clearly desired black economic development and wrote music for a film about a tough black police officer, he also engaged in cooperative work with white city officials to avoid race riots, and even joined in the campaign for black Democratic congressional candidate Harold Ford in 1974.91

This pragmatic combination of moderation and assertiveness, integration and black economic empowerment, that became a hallmark of Memphis music and Memphis civil rights

52; Jackson, In My Wildest Dreams: Take 1, 87; Wayne Jackson, In My Wildest Dreams: Take 2 (Memphis, Tennessee: Jackson and Jackson Publishing, 2006), 6, 158; Gordon, Respect Yourself; 237-238.
89 Sang and Dance/Son of Shaft, “Son of Shaft.”
activism, was on full display in the lesser-known song from *Shaft*, “Soulsville.”92 The song could not have been more different from “Theme from *Shaft*” – it was in 3/4 time, with a slow, swinging gospel feel, and largely alternated between the I and IV over tonic B-flat and a bridge section alternating G minor seven and C minor seven. Hayes most likely maintained a subtle approach to the music so that it could accompany the true focus of the song, a challenging narrative of the black struggle through poverty, discrimination, and drugs. “Black man, born free, at least that’s the way it’s supposed to be,” opened the song, which gave way to jobs that were “hard to find,” a crime rate that is “rising too.” With rent past due, some did better than others through prostitution, while others suffered through continued escapes by trying to “get so high.” True to the complicated interplay of factors that belied any academically constructed binary, however, Hayes concluded each verse with the name of this place of despair. Despite the terrible conditions, he gave it a name associated with the pride and solidarity of a people accustomed to creating beauty out of their unfair conditions: “I call it Soulsville.”

**Conclusion**

The evidence clearly demonstrated that artificial labels such as “integrationist” and “nationalist” failed to apply to Memphis or to Stax. Even when broken down into more clearly delineated and academically palatable concepts, musicians and activists continued to defy such limits. In particular, civil rights leaders and scholars alike sought to express goals and methods in terms of civil rights versus economic empowerment, or integration versus self-determination, but Memphians in the streets and in the studio consistently avoided such narrow categories.

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92 *Shaft*, “Soulsville.”
Jim Stewart and Al Bell, the black and white leaders of the city’s unlikely success story, demonstrated varying levels of activism that ran the gamut of civil rights methods. Stewart in particular mirrored Mayor Edmund Orgill in his white moderate approach and willingness to work with African Americans without any seeming pretense of activism at all. In truth, both men were likely Southern white leaders trying to achieve success who simply did not hold the same racist attitudes as many of their counterparts throughout the community. Al Bell, combining his music and marketing prowess with a clear desire to improve black life, likewise defied any essentialist categories in his activism, choosing at various times to align his work with integration and black autonomy, civil rights and economic empowerment. The resultant products of Stax’s production and Memphis’s activism, most notably the Wattstax and the sanitation strike, similarly belied any notion of a unified approach to civil rights as defined by academically constructed categories of integrationism or nationalism.

The complex nature of civil rights activism and artistic expression in 1960s Memphis rang out in the music of the era. When black-and-white Booker T. and the MG’s topped instrumental charts with playlists as varied as “Hip Hug-Her” and “More,” they spoke to the variety of perspectives on culture and society in the era. When soul men Sam and Dave sang and danced like black preachers before throngs of adoring fans, they integrated listeners while boosting their status as black men of value and economic worth in an era that desperately needed such men. And when Isaac Hayes and the Bar-Kays ushered in the funky 1970s, like the civil rights leaders in the city where they lived, they employed equal parts of anger and love, empowerment and cooperation, and integrationism and nationalism in their musical expression of the complex and turbulent times in which they lived.
Deanie Parker moved from Mississippi to southern Ohio before finally settling in Memphis, Tennessee, where she won a local contest in 1963 in which the prize was an audition at Stax Records. While she quickly realized she would not be a lead singer at the company, Parker’s personality, work ethic, and talent made her an asset to Jim Stewart, Estelle Axton, and the entire Stax family. As a company still in its early years, Stax presented “needs massive enough” that a willingness and ability to work with people allowed Deanie Parker to become “quite a generalist in the organization.” In her subsequent years at Stax, many came to believe that Parker served as THE generalist in the organization. She worked in marketing and public relations, contributed songwriting and background vocals, and served as the unifying force in the office and the studio through both eras of the company’s existence.¹

Stax witnessed the rise of several powerful female stars, including Carla Thomas, The Emotions, Mable John, Mavis Staples, Kim Weston, and Shirley Brown, despite famously passing on the definitive female star of the era, Aretha Franklin.² What set Stax apart from its peers on issues of sexuality and gender was the way its soul men approached these frequently contentious relationships. Artists such as Otis Redding and Johnnie Taylor negotiated the male-

female dynamic in subtler, warmer ways than many of their contemporaries in the era of masculine reclamation and sexual conquest through music. While they in no way compromised or led audiences to question their manhood, their performances and lyrics offered a unique alternative in which women and mixed-gender groups like Carla Thomas, Mable John, and The Soul Children entered a dialogue different from the mainstream culture that caused so many black feminists to raise their voices in protest against the intersectional oppression of race and gender.³ This gender dialogue mirrored the gender relationships of the civil rights movement in Memphis and nationally, with women taking an activist role without explicitly challenging traditional roles and men displaying a more open engagement with women.⁴

The male-female relationships in the Memphis civil rights movement and the male-female relationships at Stax Records, supported with musical analyses of Carla Thomas and Otis Redding, Johnnie Taylor, and Mable John, demonstrated the need for a more nuanced perspective on gender relationships in civil rights scholarship. This chapter attempts to apply


such a nuanced approach to gender in the civil rights movement by examining the male-female dynamic in the Memphis movement and at Stax Records. Such an exploration first requires discussion of some of the interactions between men and women in the Memphis movement, as well as the delicate relationship between black and white women during this time. This is followed by Stax case studies of founders, brother and sister Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, and the fascinating story of publicist Deanie Parker, followed by an exploration of the ways Stax both maintained and challenged black and white gender stereotypes through the 1960s and early 1970s. The music of several male and female artists at Stax will demonstrate the creative expression of these social and political ideas.

“Respect”: The Male-Female Relationship in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement

As was the case nationally, both men and women played key roles in the Memphis civil rights movement. Fortunately, scholars eventually began acknowledging the crucial – and often central – role that women played in local movements across the South.⁵ Civil rights activism in Memphis was carried out by both black and white as well as male and female, and typically represented the middle class. White civic leaders like Mayor Edmund Orgill, media members Ed Meeman from the Press-Scimitar and Bert Ferguson from WDIA, lawyer Lucius Burch, and women such as Myra Dreifus and educator Frances Coe, worked with black activists like NAACP leaders Maxine and Vascoe Smith and Jesse Turner, ambitious lawyers such as Ben Hooks and Russell Sugarmon, and business leaders like J.E. Walker and George Lee, to fight for

civil rights and economic opportunity in a manner that never openly challenged gender norms but allowed open dialogue on an equal footing for men and women. These actions demonstrated a willingness to work together as men and women within a Southern culture of paternalism in both race and gender, and paved the road for future discussions of both racial and gender equality.

Maxine Smith represented the most visible symbol of black female leadership in Memphis. While her husband, Vasco, held the more formal executive position in Memphis’ NAACP in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she took an active role as Executive Secretary, writing letters and engaging in community activism as far-ranging as addressing racism in the public school system and implementing a jobs plan to achieve fair employment, pay, and entrepreneurship opportunities for Memphis African Americans. Smith’s work demonstrated

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6 League of Women Voters of Tennessee, “A Study of Reapportionment in Tennessee,” 1959 (University of Memphis, Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection: Edmund Orgill Papers, MSS 87, Box 16, Folder I); Edmund Orgill, letter to Frank Ahlgren (editor, Commercial Appeal), encouraging to publicize cities with successful bus desegregation, 25 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); L. Alex Wilson (editor, Tri-State Defender), letter to Edmund Orgill inviting to black newspaper’s annual awards program, 22 November 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Minutes of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, 1 November 1966, 10 August 1967, 16 January 1968 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A, I.B); Bert Ferguson, “Riots Rarely Happen in Neighborhoods Where People Care,” WDIA Editorial broadcast 16 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Mrs. Maxine A. Smith (Executive Secretary, Memphis NAACP), letter to War on Poverty Committee on racism in Memphis, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box III.F); Edward J. Meeman, “Next Race Relations Task in Memphis: More and Better Jobs for Negroes,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 26 February 1963, p. 6 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Edward Meeman Papers, MVP 2207, MS 85, Box 2, Folder 5); Lucius E. Burch, Jr., letter to Edward Meeman sharing copy of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 12 July 1963 (University of Memphis, Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection: Lucius E. Burch Jr. Papers, MSS 126, Box 46: Memphis Community on Community Relations Vol. I – Memphis Street Railway Company); Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson asking for help with abuse of power by Mayor William Ingram in Memphis, 1965 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Russell B. Sugarmon Jr. Papers, MSS 108, Box 2, Folder 5); Hollis F. Price, “Education: Key to the Future,” in The ULICO (official publication of Universal Life Insurance Company), Volume XI (Summer 1962), number 2, p. 1 & 17 (LeMoyne Owen College, Dr. Hollis F. Price Library: Hollis F. Price Folder); Alice Fulbright, “Honoree’s Wife Achieves, Too,” Commercial Appeal, 24 April 1975, p. 32 (Price Folder); Maxine Smith (Temporary Chairmain, Memphis Alliance of Community Organizations), memo to steering committee discussing groups to consider for organization, May 1969 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis Tennessee, Memphis & Shelby County Room: Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection, Box V, Folder 14); “Judge Hooks Calls for Law, Order and Justice for All,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, May 1968 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Memphis Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 1418).

7 Mrs. Maxine A. Smith, letter to War on Poverty Committee on racial discrimination on the Memphis Board of Education, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); Memphis Alliance of Community Organizations, Memo to Chairmen of Human Relations Council, Employers’ Merit Employment Association, Manpower
firmness in resolve without overtly defying traditional male-female relationships in much the same way that Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer forged new roles for women in the male-dominated Mississippi movement. In both cases, these women chose civil rights over feminism as the primary problem to be resolved, but in their work demonstrated precisely the kind of feminist activism that the women’s movement sought to embrace as a consequence of African American gains in this era. Far from the daily cooking and desk work so many black women felt forced to perform, Smith and her counterparts exemplified the bold agency of which they were capable, and in Memphis no real evidence existed of any problems among the male establishment in sharing this work with such a competent and willing person.\(^8\)

In addition to the explicit activism of black and white men and women in Memphis, women contributed to the local culture of Memphis in significant ways. Much like the music of Stax was in itself a form of activism, women who served as teachers, radio personalities at WDIA, and charity workers provided meaningful work towards civil rights and feminist goals, and again they did so in a way that worked within, rather than against, the existing patriarchal system.\(^9\) Belinda Robnett asserted that women in the civil rights movement most often acted as “bridge leaders,” working in local communities to bring people into the movement. As such, Robnett argued, black female activists frequently ceded power to formal male leadership.


willingly, acknowledging their importance in the less dangerous local work of making connections and building the movement behind the scenes. While this claim is not without some credence, it fails to fully grasp the significant leadership role women often took in the movement, particularly in Memphis. Histories of education or the media, for example, demonstrated far more agency on the part of women than simply supporting the formal leadership of men, with teachers, volunteers, and media personalities playing a critical role in forging true action on behalf of civil rights goals and shaping the community in more tangible ways than any male figurehead could do with a speech. Nevertheless, Memphis actually witnessed direct formal female leadership, with women regularly writing letters, advising the mayor on reapportionment, desegregating local restaurants, and serving in key positions on the Memphis Council on Community Relations, the school board, and the NAACP. The black and white women of Memphis, while certainly in the minority on leadership positions, exhibited

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12 League of Women Voters of Tennessee, “A Study of Reapportionment in Tennessee” (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder I); Edmund Orgill, letter to Mrs. Hubert F. Fisher, Sr., acknowledging letter supporting black appointment to hospital board and complaint of rudeness of bus drivers to blacks, 3 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); “Sitdown Moves to Memphs Libraries,” from civil rights scrapbook, 19 March 1960 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box IV, Folder 1); “41 Negroes Booked After Demonstrations At Two City Libraries,” from civil rights scrapbook, 19 March 1960 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box IV, Folder 1); Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr., letter to Dr. Ross Pritchard discussing candidacy for Congress, invited to contact Mrs. Elizabeth Russell (Secretary, Program Committee), 22 May 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); Minutes of the MCCR Executive Committee meeting, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Mrs. Maxine A. Smith, letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); Tucker, Memphis Since Crump, 121-122, 136-137; Murray, Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege, 211-213; Wayne G. Dowdy, Crusade for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 78-80.
overt activism in a variety of ways while neither challenging the existing patriarchal system nor facing direct opposition from the male leadership in their cooperative efforts for justice.

One fascinating dynamic throughout the South, chronicled extensively by Sara Evans and Gail Murray generally and Kimberly Little in Memphis, was the relationship between black and white women in the civil rights movement. While black activists throughout the South increased grassroots efforts at desegregation, voter registration, and economic opportunity, young white college women from the north and middle class white women in the South, inspired by the call for justice, took up the cause of civil rights. In Memphis, black and white women engaged each other through a regular luncheon group that included a who’s-who of local white and black female activists. This group served the dual purpose of opening a biracial dialogue over social and political issues of the day and slowly and methodically desegregating some of the city’s restaurants in a quiet, peaceful manner. According to Little, while some black women viewed the Saturday luncheon group as condescending and paternalistic, the group nonetheless afforded both black and white women desiring greater cooperation the opportunity to interact with each other and demonstrate the potential of peaceful integration in Memphis.

Memphis received worldwide attention for the 1968 sanitation strike, in part because of the phrase “I am a man.” These four words have ignited a flurry of scholarly interpretation, ranging from masculinist notions of reclamation to feminist reinterpretations of “man” as

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13 Evans, Personal Politics, 23, 232; Murray, Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege, 4, 8, 205, 224; Little, You Must Be from the North, 5-6, 9, 17, 64, 76, 118-119, 152-153.
14 Murray, Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege, 208-209; Little, You Must Be from the North, 17. Little’s outstanding book highlighted the involvement of a wide range of Memphis female activists, including: Ann Willis (wife of A.W. Willis), Mary Kay Tolleson, Maxine Smith, Frances Coe (who served on the MCCR and the school board), Myra Dreifus (who moved from Detroit with her husband because they considered Memphis friendly to Jewish citizens, and whose jewelry business cooperated in hiring more African Americans at the urging of the MCCR), Anne Shafer, Selma Lewis, Sister Adrian Marie Hofstetter, Gwen Kyles (wife of Billy Kyles).
15 Little, 118-119. Among the more significant restaurants they helped desegregate without incident were the Wolf River Society and the Flame Room.
applying equally to women seeking identity as African American citizens. The conflict of black men resisting emasculation and black women challenging intersectional oppression is the heart of the gender debate in the civil rights movement, is a worthy topic of scholarly discussion. Steve Estes understood well the complexity of masculinism, and his warning of the binary notions it established, particularly in contrast to the egalitarian notion of feminism, bears repeating:

In contrast to feminism, which attempts to overturn social inequalities that result from gender discrimination, “masculinism” embraces the notion that men are more powerful than women, that they should have control over their own lives and authority over others. Masculinist rhetoric uses the traditional power wielded by men to woo supporters and attack opponents...When political leaders harness the power of masculinism to forward their agendas, they often simplify complex issues into binary oppositions, placing themselves and their allies in the dominant position...

Estes rightly argued that both white and black men shared masculinist ideas of manhood, with white men seeking to protect white womanhood and black men fighting to reclaim or maintain their place at the head of the household. While he credits World War II service and the Cold War as driving forces in men’s quest for domination, certainly the ideas of E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel Patrick Moynihan about the so-called “crisis” of black female-headed households and overbearing women had an enormous influence as well.

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17 Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 7-8.

during and in the years following the civil rights movement, noting issues such as relegation to menial tasks at the grassroots level and later problems of expectations of subservience within the Black Power movement.  

Interestingly enough, despite the ongoing debates over “I am a man” and its use in the sanitation strikes, the civil rights movement in Memphis before and after this tumultuous period seemed to lack much of the gender conflict apparent in other areas. Certainly, the movement was largely male-dominated, but several of the key activists of the period, including Maxine Smith, Frances Coe, Ann Willis, Laurie Sugarmon, and Myra Dreifus, played crucial roles on committees, in social interactions, and in the daily economic, educational, and political life of the city, and they did so without any significant challenges from the male establishment. Memphis’ black and white women participated in sit-ins, worked on the MCCR and the NAACP, served in the classrooms and on the school board, and desegregated restaurants without resistance or patronizing behavior from the men with whom they worked.

One reason for this must have been the joint husband and wife partnerships that frequently existed within the movement. Black and white women often found themselves alongside their husbands in the struggle for civil rights and economic justice in Memphis, and

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20 Constitution and bylaws for Memphis Committee on Community Relations, including list of members with Frances Coe among them (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A); Maxine A. Smith, letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); National Conference of Christians and Jews, news release announcing 1977 Brotherhood Award jointly given to Ben and Julia Hooks, 2 December 1976 (Press-Scimitar Morgue, Fild 1418); Green, 198, 233; Michael K. Honey, Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 38-39; Little, You Must Be from the North, 16, 17, 32, 37, 43; Dowdy, Crusade for Freedom, 78-80.
while they formally remained within the traditionally accepted boundaries of Southern patriarchal culture, the work these women were able to accomplish proved that female agency existed in a variety of methods that did not always require subservient menial work or outright defiance of accepted social norms in order to be both racially and sexually liberating. For example, when the Sugarmons and the Willises attempted to attend a local performance of *Gypsy* and were turned away, attorneys Russell Sugarmon and A.W. Willis drafted the formal letters and initiated the process of rectifying the situation with local and national guilds, but the presence of wives Laurie and Ann at the show and in their correspondences was no incidental matter. Both women shared experiences in working to desegregate Memphis State University and attending the biracial luncheons and other local activities that sought to improve race relations formally and informally in Memphis. While such examples may not present the ideal picture of feminism throwing off the shackles of male domination, many feminists agreed that racial progress necessitated any approach that improved black lives in the 1960s, and if choice and agency truly lie at the heart of feminism, these women deserve credit for the bold work they performed in Memphis on behalf of the civil rights struggle.

