WaxPoetics

Articles

The Soul of Stax Records

The South's quintessential R&B label had its ups and downs but never lost its soul

by Ericka Blount Danois

Al Bell at the Stax offices. Photos courtesy of Stax Records.

“Show us the master tapes,” a steely voice said, stealing all the air from the room.

Al Bell walked with measured steps toward studio “A,” where $67 million dollars of the Stax catalog master tapes were housed. Bell’s face was flushed as heat soared through his body, and he alternated between nervousness and anger. He asked one of the federal marshals that followed close behind him if he could stop in the restroom as they walked down the long corridor. There he splashed his face with cold water and tried to settle down as he stared in the mirror wondering what to do.

As he gained his strength, he walked towards the restroom door and pushed against it. Something was blocking it. One of the marshals leaned his head around the door. “Be cool man. They came to off you.”

“What?” Bell asked.

“Be cool. They came to off you,” the marshal spoke slowly.
This was the culmination of a five-year investigation, where the criminal intelligence division of the IRS—the same division that took down Al Capone—investigated Bell, following him around the world, scaring people from doing business with him, flashing their badges and telling people that he was being investigated for allegedly defrauding Union Planters bank for $1.8 million.

Bell would face a fourteen-count indictment and two life terms—140 years in jail—and was defended by James Foster Neal, the famed Watergate prosecutor who had also prosecuted Teamsters Union President Jimmy Hoffa.

Every day, Bell walked into the courtroom ebullient. A deeply religious man, when asked why he was so cheerful, he replied: “My Heavenly Father is my attorney, and he’s never lost a case.”

On December 19, 1975, an involuntary bankruptcy petition for Stax Records was filed. The marshals had come to padlock the doors to the building that had housed some of the sweetest sounds of Memphis soul—the epitome of gut-bucket feeling; hit-makers from the likes of the country-gospel-soul of Otis Redding, the passions of the sexy-preacher-soul-singer Isaac Hayes, and the gospel roars of the Staple Singers.

But on this day, a barrel-chested White man, a consultant for the bank, was the only one making any noise. He was standing next to the marshals.

“Nigger, you got fifteen minutes to get out of the building,” he told Bell.

Reverend Jesse Jackson and Al Bell at Wattstax, Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, August 20, 1972.

“We may be in the slum, but the slum is not in us. We may be in the prison, but the prison is not in us. In Watts, we have shifted from ‘Burn, baby, burn’ to ‘Learn, baby, learn.’

Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum

“When we stand together, what time is it?” the country preacher, Reverend Jesse Jackson, asked the crowd in the Los Angeles Coliseum.

“Nation time!” 112,000 Black faces answered him in unison. Heads nodded. It was what they needed to hear.

The Wattstax crowd.

It was 1972.

Seven years prior, August 1965, gunshots fell like hail throughout the streets of Watts. The Watts Rebellion would last for six days and would kill thirty-four people. Though an incident between the Los Angeles Police Department and a twenty-one-year-old African American man, Marquette Frye, was largely reported as the impetus for the rebellion, that incident was just the Molotov cocktail that exploded the frustration of years of high unemployment, poor schools, and substandard housing in the Black ghettoes of the city.

Spiritual redemption for the destruction caused by the riots would come in the form of music—a twelve-hour concert featuring the Bar-Kays, Johnnie Taylor, the Emotions, Rufus Thomas, Kim Weston, and a majestic, Cadillac-driven entrance to a finale performance by Isaac Hayes. Audience members were only charged one dollar for admission.

