

Date: 6/30/2004

Interviewees: Curtis Johnson and Samuel Jones

Interviewer: Jacob Rabinbach

Location: Stax Museum of American Soul Music, Memphis, TN

Collection: Stax Museum Oral Histories

Notes:

Interviewer: I'm going to have to ask you guys to speak up a bit because we couldn't figure out – we don't have the technology yet to have microphones for this thing, unfortunately. So we just gotta pick it up in here. I just want to say thanks for coming, I really appreciate it, I'm sorry you guys had to wait. I'd just like to ask, everybody, you know, what is soul music for you guys, how do you define it?

Jones: Soul Music... It's gotta be from the heart, straight from the heart, you know, playing what you feel. And the way we did it here, to define soul, it was just everybody getting together and chilling, making it happen, with not a lot of arrangements, not a lot of sheet music. It was just like coming together and making it happen. Soul, you know, is just a certain feel, when you get those goose bumps and you know when it's there.

[01:00]

Interviewer: When was it there for you guys?

Johnson: Well, we started doing background here at Stax, but we started in high school. We went to school together, and we started in high school with a little group, and we thought we had it together long before we really did.

Interviewer: I think that's how it is in high school.

Johnson: The guy that helped us to put the group together put us on a show in one of the clubs here with one of the real good groups here.

Interviewer: What was the club?

Johnson: The club was the Flamingo Room. When he first put us on stage, it was at the Flamingo Room with, what was that, the Del Rios?

Jones: The Del Rios.

Interviewer: Was that with William Bell?

Johnson: William Bell was in the group.

Jones: Lewis Williams

Johnson: We got on stage and we did our song, did our little

[02:00]

routines, and we thought we were doing something, except the crowd wasn't really responding the way we had thought they was; that was our first performance. After we come off stage, The Del Rios came on stage. They were dressed sharp, suits, tailored –

Jones: Loud colors.

Johnson: They come out there, and they was doing flips and splits and all types of stuff. They had it together. People just went crazy. We looked at each other like, "Uh-oh," and the guy that was managing us, who put the group together really- Herman Arnette- we had been bragging to him that we were ready, cause we had been practicing and practicing at his house for a quite a while, harmony was real tight, everything was good, and we were so embarrassed, and we asked him, you know, like, "Why did you do that to us?" He said, "It's because you got the big head already, and you needed to know what entertainment is really all about.

[03:00]

and that's when we started

Jones: Working hard.

Johnson: really working, and started putting our group together. We started doing talent shows and stuff like that around, that's how we met Carla, and after meeting Carla, we met her dad, Rufus, and he started taking us on little gigs with him down in little towns in Mississippi,

Jones: Mississippi, Arkansas, stuff like that.

Interviewer: West Memphis?

Jones: Oh yeah. Plantation Inn.

Johnson: Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Interviewer: You guys played in the Plantation Inn with Rufus?

Johnson: No.

Jones: Everybody else but Rufus, it was like, Booker T played over there, Isaac Hayes, some of everybody.

Johnson: We became a regular at the Plantation, every weekend. We were still in high school.

Interviewer: What was the name of the group then?

Johnson: The Duntinos,

[04:00]

we were The Duntinos then.

Interviewer: And after a while, when you guys were playing at the Plantation Inn, did the crowds start to respond better?

Johnson: Oh yeah. We had a little show, that we originally, the song "The Twist" was out at the time. And we had a little show where we did the twist and acted like we were playing baseball, we had one guy being the one acting like the catcher, another one would wind up like the pitcher, all the time we still doing the Twist. And he'd throw an imaginary ball, we'd swing at it, and we'd run, slide on the base, and what have you, and the crowd just, and all the time we still singing the Twist. The crowd... they just ate it up. So we began to do good there, and then we started working at Club Handy.

Jones: Yeah.

Johnson: And we started, what was her name, Evelyn Young?

Jones: Yeah.