As in the national civil rights movement, the rise of Black Power in Memphis came into conflict with established college-based and older desegregation activism, giving rise to gendered interpretations of the movement and its goals for the future. Young black men who had grown weary of modest progress and nonviolence in the face of violent white resistance challenged

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21 Russell B. Sugarmon and A.W. Willis, letter to President of Actors’ Equity Association, 24 November 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 2, Folder 15); Russell B. Sugarmon and A.W. Willis, letter to Wade H. Sides, Jr. (President, Front Street Theatre, Memphis), c.c. Members of the Board of Governors, 24 November 1962 (ibid); Wm. F. Kirsch, Jr., letter to R.B. Sugarmon, Jr., 28 November 1962 (ibid); Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 233; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 138-139; Little, *You Must Be from the North*, 16, 17.

established leadership to take a new, more assertive approach to the freedom struggle, and this included reclaiming the manhood supposedly taken from oppressive white men and domineering black women. In Memphis, where explicit Black Power never took hold the way it did in other cities, the most visible example of this was the Invaders, young black men who reached their peak during the sanitation strikes of 1968. However, unlike the Black Panthers or other similarly militant male-dominated groups, the Invaders never gained a strong foothold or dictated the long-term goals of the Memphis civil rights movement, and their approach proved less masculinist in nature. In fact, the authors of the civil rights histories of Tennessee, Memphis, and the sanitation strike all agreed that the Invaders consisted largely of high school and college students that included women in their small numbers, and gained attention only briefly when blamed for inciting violence during King’s march. While the founders, Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith, fit the profile for educated, angry African American males focused on male-dominated local economic reform, the group eventually become primarily a symbol of popularity among black youth, and their lack of true organization combined with successful biracial and gender-cooperative organization in the 1960s, kept them from ever reaching the kind of status that may have afforded the same kind of sexist hierarchy and masculinist ambitions of groups like the Black Panthers.


“Cause I Love You”: The Male-Female Relationship at Stax Records

The gender dynamic at Stax mirrored that in the Memphis civil rights movement, with black-white and male-female cooperation precluding any significant conflict between masculinity and feminism frequently discussed in civil rights scholarship. Stax, like Memphis, did not challenge the existing gendered order in any overt ways, but the cooperative work environment at the studio and the open gender dialogue that resulted in the music they produced exhibited a more comfortable, egalitarian, and progressive conversation on gender and sexuality than much of the music of the era. In particular, the examples of Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton as brother-and-sister founders of the company and the crucial role of Deanie Parker as jack-of-all-trades at Stax demonstrated the ways that Stax Records used male and female images in soul music to both maintain and break gender and sexual stereotypes in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Jim Stewart started Satellite Records, later renamed Stax, with money from his sister, Estelle Axton. During the time that Estelle remained with the company, primarily running the record shop next to the studio, she presented a starkly different authority figure than her brother. While Stewart remained the serious, stubborn engineer and producer in the control room and at the board meetings, Estelle frequently played the role of mother figure, nurturing young talent, encouraging artists to listen to the latest hits, making care packages for company members in Vietnam, and maintaining a sense a family in the company through a tumultuous period. Rather than being a civil rights activist or a feminist, Axton instead used her gentle demeanor and open acceptance of others regardless of race to foster an environment of racial and gender cooperation at Stax that mirrored the civil rights movement outside the studio. While most

Southern white women remained sheltered from interactions with the African American community, she found herself in a record store on the south side of town daily, welcoming young black men and women from the surrounding neighborhood to listen to the latest Stax product, inviting talented performers to test their skills in the studio, or finding ways to push her young son, Packy, in his own rhythm and blues career.\(^{27}\)

Despite her lack of activism, Estelle Axton shared some characteristics with white Memphis women who participated in the local civil rights movement in the 1960s. First, none of these women displayed any explicit desire to challenge the gender norms of the age, choosing instead to remain primarily within acceptable roles such as charity work, education, homemakers supporting more active husbands, or in already mixed race and gender organizations like the MCCR. In fact, Axton may have exhibited more ambition than many of these women through her key role in helping running a company.\(^{28}\) Second, Axton and her cohorts represented a bridge generation of white Southern women, whose parents’ largely segregated history contrasted sharply from their children’s upbringing of cultural exchange, school integration, and varying levels of acceptance, toleration, and continued resistance to change.\(^{29}\) In Axton’s own life, her husband Everett and son Packy embodied these complex social changes. While the Stax family agreed that Everett Axton, who was prone to drinking and clearly tried to avoid


\(^{28}\) Murray, *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege*, 205; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 169-172, 200, 269-270; Bailey, *The Education of a Black Radical*, 10-11, 19; Little, *You Must Be from the North*, 5-6, 7-8, 9, 17, 24-25, 32, 76, 100, 152-153.

interaction with African Americans, displayed a cold demeanor and chose to separate himself from the daily happenings, everyone involved in the organization shared a deep love and respect for Estelle, who they said held the company together and set the tone for the preference of talent over race as criteria for participation in the company. Their son, Packy Axton, represented the extreme of white youth enamored with black culture. His pursuits of musical and social interactions with the black population in Memphis became legendary, and despite the fact that his insatiable desire to party made him difficult for the more disciplined Stax artists to work with, Estelle never ceased to support her son, who in fact was one of the key players in originally making Stax a biracial company focused on black music.

In comparison to his sister, Jim Stewart presented the stubborn but respected patriarch of the first period in Stax history. His development from country fiddler to black music producer alone solidified his place in history, but in the context of shared financial responsibilities with his sister at Stax in a city that demonstrated relatively comfortable male-female cooperation in the civil rights movement warrants further examination from a gender perspective. To be sure, soul music never lacked powerful female stars, but Stewart’s willingness to bring in women in leadership positions at Stax that, while likely due in part to his business acumen and desire for commercial success, nonetheless also hinted at a kind of moderately progressive attitude toward women as well as African Americans. In particular, while Stewart maintained personal control over engineering and financial decisions, he granted his sister a wide berth at the Satellite record

30 Parker, interview by author; Gordon, Respect Yourself, 41.
store, often considered the gateway to the studio for aspiring artists, and while recognized early that Deanie Parker would not become a star for the company, one of his most brilliant decisions was to hire her to work with the company in marketing, songwriting, and production.\footnote{Parker, interview by author; Wayne Jackson (with wife Amy), phone interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 14 February 2015; Bowman, \textit{Soulsville, U.S.A.}, 47-48; Gordon, \textit{Respect Yourself}, 29, 41, 79, 84-85, 100-101.}

Stax Records owed a great deal to Deanie Parker, who like the women of the Memphis civil rights movement, contributed an enormous amount to the company and wielded a significant amount of power without actually serving in an official leadership position. Her personality, which blended quality interpersonal skills, an unmatched work ethic, and a knack for production and marketing, made her an ideal fit for a small local company seeking national success. After starting in the record shop, she eventually moved to publicity, where she specialized in presenting largely inexperienced performers to the media, while continuing to write songs, complete daily tasks, and work as a liaison with the community. In short, Parker exemplified the kind of woman at Stax that Maxine Smith or Frances Coe strove for in the Memphis movement. Never denying her femininity or challenging the status quo in gender relationships, Parker nonetheless earned respect and admiration from black and white people in Memphis and across the country and helped shape the destiny of a biracial company with a black musical and social message in during the civil rights era.\footnote{Parker, interview by author; Jackson, interview by author; Bowman, \textit{Soulsville, U.S.A.}, 47-48; Gordon, \textit{Respect Yourself}, 79.}

While other young women, black and white, entered the civil rights movement in the 1960s as naïve but energetic activists seeking to change the world in a better way, Deanie Parker brought her intelligence and motivation to a company that needed such young talent. She considered Estelle Axton, as she said, “because before I even knew what the word ‘mentor’
meant, she did that for me, and I’m not even sure she knew what a mentor was… I learned a lot of fundamental things from Estelle about how to be customer-friendly, and how to be persuasive, and how to take sometimes little or nothing and make something out of it – of course, I’m black, so I know a lot about that.” While she admitted to being aware of local and national civil rights issues, she credited her move to Memphis with awakening in her the need to talk about important issues, despite the fact that she never considered herself an activist. However, as has been noted many times, the very act of creativity can in itself be an act of change in racial or gender inequality, a fact she acknowledged:

…we felt we had a commitment to try and make the world in which all of us lived, and in a smaller sense, Memphis, Tennessee, a better place, because I think subconsciously, we enjoyed where we were working and the way that we were getting along, so much so that if we had had the capacity to transfer that utopian arrangement to the world outside, you know we would have done it without giving it a second thought. We did take seriously our social contributions, our contributions to politics. We helped some of the first young men and women, African American, in this community who aspired to be leading politicians, to get into office. And we also fed the hungry, we clothed the naked, and we sheltered the homeless…Those on the outside feared the influence we had on politics and society. That is why many on the outside found it difficult to embrace us when we needed someone to prop us up when we were going through our economic problems…

Surely a Southern city in the midst of changes to tradition experienced challenges in the realms of gender as well as race. Parker, as an ambitious young black woman, must have made quite an impression in a local community leadership and a national music industry accustomed to doing business with older white men. Despite her modest claims, Parker indeed breathed new life into old institutions and helped pave the way for other women like her.

35 Parker, interview by author.
36 Parker, interview by author.
A brief examination of Parker’s actual work at Stax demonstrates her immense value to the company and the complexity of being black and a woman in a successful enterprise in the civil rights-era South. A series of press releases in the early 1970s included biographies on some of the biggest Stax stars of the day, including David Porter, Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, and Rufus Thomas. The Porter and Hayes articles, chronicling the songwriting and singing sides of both men, spent a fair amount of time playing up their sexuality. In particular, the Porter autobiography focused on his astrological sign, Scorpio, which represents both sexual power and a strong drive for success. Such descriptions obliterated any attempt to connect Parker’s work to feminism, but the fact that an ambitious young black woman was behind the piece demands a more nuanced understanding of the male-female dynamic than simple essentialist categories like masculinist or feminist allow.38 Less emphatically masculine or sexual than Porter’s, her work on Hayes’s biography discussed his “imposing” demeanor and “gentle” personality, with “beauty and sadness and wisdom in his music.” Like Parker, Hayes also offered a complicated but important representation of the failure of either-or approaches to masculinity and femininity in the music of the civil rights era. While Robert Gordon interpreted Hayes’s persona as more carnal, Parker seemed to provide a balance through his civil rights activism and warmth.39 The biographies of the Staple Singers and Rufus Thomas did less than their body of recorded work in truly representing the complex gender identity at work in their music, but both articles rightly mention the importance of the daughters brought to Stax by their fathers: the Queen of Memphis

Soul, beautiful and delicate Carla Thomas, and one of the most powerful gospel-inspired female voices in the history of black popular music, Mavis Staples.40

Outside of her official Stax publications, Parker remained involved in local events around Memphis, which brought her into contact with important government officials and civil rights activists. In 1971, when racial violence broke out and Mayor Henry Loeb instituted a curfew that the black community knew had the potential to harm them disproportionately and lead to further rioting, Isaac Hayes led a contingent of Stax employees to join local activists in lobbying for a compromise. After meeting with city council chairman Jerred Blanchard, the black Memphis representatives succeeded in encouraging Loeb to lift the curfew, after which time they went through the streets of Memphis together encouraging peaceful adherence to the law. Deanie Parker was among those who accomplished this important work.41 That same year, Stax decided to award W.C. Handy’s friend and advocate, longtime political activist George Lee, for his contributions to preserving Memphis black music history. Certainly no one overlooked the fact that Lee also had a distinguished career as a spokesman for black rights and black political involvement in Memphis, a reputation Stax was quickly developing for itself under the guidance of Deanie Parker.42

Deanie Parker’s admiration of Estelle Axton demonstrated the point this chapter seeks to make about gender and race in 1960s Memphis, namely, that no academically constructed

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42 Deanie Parker (Publicity Director, Stax Records, Inc.), letter to Lieutenant George W. Lee, 14 May 1971 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis & Shelby County Room: George W. Lee Collection, Box III, Folder 67). Coincidentally, Steve Cropper also invited Lee to a cocktail reception hosted by his new company, Trans Maximus, which he formed after leaving Stax: Jerry L. Williams, letter to Lt. George W. Lee, 18 May 1971 (Lee Collection, Box III, Folder 67).
categories truly captured the essence of black-white and male-female interactions during this complicated time. Much like Maxine Smith or Frances Coe in the Memphis civil rights movement, Parker and Axton never claimed to be feminists, nor did they act as such, choosing instead to work within the established gender norms of a traditional Southern city. However, their work inadvertently challenged the status quo by blurring accepted gender roles and forging a new understanding of the work women could do in music and in civil rights. What resulted was a nuanced approach to commercial and social progress that made Stax and Memphis important case studies in the intersectionality of race and gender in the civil rights era.

“Let Me Be Good to You”: Analysis of Stax Music in Keeping and Breaking Gender Stereotypes

Carla Thomas came to Stax Records with her father, Rufus, a local celebrity on the radio and at local talent shows. The two achieved early success with the company through a duet, “Cause I Love You,” which helped spread their fame beyond Memphis onto the national scene. Carla Thomas, a product of Booker T. Washington High School, established herself as the reigning queen of early Memphis soul with several comfortable pop hits, “Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)” and “B-A-B-Y,” which exemplified the common 1960s approach to black female stars as soft, pretty, and sweet young love.

“Gee Whiz” contained the 12/8 feel and the mostly I-IV-V harmonies standard to rhythm and blues ballads of the late 1950s and early 1960s, along with lyrics of longing and adoration that emphasized the innocence and longing of the young singer. Jim Stewart and his production team at Stax certainly knew what would become a hit, as the style was indicative of the kind of

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material that made earlier vocal groups successful regionally and nationally.\textsuperscript{45} If Stax eventually
balanced a drive for commercial success with sociopolitical statements about race or gender,
certainly at the company’s inception the focus was on the former. However, Stewart’s
willingness to work with the Thomas family (Carla’s brother Marvell also played piano on many
Stax sessions over the years), alongside Atlantic executive Jerry Wexler, demonstrated a
progressive enough attitude to take advantage of biracial cooperation in his quest to build a
record company. For example, neither Stewart nor Wexler were entirely prepared for the
dangers of such cooperation in the early 1960s South, where a meeting at the Peabody Hotel with
Wexler necessitated sneaking through the back entrance and resulted in the vice squad arriving at
Wexler’s room on rumors of “race mixing.”\textsuperscript{46}

By 1966, Thomas possessed more of the soulful Stax sound, but her repertoire remained
comparatively light. “B-A-B-Y” maintained a solid gospel influence, with a plagal cadence
punctuating the I and IV chords over the main section of the song. Well into Stax’s growth as
well as the era of the mainstream civil rights movement, the lyrics to “B-A-B-Y” continued to
emphasize youthful romance and feminine deference, as evidenced in “when you squeeze me
real tight, you make wrong things right.” The song contained none of the assertive messages
common to other hits from the songwriting team of David Porter and Isaac Hayes, leaving one to
question whether Thomas’s music had anything new to contribute to the male-female dialogue in
black popular music.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45} For example, the song shared many of the characteristics of The Penguins’s 1954 hit “Earth Angel:” The
Penguins, \textit{Hey Senorita/Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)}, © 1954 Dootone Records, 348. See also: Stuart L.
Press, 2005), 2, 10, 73-74, 111-120; Richard J. Ripani, \textit{The New Blue Music: Changes in Rhythm & Blues, 1950-
1999} (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 70.
\textsuperscript{46} Bowman, \textit{Soulsville, U.S.A.}, 19-20; Jackson, \textit{In My Wildest Dreams: Take 1}, 126-129; McGuire, \textit{At the Dark End
of the Street}, 7-8; Gordon, \textit{Respect Yourself}, 41, 179, 338.
\textsuperscript{47} Comfort Me, “B-A-B-Y;” Parker, “David Porter” (Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 55889). For example, compared
to Sam and Dave hits like “Hold On, I’m Comin’” and “Soul Man,” Carla Thomas’s repertoire contained none of the
Yet, Carla Thomas demonstrated an important component to the discussion of intersectional oppression and postmodern analysis of popular music: If African Americans and women were to become truly equal, their music need not have been entirely different or message-oriented. In that sense, simply making hit songs in a conventional manner may have been in itself a social or political statement about accepting Thomas on her own terms.48 Furthermore, despite previous attempts to make clear differentiation between Stax in Memphis and Motown in Detroit, Carla Thomas clearly represented the more polished, sweet, and multi-racially acceptable side of Stax, a quality that everyone from Berry Gordy to Martin Luther King, Jr., acknowledged as vital to the success of the movement in white-controlled society.49 Finally, the music of Carla Thomas employed two techniques that set her apart from the typically strong-willed Jim Stewart’s formula: strings and background vocals. The standard fare for Stax’s soul success existed in horn backgrounds and a gritty southern sound from the rhythm section, a formula that rarely allowed for some of the standard techniques that became signatures in Detroit or Philadelphia. (To be sure, much of this existed due to financial reasons, as the southern company often did not have the money for such extravagances.) For Carla Thomas, though, Memphis strings and background singers formed the backbone of some of her greatest hits, a luxury that may have actually indicated preferential treatment for the young black woman.

civil rights messaging, leaving one to wonder if Hayes and Porter intended for the men to lead the conversation on civil rights: Sam and Dave, Hold On, I’m Comin’, © 1966 by Stax, SD 708, “Hold On, I’m Comin’;” Sam and Dave, Soul Men, © 1967 by Stax, S 725, “Soul Man.”


The appearance of old fashioned lyrics and traditional techniques in Thomas songs, then, like the appearance of deference to established gender order in the Memphis civil rights movement, should not automatically be interpreted as adherence to the status quo in racial and gender norms.  