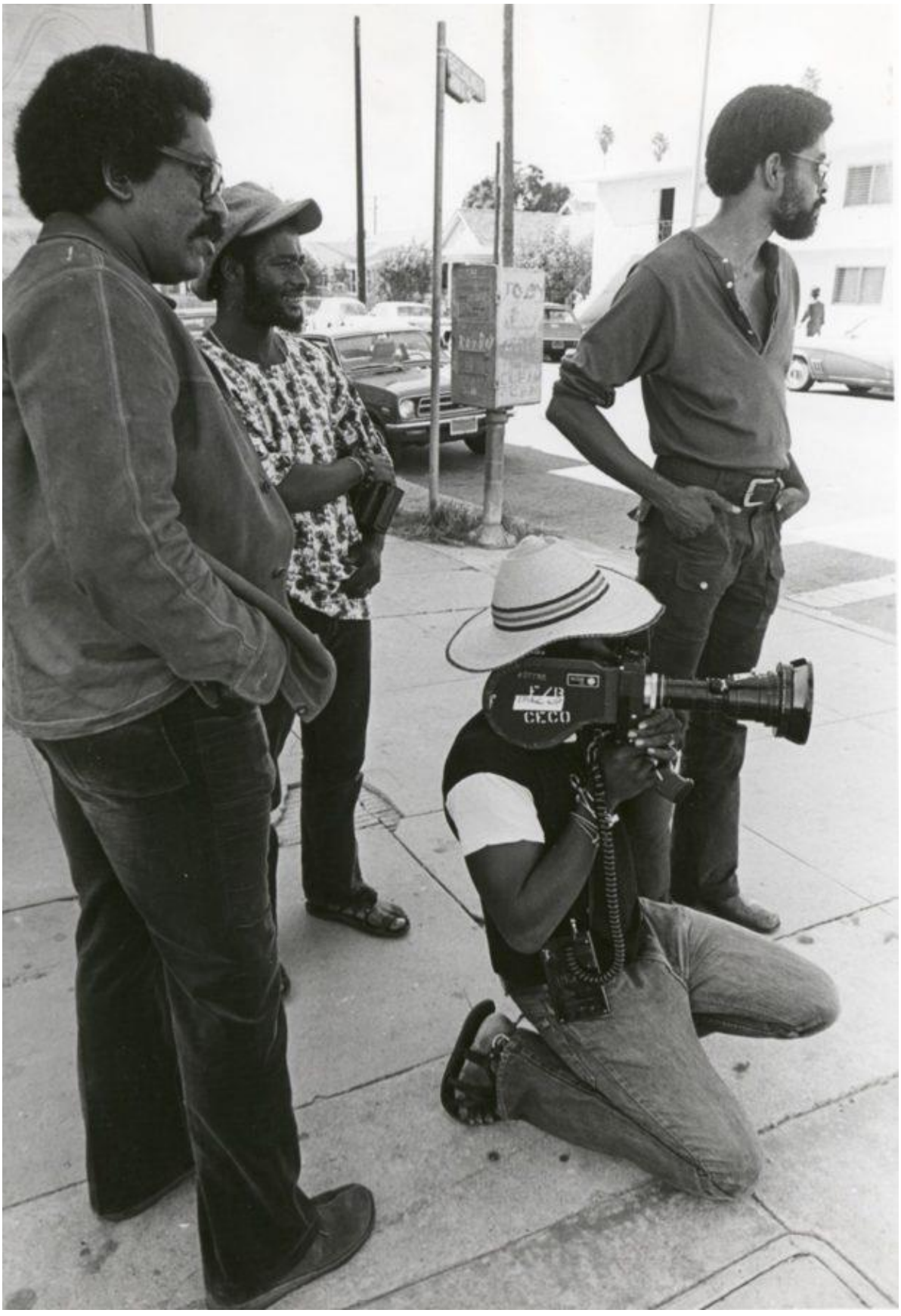
Melvin Van Peebles at Wattstax.

The security personnel, headed by filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, at the insistence of producer Larry Shaw and Al Bell, were all Black. None of the police officers from the LAPD (also all Black) were armed with guns inside the stadium. Audience members represented a large swath of the community, from gang members to the working class and professionals, to artists and entertainers like Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. There were no fights; and not a single incident.