Johnson: They started teaching us a lot of things

[05:00]

about stage presence and this. Rufus was really our basic teacher. He was the one that really sort of taught us how to perform. I remember a time when we were with Rufus, I don't remember where, but I was singing, I think it was, "Dedicated to the One I Love," and I forgot the words. I kept repeating, "Ohh this is dedicated to the one I-" over and over again, and Rufus, the guys started doing the background part, and Rufus realized that I got hung up, and he come out on stage and started adlibbing, and just got right in there and started adlibbing, and gave me a chance to get myself together, and I looked at him, he looked at me, and I guess he realized that I had it together, so he stepped back and we finished the song, but I never will forget it because

[06:00]

the audience never knew what happened. The way that he eased in and just sort of just covered it for us until we could get ourselves together. The audience never knew, and that impressed me until this day, and he never mentioned it, he never said a thing, we laughed about it later on, and they teased me about forgetting the words, but as far as audience is concerned, but it was that type of professionalism, that type of knowing how to work with the audience, knowing how to just do what you need to do to perform; he sort of taught us what to do on the roll.

Interviewer: Rufus was the greatest at that.

Johnson and Jones: He was.

Interviewer: There was no one like him.

Johnson: Because of him and Carla, we became involved with Stax. That's, well...-

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Jones: That's how it started.

Johnson: After we had done some things here, we decided to, my mother lived in Buffalo, New York,

[07:00]

and at the time, we didn't realize that Buffalo, New York was four hundred and some miles from there.

Jones: We were going to New York.

Johnson: Eliehue Stanback and I had just graduated, Sam and Richard still had another year –

Jones: I was in the tenth grade. Fifteen years old.

Johnson: So they had to come back to school. So that summer, we decided to go to New York, so we could really get into something. Got to Buffalo and realized that Buffalo is nowhere near New York City, so we hustled around. My uncle knew a lot of people in Buffalo and at the clubs, and what have you, so he took us to a lot of the little, what you call them? Joints, bars, what have you, and we started performing acapella, and a few people noticed us, so we started just doing little odd jobs, but during the day,

[08:00]

we were going to the tomato fields, because we had to make some money, we weren't making any money doing what we were doing. We did the bowling alley first, until bowling pen, you know, years ago you used to have to manually set the pens.

Jones: You had to set them up and get out the way.

Johnson: I got my leg almost busted from a bowling pen that jumped up out of there and popped me on my leg. That was the end of that, and then we started going to the tomato fields. Out there in that hot sun picking tomatoes. I don't know what country these people where from, but they were foreigners out there picking tomatoes. You know, you have a stack of bushels- the half-bushel, baskets, and you fill those up and leave them there and you go on down the line.

[09:00]

They would be all the way down to the other end of the field, I know it would look like two or three or four acres.

Jones: It was the closest thing to picking cotton that I knew of.

Johnson: But the worst part, I think, of picking cotton was that you get those stickies, but with tomatoes, your fingers go in the soft tomatoes and you got this dirty, you got this stuff, this dirt and tomato juice all around.

Jones: It was gross.

Interviewer: I bet you guys still can't eat tomatoes.

Johnson: Yeah, when I order a sandwich I order it without tomatoes. I don't care anything about tomatoes. But to get to the point, we bummed around there for a while and did that, and Carla and Sam had stayed in touch with each other after we had done talent shows together and that, and she told him about, did she tell you after you got back here?

Jones: Yea, we got back and

[10:00]

Well, I got back because what happened was I stayed up there and school had already started, and I was in the tenth grade and it was October and school had started, and my folk had sent me money, and we kept partying it off, you know, so I finally got forced to come back home. And when I came back at school I got a call, and she was telling me about the studio, that her and her father were getting ready to come down and do some things and we'd probably be interested and to get the guys together and come down, so I gave them a call in Buffalo and let them know what was happening, and one thing led to another.

Johnson: We came here to do background work behind Rufus and Carla, since they were getting ready to record, they said we could probably get some work in, that's how we started here.

Interviewer: So you guys sang background of what songs?

Johnson: Was that "Cause I Love You?"

Jones: "Cause I Love You," yeah. I really don't remember...

Johnson: It's so hard to remember back, we did background with William Bell,

[11:00]

we did...

Interviewer: "You Don't Miss Your Water."

Johnson: Mm, no. "Crying All by Myself."