Perhaps more than anyone else at Stax Records, Otis Redding defined the company’s sound and image through the mid-1960s. Redding was beloved by everyone at the company, and his music (much of which he wrote or co-wrote) offered a highly valuable glimpse into the slightly warmer, more loving masculinity of Stax’s male performers compared to the likes of James Brown or Marvin Gaye.  

Self-described in his own composition, “Love Man,” as “six feet one, ‘bout two hundred and ten,” the man from Macon, Georgia, became the biggest star at Stax in the years before his tragic plane crash in 1967. Redding’s bold, fun-loving personality, combined with a wide range of songs about love, power, respect, and tenderness in male-female relationships, demonstrated the nuanced approach to gender within Stax male performances that mirrored the more inclusive but still traditionally rooted gender relationships in the Memphis civil rights movement.

Two famous Redding songs, “Love Man” and “Respect,” appeared on the surface to be standard masculinist fare, but taking into consideration the musical and historical context, showed a much warmer approach to romantic relationships than previous blues or rhythm and

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blues songs had tended to contain.53 “Love Man,” an up-tempo groove with a blues-inspired harmony based primarily on the I, IV, and V chords, Redding’s lyric mostly bragged of his physical prowess and ability to please women. According to Charles Keil, this sense of sexual power carried on the blues tradition of a kind of battle of the sexes, where black women often claimed that men were no good, and black men sought to restore their previously emasculated power by stating their dominance over women. While in song this power remained largely sexual, in the social and historical context it touched on social gender relationships in the home and community.54 This limited analysis is problematic, though, because despite the clear lineage from the blues to soul, historical changes in the black experience brought greater social stability that led to a more inclusive, if still male-dominated understanding of not just sexual conquest but of warm love and a desire for companionship, and at times, even partnership.55 Musically, while “Love Man” paid homage to the blues in both the chord changes and the horn and guitar backgrounds, which emphasized the flatted seventh, it also contained a brief instrumental bridge section with a common Redding technique of moving from the tonic down a major third to the major flat sixth chord, with an octave line of B – A – G – D, then B – A – G – F# to carry back to the tonic. Such a line, while not non-existent in the blues, signaled a fresh approach to harmony in soul music at the same time his open invitation for love (“Which one of you girls want me to hold you?”) offered a new attitude toward sexual and romantic relationships.56

Otis Redding’s most famous song became so in the hands of Aretha Franklin, whose legendary rendition of “Respect” became such a powerful anthem for African Americans and

55 Ritz, “Happy Song,” 51-52; Haralambos, Right On, 112-117.
women in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Redding’s original version often remains underappreciated. The song apparently took on new meaning in the hands of a black woman, who arguably took a traditional theme of the man demanding respect and transformed it into a new late-1960s message that women in general – and black women in particular – would no longer be passive victims of masculinist thought and action. However, Redding’s original version provided a tempered outlook on race and gender, rather than a stark contrast to Franklin’s remake. Once again, his lyrics failed to challenge the overriding male dominance of the era, but offered a sense of cooperation and appreciation that marked a change from earlier power-based themes common to the blues. For example, he described his potential mate as “sweeter than honey,” and promised to give her “all of my money;” in return, he asked, rather than demanded, “a little respect when I come home.” While any honest analysis of the lyrics rightly interpret “respect” to mean sex, the fact that Redding asked for it, paid a compliment, and offered to care financially for his partner demonstrated a gradual but noticeable change in romantic relationships. Furthermore, while Franklin changed the opening verse to “what you want, you know I got it,” Redding’s original stated, “honey, you got it,” perhaps drawing a direct line to the current African American trend – and eventual feminist sentiment – of self-determination and agency – even the “Love Man” acknowledged that woman’s happiness and power ultimately resided within herself, even if in 1960s Memphis the norms still required male leadership. Redding, like other men inside and outside the McLemore studio, were not feminists,

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but neither were they aligned with the chauvinist nature of Stokely Carmichael or the Black Panthers, further demonstrating the futility of essentialist categories in the realm of gender.⁵⁸

Musically, “Respect” maintained a highly positive feeling, avoiding even the blue notes found in other Stax hits and remaining strictly diatonic except for the short instrumental bridge alternating between the flat seventh and the flat sixth (even those chords were still major). The slightly faster tempo and the major pentatonic horn lines provided a sense of joy that tends to support this interpretation of the song as a positive interaction, especially Wayne Jackson’s clear, almost classical octave jump prior to the vocal entrance. Jackson’s own personal recollections of Redding included using his good looks and fame to simultaneously embarrass and enthrall young female workers at Kentucky Fried Chicken, as well as hosting an enormous party at his ranch that welcomed men and women, black and white equally to celebrate music and friendship. These anecdotes belied any sense of masculinist demands, and instead pointed to a fun-loving entertainer with an enormous personality who sought to make music and enjoy life.⁵⁹

David Ritz, in a 1970 article, gave further credence to this, noting that while on the surface black men sang about conquest and devotion in equal parts, at all times artists like Redding intended to convey a sense of “warm and inviting” love for women. Not entirely free of the male-dominated norms of the day, Redding’s “Respect” paved a new path for deeper cooperation between black men and women in music and in the civil rights struggle.⁶⁰

If Otis Redding’s up-tempo songs provided more of Ritz’s conquest themes, his ballads offered a glimpse of his warm devotion and inclusion of women. When Redding collaborated with Booker T. and the MG’s on the American standard “Try a Little Tenderness,” the result was

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⁵⁹ Jackson, interview by author; Jackson, In My Wildest Dreams: Take 1, 94-95, 134-135.
⁶⁰ Ritz, “Happy Song,” 51-52.
a soulful and entirely new interpretation of a classic that breathed activist life into a formerly paternalistic song. Their arrangement opened with a trumpet-saxophone chorale that blended gospel harmonies with an almost Baroque sound, followed by the opening verse sung rubato with guitar accompaniment from Steve Cropper. What happened next seemed to encapsulate the entire soul genre in one song: Al Jackson provided a quarter-note click on the rim of the snare drum, and the band went into an almost Latin feel common to early black popular music such as The Drifters, but as the song developed, eventually climaxing with the fadeout on the tag ending, it exhibited the gospel frenzy and blues sentiment that Ray Charles and Sam Cooke had started and that Stax carried to new musical heights. In the capable hands of Redding, the MG’s, and the Memphis Horns, “Try a Little Tenderness” transformed a song about caring for a sad woman into a message of understanding, empathy, and uplift. He chose to abandon the clearly patronizing words of the introductory verse:

In the hustle of the day, we’re all inclined to miss
Little things that mean so much, a word, a smile, and a kiss
When a woman loves a man, he’s a hero in her eyes
And a hero he can always be, if he’ll just realize

While other artists like Frank Sinatra understood “wearing the same shabby dress” or “things she may never possess” as needing a man to fill the void in a phallocentric society, Otis Redding seemed to interpret them as the trappings of a former era forced on women who desired an equal place with men. Clearly Redding found more meaning in the bridge than the introduction, where “it’s not just sentimental, no no no, she has her grief and care, yeah yeah yeah.” Certainly the

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63 Frank Sinatra, Try a Little Tenderness, © 1967 by Capitol Records, SPC 3452, “Try a Little Tenderness.”
answer may have been found partially in romantic love, as evidenced in the closing exclamations of “squeeze her,” but when he added “don’t tease her” and “never leave her,” once again Redding demonstrated the nuanced approach indicative of gradual change within progressive males in the 1960s who recognized both the need to include women as equals and the pragmatism of acknowledging accepted gender norms to achieve civil rights goals in Memphis.  

The 12/8 ballad, “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long,” further demonstrated the complexity of Redding’s body of work and the failure of a masculinist-feminist binary to adequately frame analysis of gender in the civil rights movement. Musically, the song bore the trademarks of a Redding composition and performance, with harmonic movement in sixths and thirds but using major chords, and a higher vocal range that brought his signature emotional cry to the lyric. To be sure, black popular music prior to Redding and Stax already contained a wealth of themes around losing a beloved woman, but this approach was markedly different. Rather than anger or sadness, Redding exhibited a urgent and pleading desire to keep the relationship intact. Making no promises, showing no dominance, he simply acknowledged that the woman grew tired and wanted freedom but expressed his deep love for her and laid out his fear of losing her. In so doing, theorists of masculinism might accuse him of falling victim to emasculation, and feminists scholars might compare his song to the racial and sexual violence committed against black men in the name of protecting white womanhood, but both would be significantly off

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64 *Try a Little Tenderness*, “Try a Little Tenderness;” Edmund Orgill, letter to Mrs. Hubert F. Fisher, 3 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A; Edward J. Meeman, “To My Negro Friends,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 29 October 1962, 6 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Edward Meeman Papers, MVP 2207, MS 85, Box 2, Folder 3); correspondence between Russell Sugarmon, president of Actors’ Equity Association, Wade H. Sides, and Wm. F. Kirsch, regarding mistreatment of Mr. and Mrs. Sugarmon and Mr. and Mrs. Willis at local production of *Gypsy*, November 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 2, Folder 15); Mrs. Maxine A. Smith, letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); “Job Gains Are Urged For Women, Blacks,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 23 September 1973 (*Press-Scimitar* Morgue, File 1418).  

Understanding Otis Redding as a southern black man in the 1960s who worked with black and white people as well as men and women helps shape a middle ground for “I’ve Been Loving You Too Long” as a forthright and deeply connective song between a person still in love and a person seeking to leave the relationship. Placed in this context, the song continued to push for a gradually new understanding of equal gender relationships without overtly challenging the established expectations of society. It seemed only fitting that the song ended on a vamp between B-flat major and G-flat major, a decidedly non-traditional chord progression that left the listener in a sort of limbo that mirrored the turbulent and changing racial and gender dynamic of the civil rights era.

In addition to Carla Thomas and Otis Redding, Stax also featured traditional blues artists who presented a fascinating study of the interplay of traditional and progressive gender dialogues in music. Two of the finest examples included Johnnie Taylor and Mable John. Both artists developed out of the blues tradition more than the newer soul idiom, but their convergence at Stax in the 1960s and 1970s framed their blues performances in a slightly different light than more strictly blues-oriented stars like B.B. King or Bobby Bland. The male Taylor’s approach sought a deeper understanding of the root causes of male-female problems, while the female John’s songs demonstrated the continued lineage of earlier female stars using the blues as personal and political expression of sexual and political liberation.


Two of Johnnie Taylor’s songs, “I Got to Love Somebody’s Baby” and “Who’s Making Love,” exemplified this old-and-new approach to gender relationships in the blues. The first, written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter, contained familiar blues themes of infidelity and male-female relationship problems, but with a slightly different twist. In this song, rather than calling the unfaithful woman no good or taking retaliatory action against the other man, Taylor simply began the search for another partner, even if that woman was already in a relationship herself. Taylor demonstrated the macho bravado of a blues man who cared little for the feelings of others in his desire for sexual conquest, but also accepted the agency of other women who could freely make the choice to take on other lovers as well. “Who’s Making Love” took these notions to a new level, challenging unfaithful men to consider the fact that their own partners were likely unfaithful “while you were out making love.” While Redding, Taylor, and the other men of Stax may not have fought for women’s political and economic equality, they at least recognized the changing times and capitalized on the notion that sexual prowess and infidelity were no longer merely men’s territory.

Brian Ward addressed this issue in his analysis of soul music, noting that animosity between black men and women often became the subject of black popular music, but that such issues of power and control were often exaggerations intended to express cultural issues rather than true mirror images of reality. Additionally, he accurately recognized that many black singers, such as Johnnie Taylor, exhibited macho and sensitivity simultaneously. Trumpeter Wayne Jackson acknowledged the wake-up call that “Who’s Making Love” sounded to men of

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the era: “It was during a time when I was certainly guilty of those charges, and it nailed me right between the eyes. So if you think the horn lines are particularly inspired during that session, you’re one hundred percent correct!”

It is especially important to consider the fact that “Who’s Making Love” was co-written by Bettye Crutcher, one of the most important writers in the later years of Stax Records. Typically partnered with Homer Banks and Raymond Jackson, Crutcher once admitted in an interview that she wrote “mostly for women and children,” because they represented the largest numbers of record buyers, but this song demonstrated far more depth of understanding as a black woman in the civil rights era.

Blues women never exhibited any lack of depth in sexual and racial relations, and Mable John sought to continue that lineage during her tenure at Stax. “Able Mable,” unlike male love songs like “Love Man” or “I Got to Love Somebody’s Baby,” held nothing back. John exhibited all of the bravado and sexual power often attributed to the blues men and women of earlier years, and her candid willingness to share her pride in her skills represented a stark contrast to the nuanced, often veiled approach of the male Stax performers. John’s assertiveness in sexual relations shared similarities with Maxine Smith’s assertiveness in civil rights activism, as both women reached beyond widely accepted gender norms in their quest for musical success and civil rights gains.

When Mable John performed Hayes and Porter’s “Your Good Thing Is About to End,” she signaled to disrespectful men a new kind of black woman, no longer willing

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71 Jackson, *In My Wildest Dreams: Take 1*, 176.
73 Mable John, *Able Mable/Don’t Get Caught*, © by Stax, S-249, “Able Mable.”
74 Mrs. Maxine A. Smith, letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F); Maxine Smith, Memo to Human Relations Council and Alliance of Community Organizations, January 1968 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box V, Folder 14); Maxine Smith, Memo to Memphis Alliance of Community Organizations Steering Committee, May 1969 (Smith NAACP Collection, Box V, Folder 14).
to put up with oppression or inequality.\textsuperscript{75} The man, clearly fortunate to have such a woman, received notice that mistreatment would no longer be tolerated, and while the song never achieved the same level as Aretha Franklin’s remake of “Respect,” it could have easily served as a black feminist anthem for its social undertones.\textsuperscript{76} Neither explicitly challenging existing norms nor succumbing entirely to prevailing establishment views, Carla Thomas, Otis Redding, Johnnie Taylor, and Mable John represented the blended views and transitioning approaches to gender in the civil rights movement.

\textbf{Conclusion}

It was no mere coincidence that men in Memphis during the civil rights era held key positions as mayors, principals, and record executives, even though those who knew better readily accepted and encouraged a gradual but recognizable increase in female occupation of key roles. Memphis men and women seemed to understand implicitly that few tangible civil rights and economic gains would be made if at the same time they attempted to move too fast on feminist gains. Admittedly, this outlook opened analyses to the same criticism as civil rights movements in other places, namely, that the quest for full equality struggled in the face of divisions of race, gender, sexuality, or class, typically with women forced to wait for race gains and black women suffering the double indignity of sexual and racial oppression. Yet Memphis experienced significant successes in desegregation and job gains that eluded other cities for years, and did so with cooperative leadership from black and white men and women, and they

\textsuperscript{75} Mable John, \textit{Your Good Thing (Is About to End)/It’s Catching}, © 1966 by Stax, S-192, “Your Good Thing (Is About to End).”

did so largely because of their ability to act in a progressive fashion within established southern
gender norms.

James Cone argued that to truly understand the theology of Black Power, white people
must in a sense become black. In a similar way, one might argue that to truly understand the
goals and needs of feminism, men must in a sense become like women. Perhaps without truly
understanding this, the activists in Memphis and the artists at Stax played a role in that process.
When Edmund Orgill called upon women to serve on biracial community organizations, when
Jim Stewart and Al Bell gave increasing authority and respect to Deanie Parker and Estelle
Axton, or when Otis Redding and Johnnie Taylor treated women with greater agency than male
performers before them, the men at Stax and throughout Memphis acted in a moderately
progressive manner. No one could consider them feminists, but their understanding of the need
for racial equality in Memphis and at Stax must have influenced their desire to cooperate with
some of the brightest and most talented women in their fields.

Deanie Parker, Estelle Axton, Maxine Smith, Frances Coe, Carla Thomas, and Mable
John represented the range of remarkable women at Stax Records and in the Memphis civil
rights movement whose work challenged the binary understanding of masculine reclamation or
feminist empowerment in civil rights scholarship. None of them claimed to be feminists, nor did
their work focus on overtly feminist causes, but their very existence as strong and capable
women working in previously male-dominated fields such as record production and civil rights
also served to further women’s rights by demonstrating their desire and ability to work alongside
men in leadership positions. While Memphis did not represent progressive feminist
development in the civil rights era, the civil rights movement benefited enormously from its

77 James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 53-54, 71, 134, 147-
148, 151.
leadership’s pragmatic approach to improving the gender relationships without explicitly challenging existing gender norms.
Roebuck “Pop” Staples raised his children to love music, faith, and justice. His daughters, Mavis, Cleo, and Yvonne, and son Pervis, joined him to create The Staple Singers, who eventually landed at Stax. Pop Staples’ family band started by singing mostly gospel, and worked with Martin Luther King, Jr., to help spread his Christian-based civil rights work through music. The Staple Singers became international stars performing a hybrid of gospel and soul with a decidedly social justice-driven message, and alongside Isaac Hayes, they helped define the second Al Bell era of the Stax sound.¹

After King’s assassination, Al Bell felt inspired to use Stax Records to emphasize the notion of black economic empowerment, which led him to collaborate with civil rights leaders like Jesse Jackson. Such partnerships brought Stax into a new era of direct activism and facilitated the rise of the Staple Singers with such hit songs as “Respect Yourself” and “I’ll Take You There.” If Stax’s early years focused on making hit records and inadvertently contributing to the sound of the civil rights movement, the later years, especially as exemplified in The Staple Singers, demonstrated a bold new direction of civil rights activism through community action, national support for the movement, and music with an explicit civil rights message. Ironically, this message primarily focused on Christian themes of community, peace, love, and respect.

while the national civil rights movement apparently moved toward a secular focus on Black Power.²

In the Black Power era, the new social justice oriented Stax contributed to the civil rights conversation with gospel-infused, religious-driven music that inspired a nation seemingly moving toward secular notions of black empowerment and self-determination. The results challenged the older academic notions and prevailing music literature claiming that civil rights activism and soul music existed in a sacred-secular binary. This was primarily due to the fact that African American life and culture existed in a holistic nature that defied boundaries and incorporated Christian beliefs and practices into everyday life.³ The mixed sacred and secular nature of the Memphis civil rights movement and the music and activism at Stax Records challenged the notion of separation between religious and secular approaches to the movement in general. I demonstrate this first by examining the interactions between religious, civic, and

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educational institutions in the Memphis movement, then by comparing key scholarship on sacred and secular issues in black music to the reality at Stax, and finally by analyzing selected Stax music, especially from Eddie Floyd, Albert King, and of course The Staple Singers.