The jewel of the entire documentary was candid interviews with members of the Watts community sounding off without self-censorship on issues ranging from love to unemployment—(in one interview, a man says, “If I can’t work and make it, I’ll steal and take it,” a quote that illuminated the frustrations of unemployment better than any study of the problem)—discrimination, and everything in between. A Black

camera crew from South Central conducted the interviews. Stax insisted in their contract with Wolper Films that they would have “absolute right of prior approval of film or narration which is included in the Motion Picture which relates to Black relationships and feelings; words or phrases having a special Black connotation.”

“We have never been portrayed the way we are. We have often had our history rewritten. We wanted it done right,” said Bell.


CECO

Producer Larry Shaw and the all-Black camera crew filming interviews in Watts.

These interviews with community members were intercut with clips from the concert and improvised monologues by then relatively unknown comic Richard Pryor. According to Mel Stuart, Pryor was added like the chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V*; someone who would sum up what the film was about and would be the voice of the community in comedic terms. Pryor would later record *That Nigger's Crazy* for Stax's Partee comedy label. Brilliantly devised, there was no better tool than *Wattstax* to showcase the vitality of music in the Black community while simultaneously showing music as a reflection of what goes on in the lives of people in that community. Ticket sales of over $70,000 were donated to the Watts Summer Music Festival, Martin Luther King Hospital, the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee.

"Wattstax came four years after King died, seven years after Malcolm, a year before the Vietnam peace treaty was signed; the Panthers were on the wane, Watergate followed, politics and protest were in the news every day," remembers Gary Harris, a music supervisor for television and film who was inspired by Stax to create the *New Jack City* soundtrack. "Ali had regained the ability to fight. Billie Jean King was fighting to get Title 9. Stax was the soundtrack for all of this. And that shit Al Bell was putting out was so Black it was blue—it should have included a discount coupon for Johnson hair care products and a five-dollar coupon for a rib, collard green, and black-eyed peas dinner."

Richard Pryor during a Wattstax monologue.

Al Bell in the Stax studios.

It didn't matter about the color of your skin. We weren't in there to prove that we were Black and they were proving that they were White; we were there proving that music is a sentiment of a man's soul.

–Blues vocalist Mable John from *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*

Booker T. and the MG's

Bell had always insisted, despite the unapologetically Black sounds coming from Stax's studio—that it was an integrated operation despite the intractable racism that hung in the Memphis air by swinging "Colored Only" signs. The label's beginnings, founded by Jim Stewart, who was later joined by his sister, Estelle Axton, were the moral compass of the operation that created a family atmosphere that endured until the end, where employees worked months without pay to keep the company afloat. Artists would hang out at the studio even when they weren't working. Booker T. and the MG's, became the company's house band, one of the first and only integrated R&B bands at the time.

Still, it was the undiluted collared-green soul of artists like Johnnie Taylor and Booker T. and the MG's, and showmen like Sam and Dave, Otis Redding, and Rufus

Thomas and his daughter Carla that would put the label on the map. Carla and Rufus's "'Cause I Love You" and Carla's "Gee Whiz" (written when she was sixteen years old) would provide direction and much-need cash flow to the fledgling company. When radio man, Al Bell, came in 1965 to build relationships with DJs around the country to promote Stax product, activity and profits increased exponentially. He would eventually buy out Estelle Axton's ownership in the company.

Stax Record Company, Memphis, Tennessee, 1967.

Stax's blues-based music represented the sentiment of the Black Southern migration north. Otis Redding would be the quintessential leading man to direct the company to a new kind of Black self-empowerment and identity. When he walked into a room, the whole place would light up. By the time he was twenty-six, he was at his creative peak, gaining new audiences playing the rock-inspired Monterey Pop Festival with an audience of 55,000 people. In December 1967, when Redding and the Bar-Kays left for a weekend tour in Madison, Wisconsin, they flew on his own twin-engine Beech craft plane. They would never make it. Stax's biggest star—the soul of the label—along with most of the members of the Bar-Kays, was gone. A few weeks later, Jim Stewart found out that the Atlantic Records deal he signed contained fine print that signed away ownership of all of Stax's releases. Stewart, more casual and family-oriented, had trusted Jerry Wexler with their verbal agreement and hadn't read the fine print.