Jones: Couple other things we did with William.

Interviewer: Now, what was the studio like back then, when you first got there?

Johnson: What you mean? The way it looked or how the people, or what..?

Interviewer: It was in Brunswick, right?

Johnson and Jones: No, it was here.

Interviewer: Oh, when you first got here it was here. You never were out in the Brunswick location.

Johnson: No, that's when, when they opened this, that's when Rufus met, you know, Jim Stewart and got involved with Jim Stewart and that's when about, recording Carla, and then she let us know about the studio and that her and her father were getting ready to record here.

Interviewer: So what were those sessions were like with Jim, and Rufus, and Carla?

Johnson: They were good. The only problem was in that day you had to do the songs over and over again. If anybody made the slightest mistake,

Jones: One mistake, everybody had to do it all over again.

[12:00]

Johnson: You had to do it over again, so sometimes we would do a song 25 or 30 times to get one good one.

Interviewer: You wore out your voices.

Jones: It could happen, yeah.

Johnson: We would be here sometimes until –

Jones: A lot of lemons and a lot of peppermint.

Johnson: late at night, lemons and gargling and all kinds of stuff –

Jones: It was really like doing a gig, like doing a show.

Johnson: We were excited, because we had tried, we had auditioned at many different record companies, we auditioned at one place called PEAK Records, down on, what was that- 3rd and Beale St., something like that? It was behind the Lansky Brothers, which is now, well, they turned it into Elvis Presley. We went in there, and we auditioned some songs and waited to hear from them, and after about two months, we didn't hear anything, we called, phone disconnected. We went down, and they'd moved completely out of the building, and we also auditioned at

[13:00]

Sun Records. Something happened in there but I won't go into that.

Jones: Did a little background work there. I think we did something with Jerry Lee and some other stuff with Knoxville...

Johnson: We did these songs that was on the flipside of "Great Balls of Fire,"

Interviewer: Which was what?

Johnson: Uh, Stanback wrote that,

Jones: Oh, I forget about that!

Johnson: But there's no way of verifying any of that, so we won't get into that. Anyway, we tried different places, and to get into a place where we were accepted, after we started doing background, we became a part of the family here.

Interviewer: And that's what it was like then.

Jones: It was family, really family.

Johnson: And it felt that way, everybody was just about making music.

[14:00]

It wasn't about, years later, you think about it was blacks and whites here together –

Jones: None of that.

Johnson: Doing this thing. You didn't think about that. All of the sudden there's a bunch of musicians in and everybody is trying to get a good sound, and that was the only point of anything that was going on, was a good sound. Everybody would come up with an idea. They'd say, "Let's try that." If that didn't work, then we'd go to something else. But they were receptive to everyone's ideas, and that's how, to

me, the Stax sound really got created, is because they let all the people, wasn't anybody like a lot of studios that we dealt with, where someone is directing or someone is writing music they're producing and they say, "Just do it this way, do it this way." Here, everybody has some input, and if you heard something or you felt something, then you didn't mind bringing it out. If they like it, they want to use it, fine, if they didn't wasn't no big deal, we'd go on to the next thing. And you just sit in here and work together, and

[15:00]

I got to the place where I hung down here so much, my wife wanted to know, "What is going on down there at Stax?" Because we spent so much time. His car got stolen right out front.

Interviewer: You parked in front?

Johnson: We used to park at that little area that comes in right there.

Jones: Getting ready for a session, unloading equipment, and brought some stuff in and went back out to get some stuff. The car was going down McLemore, over the hill. My Chevy.

Interviewer: That was that?

Jones: That was that. They found it a day later, you know, in South Memphis, on Prescott somewhere.

Interviewer: So they just took it for a little ride.

Jones: Yeah.

Johnson: But we used to spend a lot of time here, working on ideas, and then after Chips Moman got involved, how did that come about Chip, that we ended up Chip wanted to produce us? He said, "Let's do a record

[16:00]

on the Duntino's," and we're still the Duntino's, and we were still the Duntino's at that time.

Interviewer: Where did you get the idea for the name the Duntino's?

Johnson: It was all types of names...