“Respect Yourself”: Sacred and Secular Interactions in the Memphis Movement

As in other southern cities, the black church exerted a powerful influence on Memphis. It offered a refuge for African American free expression, provided an impetus for social justice and community activism, and served as a training ground for young musicians. The Church of God in Christ originated in Memphis, and included white civic leaders in its celebrations while maintaining the proud tradition of black Christian theology. Church leaders played key roles in Memphis activism, most notably James Lawson’s participation in the 1968 sanitation strike.

Memphis musicians, including those who worked at Stax, often cited the church as their primary source of music education, where young black musicians sat on laps or mimicked their mentors without plugging into amplifiers to learn how to play and sing. Additionally, several white churches and synagogues proved willing to support the black freedom struggle, although these

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tended to be the smaller denominations in Memphis, such as Catholics, Unitarians, and Jews. Yet, the majority of civil rights leadership came not from clergy, but from secular fields, including law, education, and business. This phenomenon, rather than contradicting the notion of a church-led movement, exemplified the problematic nature of constructed binaries of sacred and secular in understanding the civil rights movement, for in Memphis, as in African American culture generally, the sacred and secular regularly and seamlessly intersected in social and political activism.

Memphis churches and religious organizations frequently interacted with civic leadership throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Edmund Orgill, personally a racial moderate but in reality the most progressive mayor of the civil rights era, regularly corresponded with black churches and activist religious organizations, as well as being a member of the Memphis Council on Community Relations alongside black and white religious and civic leaders. In the late 1950s, while many southern politicians struggled to resist desegregation in the wake of the 1955 Brown decision, Orgill wrote to Frank Ahlgren of the local Commercial Appeal advocating positive news coverage of desegregation in other cities: “...I guess it is a foregone conclusion as to how

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5 Edward J. Meeman, “Men Won’t Lay Down Their Arms Unless They First Disarm Their Minds of Prejudice,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 2 June 1960, p. 6 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Edward Meeman Papers, MVP 2207, MS 85, Box 2, Folder 3); Program, “Second Annual Brotherhood Award Dinner Honoring Edward J. Meeman, Recipient of the National Human Relations Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews,” 25 February 1963 (Meeman Papers, Box 2, Folder 27); “Brief History of the Council,” from Program for Mass and Dinner of the Catholic Human Relations Council, 25 March 1968 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B).

6 Edmund Orgill, letter to Mrs. Hubert Fisher about appointing black person to John Gaston Hospital board and addressing rudeness of white bus drivers toward black riders, 3 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); L. Alex Wilson, letter to Edmund Orgill inviting to Tri-State Defender annual awards program at Universal Life Cafeteria, 22 November 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Edmund Orgill, letter to Hollis Price, president of LeMoyne College, about statistics of black families, 22 March 1958 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); “Constitution, Purpose, and By-Laws of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, including list of members that included media people Frank Ahlgren and Bert Ferguson, Mayor Edmund Orgill, educators Hollis Price, Blair Hunt, and Francine Coe, lawyers Lucius Burch, Russell Sugarmon, and A.W. Willis, businessman J.E. Walker, Rabbi James Wax, and Reverend James Lawson (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A); “The Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee 1960,” unpublished scrapbook containing clippings on desegregation movement in Memphis, 1960 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis Tennessee, Memphis & Shelby County Room: Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection, Box IV, Folder 1).

7 Ibid.
the case will be decided, therefore I wonder if it might not be a good idea to report these and other cities where buses have been de-segregated…Properly timed, it might be helpful.”

Orgill sparked controversy with a failed attempt to appoint an African American to the board of the John Gaston Hospital, but his modest efforts to improve relations between black and white Memphians earned him favor in the early years of the movement. Despite Orgill eventually disappointing black civil rights leaders and losing elections to less progressive mayors in the 1960s, these early gestures demonstrated a combination of moderate civic action and friendly church-state cooperation to work toward basic goals in the early part of the civil rights movement.

Even more than white political leadership, black political leaders who used the Shelby County Democratic Club to increase black electoral participation and ran black candidates in the 1960s, relied heavily on cooperation with black Christian leadership in Memphis. Instructions for canvassers on one form encouraged good behavior, much like what would have been expected in church: “Many of the voters will sum up their opinion of our candidates by the way you conduct yourself in both words and action…Do not in any way have misconduct (horseplay, etc.) among the workers…” Another included instructions such as “dress properly” and “be courteous,” and on a form to report excuses for not voting, one of the top options was “thinks POLITICS are unchristian,” noting the frequent concern that older black Christians sometimes

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9 Bishop Cornelius Range, letter to Mayor Orgill, 25 October 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); L. Alex Wilson, letter to Edmund Orgill, 22 November 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A).
felt it unbecoming to engage in worldly endeavors like politics. The Democratic Club reached out directly to churches, as in a form letter to black church leaders across Memphis urging votes in the Democratic primary. This advocacy made many black voters unable to vote in the Republican primary for longtime black spokesman George W. Lee, who “has and will continue to serve this community well and we make no personal attack on him; however, we feel that the Negro’s hope, destiny and future rest in the Democratic party…” The Democratic Club instead asked black Christians to vote for black candidates Russell Sugarmon, Jesse Turner, Alexander Gladney, George Holloway, and Fred Davis, as well as in favor of integrationist-leaning white candidates Frank Clement for governor of Tennessee and Ross Pritchard for U.S. House of Representatives. The letter opened and closed as follows:

The Scripture says: “Ye shall know the truth- - - - -”

The Holy Writ concludes: “- - - - -and the truth shall make you free.”

Lieutenant George W. Lee represented the small number of African Americans in Memphis who remained with the Republican party while continuing to strive for civil rights. Lee was part of an older generation, having known bluesman W. C. Handy and spent a good part of his life striving to honor his memory in Memphis. Like his younger counterparts in the

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12 Rev. Alexander Gladney (General Chairman, Shelby County Democratic Club), form letter to “Dear Reverend” about 1962 election, 19 July 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3).

13 George W. Lee, “The Legend of W. C. Handy – ‘Father of the Blues,’” pamphlet on W.C. Handy to raise funds for memorial statue and scholarship, committee included Frank Ahlgren of Commercial Appeal, Bert Ferguson of
Shelby County Democratic Club, Lee understood the intertwining nature of sacred and secular approaches to the black civil rights struggle that represented a more holistic way of life. In a speech delivered at the home office of his employer, the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, he addressed the issue of black economic empowerment with comfortable references to the walls of Jericho, the “martyrdom” of Martin Luther King, Jr., the growth of soul culture, and the importance of spirituals like “We Shall Overcome.” Yet these biblical references flowed seamlessly alongside constitutional and economic arguments, as in his closing statement:

My faith mothers the belief that it lies in white leadership helping that segment of Negro leadership that stands for moderation. My faith mothers the belief that it lies in a Marshall Plan at home in which the government can show the same compassionate concern to the poor of our land as it did when it assumed the burdens of helping Europe back on its feet after World War II. My faith mothers the belief that it lies in black ownership of homes, of land, of businesses, and of productive enterprise, and ownership of businesses which will not give impetus to the advocacy of a separate but black economy, but will serve to help black employees to become black employers and make the concept of self help a workable reality.  

Lee, like most African American civil rights activists, failed to fit constructed binaries such as religious or secular, instead being recognized simultaneously for “alleviating the burden under which our people have been laboring for the past ninety years,” and for being “chosen by the Supreme being like Moses in the days of old…”

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WDIA, Blair T. Hunt, Hollis Price of LeMoyne College, and Jesse Turner of NAACP (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder VI); William E. Shelton, III (Chairman, Beale Street National Landmark Designation Ceremony), letter to Lieutenant George W. Lee, thanking for speech at Beale Street National Landmark designation ceremony, 31 October 1966 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis & Shelby County Room: George W. Lee Collection, Box III, Folder 67); Deanie Parker (Publicity Director, Stax Records), letter to Lieutenant George W. Lee (Atlanta Life Insurance Company), inviting to accept award at first annual Memphis Sound awards, 14 May 1971 (George W. Lee Collection, Box III, Folder 67).

14 George W. Lee, “Black Economy Rather than the Rhetoric of ‘Black Power’ as a Way Out,” Address delivered at the home office of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company (Lee Collection, Box IV, Folder 6).

15 C. A. Rawls (Manager, Rawls’ Funeral Home), letter to Mr. Frank Scott praising his association with George Lee, 3 November 1959 (Lee Collection, Box III, Folder 67).
One of the chief vehicles for the black civil rights activists in Memphis was WDIA, a white-owned radio station that made history as the first in the nation to convert to all-black programming. During the historic 1962 campaign, the station hosted candidates and campaign workers in forums on the election such as “Where the Negro Stands in the August 2nd Election,” featuring local black leaders attempting to persuade black Memphians to vote for the Democratic ticket, which featured several black civil rights leaders. WDIA’s black programming in 1960s Memphis represented African American cultural expression by blending entertainment and politics, civic and personal interests, and most importantly, sacred and secular music and news. Depending on the day of the week or the time of day, one could turn to WDIA and expect to hear local community news, the latest gospel music, soul hits from Stax Records or across the nation, housekeeping tips, or local and national political commentary. Radio personalities included Nat Williams, who also taught social studies at Booker T. Washington High School and remained active in black Memphis, and Rufus Thomas, who hosted a local talent night and became a Stax Records celebrity. Bert Ferguson, the white head of WDIA, may have initiated the all-black programming for primarily economic reasons, but in addition to helping create a station that symbolized black pride, Ferguson himself served on the MCCR, corresponded with civic leaders on race issues, authorized editorials supporting black civil rights in Memphis, and sponsored the annual Starlite and Goodwill Revues (which frequently employed Stax performers) to raise funds for community projects.

16 “The Shelby County Democratic Club Presents a Forum on ‘Where the Negro Stands in the August 2nd Election’” on WDIA Radio Station, 31 July 1962 and 1 August 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3).
18 Bert Ferguson, “Three Good Goals for Community Relations Committee,” WDIA Editorial broadcast 14 August 1967; “Riots Rarely Happen in Neighborhoods Where People Care,” WDIA Editorial broadcast 16 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Letters between Bert Ferguson and George Lee on numerous topics (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis & Shelby County Room: George W. Lee Collection, Box
Although public schools often invoke images of church-state separation, the existence of segregated black schools in Memphis further blurred the lines between the sacred and the secular at places like Booker T. Washington and Manassas. These institutions instilled black cultural pride in their isolation from white society, included teachers and administrators who also served in key positions in local Memphis religious and civic organizations, and produced a wealth of activists and artists who continued to defy categorization within the sacred-secular binary. Of particular importance to Stax Records, Booker T. Washington High School was located in the same south-side neighborhood as the studio, produced many of the company’s finest artists, and served as a connecting link between Memphis black life and civic and religious engagement in the civil rights movement.

Blair T. Hunt served as the principal of Booker T. Washington High School through the 1950s, acted as pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church for decades, and participated in the struggle for racial equality in Memphis. It was under his leadership that the high school developed a reputation for producing outstanding young African American leaders, and it was under his administration that local celebrity Nat D. Williams taught social studies while simultaneously providing entertainment and social commentary in black newspapers and on the airwaves. Booker T. Washington produced music legends Phineas Newborn, Jr., Gene

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“Bowlegs” Miller, and Al Jackson, and politicians D’Army Bailey and Marian Barry. Bailey said of Hunt: “He sought to instill pride and accountability in each student, always telling us in his rich, deep voice, ‘You are somebody.’ Hunt ruled the school with a firm hand... Hunt had guided decades of students, including my parents, and at the same time he pastored one of Memphis’s most prominent black churches...”

Even after Hunt’s tenure, the high school continued to produce such important cultural and political icons as Stax stars Booker T. Jones, David Porter, Homer Banks, the Bar-Kays, and Barbara Clark of the Mad Lads, Earth, Wind, and Fire founder Maurice White, and historian Bobby Lovett. Clearly, Hunt’s legacy at this segregated black high school on the south side of Memphis was far-reaching, and Booker T. Washington, which would play an important part in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, merits closer examination as a component of the sacred and secular intersection in the movement.

In addition to excellent music education, most Booker T. Washington students at some point took social studies with Nat Williams. One of the most beloved and powerful black cultural leaders in Memphis for decades, Williams also emceed a legendary talent show and parade, wrote articles for local and regional publications, and served as the pivotal figure in WDIA’s decision to become the nation’s first all-black radio station. Few Memphians embodied the seeming contradictions of sacred and secular life – or the blurred lines of entertainment and

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activism, for that matter – like Williams. Just as Hunt combined educational, religious, and civic work in his quest for civil rights, Williams understood that his presence on Beale Street and on the airwaves, his clever combination of folksy wit and educated commentary on black issues made him an ideal cultural leader in the early years of the movement. His nearly impossible days included early broadcasts at the radio station, a full day of teaching (including several years sponsoring the student yearbook), more work at the radio station, hosting Amateur Night at the Palace Theater, and somehow continuing to write and raise a family. Of Williams, D’Army Bailey commented:

He was a favorite among the students as he exhorted us to have multiple skills and to learn how to do the things that would help us get a job. Williams was an intellectual who wrote a weekly syndicated column for black newspapers and was a popular radio host at the city’s first black radio station. In front of my Tennessee history class, Williams stood with a broad smile as he summed up his theory of strategic survival: “The Indian fought and died, the Negro grinned and multiplied.” In Williams’s class, the question wasn’t whether you would succeed, but how.22

While some criticized Williams’s more worldly pursuits, such as his love of the blues, there can be little doubt that his students at Booker T. Washington experienced engaging lessons with a fascinating local personality that helped shape their future as black community and national leaders.23

“Touch a Hand (Make a Friend)”: Sacred, Secular, and the Soul of Stax Records

Numerous Stax artists attended Booker T. Washington High School, including members of the Mad Lads and the Bar-Kays, who began by hanging out at the Satellite record shop and eventually worked their way to the studio. From the roots of black music to the soul music of the 1960s and 1970s, sacred and secular influences coexisted comfortably, and in Memphis during the civil rights era this tradition continued. The holistic black education at Booker T. Washington and in the south Memphis black community influenced the soul music created by these groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as evidenced in songs like the Mad Lads’ “Cry Baby” and the Bar-Kays’ “A Piece of Your Peace.” Both songs demonstrated the flexible relationship between sacred and secular influences at Stax, and served as a case study for the problematic nature of binary interpretations of civil rights activism and soul music in this period, both in Memphis and nationally.

On the surface, “Cry Baby” served up standard teenage fare, a song about a lost love returned in 12/8 meter. The solo vocals on the verses that crescendo into harmonized choruses of “cry baby” sung over long-tone horn backgrounds and soulful guitar fills provided a sense of musical comfort in the long tradition of gospel-inspired black group harmony. While the theme and the music may not have challenged any existing notions of race or culture, closer examination of the lyrics demonstrates a significant point about the sacred-secular interaction in Stax’s music. In short, the lads’ crying lover mirrored in every possible way the story of the Prodigal Son from the Gospels; she left her loving man for a better one, only to return to him broken. Despite his initial reaction of “cry baby,” he concluded each chorus with the line

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“welcome back home.” Religious themes like this, rather than challenging rigid notions of sacred and secular exclusivity in black popular music, reinforced the notion that such constructed categories served no purpose in analysis of the music, either at Stax or on the national scene.

The Bar-Kays recorded “A Piece of Your Peace” two years later, and provided a funkier, angrier song that nonetheless combined religiously influenced imagery with the sadness of lost love. Despite feeling like “a penny with a hole in it” as a result of “having lost my best friend while you just sit there so contented,” they continually ask for “a piece of your peace.” At some point in their youth, these young performers must have heard how Jesus claimed to be the good shepherd, who protected his flock while others did not care for them. One may interpret the Bar-Kays’ anger and confusion over the loss of a woman alongside the desire to share in her contentment as the youthful exploration of such themes common to religious and secular life. Obviously such connections require a postmodern interpretation of popular music in the context of black culture, which defied easy categorization of the sacred and secular. Yet through this interpretation we may begin to understand how the same holistic nature of black life that guided Memphis civil rights activists was also present in the McLemore studios as Stax artists and staff brought their life experiences to the company.