Rev. Jesse Jackson speaking at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Three months later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would be assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The motel had been a refuge for Stax's White and Black musicians who were barred from other hotels because of segregation. The day a bullet would pass through King's body, expand, and sever his spinal cord, the oasis

of racial harmony that Stax employees had created inside its doors would soon start to disintegrate. The neighborhood changed. Threats to the employees and artists began. There were guns flashed and extortion attempts. Bell hired two New York thugs—Johnny Baylor, who had worked with Sugar Ray Robinson, and Dino Woodard—as security for the company.

Because of the fine print in the Atlantic deal, Stax was a label without any product. Bell came up with the idea of a marketing ploy he called—"Soul Explosion," where he devised a plan to flood the market with twenty-seven albums at the same time, with the emphasis on selling albums, rather than singles. One album, *Hot Buttered Soul*, by a man that came to be known as Black Moses, would rewrite the history of Black album sales.

Isaac Hayes grew up in Covington, Tennessee, with his grandparents who were sharecroppers and his sister after he lost their mother when he was one year old. As a child, he picked cotton to survive and would dream about having a warm bed to sleep in and a full meal to eat. The family moved to Memphis after his grandfather died.

"When I first met Isaac, he had two shirts—one red Ban-Lon and one yellow Ban-Lon—a pair of khaki pants, and one pair of shoes that didn't have laces. He lied his way up into Stax, saying he could play this and that. He was learning all the time, he had a symphony in his head," said Deanie Parker, former Stax Director of Publicity

Deanie Parker at Stax Record Company.

Hayes's humble beginnings—from sleeping in abandoned cars and dropping out of school because he didn't have decent clothing to watching his sister and grandmother get sick from hunger—would haunt him through adulthood. He would donate millions of dollars of toys to children anonymously, build homes for the homeless, personally deliver groceries to families at Christmas, and give money away at will. His generosity would be his most enduring gift and greatest weakness.

Hayes began at Stax as one half of the songwriting duo with David Porter—who sacked groceries across the street from the studio. One day, Hayes was at the piano developing a catchy riff, while Porter excused himself to go to the bathroom. As Hayes struck a groove, he called out to Porter, who was taking forever in the bathroom, "David, c'mon, man! I got something."

"Hold on, I'm coming!" Porter answered. Hayes ran to the piano, "That's it, that's it!"

"Hold On! I'm Comin'" rose to number one on the R&B charts, establishing Sam and Dave as stars and Hayes and Porter as hit songwriters.

Isaac Hayes with his custom Cadillac behind the Stax Records building.

On the heels of the success of *Hot Buttered Soul*, Isaac Hayes struck gold with the *Shaft* soundtrack. Hayes walked into the Oscars, arm-in-arm with his grandmother, Rushia Addie-Mae Wade, wearing a powder-blue fur tuxedo with a matching bow tie and powder-blue fur cuff links—the first African American composer to win an Oscar for Best Original Song for the "Theme from Shaft." He presented the award to his grandmother. He would become Stax's biggest star.

Al Bell had a $26,000 1972 peacock-blue, gold-plated Cadillac custom made for Hayes. It had to be insured by Lloyd's of London. It contained a refrigerated bar, a television set, twenty-four-carat windshield wipers, and custom crafted wheels. "There would be car wrecks every time he drove down the street from people staring," Parker remembers.

"Theme from Shaft" opened up opportunities to Black composers and the record industry to Black soundtracks.

And the hits kept coming.

Al Bell was sitting on the hood of an old school bus underneath some old oak trees in the back of his house where his father used to haul old cotton choppers and cotton pickers. Bell had just attended the funeral for his younger brother, Louis, who was murdered. The wake had begun inside his father's house, but he couldn't bear to participate. Between 1965 and 1977, he would lose three brothers to murder. He had gone to find his younger brother's killer, but couldn't find him. He sat brooding on the hood of the bus, trying his best to reconcile death.