Jones: Tinos, and the Largos, and all that. Valentinos...

Johnson: And that's just the name that we came up with.

Interviewer: What kind of records were you guys listened to when you were in high school and sort of creating this sound?

Jones: Oh, some of everything. Because I was, I had a record shop later, I worked with Lady A, in her studio, record stores, but even prior than that, we were always into Spaniel's, Domingo's, and that type of stuff. Shep and the Limelights. The Isley Brothers, The Teenagers.

Johnson: We were talking about that last night while watching B.E.T, the Isley Brothers all the way from, "Shout."

Jones: Impressions. You know. It was like to have heard them

[17:00]

and to eventually, just, finally, work with these guys, you know, that was the ultimate. The Coasters.

Johnson: We worked with the Coasters on the road, we worked with the Impressions.

Jones: The OJ's, Little Anthony and the Imperials.

Interviewer: What was it like when you got to work with the Impressions?

Jones: That was good.

Johnson: We did a short tour with Curtis Mayfield, the Impressions, Major Lance, Walter Jackson...

Jones: Jill Crockett, the guy with the coal mine, Lee Dorsey.

Johnson: The only problem with that tour was that we didn't have our own band, and Lee Dorsey's band was our backup band.

Jones: And they had our sheet music with them, which they probably still have.

Johnson: They took our sheet music.

Jones: They ran off with it.

Johnson: We had spent money...I'll tell you, so many of the stories...When I was in military,

[18:00]

I was in service, we had done a lot of recording and what have you, nothing had really hit big for us, mostly local hits or what have you, and we recorded "Candy", which we weren't that fond of.

Interviewer: This was for Stax?

Johnson: Yes.

Interviewer: With Chips or was this after Chips?

Jones: Well, "Candy" was a different situation.

Johnson: This was after Chips. The first records that we recorded, we did with Chips.

Jones: We wanted to change our name when the company changed their name. It was just Satellite Records, and then they changed the name of the company.

Johnson: Packy Axton more or less produced "Candy."

Jones: When Jim Stewart had left town. He was out of the area. He was in New York.

Interviewer: So that's when Packy was allowed to come in.

Johnson: Yeah. We came in with Packy, and we worked on "Candy." When we first did Candy, Ms. Axton took it out into the record shop and played it,

[19:00]

a demo of it, and she said that it sounded too much like the Impressions., so she sent us back into the studio and told us we had to do something with that.

Interviewer: So what did you do?

Johnson: I don't remember, but it turned out like...

Interviewer: What did it sound like first?

Jones: The Impressions.

Interviewer: It was slower?

Jones: No, it was our beat, but we were playing with harmony.

Johnson: The falsetto-type voice, which was my voice, was similar to that, and the harmony and stuff that we were doing was almost like, I can't remember what song it was, but when you played it, it didn't sound like one of their songs, but it would sound like you were listening to the Impressions.

Jones: Like an Impressions wannabe.

Interviewer: An impression of the Impressions.

Jones: Yeah, that's good.

Johnson: And we worked on it and worked on it and worked on it until we ended up with "Candy" the way it is now.

[20:00]

Anyway, Candy, I was still in service. I was home on leave when we did that. And had to go back in service, the record came out, and all of the sudden, it started taking off. I'm still in service and I'm like, "Oh man. We finally came out the record," and then here I am in the military, I can't get out. And just so happens that the base that I was stationed at, they decided to close, and they offered to everybody that was stationed there, and they wanted me to extended or reenlist, or you could take an early out... early out? That's me. So I come out of the service, "Candy" is now hitting the chart, so now they want us to go on tours, so we get together, go on tours...Seven weeks.

[21:00]

Went down to Lansky Brothers...

Jones: Oh, yeah. The one-suit deal.

Johnson: We bought that one suit, got sharp.

Jones: It was sharp. Brown three-piece.

Johnson: and then took a Greyhound bus to Philadelphia. They had booked us at the Uptown theater

Jones: Ten days.

Johnson: Ten days.

Jones: With three shows a day.