Existing scholarship on sacred and secular influences on black popular music offers fascinating and meaningful dialogue worth mentioning, for it established an important foundation from which to examine the interplay of these ideas in the music of Stax Records in the civil rights era. Pop music writers Phyl Garland and Arnold Shaw acknowledged the influences of both gospel and blues musical styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s, noting the

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black church as a constant factor in black life and culture and comparing soul singers to black preachers. 28 Theologian James Cone, writing during the height of soul popularity, understood both the spirituals and the blues as essentially expressions of black liberation theology, rightly asserting that the two possessed more similarities than differences, and that black culture never existed in a vacuum of separate religious or worldly construction. 29 Beginning in the late 1990s, several scholars contributed vitally important works that enhanced the dialogue about the connections between the sacred and secular in soul music. Brian Ward traced the origins of soul to the 1950s black vocal groups, who facilitated a new sexual discourse in music by singing of hopeful, even idealistic romance as “relief from r&b’s dominant vision of opportunistic, predatory, distrustful and often destructive black sexual politics.” Despite his understanding of the gospel and black church roots of black popular music, Ward study became problematic in that he downplayed the continued influence of the black church on soul music. Writing about the growing secular nature of the music and the movement, he failed to understand the continuing internal influence of black theology on black life, whether or not the church remained a central authority, and thus missed an important aspect of the multifaceted nature of soul in the civil rights era. 30 Fortunately, scholars such as Lawrence Levine, Teresa Reed, Craig Werner, and Jennifer Ryan provided relief to Ward’s otherwise important study. Taken together with Ward’s more secular-focused interpretations, black popular music has emerged as both sacred and secular in nature, with some going so far as to pronounce black popular music as the key black religious expression of the twentieth century. In this context, the music produced at Stax Records in civil rights-era Memphis should be seen as continuing a legacy of artistic and

30 Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 80, 184, 206, 244.
commercial expression that sought neither to overtly express nor purposely eschew separately religious and worldly influences that both comfortably coexisted in black life.\textsuperscript{31}

African Americans at Stax Records brought all of these influences to their work at the company, creating a southern soul sound that was simultaneously gospel, pop, and country, without being any of those, with a message of love and brotherhood that primarily meant to sell records. Stax historian Robert Gordon recounted a story of the difference between black and white members of the company on Memphis Sunday that produced “Walking the Dog”:

…arrangements were made to play golf on Sunday morning with some of the guys… “…all of a sudden Steve says, ‘Well, we’d better be heading back to the studio, we just about have time to get coffee and doughnuts.’ And I was surprised because it was Sunday. Well, on Sunday when people come out of church, they fall by the studio. Al Jackson shows up and Isaac [Hayes] and David [Porter] and the horns mosey in… Then Rufus Thomas comes walking in the door and says, ‘Hi everybody…’ So Rufus runs this song by the once or twice, and I’m up in the control room to engineer and I’m laughing…Rufus never broke stride. He sang it for the band twice, says, ‘See y’all later!’ and he walked back out the door, going home to have Sunday dinner. It was very casual…” Jim said it was the best-sounding record yet to come off their console…\textsuperscript{32}

While Gordon’s story legitimately focused on the magical nature of a casual session at Stax that produced one of the biggest hits of the era, it also provided an important insight into the subtle differences between white and black culture in 1960s America. The golfers were white, and the churchgoers who came later to the studio were black, perhaps signaling the continuing importance of the black church in 1960s Memphis, where many Stax artists attended services and sometimes play and sing at services.\textsuperscript{33} Yet they were not above breaking the Sabbath to


\textsuperscript{32} Gordon, \textit{Respect Yourself}, 80-81. Quotes are from the author’s interview with engineer Tom Dowd.

\textsuperscript{33} Reed, \textit{The Holy Profane}, 28; Gordon, \textit{Respect Yourself}, 291.
come to the studio and create the music that brought them all together, music that clearly bore the imprints of music from the church as well as the streets.

Stax artists, like anyone, expressed varying degrees of religiosity, further complicating the notion of a sacred-versus-secular framework. In a city that built the Church of God in Christ and served as home to numerous Baptist and Pentecostal churches, a young Booker T. Jones actually discovered the Hammond organ not in the sanctuary but in Club Handy on Beale Street before being chased away as a youngster. In fact, he was apparently warned not to go into Pentecostal churches as a child. Trumpeter Wayne Jackson, a white West Memphian who collaborated with nearly every major southern soul artist in and out of Stax throughout the 1960s, discussed his Methodist upbringing as just a part of his identity: “I find it hard to say that it influenced me, but it did. It influenced how I felt about people in my church.” Yet he could not deny the value of black religion in soul music: “Soul music was an offspring of black preachers…I mean, James Brown was acting like a black preacher.” Perhaps Jennifer Ryan summarized it best when she discussed her on-site research among Memphis musicians negotiating faith and club performances, writing “Nearly every musician with whom I worked cited scripture that was particularly inspirational to them and that justified their position as secular musicians. Many also come up with novel explanations for their beliefs…This discrepancy suggests that the unique situations of these musicians calls for a unique approach to faith.” Just as it was not uncommon for civic leaders and civil rights activists in Memphis to blend faith and worldly activities in their quest for justice, individuals at Stax Records demonstrated a wide variety of approaches to the soul music their produced.

34 Ryan, “‘Can I Get a Witness?,’” 16; Gordon, Respect Yourself, 26.
35 Wayne Jackson (with wife Amy), interview by author, Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 14 February 2015.
Deanie Parker, for example, flowed comfortably between faith-based and secular expressions in conversation. When asked about her early musical influences, she cited Rosetta Tharpe and James Cleveland alongside The Platters and Ray Charles, but emphasized that she particularly “chose to immerse myself in music that were unique to my roots, and that was gospel, because I loved the gospel quartets” such as The Soul Stirrers. Parker never overtly mentioned her own religious beliefs, but when she spoke of her time at Stax, she noted the importance of morally grounded mentors who provided positive guidance for rising stars, the application of the Golden Rule in biracial work at the company, and the fact that “we also fed the hungry, we clothed the naked, and we sheltered the homeless.”  

Indeed, Parker’s words translated to actions, as when racial violence broke out and she joined other Stax employees in going around Memphis to assist in encouraging angry black youth to remain peaceful. True to the teachings of her Christian faith, she made no mention of this incident in her interview and received no mention in the press, which focused primarily on Isaac Hayes’s role in negotiations with the mayor and the city council.  

Despite a Christian-based faith of words and actions, Parker also wrote about secular and even non-Christian ideas in her songs and press releases. Her songs, such as “My Imaginary Guy” and “(Ain’t That) A Lot of Love,” focused on standard themes of love, and while one might argue that her work bore similarities to that described by the Mad Lads and Bar-Kays in applying spiritual principles to worldly lyrics, the former spoke mostly of an unreachable ideal,

37 Deanie Parker, phone interview by author (facilitated by Levon Williams), Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 18 June 2013.
38 The article discussing this incident focused on Memphis City Council chairman Jerred Blanchard and Stax star Isaac Hayes: “Citizenship In Action,” in Memphis Press-Scimitar, 22 October 1971 (Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 55889). Robert Gordon’s book, which included extensive interviews, mentioned the involvement of Parker, Rufus Thomas, and James Alexander as well: Gordon, Respect Yourself, 264, 265. Bowman noted that Hayes and Thomas received awards along with seven other black Memphians for “outstanding contributions to the community”: Bowman, Soulsville, U.S.A., 241-244.
while the latter expressed a scope and breadth of emotion normally reserved for the divine
applied in this case to romantic love. 39 Additionally, her publicity department submitted
biographies on artists including David Porter, Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, and Rufus
Thomas, which spanned an enormous breadth of spiritual references and worldly vernacular.
While Hayes credited “God-fearing neighbors who believed that cheerful givers are blessed and
will someday inherit the Kingdom of Heaven” with assisting his upbringing, David Porter’s
background primarily focused on his sexual prowess and ambitious work ethic being attributed
to his astrological sign, Scorpio. Rufus Thomas’s biography made no mention of a religious
upbringing, focusing on his heroic stature on the Memphis cultural scene and his uncanny ability
to create teenage dance crazes in his fifties, while even the Staple Singers, who originated as a
gospel group, found their message distilled to the leftist desires of the age: “It is more than just
characteristic Negro spirituals or Gospel songs. It is peace. Although the Staple Singers
originally began with pure Gospel, today they sing almost anything they like that carries the
message…” 40

Stax artists like Steve Cropper, Rufus Thomas, Booker T. Jones, Wayne Jackson, Deanie
Parker, and others, negotiated sacred and secular influences with flexibility and little overt
attention to the role either played in their music. The resultant product was the sound that
defined southern soul music in the civil rights era, and existed as a form of artistic activism
without any explicitly activist overtures. The most publicly recognized activist and commercial
endeavor in Stax history, the Wattstax concert in Los Angeles, has been identified by scholars in

39 Deanie Parker & the Valadors, My Imaginary Guy/Until You Return, © 1963 by Volt, 105, “My Imaginary Guy;”
Homer Banks, A Lot of Love, © 1966 by Minit, 32000, “A Lot of Love.”
Morgue, File 55889); Deanie Parker, “Biography of Isaac Hayes,” official Stax press release, 30 March 1971 (Press-
Scimitar Morgue, File 55889); “Rufus Thomas – 40 Years of Memphis Soul,” official Stax press release, 3 July
1972 (Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 59867); “Biography: The Staple Singers,” no official letterhead/author, 8
purely secular context, but this enormous undertaking also warrants attention for the way it maneuvered sacred and secular territory in the later years of the civil rights movement.

Wattstax, especially as captured in the documentary motion picture, demonstrated the holistic nature of black entertainment and activism in its inclusion of gospel and pop acts, as well as in its combination of black economic empowerment and Christian-inspired mainstream civil rights goals.\textsuperscript{41}

Just a few years after Wattstax, Michael Haralambos interpreted the event as primarily an expression of Black Power. He noted Kim Weston’s version of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” performed to raised fists, and Jesse Jackson leading the audience in the so-called “Black Litany,” in which the audience affirmed, “I am somebody.” Yet he mentioned very little about the music at the event.\textsuperscript{42} Peter Guralnick and Brian Ward saw Wattstax as primarily an economic endeavor, one that provided considerable charitable donations for important causes while simultaneously assisting Al Bell’s goal of black economic empowerment and commercial expansion into the West Coast market.\textsuperscript{43} Stax historians Rob Bowman and Robert Gordon better understood the multifaceted goals of the event, including philanthropy, political engagement, economic empowerment, and commercial promotion. Both Al Bell and Jesse Jackson increased their audiences, the artists won acclaim for their performances as well as their generosity, and the event stood as a peaceful and successful expression of black unity and pride, complete with Rufus Thomas keeping fans off the field and Isaac Hayes dazzling the crowd in his customary bald head and chains.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Wattstax, 30th Anniversary Special Edition}, prod. and dir. By Larry Shaw and Mel Stuart, 1 hr. 43 min., Warner Brothers, 2001 (1972), DVD.
What no interpretation of Wattstax included was that the event also represented deeply religious influences within a primarily secular context. Wattstax included religious performances from Jimmy Jones and the Rance Allen Group, as well as the ambiguous “message songs” the legendary Staple Singers, who by that time had made a name for themselves for a crossover that never truly left religious music behind them. The very notion of the crossover, from Sam Cooke to Aretha Franklin and the Staple Singers, belied the strict separation of sacred and secular music in black culture, for while gospel music developed as a popular genre in its own right, rhythm and blues continued to carry gospel messages of unity, equality, and spirituality, further blurring the lines between Rance Allen or the Staple Singers and “secular” Stax stars like Albert King, Isaac Hayes, and Rufus Thomas. The producers took no issue with the combination of sacred and secular performers, nor did the audience, a fact further supported by the gospel-infused performances of the so-called secular artists. When the Bar-Kays prefaced “Son of Shaft” with a message to follow them to a new freedom, when Johnnie Taylor warned of the dangers of adultery in “Jody’s Got Your Girl and Gone,” or when Carla Thomas invoked the Mad Lads’ and Bar-Kays’ use of romantic love and reconciliation in “Pick Up the Pieces,” popular music dripped with gospel sentiment despite the total absence of sacred intent.

Furthermore, Wattstax encompassed a wide range of black cultural endeavors, despite the tendency of scholars to consider only secular motives. There is, of course, more than a little truth to the argument that the event and subsequent movie represented a stunning mix of

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47 Wattstax, 30th Anniversary DVD.
nationalist and integrationist accomplishments, such as the inclusion of civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, singing the black national anthem, raising funds for charities, promoting black financial enterprises, and bringing pride and unity to a city torn apart by racial and economic uprisings.\textsuperscript{48} But Watts\textsuperscript{50}tax also represented the unity, hope, generosity, and love that stemmed from a long tradition of black Christianity, a faith rooted in the struggle against oppression and the promise of a better future.\textsuperscript{49} When Al Bell and Jesse Jackson (a religious leader who had recorded his own sermons on a Stax subsidiary) organized the event, they were driven as much by the religious impulse to improve African American life as they were by civil rights or profits.\textsuperscript{50} David Chappell and Teresa Reed started to get at the issue by claiming that the civil rights movement and soul music, respectively, existed as extensions of black religious expression in the twentieth century, but this view tends to tip the balance too far away from the secular contributions to the movement and the music at Stax.\textsuperscript{51} Jackson himself put it best in his introductory remarks at Watts\textsuperscript{52}tax:

\begin{quote}
Today we are together. We are unified, and on one accord...Today on this program you will hear gospel, and rhythm and blues, and jazz. All those are just labels. We know that music is music, all of our people got a soul. Our experience determines the texture, the taste, and the sound of our soul. We say that we may be in the slum, but the slum is not in us...In Watts, we have shifted from “burn baby, burn” to “learn baby, learn.” We have shifted from having a seizure about what the man got to seizing what we need...That is why I challenge you now to stand together, raise your fist together, and engage in our national Black Litany... “I am somebody...”
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{50} Rev. Jesse Jackson, \textit{I Am Somebody}, © 1971 by Respect, TAS-2601.

\textsuperscript{51} Chappell, \textit{A Stone of Hope}, 2, 3-8; Reed, \textit{The Holy Profane}, 12.

\textsuperscript{52} Watts\textsuperscript{30th Anniversary DVD.
The civil rights movement in Memphis and across the nation, as expressed in the music of Stax Records, consistently defied essentialist notions of sacred and secular, instead continuing the holistic African American tradition of oneness of all things in life.

“Raise Your Hand”: Musical Analysis of Sacred and Secular Expression at Stax Records

Stax artists throughout the civil rights era rarely limited their work to strictly sacred or secular modes of expression, displaying the same varied influences and blurred lines of spiritual and worldly notions as the Memphis civil rights activists. In a city and culture overwhelmingly rooted in Christianity, these artists and producers converged in Memphis and made music about having fun, falling in love, sharing fellowship, demanding respect, and seeking a higher power without often even considering the deeper notions of the songs they wrote, performed, and produced. Some at the company demonstrated an affinity for astrology, one of the more popular trends of the time, yet even then maintained musical and lyrical connections to black cultural roots in racial unity and gospel hope. Musical analysis of three key artists in the 1960s and 1970s yields a fascinating range of expression, especially in the popular blues-based work of Albert King and Eddie Floyd, and of course in the gospel-infused message songs of The Staple Singers.

Written by Stax artists William Bell and Booker T. Jones, Albert King’s “Born Under a Bad Sign” skyrocketed to fame, eventually becoming standard fare for blues musicians. The song did not follow the standard twelve-measure blues form, instead remaining on the tonic until reaching the chorus section of each verse – “If it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at

all” – which applied the last four measures of the blues (V-IV-I). The lyrics focused entirely on negative experiences, weaving a typical blues tale of difficulty in childhood and continued challenges throughout the singer’s life. Complemented by an album cover filled with traditionally superstitious symbols of bad luck, King sang about having been born under a “bad sign,” taking advantage of the popular fascination with astrology just as Deanie Parker would a few years later when highlighting David Porter’s Scorpio identification. Rather than signaling a departure from black cultural tradition, however, the song ultimately shared much more with the blues and gospel traditions than with any astrological fad. Like traditional bluesmen, King also expressed himself in the singular first person, making difficult life experiences a highly personal experience to which the audience could relate. Furthermore, he employed techniques like repetition and call and response between his vocal lines and guitar fills, musical practices typically associated with both gospel singing and black church preaching. One line of the lyric said, “wine and women is all I claim,” a point worth boasting about in some blues songs. For King, the line stood alone, which offered two possible analyses: To some, the line might be interpreted in a pious manner, moralizing about wine and women being a continuance of the negative blues experience, but others might argue that superstition, sex, and alcohol, despite more modern Christian proclamations, represented parts of the fuller, less either-or understanding of life from African heritage. Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that Albert King’s “Born Under a Bad Sign” defied easy categorization.

56 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 7-8; Gerhard Kubik, Africa and the Blues (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 4, 21-23, 26; Peter R. Aschoff, “The Poetry of the Blues: Understanding the Blues in Its Cultural Context,” in The Triumph of the Soul, ed. Ferdinand Jones and Arthur C. Jones (Westport,
Eddie Floyd represented another seemingly simple blues and soul voice from Stax who, like King, proved far more complicated upon further analysis. Floyd was beloved by the Stax family, described by trumpeter Wayne Jackson as “the nicest guy of all,” “a Southern gentleman,” and “a real man” who would “work the hardest on stage,” and listed among his favorite artists to work with at Stax. While his positive songs, including “Knock on Wood” and “Raise Your Hand,” seemed a far cry from the bad luck blues of Albert King, he also included a reference to superstition by guessing he “better knock on wood” in order to hang onto such a wonderful partner. Floyd clearly considered himself lucky to have his woman: “I don’t want to lose this good thing” – and proved willing to transform a seemingly insignificant superstitious cultural practice into an act worthy of the chorus of a hit song (complete with “knocking” provided by Al Jackson smacking eighth notes on the snare drum between the words “knock” and “on wood”). As the song faded out at the end, a practice common to Stax recordings, Floyd sang “Think I better knock,” which received echoes of “knock-knock” in the background vocals. Once again, the practice of repetition invoked the feeling of preaching and singing in the church, this time with the enhanced sense of urgency and spiritual duty. While nobody would assume Floyd or collaborators Steve Cropper and Wayne Jackson considered it even remotely the late night they wrote the song at the Lorraine Motel, one cannot help but marvel at the fact a black man and two white men sat together in a hotel room in 1967, within years of the Shelby County Democratic Party knocking on doors and contacting church leaders to integrate Tennessee politically through the electoral process.

Musically, the song featured the trademark power of the Memphis Horns, doubled by the guitar, providing the “blue notes” of the flatted third and seventh to emphasize the African roots of blues and gospel. As was usually the case with Jim Stewart productions, the notes remained in those lines, while the chords in the rhythm section remained distinctly major, thereby further reinforcing the notion of a separate musical vocabulary in the black tradition that makes it difficult to analyze within the limits of western harmony. Harmonically, “Knock on Wood” employed the I and IV throughout, frequently referred to as a plagal cadence in western music theory, and regularly applied to gospel music. In the mixed context of civil rights and commercial endeavors, or sacred and secular interplay, one can forgive Floyd the claim that “I’m not superstitious” while he continued to “knock on wood” to hang onto his good luck in a clearly gospel-inspired musical context.

The I-IV progression also served as the foundation for Floyd’s “Raise Your Hand,” from the same 1967 album. Unlike “Knock on Wood, which dealt with employing superstitious methods to hold onto good luck in the form of a woman, “Raise Your Hand” opened Floyd up to love beyond that of simple romance. Cloaked in the search for a partner to satisfy, this song never actually referred to a particular woman or relationship, instead offering love and support to those who identified themselves as needing something. To further enhance this aspect of offering deep, meaningful love, the song featured an aspect rare in much of the Stax catalogue:

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(Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); Alexander Gladney, form letter to Memphis pastors encouraging Democratic votes in 1962 election, 19 July 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 1, Folder 3); Bowman, Soulsville, U.S.A., 94; Gordon, Respect Yourself, 139-140.


