



Booker T.

and the MG's

Booker T. & the MGs grew out of a pair of boyhood friendships in Memphis. Guitarist Steve Cropper (born October 21, 1942) and bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn (born November 24, 1941) attended Messick High School and played together in an all-white R&B band called the Royal Spades. On the other side of town, drummer Al Jackson, Jr. (born November 27, 1934) and bassist Lewis Steinberg (born September 13, 1933) were regulars in the all-black band at the Plantation Inn.

In 1960, Stax Records and its affiliated record shop had just opened on East McLemore Avenue. Steve Cropper was a clerk in the record shop and an assistant studio engineer. One of Steve's regular customers was sixteen year-old Booker T. Jones (born December 11, 1944), already an accomplished keyboard and horn player.

By mid-1962, Cropper, Jones, and Steinberg were established Stax sessioners, Steve and Lewis having played on the Mar-Keys' (*nee* Royal Spades) Top Ten hit "Last Night"; Duck Dunn was mostly on the road with the touring Mar-Keys. When Jim Stewart called them to Stax for a Billy Lee Riley session, Steinberg recruited his friend Al Jackson, Jr. on drums. That day's work produced a Top Ten hit and one of the most popular instrumentals of all time.

"The session wasn't going particularly well," Jim Stewart recalls. "At one point we took a break, and Riley disappeared." Stewart decided to cut the backing band on a pair of instrumentals, "Behave Yourself" and "Green Onions." To settle an argument with Stewart over the choice of A-side, Steve Cropper rushed a demo pressing of "Green Onions" to WLOK DJ Reuben "Mad Lad" Washington, and his first spin of the disc prompted an outpouring of positive calls. "And that," says Cropper, "was the end of that" — or rather, the beginning.

Time is Tight (*l. to. r.*): "The Memphis equivalent of the Modern Jazz Quartet," Booker T. & the MGs, with Donald "Duck" Dunn (bass), Booker T. Jones, Steve Cropper and Al Jackson, Jr.

After Duck Dunn replaced Lewis Steinberg on bass in 1963, Booker T. & the MGs developed into one of the most prolific pop music ensembles of the Sixties. They appeared on ten albums of their own and over 600 Stax recordings, including all of Otis Redding's timeless classics plus those of Eddie Floyd, Rufus Thomas, Johnnie Taylor, William Bell and Sam & Dave.

"Our music was all very spontaneous," explains Duck Dunn. "A lot of the MGs' songs came from the vamps we did during the fades on other artists' records." "Hip Hug Her," "Time Is Tight," "Hang 'Em High," and "Soul Limbo" were among the MGs' fourteen instrumental chart hits spotlighting Steve Cropper's stinging guitar and Booker T.'s churning Hammond organ. But Al Jackson, Jr. "was the heart of the band," Duck acknowledges, "our musical and spiritual leader."

The MGs' era drew to a close with the sale of Stax in 1968. Booker was the first to leave, in 1969, followed the next year by Steve. But Duck and Al played on many hits of the label's second golden era, and Jackson moved Memphis soul into the Seventies with Al Green. Booker's subsequent productions include Bill Withers' "Ain't No Sunshine" and Willie Nelson's multi-platinum *Stardust*. Steve Cropper produced albums for Tower of Power and John Prine, and joined Duck Dunn in their ongoing Blues Brothers Band.

In September, 1975 the MGs were planning a reunion album. But their plans came to a halt with the shocking murder of Al Jackson, Jr. in Memphis on October 1. The other members played together only occasionally over the next fifteen years. But in 1990, the MGs hit the road again, with either Danny Gottlieb or Anton Figg on drums--and all of the controlled power and melodic grandeur of their music intact.

Jim Stewart: "The blend of Steve and Duck, who were a little bit rock & roll and a little bit country, with Booker, who loved jazz and understood music theory, plus Al Jackson, the rock upon which it was all built — this is what made the MGs magical. Booker T. & the MGs were The Memphis Sound."

— Steve Greenberg