



NONPERFORMER

JIM STEWART

By STEVE GREENBERG

BORN IN 1930 IN MIDDLETON, TENNESSEE, JIM STEWART got his start in the music business as a part-time country fiddle player. Recognizing his limitations as a musician, Stewart went on to start the label that would be at the forefront of the soul-music revolution. After founding Satellite Records in the late 1950s, Stewart – a longtime resident of Memphis – convinced his sister Estelle Axton to take out a second mortgage on her home to finance a label inspired by

Sam Phillips's success at Sun Records. From 1960 to 1975, Stax (after STewart and AXton) scaled the heights of success with classic recordings by Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, Booker T. and the MG's, Rufus Thomas, Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, the Dramatics, Eddie Floyd, Johnnie Taylor, Carla Thomas, Albert King and dozens more. As producer, engineer, businessman and mentor, Jim Stewart was at the center of it all.

Stewart housed Stax in a rundown

Opposite: Jim Stewart in his office at Stax on McLemore Avenue in Memphis, 1967; below: A Stax trade ad from the early 1970s boasts the label's distinctive roster





movie theater in Memphis's black ghetto. He converted the theater into a recording studio, and Axton opened a record shop where the lobby once stood. Initially intended to help the fledgling company pay its bills, the shop ultimately kept Stax in touch with the public's musical tastes and provided it an avenue to test new recordings. Stewart originally envisioned Stax as cutting country and pop singers, but given the studio's location, it was inevitable that he would come in contact with rhythm & blues. When he did, he later recalled, "It was like a blind man who suddenly gained his sight. You don't want to go back; you don't even look back." Stax soon found itself with a local hit, "'Cause I Love You," by Memphis DJ Rufus Thomas and his teenage daughter Carla. In short order, the label shifted its focus to R&B.

Until the late Sixties, Stewart engineered most Stax recordings himself, producing many of the label's classic sides, including its first national hit, Carla Thomas's "Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)," after which the hits just kept coming. By the mid-Sixties, Memphis soul – grittier and closer to gospel and

Above: Stewart with a teenage Carla Thomas, ca. 1961, who scored the label's first Top Ten hit with "Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)"; opposite: (From left) Stax Records executive Al Bell, the label's most successful artist, Isaac Hayes, and Stewart, 1975

time of the group's formation, in 1961, the four men couldn't have attended the same Memphis high school or even sat down for a meal in the same restaurant. But with Jim Stewart's encouragement, they joined together and developed a sound that revolutionized soul and pop music.

Even more shocking to the still segregated Memphis society of the late Sixties was Stewart's decision, in 1968, to make an equal partner of Al Bell, an African-American who was then Stax's head of promotion. Coming on the heels of the assassination of Dr. King at the nearby Lorraine Motel and the awful riots engulfing the neighborhood in its aftermath, this was a powerful rearticulation of the company's belief that blacks and whites could continue to work together despite the racial tensions that tore the country apart. It was also an embrace, on Stewart's part, of black America's growing assertion that there could be no true equality in business without the sharing of equity.

Stewart further reaffirmed his commitment to building a multiracial enterprise in the South by keeping Stax in its original McLemore Avenue loca-

blues than its northern counterpart – was so popular that the label's distributor, Atlantic Records, sent two of its stars, Wilson Pickett and Don Covay, to the Stax studios in the hope that the magic would rub off. The results included "Midnight Hour," "634-5789" and "See-Saw."

Arguably as important as Stax's groundbreaking music was the fact that Stewart, within the confines of that converted movie theater, created an environment that brought to life Dr. Martin Luther King's integrationist dream. Located in the heart of the segregated South, and operating at the height of the most tumultuous period in the civil rights movement's history, Stax Records defiantly stood as an oasis where black and white musicians wrote songs, played music and forged friendships as complete equals. While much of white Memphis gasped in horror, Stax created magic.

At its center were Booker T. and the MG's, a quartet consisting of two blacks, keyboardist Booker T. Jones and drummer Al Jackson Jr., and two whites, guitarist Steve Cropper and bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn. At the

tion, even after the post-King riots and despite the growing hostility in the neighborhood toward the whites at Stax. And when, in the early 1970s, Stewart sold his remaining interest in Stax to Al Bell, the company's evolution truly mirrored that of the civil rights movement, where Dr. King's impulse toward integration ultimately gave way to his successors'

greater emphasis on black self-determination.

Jim Stewart's unique achievement at Stax was, then, multidimensional. The environment he created in the Sixties and allowed to evolve with the times said a lot about his heart and spirit. And the company's rich musical legacy says it all about his ears. †