As the silence opened to him, he began to hear sounds in his head: "Dum, dummm, dud, dud, dun." And he thought to himself: *I know a place…ain't nobody crying, ain't nobody worrying, ain't no smiling faces, lying to the races. I'll take you there.*

The Staple Singers at Wattstax.

He would take the lyrics to the Staple Singers. When he heard Mavis sing “I’ll Take You There,” the entire song written in the key of C, he knew for sure that it was something that only the Lord could make—a gospel song inviting listeners to seek heaven. God had written this song through him.

By the early ’70s, Stax had become a vocal powerhouse of gut-bucket soul and funk consummated with Bell’s hustle despite a lot of bad luck. With increasing success, Stax started operating like a big business and less like a family—artists started to complain about having to make appointments with Bell.

Stax as a company helmed by Jim Stewart and Al Bell had the uncanny ability to traverse adversity with a smile. It fit the spirit of the times.

Everything was about to change.

The Stax building on McLemore Avenue, Memphis.

Stax wasn't just making a name for itself with music. They were supporting the community—supporting Senator Harold Ford Sr.'s election campaign, aiding poor children during holiday seasons, and attempting to buy the Tams—Memphis's ABA basketball team. They were growing larger than Bell, Axton, and Stewart could have imagined. During the rioting after King's assassination, no one touched Stax studios. They were a beacon in the community—an unwavering source of hope and pride. Everyone took notice—including thugs, the police, and eventually the FBI.

In an effort to stretch further into the mainstream market—because Stax albums weren't reaching suburban stores—Bell negotiated a distribution deal with Clive Davis at CBS. At the time, Davis was the most powerful man in the music industry with a salary of $350,000. He and Bell shared a vision for getting authentic, gut-bucket soul into the mainstream. CBS Records had commissioned the Harvard University Business School to do a study on marketing and the marketability of Black music and its crossover appeal. Recommendations, among many, included purchasing already established talent from Black companies and creating Black music divisions at the major labels. The study, released in 1972, was titled "A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group," often referred to as the Harvard Report. Bell was originally reluctant to get into business with a monolith like CBS, but he was moved by Davis and their shared vision for Black music.

But their relationship ended quickly. In 1973, Newark and New York grand juries began an investigation of Davis for a number of activities including payola and ties between the music industry and organized crime.

That May in 1973, Davis was fired. Suddenly the brass at CBS, who didn't share Davis's vision of promoting Black music, put the squeeze on—warehousing Stax products and not paying for sales of product already on the market. At the same time, Union Planters Bank, a bank that Stax had gone to for years for loans, was under investigation by the SEC for bad loans and was being threatened with a cease and desist order. Stax, which had been moving at breakneck speed, was suddenly at a standstill.

Beginning in the winter of 1973, a series of unfortunate events would happen at Stax—much of it spurred on by the caustic mix of greed and racism. Rob Bowman's book, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, reports in painstaking detail the financial woes that would plague the company. But the spirit of Stax never suffered even in their worst times. Employees worked without pay for six months, so committed they were to the family atmosphere and to Al Bell's vision that had always pulled them through tough times. Most saw what happened to the company as something akin to a witch-hunt.

CBS deliberately put the squeeze on Stax. And Bell claims that he and Stax employees were told in no uncertain terms that they were aiming for Stax's jugular and intending to take down the "biggest nigger" from the company. Stax brought undiluted Black culture—from the soul of Isaac Hayes and Johnnie Taylor and the gospel of the Emotions and Staple Singers to the funk of the Bar-Kays and the Mar-Key—to the masses.

The reward?

Most were lucky to get away with just the clothes on their back.

Stax offices, 1972.

February 9, 1973.