62 Knock on Wood, “Raise Your Hand.”
background vocals. While Rob Bowman’s useful and detailed musicological analysis of Stax noted that the majority of recordings featured solo vocals with horn backgrounds, this recording added background vocals that created a call-and-response effect with Floyd’s lead singing. The decision to include group singing on a song welcoming others into a loving fellowship created a sense of inclusion familiar to both the black Christian tradition and the Memphis civil rights movement.

When Floyd sang, “I’m standing by, I want to give you my love, please let me try,” even though he may have simply intended to have invited a woman to receive his romantic affection, his lyric within this context resembled the notion of agape, or perfect love, a concept central to the black Christian tradition. James Cone expanded on the idea of agape in his defense of Black Power and black liberation theology: “Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless. Indeed, there is no place in Christian theology for sentimental love, love without risk or cost.” In 1967 and 1970, Gary Marx and Kenneth Eckhardt produced studies finding a generally inverse relationship between religiosity and civil rights militancy, but these scientific approaches further highlighted the limited nature of essentialist binary understandings of religion and civil rights. When compared to nuanced philosophical and religious understandings of the black church’s deep roots in oppression and multifaceted

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64 Mayor Edmund Orgill, letter to Bishop Cornelius Range congratulating jubilee anniversary of Bishop Charles H. Mason of the Church of God in Christ, 29 October 1957 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Edward J. Meeman, “To My Negro Friends,” Memphis Press-Scimitar 29 October 1962, 6 (Meeman Papers, Box 2, Folder 5); Russell B. Sugarmon, letter to “Frank” (handwritten name on form letter) inviting to reception for Congressman John Conyers, 24 October 1966 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 3, Folder 2); Minutes of the MCCR Executive Committee Meeting, Dr. Hollis Price presiding, discussion of poverty problems in Memphis, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Ward, Just My Soul Responding, 80, 184; Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop (Berkeley, California, and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 21-22; Reed, The Holy Profane, 12, 37-38, 93-94; Goosman, Group Harmony, 2.
66 Barbour, Black and White Together, 19; Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 53-54.
approach to social justice, these studies failed to comprehend the complicated layers of spirituality and worldliness that influenced African Americans to fight for their rights. When considered through a postmodern lens, African Americans called upon varying levels of religious influence in different circumstances to stand up for their rights at the ballot box, in the church, on the streets, or – for artists like Albert King and Eddie Floyd – in the recording studio.67

No group at Stax represented the blurred lines of sacred and secular music and activism like the Staple Singers, the quintessential message group of the early 1970s and one of the most popular acts on the company’s roster. Two of the group’s best known hits, “Respect Yourself” and “I’ll Take You There,” presented starkly different approaches to the Staples’ call for social justice in song. While “Respect Yourself” chose sarcasm, humor, and direct confrontation over significant issues of the era, “I’ll Take You There” offered a transcendent vision of heaven that promised a brighter future.68 Together, the songs offered important insight into the various ways civil rights musical activists blended spiritual and worldly messages to call their audiences to action.

“Respect Yourself,” written by Mack Rice and rising Stax singer Luther Ingram, seemed almost confrontational in the demand for respect, a respect that people could only show for themselves by earning it through their respect for others. As Pop Staples sang in the opening line, “If you disrespect everybody that you run into, how in the world do you think anybody’s


68 The Staple Singers, Be Altitude: Respect Yourself, © 1972 by Stax, STS-3002, “Respect Yourself,” “I’ll Take You There.”
supposed to respect you?” Clearly, the Staples understood the African American Christian theology of community uplift and agape love for others. 69 For a song about self-respect, however, the lyrics offered a wide variety of complaints about people, including disagreements with religious leaders, selfishness, feelings of entitlement, cursing around women, and (of all things) environmental concerns (“Keep talking about the president, won’t stop air pollution. Put your hand on your mouth when you cough, that’ll help the solution.”) Set to one of the few minor keys found in the Stax catalogue (Al Bell had taken control by this time, allowing a broader range of musical expression than Jim Stewart had preferred in the control room), the song seemed not only serious but also unhappy. 70 But despite the song’s overall demands for more respect and patronizing tone (even addressing the audience in the second person to drive the point home), an air of hope remained, first in the libertarian response to the anti-clergy complaints (“Just get out the way, let the gentleman do his thing”) and later in the invitation to the Klansman for reconciliation (“Take the sheet of your face, boy, it’s a brand new day”). One cannot help but feel that, in the midst of anger and despair, the Staple Singers continued to offer hope for a brighter future. 71

If hope required searching among the frustration and admonition of “Respect Yourself,” it burst from the seams of “I’ll Take You There.” Written by Al Bell during a sorrowful time in his life, the song actually featured minimal lyrics focused entirely on the hope of a place where


71 Reed, The Holy Profane, 127-128, 130; Chappell, A Stone of Hope, 86.
there was “nobody crying” and “no smiling faces lying to the races.” The song focused primarily on the groove, which like much of the Staple Singers’ work was provided not by Memphis players but at the Muscle Shoals studios in Alabama. Bell and the Staples collaborated with the band to exploit the growing popularity of Jamaican music in the United States with a reggae-influenced feel that allowed the true star of the group, Mavis Staples, to improvise over the top of the groove. In doing so, much as she did on “Respect Yourself” and throughout her career, Staples provided one of the most powerful and distinctive voices in soul music, including passionate, audible breathing similar to what preachers and gospel singers had done for generations. The notion of heaven not as a reward after this life, but rather as a sense of community and freedom worth working for in this world, was embodied in the floating reggae groove, the hope of greater joy, and the repeated promise that “I’ll Take You There.”

In 1973, the Staples Singers produced another album, featuring “Touch a Hand, Make a Friend,” a musical feeling far different from the previous year’s funky grooves. Featuring strings and prominent melody lines from flutes and marimba, the song ventured farther from the sound that had defined Stax through much of the 1960s, demonstrating strong influences from Detroit and Philadelphia soul as well as the Caribbean music that drove “I’ll Take You There.” The symphonic sound cropped up from time to time at Stax, but typically the team had maintained a primarily rhythm- and horn-dominated sound for financial, pragmatic, and aesthetic

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74 Jesse Jackson, opening speech and Black Litany, Wattstax, 30th Anniversary DVD; Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 35-36, 134, 151; Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 91-92, 95; Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience, 6, 347.
75 The Staple Singers, Be What You Are, © 1973 by Stax, STS-3015, “Touch a Hand, Make a Friend.”
reasons. Partially due to Isaac Hayes’s enormous success with *Shaft*, however, the company obviously used more strings, such as on this example, when desired.\(^7^7\) While the use of strings primarily signaled a commercial decision driven by popular tastes in the early 1970s, the fact that orchestral musicians were overwhelmingly white people working with black artists to produce music for an increasingly mixed audience also represented the religious and secular desire for meaningful integration. James Cone wrote about the need for white people to become black in order to truly reconcile and make racial progress. Perhaps this track, performed over a decade after Mayor Edmund Orgill received a hail of criticism for attempting to appoint J. E. Walker to a Memphis hospital board, helped to facilitate exactly that.\(^7^8\)

“Touch a Hand, Make a Friend” provided much more of the forward-looking hope found in “I’ll Take You There” than the frustration of “Respect Yourself.” The song featured Mavis Staples prominently, with her strong, gritty gospel ad lib riffs over the repeated chorus driving the song ever forward, urging people “reach out and touch a hand, make a friend if you can.” Like Eddie Floyd on “Raise Your Hand,” the Staple Singers offered their agape love to anyone willing to grasp it, urging others “from every walk of life” to see the light and embrace in fellowship. Once again bridging the essentialist gap between the sacred and the secular, the Staple Singers, along with other Stax artists such as Albert King and Eddie Floyd, innately understood that successful soul music and civil rights progress both relied on taking action and

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working with others in a framework that regularly applied the worldly and the otherworldly to the important work they carried out.

**Conclusion**

Stax Records created music that defied the limited constructed binary interpretations of religious or worldly endeavors. Beyond the label’s overtly gospel releases, the pop stars consistently provided decidedly secular popular music with noticeably broad influences, including black theology and gospel music, despite the overarching themes of love, fellowship, or entertainment. This is not surprising, nor is it unlike the complicated interplay of the more general notion of creating music that both entertains and inspires to activism. Furthermore, the soul music from Stax Records was influenced by and helped to influence the civil rights movement, both at home in Memphis and across the nation.

Civil rights activism, in Memphis and nationally, rarely existed solely within a sacred or a secular milieu. The grassroots activists and civic and religious leaders who carried out the important work of racial progress sought to achieve gains of integration, economic empowerment, racial harmony, and black pride in a way that crossed the boundaries of such academically constructed binaries. The holistic nature of African and African American culture, which defies compartmentalization into such essentialist categories, shaped the work of Memphis religious and civic leaders, and naturally influenced the music produced in the McLemore and Muscle Shoals studios by Jesse Jackson’s friend and colleague, Al Bell. As a result, Stax Records provided a wealth of powerful musical evidence that the civil rights movement in all its forms applied the full scope of human emotion and experience to creating the sound of an era and of a movement.
CHAPTER 5
BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

The Connections between Stax Records and the Memphis Civil Rights Movement in the American Federalist System

Rufus Thomas and William Bell came to Stax Records in the early days of the company as veterans of the Memphis music scene. They presented starkly different voices and styles, with Bell bringing a smooth, high class polish from his experience as a jazz singer and Thomas honing his image as a Southern soul entertainer with a knack for staying young and having fun. While Bell crooned about love lost and gained, charming women with his sly smile and silky voice, Thomas built an image of equal parts black spokesperson and fun-loving life of the party. For all their outward differences, these two Memphians played key roles in building Jim Stewart’s experiment on McLemore into an international black music success story. They helped write hit songs, brought important artists to the label, and built outstanding reputations as recording artists and performers who brought the soul music of Memphis to the world. And in doing so, Rufus Thomas and William Bell represented the kind of all-of-the-above approach to artistic and commercial success that mirrored the work of local civil rights activists working for equal constitutional participation in the complicated American federalist system.¹

African American history and American federalism share a complicated history. Both contain roots in the early years of a republic that combined the lofty rhetoric of liberty with the brutal realities of slavery, segregation, and political and economic inequality. The civil rights movement created new interactions between the black freedom struggle and the conflict between national power and states’ rights that raised questions over the proper channels for political and economic reform. In general, despite conservative analyses lamenting the immense growth of national power, to deal with issues such as poverty and civil rights activists themselves demonstrated a more inclusive approach to racial problems, turning to varying levels of local, state, and national government depending on the immediate needs and best long-term outcomes of their goals. This was the case in Memphis just as in other locations, and represented a similar all-of-the-above approach to achieving aims of equality to that employed by Stax Records in their quest for success. Consequently, an analysis of Memphis civil rights movement, coupled with an analysis of the people, actions, and music of Stax, illustrates the complex relationship of federalism and civil rights, and the artistic and philanthropic expression of a local company provides a unique lens through which to view this interplay.

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John Gaventa performed a study of power in Appalachia that offered credence to the notion of Third World colonization applying power in such a way that lent a sense of legitimacy to the colonizers, which subsequently he applied to the communities he studied. Gaventa based this work on scholars like Franz Fanon, a frequently cited theorist among Black Power advocates seeking to place the position of African Americans in a third world context. If such power, as he argued, fostered quiescence in the victims of colonization, then in the case of civil rights, activists faced a difficult uphill battle against local, state, and national forces. Yet despite the overwhelming odds, African Americans achieved significant gains in the area of civil rights through action designed to attack systematic problems like segregation, unequal education, poverty, and job opportunities, according to what they perceived to be the most promising avenue. Writing at the height of the civil rights struggle, political scientist Hanna Pitkin addressed the problematic nature of purely descriptive or substantive representation, a problem surely compounded for black Americans who were denied such representation. While some later activists and politicians called for more direct representation of black people by black people, this approach largely failed to take into account the diversity of black America or the potential for further political alienation through racial gerrymandering. Furthermore, Pitkin noted, representatives in a federal republic such as the United States faced the unenviable position of balancing the desires of their constituents with the needs of the country, a particularly acute problem for members of Congress representing Southern districts with newly enfranchised black voters.

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6 Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, 216-218, 238.
Theorists like Gaventa and Pitkin were not writing directly about the political needs of African Americans, but the dialogue they initiated through their work applies here, particularly in the context of the civil rights movement in Memphis. Power lay at the root of the oppression of African Americans, and it was the goal of the black freedom struggle. While the struggle involved issues of method, gender, and spirituality, ultimately it relied on political representation in the American federal system of government, and gaining that representation meant working through that system. At the same time Memphians negotiated such political realities, the artists and staff at Stax Records continued to produce the soundtrack to the revolution, and their daily lives became intertwined with the struggle. While few may view the issue of federalism and American politics in a binary framework, the existence of national and state power necessitated a movement that understood and worked within all levels of government. Similarly, Stax Records negotiated local and national issues related to growing a successful company and producing outstanding soul music. This chapter examines the ways in which this happened.

“The World Is Round:” The Memphis Civil Rights Movement and American Federalism

In the late 1950s, Mayor Edmund Orgill of Memphis was one of many in Tennessee reexamining reapportionment. The state’s system overwhelmingly favored rural areas in a time that witnessed enormous migration to the cities, particularly among the black population. One study concluded that “Moore County, with a voting age population of 2,340, elects one member to the House of Representatives; the floterial district of Anderson and Morgan, with a voting age population of 42,398, also elects one member. The First Senatorial District has a total voting age population of 99,355 as compared to 25,190 in the 13th District.”7 The study went on to list

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7 League of Women Voters of Tennessee, “A Study of Reapportionment in Tennessee” (University of Memphis, Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection: Edmund Orgill Papers, MSS 87, Box 16, Folder I).
numerous problems with this unequal system of representation, including aggravation of problems in larger cities and increased relationships between the local and national governments coinciding with decreased effectiveness of state legislatures.8 Memphis represented one of those growing cities in the 1950s, and with an increased African American population receiving even less attention from the state government while national civil rights organizations prepared for action in the wake of Brown, local and state officials in Tennessee certainly must have understood the problems of representation in a changing state.9

Memphis in particular, and Tennessee in general, experienced the phenomenon of the plantation mentality, a desire for white supremacy to remain intact despite changing demographics from rural to urban environments and agricultural to manufacturing economies. The multi-layered forms of oppression to maintain the traditional racial order took on many guises, including sexual violence, menial labor, segregated schools, and censorship of radio, television, and film, but the goal remained the same: maintaining white dominance in politics, economics, and social and cultural life.10 Memphis challenged white political, economic, and social oppression in two important ways that get at the heart of the political problems for African Americans in the federalist system. Black Memphians originally represented, and later

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8 Ibid.
9 Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, 117; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 2, 185.
challenged, what political scientist Paul Frymer referred to as a “captive electorate.” Under the Crump Machine, African Americans received paternalistic treatment in exchange for votes, and as the city mobilized toward civil rights progress, local African American leaders fought to break free from such captivity through organizations like the Shelby County Democratic Club. Furthermore, as a city known for its “good race relations,” Memphis nonetheless served as home to numerous instances of resistance to the system of oppression, most notably the sit-ins of the early 1960s and the sanitation strike of 1968. The existence of a powerful, biracial movement for integration and job opportunities belied the city’s claims of good race relations, and ushered in an era of civil rights activism that included a complicated dance between local, state, and national powers.

As Memphis entered the 1960s, the black population clearly exemplified the captured electorate. While votes were far less restricted than many other parts of the South, neither party


truly represented African Americans in the city, despite the attempts of the national Democratic Party to garner black votes through civil rights initiatives that were opposed by southern members of the party. Even more importantly, black Memphians not only found themselves out of electoral politics, but also excluded from local government employment above the most menial positions. To combat this problem, Democratic Clubs for Memphis and Shelby County mobilized the African American population by running black candidates for political office. While mostly unsuccessful at the time, the candidacies of J. E. Walker, Russell Sugarmon, Alexander Looby, and others brought national civil rights leaders to Memphis, increased the black voter rolls in the area, and forced the Democratic Party to answer to the questions of racial inequality in politics and economics.

Scholars have noted the existence of a powerful NAACP in Memphis, an organization which linked the city to the national movement for black legal equality. Members of the Memphis NAACP supported the sit-in movement and worked tirelessly on legal battles for civil

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14 “Mayor Backs Down On Negro Appointee,” AP (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); O. Z. Evers, T. R. Fugh, and Eliehue Stanback (President, Vice President, and Chairman of Binghampton Civil League), letter to Mayor Edmund Orgill urging better city employment for Negros, 9 November 1959 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A).


16 Deanie Parker, phone interview with author (facilitated by Levon Williams), Des Moines, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee, 18 June 2013; Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, 117, 144, 189-191; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 184-185, 190-191; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 38-39; Dowdy, Crusade for Freedom, 78-80.
rights issues such as integration and poverty.\textsuperscript{17} The NAACP offered an important response to the complications of the federalist system as it worked on the local and national levels to deal with problems associated with racial inequality. Working through local chapters, NAACP members dealt largely with problems in and around Memphis, but their fundraising and publicity simultaneously supported national efforts and benefited from national assistance. It is important to note also that, just as the study on reapportionment warned, Memphis activists tended to focus on local and national issues while bypassing a stubborn Tennessee state government.\textsuperscript{18}

Compared to more visible sites, such as Little Rock or Birmingham, Memphis garnered relatively little attention in its struggle to desegregate schools and public facilities. While not without arrests and local media disagreements, Memphis students, assisted by the NAACP, succeeded in desegregating facilities such as the libraries and swimming pools in the early 1960s without violence or national attention.\textsuperscript{19} Despite these impressive gains, however, meaningful public school integration remained elusive for black Memphians. In a desire to remain below the radar, local and state officials took more tempered positions on \textit{Brown} than their counterparts in other places, and the white power structure ensured that quiet token integration combined with eventual white flight to the suburbs maintained a mostly segregated education in Memphis.\textsuperscript{20} In response to this, a white Jewish woman by the name of Myra Dreifus, who had moved from

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\textsuperscript{17} “The Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee 1960” (Smith NAACP Collection, Box IV, Folder 1); Maxine Smith (Executive Secretary, Memphis NAACP), letter to War on Poverty Committee, 7 December 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder III.F).