Johnson: The OJ's, the Coasters, Red Fox, Lester Phillips, Night Brothers, they had a record called "Temptation." Gospel Pearls, a gospel group called Gospel Pearls, we hadn't performed, other than the little performances that we had done some years back, before I went into service, with Rufus and all the little clubs, we have never done really a big stage, big production type of performance.

Jones: With the music and all that stuff, you know, sheet music.

Johnson: So here's the funny part. We go to Philly, we get there, we're on the bus,

[22:00]

so we take a cab to the Uptown Theatre. On the way, we hear our record on the radio.

Jones: And they got our names on the billboards and stuff.

Johnson: On the marquis, what have you. We are excited, oh man, and our record was probably big in Philly, so they really promoted us, we were hot when we got there, we were hot –

Jones: Didn't even know it.

Johnson: We go to the theater, and all these other groups that we just named are there for rehearsal. We had to be there at 8 that morning.

Jones: No, the OJs pulled in a station wagon, they had two station wagons, trailers, and they dropped their rhythm section off, and they go to the hotel. You know, this is really a big town, that's what you do, and they leave the rhythm section to take care of their business, you know. So they go to the hotel and chill out and they think the rhythm section will take care of their business.

Johnson: Yeah, to do the rehearsal. They don't need to be there for the rehearsal, so anyway, Patti LaBelle and the Blue Bells, were in the audience, because

[23:00]

they were finishing up their ten day run at the Uptown. So they were in the audience for all the new groups that were coming in for the next week, and we sit down, we watch the rehearsal. Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, who we eventually wrote for, and the OJ's and the Philadelphia Nationals and all of those groups, but anyway, they were in charge of the band, eighteen piece band at that time. Everybody went up, did their rehearsal, eighteen piece orchestra, they put their sheet music back.

Jones: And we performed at the same night, show's going to be tonight.

Johnson: The show is going to be tonight. The first show starts at afternoon, 4 o'clock on that day. The other days, they started the first show was at, what, around 1 o'clock? Another show was at 4, what have you. Anyway, with all of the groups that we had been working with

[24:00]

here in Memphis, we would take this little record player, this 45 box, about this big, and we would take our record. We put it on, and the band would listen to it, they'd pick up the beat, they'd pick up the guitar parts, and so on...So here we are at the Uptown at Philly with this eighteen piece orchestra, and Kenny was the band director, and Kenny said, "Okay," Astors, we're ready to rehearse, bring up your music. I go up to the stage with my little record player and a 45, and I hand him the 45, he said, "Oh yeah, this is you guys' record, we heard it, yeah we like it." He said, "Okay, where is your music?" I said, "That is our music."

[25:00]

He said, "No, where is your sheet music?" I said, "Nobody told us we needed sheet music."

Jones: Man, at that point right there, I was ready to get back on the bus and come on back to the house.

Johnson: He took the record, and he said, "Hey fellas, this is," he had it spinning around on his, "this is the Astors' music," and everybody just chuckled. Ha ha ha!

Jones: You gotta be kidding.

Johnson: And we embarrassed Miss Patti LaBelle and the Blue Bells sitting in the audience or what have you city... if I could've dug a hole in the floor and went through it, I would have.

Jones: Yeah, that was a pretty low point there.

Johnson: He said, "You guys don't have any sheet music?" We said, "No." He said, "Okay. I've got a studio, I'll take the record and I'll write a chart. It'll cost you \$250." We just barely were able to pay our way

[26:00]

to get to Philly. We don't get paid until the end of these ten days.

Jones: And it ain't like we was making a whole lot of money on this particular, it was the first gig.

Johnson: No, this was our first gig on the chitlin' circuit, as they call it, you're just out there, basically expenses is what you're making, you're not making any big money, so we had no choice but accept it, and we said, "Well, hey, we don't have any money," He said, "I'll get it at the end of the ten days. When you guys get paid, you can pay me, he said." So we did, he wrote the charts, but now we got to perform that evening with this 18 piece orchestra, and they haven't even seen this music, so we got to go out there onstage, they don't know the tempo, they don't have the feel, all they got to do is sit there and sight read what's been written for them, and it was pitiful.