The U.S. Attorney's office and the IRS began an investigation into Stax's finances after their security guard, Johnny Baylor, was stopped in the airport carrying $130,000 in cash in a suitcase. The IRS began investigating Stax and interviewing DJs about possible payola practices. Baylor, a thug hired to protect Stax employees and artists from other thugs that sprang up from the debris of King's assassination, would be the fuel to light the fire for Bell and Stewart's enemies.

Two months later, a federal judge ordered Stax to submit all financial records to the clerk's office of the Memphis Federal Grand Jury. CBS was still warehousing their products and refusing to admit they were doing it. Bell conducted his own investigation, sending sources to various stores around the country—all of which

said they had trouble getting Stax product from CBS. CBS responded to Bell's investigation by saying it was false and withholding forty percent of the money due to Stax as a reserve against records already paid for but had not been sold.

"CBS was intentionally trying to put Stax out of business," Bell said. He filed a $67 million anti-trust suit against CBS.

Meanwhile, Union Planters Bank was under investigation by the SEC for bad loans, among other activity, and was threatened with a cease-and-desist order. The United States Attorney and Grand Jury began to investigate all large customers for the bank, including Stax.

By the winter of 1974, the investigation by the U.S. Attorney began to focus on Al Bell—alleging that Bell conspired with Union Planters employee, Joseph Harwell, who had been convicted of forging Bell's and Jim Stewart's (as well as Al Green's) signatures on loans, and creating fictitious individuals that were supposed to have worked at Stax and taking out loans in their names. Stax couldn't meet the payroll anymore and began asking employees if they would agree to take fifty percent of their salary. Hits were still being made. Shirley Brown signed to Stax and hit with the single, "Woman to Woman," which peaked at number twenty-two on the *Billboard* Hot 100 singles chart. It would be Stax's last hit.

By 1975, CBS and Stax reached an out-of-court settlement, heavily favored in CBS's interests. The company agreed to relinquish its rights to distribute Stax product if Stax repaid its debt by August 31, 1976—approximately $6.3 million.

In the Stax offices by this time, Jim Stewart had given up his house and money out of his pocket. David Porter was paying employees weekly out of his pocket for their rent and whatever they needed to get them through the week. Leaving no stone unturned, Bell initiated a tentative agreement with Saudi Arabia's King Faisal to give them a substantial amount of money to pay off CBS and loans outstanding with Union Planters Bank. Faisal was motivated by supporting African American economic empowerment. In a macabre twist of fate, Faisal was assassinated by his nephew days before the face-to-face meeting could happen.

Stax artists began defecting to other labels—most notably to CBS—including the Soul Children, the Emotions, and Johnnie Taylor.

Al Bell's father contributed $50,000 to the company. They bounced an $83,000 check to CBS. People lost their houses. They continued to volunteer their time to the company. One person committed suicide.

The crumbling facade of Stax Record Company. 1976.

September 8, 1975.

Al Bell was presented with a fourteen-count indictment by a Memphis grand jury accusing him of conspiring with Joseph Harwell to defraud the bank for $1.8 million in loans. A handwriting expert was brought in. The trial was fraught with racist rhetoric. Bell would be exonerated of all charges. At the conclusion of the trail, Watergate prosecutor James F. Neal told Bell:

“Al, I’m going to have to bill you; I have a partner. Al, if you pay me in thirty days, that’s fine. If you pay me in sixty days, Al, that’s fine. If you pay me in ninety days, that’s fine. But, Al, if you never pay me, that’s fine too. I have prosecuted and defended a lot of people in my life, but I’ve never prosecuted or defended anybody that I didn’t see some criminal tendencies in them. And I find none in you. I just want to be your friend for the rest of my life.”

The next month, Al Jackson, songwriter and drummer with Booker T. and the MG’s was shot and killed execution-style in his home. His estranged wife was found screaming on the front lawn, her hands tied behind her back. Their marriage was volatile and she had shot him in the chest a few years before his murder. His murder would never be solved.