\textsuperscript{18} League of Women Voters of Tennessee, “A Study of Reapportionment in Tennessee” (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder 1); Elazar, \textit{American Federalism}, 6-7, 81; Sarvis, “Leaders in the Court and Community,” 53-54; Lovett, \textit{The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee}, 197; Green, \textit{Battling the Plantation Mentality}, 185.


\end{flushleft}
Detroit to Memphis, cooperated with white educator Frances Coe and black head of LeMoyne College Hollis Price to improve conditions in poor black Memphis schools. The Fund for Needy School Children fought through state-level aversion to federal assistance to provide free lunches, school supplies, and educational materials and activities in another example of local-federal cooperation bypassing state resistance.\textsuperscript{21}

In addition to the NAACP and the national connections, Memphis civil rights leaders also took advantage of the federalist system to engage in significant work at the local level, particularly in economic affairs. Most restaurants desegregated in the mid-1960s through a combination of student sit-ins, a biracial women’s lunch group, and, surprisingly, the encouragement of a typically strong-armed police commissioner, Claude Armour. Without national attention or reference to the recent Katzenbach \textit{v. McClung} case desegregating restaurants, Memphian activists demonstrated the peaceful nature of blacks and whites dining together while Commissioner Armour highlighted the disadvantage to businesses in continuing to fight for segregation.\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps the most important local organization throughout much of the Stax era in Memphis was the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, a biracial group that included civic and education leaders, lawyers, business owners, and members of the NAACP. One of the most important functions of the MCCR included pressuring local businesses to hire African Americans above menial positions, and ensuring fair opportunities for education and training to earn those jobs. While federal affirmative action mandates remained


\textsuperscript{22} Tucker, \textit{Memphis Since Crump}, 136-137; Murray, \textit{Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege}, 208-209; Little, \textit{You Must Be from the North}, 5-6, 9, 17, 118-119.
years from enactment, local leaders in Memphis achieved significant gains within their city through biracial cooperation and coordination between civic and economic leaders.  

Few Memphians embodied the spirit of the all-of-the-above approach to civil rights activism within the federal system more than Benjamin Hooks. The grandson of a music teacher who had once assisted W. C. Handy with orchestration when she was not busy establishing a black juvenile court or fighting for desegregation of the library, Hooks joined forces with fellow attorneys Russell Sugarmon and A. W. Willis to lead Memphis in its more forceful desegregation efforts of the 1960s. Hooks proved a brilliant legal mind and passionate civil rights leader who defended students during the sit-ins of the early 1960s. He was not only a leader in the Memphis civil rights movement; he eventually earned a position as the first black criminal judge in Tennessee. He also moved from state to federal government employment when he was appointed as Commissioner to the Federal Communications Commission. Hooks concluded his symbolic move through the American federalist system by serving as Executive Director of the NAACP for nearly two decades, where he oversaw local and national civil rights issues. Throughout Hooks’s impressive career, he continued to return to Memphis for speaking engagements, reminding citizens about the importance of justice alongside law and order, urging

23 “Constitution, Purpose, and By-Laws of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations” (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A); Clark Porteous, “Memphis Provides More and Better Jobs for Negroes: Report on Work of Employment Committee,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 20 May 1963 (Burch Papers, Box 456, Vol. 1); Hollis Price, presiding, Minutes of the MCCR Executive Committee, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); Edmund Orgill, presiding, Minutes of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations, 16 January 1968 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.A).

24 Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, Beale Black & Blue: Life and Music on Black America’s Main Street (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 18-19; Tucker, Memphis Since Crump, 101; Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 104; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 190-191.

25 Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, 189-191; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 218, 249.
for more jobs for blacks and women, demanding an end to racism in radio and television, and encouraging young African Americans to set high goals and take pride in themselves.26

Another Memphian dedicated to justice and equality, Ed Meeman, spent his career in the fourth branch of government. Meeman wrote countless editorials for the Press-Scimitar supporting integration and economic opportunity, participated in the MCCR, and corresponded privately with civic leaders on topics such as Martin Luther King’s letter from Birmingham jail and their need to take a stance on racial issues.27 Meeman’s Christian faith led him to take a strong stance from the early days of the movement, beginning with his public approval of the Brown decision, a bold move for a white newspaper man in the mid-1950s.28 Meeman’s careful moderation sometimes limited his willingness to support the freedom struggle through the 1960s, and in hindsight often made him appear tepid and weak from his privileged position, but as the editor of a major white newspaper in Memphis he proved instrumental in ushering in a more peaceful and cooperative movement than other cities experienced.29 Despite certain understandable criticism, Meeman’s ability to influence the citizens and leaders of Memphis and Tennessee through the press earned him the National Human Rights Award of the National


27 Ed Meeman, letter to Edmund Orgill supporting strong stance on desegregation of public golf course, 15 February 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.B); Edward J. Meeman, “Men Won’t Lay Down Their Arms Unless They First Disarm Their Minds of Prejudice,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 2 June 1960, 6 (University of Memphis, Special Collections: Edward Meeman Papers, MVP 2207, MS 85, Box 2, Folder 3); Lucius Burch, letter to Edward Meeman with Letter from Birmingham Jail enclosed, 12 July 1963; Edward Meeman, letter to Lucius Burch supporting King’s ideology but questioning his action, 15 July 1963 (Burch Papers, Box 46, Vol. I).

28 Graham, Crisis in Print, 41.

Conference of Christians and Jews in 1963, an honor which he used to give one of his most powerful addresses urging employment equality for African Americans based on Christian principles of brotherhood.\textsuperscript{30}

The Memphis civil rights movement existed within a complex web of local, state, and national factors. The work of activists like Russell Sugarmon, Myra Dreifus, Hollis Price, Ben Hooks, and Ed Meeman, among others, demonstrated the need for an all-of-the-above approach to negotiating change in the federalist system. Their quest for equality demonstrated understanding of the nuances of American federalism and political representation.

“I Had a Dream:” Stax Records’ All-of-the-Above Approach to Commercialism and Activism

In a 2005 article, Howard Harrington provided a compelling case for the city the center of black music production, “the nexus of musical as well as industrial organization, creativity, innovation and production for music as a culture products industry within the cultural economy.” He argued that African American music represented “the totality of society in which they are embedded,” a cultural expression rooted in performer-audience interaction and heavily influenced by social-cultural interactions. Post-World War II black music, such as that created at Stax, was thus the product of multiple factors converging in cities like Memphis, driven forward by technical innovations in recording and radio, and circulated through black (and white) communities in growing urban environments.\textsuperscript{31} Harrington’s insightful article provided the basis for understanding black music production as an urban phenomenon, but for Stax Records, the

\textsuperscript{30} Edward J. Meeman, editor emeritus of \textit{Press-Scimitar}, speech later printed under title “Next Race Relations Task in Memphis” (Meeman Papers, Box 2, Folder 5); program from award ceremony (guest list included Hollis Price, Blair Hunt, Bert Ferguson, Henry Loeb, Frances Coe, Edmund Orgill, and Lucius Burch), 25 February 1963 (Meeman Papers, Box 2, Folder 27).

city of Memphis existed in a Southern environment of mixed urban and rural influences. This created a soul sound entirely unique to Stax, but like other companies (such as Motown in Detroit), the company also sold internationally and sent its stars on tour, contributing to the national and international development of soul. In other words, while Memphis activists approached civil rights through all levels of government, Stax demonstrated a similar all-of-the-above approach to commercial and artistic success through the civil rights era.

While the Memphis civil rights movement actively engaged with all levels of government throughout the black freedom struggle, Stax Records’ history can be clearly delineated into two distinct periods. The first was the Jim Stewart-dominated era, from 1960 until around 1968 after the deaths of Otis Redding and Martin Luther King. In this period, Stax existed primarily as a local company, recording exclusively at the McLemore studios, utilizing mostly Memphis-based singers, players, and producers, and remaining true to Stewart’s specific vision of Southern black soul. With the rise of Al Bell’s influence in the late 1960s, Stax expanded to a more national product. Bell brought in outside producers and artists, utilized other studios such as that in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and incorporated both musical and sociopolitical influences from places like Detroit and Chicago into the expanding Stax catalogue. The result was that the company’s historical narrative, in many ways, developed from a local to a national theme before its ultimate demise in the mid-1970s.

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From its inception, Stax Records was white-owned and black-featured, and while Jim Stewart was white, he took pride in producing what many considered to be black soul music. Early music writers consistently commented on the harmonious integrated nature of the house band and the company leadership.\(^{34}\) Despite the constant descriptions of Stax as an “oasis” where blacks and whites came together to create music without social conflict, one must acknowledge that it was a white-run company through the 1960s, a fact made more poignant in light of the sharecropping system imposed from Atlantic Records during much of Stewart’s tenure. While the music made at Stax created a sense of black pride and provided much of the soundtrack for the civil rights movement, the two-edged sword of white management, at once beneficial for sales and distribution as well as indicative of a city, state, and nation run by white men, likely called into question the colonialist nature of race relations in the United States.\(^{35}\) In fact, some scholars even went so far as to question whether black music was hurt by integrationist goals which led middle- and upper-class African Americans to turn away from the black lower class and white executives to maintain hegemony over the recording industry.\(^{36}\)

Unlike politics, however, black Stax artists could hardly have been considered a captive


electorate. They collaborated with each other, engaged in comfortable dialogue with Stewart and his sister, Estelle Axton, and became the faces of some of the most exciting and important music in the civil rights era.\textsuperscript{37}

Through the mid-1960s, Stax generated hit records and gained international popularity, but remained primarily a locally-run company. Even when artists like Sam and Dave came from Florida via New York or Otis Redding came from Georgia (originally as the driver for a potential act that did not end up with the company), their work became different versions of a similar formula: writing with Isaac Hayes and David Porter or Steve Cropper, cutting with Booker T. and the MGs and the Memphis Horns, originally engineered mostly by Stewart himself. The result was a clearly defined product, albeit including a wide range of talents and tastes in the songwriting and vocals. Critics and audiences fell in love with the “Memphis Sound,” a product of integrated work in a segregated city, blending country, gospel, and blues influences to create the sound of Southern soul.\textsuperscript{38}

By the time Al Bell’s control over Stax Records increased in the late 1960s, a great deal had occurred in Memphis and across the nation. Otis Redding died in a plane crash in 1967, Martin Luther King was assassinated during his involvement in the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968, and the movement experienced greater diversity in membership and approach as a result of


frustration over lack of change in the years following the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Bell could not help but be influenced by these monumental experiences, but as a black executive in a Southern company with experience in the movement, he took Stax in new directions of broader musical expression, message songs, and corporate involvement in political and economic issues. Bell brought in producer Don Davis from Detroit, collaborated with visionary Larry Shaw to promote a strong Black Power-oriented image, and hired out work at studios like American across town and Fame in Muscle Shoals to broaden the Stax sound. Additionally, Stax employed a wider range of artists and allowed them far more room to stretch creatively, resulting in such enormous hits as the message music of the Staple Singers and the pre-disco funky sound of Isaac Hayes.

In essence, Stax Records went from local to national in an era when the national government increased its scope and power over the states in the realm of civil rights. While the sound of the company went from a narrowly defined Southern black sound under Jim Stewart to a broader scope of African American expression with Al Bell at the helm, civil rights leaders in Memphis and across the South applied an all-of-the-above approach that eventually connected local needs with federal power at the expense of state influence. This is not to say that federalism did not also include state actions, but clearly the direction shifted to national

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institutions when southern white citizens and their state government representatives continued to resist integration and economic opportunity through the civil rights era. When white Memphians distributed pamphlets opposing integration and wrote letters to state and local officials discouraging racial progress, Stax Records grew in popularity, garnering recognition from fans in Los Angeles, New York, and London, and civil rights activists in Memphis turned to Washington, D.C., for assistance they could not receive in Tennessee.41

While Stax was never an overtly political organization, the company involved itself in numerous community projects, demonstrating the value of social and cultural activism and the power of black celebrities supporting important civil rights causes.42 In 1967, for example, the


U.S. Department of Labor approached Stax about participating in a “Stay in School” campaign.

According to Rob Bowman:

Four thousand copies of the album were pressed, which were then distributed by the Department of Labor in August as a public service to disc jockeys and radio stations across the country. Deanie Parker coordinated putting the album together...

Altruistic gestures like the Stay in School album garnered a certain amount of free publicity for the label and its artists. Deanie Parker confirmed that Stax was well aware of this potential...For a brief period, the message on the marquee outside of the company’s studio was changed from “Soulsville U.S.A.” to “Don’t Be a Dropout.” When neighborhood children greeted the new message with a barrage of rocks one evening, it was quickly changed back.43

Despite the mixed public reception, Stax demonstrated business savvy as well as investment in the community and the country. Education served a vital function in uplift of the African American community, and Stax, located in the heart of a middle class black neighborhood in south Memphis that produced Indiana University graduate Booker T. Jones, understood this clearly.44

Stax artists engaged in spontaneous and long-term projects to assist Memphians and others nationally and internationally, including participating in benefit concerts for youth projects, coordinating with local officials to halt racial violence and raising funds to support low-income housing projects. Artists such as Booker T. and the MGs, the Mad Lads, Eddie Floyd, and Rufus Thomas performed at annual revue concerts to support the Goodwill Home for Boys and other local charities; this event also brought in artists from across the country, demonstrating the national development of soul music.45 In 1971, racial violence erupted in Memphis, and

Mayor Henry Loeb (already viewed as hostile to African Americans in the city after the 1968 sanitation strike) issued a curfew that negatively affected black workers and families. Isaac Hayes participated in negotiations to lift the curfew, and then led various Stax artists through the black neighborhoods encouraging calm and order.\textsuperscript{46} Al Bell and Isaac Hayes also engaged in plans to build low-income housing in Memphis and elsewhere, combining their wealth, concern for others, and public personas into active uplift of African Americans locally and nationally.\textsuperscript{47} Other examples of Stax’s civil rights involvement included a David Porter performance at a penal colony, the company’s sponsorship of a daycare and trade school, collaboration between Al Bell and Jesse Jackson in the studio and through philanthropic performances around Chicago, and donations to numerous organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the United Negro College Fund.\textsuperscript{48}

Stax Records and the civil rights movement did not exist in a vacuum of domestic racial issues. The most significant international issue affecting Stax artists and staff from the mid-1960s on was the escalation of the Vietnam War. While progressive Americans tended to look hopefully to the national government for assistance in achieving movement aims, the legacy of Vietnam raised significant questions about the power of the president and the role of the United States government in world affairs. Many at the company either served in the conflict or had

friends and family sent to Southeast Asia, an issue addressed personally and musically at the company. Robert Gordon noted that Estelle Axton prepared monthly care packages and secured employment for artists William Brown and John Gary of the Mad Lads, William Bell, and songwriter Homer Banks. Booker T. Jones had been in the ROTC at Booker T. Washington High School but received a college deferment to avoid combat. While Stax made no outward gestures for or against the war and did not produce the wealth of Vietnam-related songs seen in the world of rock and roll, several important songs addressed this important issue, including the Charmels’ “Please Uncle Sam” (1966) and Eddie Floyd’s “People, Get It Together” (1969). William Bell seemed particularly affected by his two-year stint in Vietnam, recording “Marching Off to War” and “Soldiers Good-bye” in 1966 and “Lonely Soldier” in 1970.

Stax Records rose to national prominence in an era of shifting federalist power due to civil rights and social justice movements as well as Cold War foreign entanglements. The development of the company led to involvement in local and national causes, despite a lack of overtly political claims in corporate dialogue or musical expression. While artists, producers, and staff at Stax may not have intended to speak to the political atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s, their music and social and cultural activities displayed the value of examining the work of the company in light of growing national power and a local civil rights movement intent on bringing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the people of Memphis.

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49 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 109. David Porter also had the title of Captain and claimed his ambition was to serve in the Armed Forces: The Warrior, Booker T. Washington High School Yearbook, 1961 (Benjamin Hooks Central Library, Memphis & Shelby County Room).


“Please Uncle Sam:” Musical Analysis of Stax Records, Civil Rights, and Federalism

Robert Gordon made an important point about Rufus Thomas’s decision to present himself to Jim Stewart in the early days of Stax:

Rufus’s simple act of entering on his own terms was actually no simple act at all… Rufus meeting Jim on McLemore was taking place five years after the nearby Emmett Till murder; three years after the Little Rock Nine defied the city and upheld the nation’s law, integrating their Central High School. It was four years the federal government passed the Civil Rights Act… The entertainment culture, music particularly, moved at a faster pace than social changes… Social issues were not on Jim’s mind when he leased the Capitol, but music was. While Stax was getting into rhythm and blues, rhythm and blues was working its way into Jim…

Rufus Thomas, a famous black entertainer in 1960s Memphis, approaching Jim Stewart, a white man starting a record company, represented an act of agency worth noting in the Jim Crow South. Thomas’s wife, Lorene, served as secretary for the NAACP, and he regularly engaged black audiences in witty dialogue to ease discussion of difficult issues on WDIA radio. Thomas developed a reputation for himself as “the world’s oldest teenager” and “the funkiest man alive,” but underneath his fun-loving exterior he was both brilliant and serious in engaging in cultural codes to use popular music and entertainment as a method of achieving important aims of the black freedom struggle. A comparison of two of Thomas’s biggest dance hits, “Walking the Dog” and “Funky Chicken,” with one of his more politically-driven songs, “Get on

52 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 22-23.
53 Cantor, Wheelin’ on Beale, 95-97, 126-127 Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 244.
Up and Do It,” illuminates the subtle ways in which he negotiated significant topics of the era without drawing controversy to himself.\(^{55}\)

Thomas made a reputation for himself as an artist who initiated teenage dance crazes. One of his best-known early hits, “Walking the Dog,” opened by quoting the “Wedding March” from Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, most famous for its use as a wedding recessional.\(^{56}\) For “Walking the Dog,” the horn section played the introduction across three octaves, providing a powerful opening, following by a bluesy guitar lick that set up the groove. This playful attitude characterized much of Thomas’s music and stage antics, and demonstrated his ability to move effortlessly between the intellectual and the vernacular, a trait shared by Nat D. Williams when discussing black issues on the radio or Russell Sugarmon when inviting potential supporters to a political reception.\(^{57}\) The rest of the song served as a vehicle for dancing, with an E-flat vamp under verses that included snippets of folk tales and children’s rhymes and a V-IV-I blues cadence offering assistance in learning the dance (“If you don’t know how to do it, I’ll show you how to walk the dog”).\(^{58}\)

In a similarly fun-loving fashion, “Funky Chicken” began with Thomas imitating a chicken, following by a short “rap” where he introduced the song by listing other dance hits over the years. The verses consisted of nothing more than describing the proper moves to do the


\(^{57}\) Cantor, *Wheelin’ on Beale*, 46-47, 115, 126-127; D’Army Bailey with Roger Eason, *The Education of a Black Radical: A Southern Civil Rights Activist’s Journey, 1959-1964* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 19-20; R. B. Sugarmon (handwritten: “Russ”), form letter inviting supporters to Shelby County Democratic Club reception for John D. Conyers, 24 October 1966: “This means that if we are to serve any type of beverages, we must rely on our friends (hopefully, smile) to supply the, ‘makings.’ In the vernacular, if you can make this scene, man, please bring a bottle (if you really want to make the scene, bring two).” (Sugarmon Papers, Box 3, Folder 2).

\(^{58}\) *Walking the Dog*, “Walking the Dog.”
“Funky Chicken,” interspersed with Thomas talking and joking over the groove. He performed this song at Wattstax to roaring approval and dancing audience members of all ages, which was followed famously by the crowd temporarily losing control and storming onto the football field behind the stage. Thomas, ever the leader, stayed on the microphone and successfully coaxed the crowd back to their seats with his signature combination of wit and pride, spontaneously using phrases like “more power to the folks that is goin’ to the stands” and “don’t jump the fence because it don’t make sense” while amicably teasing individuals like a comic.59

Some may question the value of analyzing Rufus Thomas dance hits in the context of civil rights and American federalism, but not to do so would be to miss the larger point of black popular music. Susan McClary and Robert Walser wrote about the body as a link between the physical and spiritual in African and African American culture, and argued that music and dance actually served a more important expressive function than so-called high art in the Western tradition. Consequently, scholars must consider the discourse over black music, the body, and sexuality, and understand that commercial music like Thomas produced at Stax actually provides as valuable a topic of analysis than other, more traditional artifacts.60 Thus, when Rufus Thomas created dance hits using vernacular lyrics and his trademark entertainer style, he provided a meaningful context for discourse over black culture, and when he combined his musical endeavors with public radio appearances, he represented a valuable black spokesperson in the

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Memphis community and across the country. As Brian Ward explained, “the crucial point here is that during the black power era, black pride, the quest for a common black heritage, and the celebration of a distinctively black world view were simultaneously a genuine reflection of a new black consciousness, and a lucrative commercial and marketing opportunity. Even the most escapist rituals and crass exploitation of the search for roots and cultural validation could be transformed by acts of creative individual and collective consumption into thoroughly positive assertions of self and community.”

When Rufus Thomas recorded “Get on Up and Do It” in 1973, he entered the explicitly political realm with a distinctly Black Power-based message. Demanding that his audience – ostensibly African Americans – stop waiting for opportunity and take action, Thomas touched on themes such as taking oneself seriously (“If you wanna be somebody, you can’t mess around”), motivation and entrepreneurship (“You gotta go and do it, ‘cause doin’ ain’t comin’ to you”), and avoiding troublemaking (“Hangin’ on the corner can cause some tears, you’ll find more trouble in five minutes then you can get out in twenty years”). By the early 1970s, trust in the national government waned from both sides, as civil rights activists grew frustrated over lack of improvement following major legislative and court victories and conservatives began to demand devolution back to the states in an attempt to capitalize on anger aimed at civil rights gains.

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62 Crown Prince of Dance, “Get on Up and Do It.”
This led many African Americans to call for economic empowerment and black entrepreneurship, with Al Bell counted among those ranks. Certainly “Get on Up and Do It” fit the message of self-sufficiency, black capitalism, and racial pride in an era of disappointment over lack of gains after years of struggle for equality.64

Musically, “Get on Up and Do It” represented a new approach for Thomas. Like others, he utilized several 1970s influences, including the Shaft-inspired wah-wah guitar effect and the dominant seventh chord with a sharp nine, a harmonic structure previously reserved for vocal or horn lines while the keyboard and guitar played simpler chords per Jim Stewart’s preferences.65 As black popular music developed as a national phenomenon, the various artists and record labels borrowed more and more from each other, and clearly this Thomas record was no exception. While Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia all adopted Memphis practices, Stax branched out and picked up influences such as James Brown and the Meters, as evidenced on this song.66 Once again, while the federal government steadily increased its power throughout the civil rights era, Rufus Thomas and Stax Records nationalized a previously regional sound to create music for a new generation of listeners and dancers.

William Bell, like Rufus Thomas, spanned almost the entire history of Stax Records, and demonstrated enormous talent as both performer and songwriter. One of his biggest early hits,

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“You Don’t Miss Your Water,” became a kind of signature for him, and when compared his post-Vietnam experience singles “Share What You Got” and “Marching Off to War,” formed a foundation for understanding the interplay between Bell’s music and political events of the day.67 “Water” represented the transition period, a 12/8 ballad with the horns taking the place of vocals in a doo-wop feel but with a definite gospel influence through the IV-I plagal cadence and the call-and-response between Bell’s vocal lines and the organ fills.68 Lyrically, Bell sang about his lost love, with the metaphor of the well as the woman he drove away. He begged her to return, admitting his own flaws in the process, much like when the black community turned to the city of Memphis, the state of Tennessee, and the United States government, and sought reconciliation through the civil rights movement.69

After his two-year stint in Vietnam, William Bell returned and recorded “Share What You Got (But Keep What You Need)” and “Marching Off to War” as the A- and B-side to an important single. In the former, Steve Cropper’s choppy guitar imitated the marching snare drum before joining with Al Jackson’s military quarter-note feel. Other than the “hut-two-three-four” chants, the song mostly described Bell’s experience waiting at the train station to be

69 Edmund Orgill, letter to W. C. Johnson urging action on poor treatment of black riders by white bus drivers, 3 March 1956 (Orgill Papers, Box 16, Folder IX.A); Russell Sugarmon and A. W. Willis, letter to Wade Sides (President, Front Street Theatre) complaining of racial discrimination in local theater attendance, 24 November 1962 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 2, Folder 15); Russell Sugarmon, letter to President Johnson regarding unfair representation for black Memphians under Mayor Ingram, 1965 (Sugarmon Papers, Box 2, Folder 5); Hollis Price presiding, MCCR Executive Committee Meeting Minutes discussing economic, educational, and employment relief for black citizens from Memphis businesses, 10 August 1967 (Orgill Papers, Box 24, Folder I.B); “Judge Hooks Calls for Law, Order and Justice for All,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, May 1968 (Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 1418); “FCC Member Calls for End to ‘Racism’,” Memphis Press-Scimitar, 18 November 1972 (Press-Scimitar Morgue, File 1418).
shipped overseas, particularly having to say goodbye to the woman he loves and promising to return to her. Robert Gordon accurately described the tone of the song: “Set to a martial beat, this story of a soldier being shipped out and saying good-bye to his sweetheart captures the mid-1960s zeitgeist, the young man’s quandary: duty versus freedom, R-O-T-C versus L-O-V-E.”

Compared to the other side of the record, however, this analysis does not seem to go far enough. “Share What You Got (But Keep What You Need)” stood alone as a love song of greater depth and maturity than “You Don’t Miss Your Water.” Bell sang about giving his money, his efforts, and his home to help a friend in need, but above all other things, he remained fiercely devoted to his baby. Several years after acknowledging his wrongs and missing his water, and a flip of the record away from saying goodbye to serve his country, William Bell seemed to intuitively understand exactly how important love truly was, and he refused to do anything to risk losing it. Perhaps his own personal experience in the conflict, well before it developed into the national crisis of conscience it became in the later 1960s, helped influence this work.

William Bell and the Stax family, like the American public, could not have predicted the impact Vietnam would eventually have on the nation. In the mid-1960s, black Americans remained heavily invested in the cause of domestic civil rights, seeking an equal voice in the representative system at the same time that Stax sought to increase their audience across the country. Unlike the competitive nature of capitalism, however, civic equality remained a demand rooted in the American ideal, and participation remained elusive for African Americans throughout the South. In the quest for civil rights, African Americans fought for their place in

70 Gordon, Respect Yourself, 109.
a political system theoretically built on representing all interests, and William Bell, a black man returning to Memphis after serving his nation to find that the musicians he worked with could not all be served from the same counter and the black garbage workers risked their lives for pay that could not sustain their families, must have intuitively understood these inherent contradictions when he went to the studio to record this music.72

Eldridge Cleaver and William Bell shared little in common other than the color of their skin, but in an era defined by the civil rights movement, this formed a powerful connection. Writing in 1968, in the height of the controversy over continued American involvement in Vietnam, Cleaver argued that President Johnson “adopted Goldwater’s foreign policy,” causing disillusionment among a population who had expected to finally witness the long-awaited changes in civil rights. He went on to note the connection between civil rights and Vietnam in American politics: “The fact that the brains in the Pentagon see fit to send 16 per cent black troops to Vietnam is one indication that there is a structural relationship between these two arenas of conflict. And the initial outrageous refusal of the Georgia Legislature to seat representative-elect Julian Bond, because he denounced the aggressive U.S. role in Vietnam, shows, too, the very intimate relationship between the way human beings are being treated in Vietnam and the treatment they are receiving here in the United States.”73 Cleaver refused to mince words or mask his message in code the way black performers frequently did, and his criticism of the Vietnam War found growing support among African Americans in the late 1960s.74

72 Pitkin, The Concept of Representation, 115, 141, 209, 216-218, 232-234; Jackson, In My Wildest Dreams: Take 1, 142-143; Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 224, 241-242, 253-254; Honey, Going Down Jericho Road, 3, 55.

73 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 115, 121.

Bell would not have gone this far; “Marching Off to War” served as a goodbye to his girlfriend and not a question of his duty. But in the context of his developing understanding of romantic love, from acknowledgement of his mistakes in “Water” to undying loyalty in “Share What You Got,” his message becomes clearer, and it is above all a message of love. This love went far beyond what could be shared between two people in a romantic relationship; it expressed the kind of agape love that held the African American population together through centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, violence, and unequal opportunity. Eldridge Cleaver feared truly loving another person and acknowledged that difficulty in explaining the difficulty of romantic relationships within a history of oppression, but James Cone understood the monumental importance of this kind of love, not just in holding a community together through hardship, but in reconciling black and white America and moving toward a brighter future. Cone went on to argue that true racial harmony relied on meeting both black and Christian requirements, and in a sense, it relied on white Americans reconciling by becoming black. Both liberals and conservatives agreed that no amount of action by the federal government, no matter its best intentions, had the power to create the kind of love and understanding that could reconcile black and white Americans rooted in a history of oppression and inequality. William Bell and his colleagues at Stax, however, may have held the key to reconciliation. Black popular music’s expansion to a national audience throughout the 1960s and 1970s included white as well as black listeners. When Stax artists traveled to hippie festivals in California and concert revues in Europe, they transcended racial boundaries and brought together groups with vastly different

75 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 22; Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 53-54, 134.
76 Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 147-148, 151.
77 Elazar, American Federalism, 32, 53, 102, 153-154, 224; Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness, 31-32, 162-163, 260-261; Zimmerman, Contemporary American Federalism, 6-7, 56; Frymer, Uneasy Alliances, 6-7, 52-53, 120-121.
social, political, and economic experiences. Faced with an electorate and a government hesitant to act, these hopeful experiences did not materialize in the form of significant national change, but certainly the music of artists like William Bell and Rufus Thomas offered at least a vision of what could be if the country truly followed its representative and federalist ideals.  

Conclusion

American federalism and representative democracy presents a complicated system, and the history of slavery, segregation, and economic inequality further complicates the relationships between state and national governments and constituents and their political representatives. Stax Records existed during the span of one of the nation’s most visible and controversial struggles over American political identity. The artists and producers at the company constantly dealt with the reality of being a racially integrated organization in a segregated Southern city during the height of the civil rights struggle, and they did so far more admirably than anyone could have possibly expected in that context. The music produced at Stax rarely dealt explicitly with the larger political issues of foreign and domestic policy, and when it did, it tended to carefully tread the line of artistic expression and commercial success. Nevertheless, the music of Stax records in the civil rights era offered a wealth of important resources with which to consider the shifting notions of federalism, representation, and racial equality in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The rise of Stax Records coincided with the rise of national power in the era of civil rights, the War on Poverty, and escalating involvement in Vietnam. While Memphis civil rights leaders demonstrated a nuanced, all-of-the-above approach to achieving its aims through local,

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state, and national channels, Jim Stewart and Al Bell sought an ever-expanding national market for their unique brand of Southern soul music. In their use of regional flavor and national marketing, they mirrored in many ways the methods used by the NAACP and the MCCR. Despite the disappointment in lack of change following major national action on civil rights, Stax Records continued to expand its fan base – along with its musical expression – until its ultimate demise in 1975, providing a fascinating and important example of the value of cultural contributions speaking to the larger political context of the time.
MEMPHIS represents a crossroads, geographically, socially, economically, politically, and culturally. A Mississippi River town at the top of the Delta, it served as the perfect example of the plantation mentality, where white supremacist tradition transferred from the cotton fields to the urban labor system. Beale Street, once one of the most important black districts in the United States, served as a place to live and play, where black and white people discovered that art and culture knew no segregated boundaries, and where some of the finest musicians in the world honed their craft. A distinctly Southern town situated in a Mid-South border state, Memphis provided the ideal location for biracial civil rights efforts and biracial musical collaboration in the 1960s and early 1970s. At once modern and traditional, boasting “good race relations” while struggling with segregation, Memphis offered a fascinating study in apparent contrasts and contradictions to challenge the notion of essentialist binaries in historical analysis.

I must admit to originally being a fervent adherent to the four binaries laid out at the beginning of this work, the method binary of integrationism and nationalism, the gender binary of masculinity and feminism, the theological binary of sacred and secular, and the federalist binary of national and state power. Fortunately, recent scholars provided meaningful and useful challenges to these notions, and convinced me of the nuance necessary to truly understand civil rights history. The music of Stax Records proved incredibly useful in challenging essentialist notions through postmodern analysis in the context of the Memphis and national civil rights movements.
No civil rights activist ever existed as purely integrationist or nationalist, and certainly no activist in Memphis fit these categories. The black freedom struggle required varied approaches to achieving goals of desegregation, economic empowerment, and opportunity, and black and white Memphians proved adept at applying any means necessary to achieve those aims. While operating in a highly traditional society marked by the plantation mentality, black and white men and women worked apart and together as circumstances necessitated. Overt challenges to the patriarchal system in particular were rare, yet women and men engaged in meaningful dialogue that placed women in powerful positions throughout the city in order to work toward equality. Memphis, a city filled with equal numbers of churches and nightclubs, negotiated the sacred and the secular in ways not unlike the larger civil rights movement. The holistic nature of African American culture, combined with the Southern religious tradition, enabled activists to apply Christian principles to secular life without contradiction. Few truly believed that national and state power existed in binary relation to each other, and Memphians intuitively understood the intricate relationships of American federalism and representative democracy in ways that allowed an all-of-the-above approach to achieving political aims.

Stax mirrored the Memphis civil rights movement in powerful ways. Despite the oasis metaphor of race relations at the company, no one came to work in a vacuum. The music they made reflected integrationist and nationalist goals, engaged in gender dialogue, exhibited spiritual and secular influences, and spoke indirectly to the politics of the age. The company began as a white-owned endeavor featuring black voices with a mixed band, and grew into a national product symbolic of the drive for black economic empowerment as well as integration into the world of commercial music. Artists and producers became involved in local and
national causes related to civil rights, poverty, education, and culture, further demonstrating the role of soul in providing far more than a soundtrack to the revolution.

While WDIA and Beale Street boasted B. B. King and Bobby Bland, Sun claimed Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins, and Hi fostered Al Green, Stax Records was the king of them all at its height, the quintessential example of unlikely success, unintentional segregation, and unmatched soul. Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton could scarcely have imagined what their gamble would eventually pay out. William Bell, Rufus and Carla Thomas, Sam and Dave, Otis Redding, the Mar-Keys, the Bar-Kays, the Mad Lads, the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes, Johnnie Taylor, Eddie Floyd, Mable John, Albert King, and of course, Booker T. and the MGs and the Memphis Horns, created the sound that defined Southern soul and changed American life and culture. Deanie Parker, an ambitious young black woman with huge dreams, helped create an internationally recognized brand that influenced local and national events and ideas for decades after the company closed its doors, and then she worked another miracle when she revitalized the Soulsville neighborhood with a museum and school on McLemore. Al Bell, the perfect example of the intersection of politics and culture, went from radio to civil rights activism to running one of the most successful black businesses in the country from a Southern city with a history of segregation and inequality. And lest we forget, all of this happened in the same city where Ben Hooks, Russell Sugarmon, Edmund Orgill, Lucius Burch, Hollis Price, Frances Coe, Maxine Smith, George Lee, Edward Meeman, A. W. Willis, J. E. Walker, and countless others fought daily for equal opportunity.

Memphis remains a highly segregated city. White flight, city planning, and unanswered calls for justice ensured that it would meet the same unfortunate fate as many American cities that struggled so valiantly in the civil rights movement. Yet their fight was not in vain. Their
story remains in the archives of a library named after Benjamin Hooks and in the halls of a beautiful museum honoring the black and white musicians who created a legacy on the south side of town. The struggle for racial justice remains, and music holds the key. It defies academically constructed categories, it transcends racial boundaries, and it offers a vision of hope and beauty that remains limited in politics or religion alone. If we look to the Soul Men and Soul Women, the promise remains: “I’ll Take You There.”
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