By December 1975, Union Planters foreclosed on Stax’s studio and forced them into involuntary bankruptcy on a debt of $1800—which Bell offered to give them out of his pocket, but they responded to that offer only with threats. As Stax employees were given fifteen minutes to leave, Eddie Floyd was calling the company to find out about the company’s medical insurance policy. His two-year-old daughter had been playing with his gun and accidentally shot herself. He was told by a woman, “We can’t get into that now, because the marshals are here closing the company. “

For much of this time, Bell, his wife and his two sons were forced to live in an unfinished basement. Jim Stewart to this day does not receive royalty payments for his work in creation of the music.

In the years following the closing of Stax, the building was sold to the Southside Church of God in Christ for ten dollars. By 1989, after years of neglect and decay, the original building was demolished despite efforts to save it. All that was left was a sullen, overgrown vacant lot with the requisite junkie's needles, beer cans, and broken glass where the greatest soul talents were once nurtured. Occasionally Bell, who had lost everything, would drive to the vacant lot, park across the street, and stare at the destruction. Then he would cry inconsolably.

Bell would eventually reinvent himself with the help of his once business rival, Berry Gordy. In the 1980s, he became the president of Motown and later started his own label, Bellmark, garnering hits like "Whoomp! (There It Is)" from Tag Team and Prince's "Most Beautiful Girl in the World," among others. Still, he couldn't get over the magic that happened in the years of Stax.

A non-profit foundation, Ewarton, had discussed with civic leaders the possibility of somehow erecting a memorial to the company. In 2000, that dream began to take shape with the help of $10.2 million—$6 million from anonymous donors, $3 million from city, county, federal dollars, and the Plough Foundation, and the rest was raised from individuals and corporations.

The dream was to erect a museum in Stax's honor and a music academy that would serve the area's at-risk youth in the neighborhood of Soulsville.

Civic leaders asked one of the most loyal employees, Deanie Parker, who had been with Stax since the beginning with Estelle Axton and Jim Stewart, to help with the efforts. She began collecting memorabilia, first calling Johnnie Taylor's wife and sorting through his flamboyant outfits. Then she spoke to the mother of Bar-Kays saxophonist Phalon Jones, who died in the plane crash with Redding, but she was reluctant to give up the saxophone—the only memory of her son. Parker also contacted the police association who had bought Isaac Hayes's custom-made Cadillac from auction. They had it refurbished to look just as it did in the early '70s.

In 2002, the Stax Music Academy opened. Then the Stax Museum opened. In 2005, the Soulsville Charter School, serving young people from grades 6–12, opened, sharing space with the museum. The charter school opened in their own building in 2011. Their first graduating class from the Soulsville Charter School in 2012 boasted

a 100 percent acceptance rate to colleges. Students have had the opportunity to play "Theme for Shaft" for Isaac Hayes, get training from Frankie Beverly, Stevie Wonder, and John Legend, and travel to D.C., Berlin, Germany, and Australia.

One day in November 2012, the children, under the director of twenty-five-year-old vocal director Justin Merrick, are in rehearsal. They give a stirring a cappella rendition of "Soul Finger" by the Bar-Kays before they launch into "There Is a Balm in Gilead"—*Sometimes I feel discouraged/ And think my work is in vain*, a soloist sings.

Al Bell, still effusively positive and loquacious, relocated back to his hometown in Little Rock, Arkansas, but was called in to serve as the chairman of the Memphis Music Foundation. He could have pinched himself.

"I often say to Al, I'm amazed that you are still able to smile and deal with this, and you still have this unbelievable love for this music and can come back to Memphis and volunteer to help us rebuild this industry the way they put their foot up your butt," says Parker. "His approach to coming out on the winning side was always different."

Johnny Baylor was convicted of fraud and died of cancer. His partner, Dino Woodard, who intimidated as Stax's security, became assistant to the pastor at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Union Planters went out of business. Union Planters employee, Joseph Harwell, served seven years in a federal prison.

But Stax still sings.

Ericka Blount Danois wrote the Earth, Wind & Fire and Lenny Kravitz cover stories for **Wax Poetics Issue 47** and **Issue 52**.