[27:00]

And the people was like, "Huh?" Because our record is big there, our record is really booming, so when they announced us, the Astors, you know, it was like, "Hey!" And we come out on the stage and we do the show and they were like, "What?"

Jones: And here's another thing. That was the first show, now we got two more shows to do. Nobody wanted to go out back there and do that again.

Interviewer: Did they get together by the second one?

Jones and Johnson: Yes, it for sure was better.

Jones: But the thing about this, okay, like OJ's and everybody else is changing every show.

Johnson: They doing three shows. They putting on a show. That's when it was five of them. Ad-libbing, Eddy getting off the stage, walking down into the audience, sitting on the girls' lap, they just performed and everybody is in the wings watching everybody else. When we come on stage, we look at the wings, there's nobody in the wings, they've gone

[28:00]

downstairs into the dressing room. That happened for...we had ten days, that happened for five days. We realized after the first day that we were completely out of our league, but we decided that, "Hey, we gonna get up early in the morning, every morning, at the hotel and we gon' put a show together.

Jones: And then the OJ's came to our aid. They said "We got you, man. Show you what you need to do."

Johnson: Everybody, and this is what was nice, instead of the entertainers really looking at us, or looking down on us, it was like they almost felt sorry for us.

Interviewer: They wanted to take care of you.

Johnson: Yeah. So they started talking with us, they started us, and they started really talking to us into what we needed to do and how we need to do it.

Jones: You need a gimmick, your song is Candy? Use that. So we go to the store buy some candy, man.

Johnson: We bought some little candy kisses.

[29:00]

Jones: Started throwing candy to the audience and stuff.

Johnson: But we put a show together, we didn't do that until that sixth day, but we put steps, we started working on steps and routines, because the OJ's would just process...

Jones: We had routines, but we didn't have "routines."

Johnson: We had little steps and stuff, but not a really a show. We started working on that, we worked on that up until it was time to get showered up and go to do the show around 12 or 1 o'clock. We kept it to ourselves and just bared the embarrassment and pain for those five days.

Jones: We still wore the same one suit that at this point had got real shiny.

Johnson: Well, what we started doing is we wouldn't wear the coat. It was three pieces, we would wear the vest and the shirt; we'd switch up and wear the pants and the coat, we switched up around each show, we got ten days, three shows a day with just one suit

[30:00]

for the first ten days. Probably the best lesson that we had out of everything, because it taught us so much and threw us right in the middle of everything and we had to get it together in order to save ourselves.

Jones: At that time, they were booking everybody that was anybody.

Johnson: And they had other bookers, and from there we were getting ready to go to the Howard Theatre and James Brown Review.

Jones: We said, "Are you kidding? Are you serious? We're going where? With the who?"

Johnson: But by the time we left Philadelphia, we were ready. We had put a show together, and once we, when we came out that sixth day and started doing this new show, it was like the people had been just waiting, you know, you finally got it together. It was like the entertainers that was on the show -

Jones: And we picked up a manager.

Johnson: When we come off the stage, you know,

[31:00]

they embraced us, they had came back, the audience. The dressing rooms were up under the floor of the theatre, so you can hear the crowd upstairs, with us up there it was completely quiet all the time, and all of the sudden we're on the stage and the crowd is up and then they're bumping and clapping.

Jones: What is going on up there?

Johnson: So, the other people of the show came up to the wings and watched the rest of our show, and when we came offstage, they hugged us. From then on, that encouragement itself, that inspired us to work hard hard and hard. From that day on, the whole time they asked us, we worked. We get up in the morning, we rehearse, and sometimes late in the night if we still had strength, if somebody had an idea, we'd drop whatever we was doing and we'd start on that and worked on that, we, like he said, we ended up getting a manager out of Philly, who got us

[32:00]

an automobile.

Jones: And we had a fan club that was five hundred strong in Philly.

Johnson: And we ended up hooking up with Queen Booking Agency and started booking us, we booked at the Howard Theater in Washington D.C., the Regal Theatre in Chicago, the Apollo Theater, and we did all of those with James Brown Review.

Interviewer: What was that like, the James Brown Review?

Jones: It was fabulous because he took us and embraced us too.

Johnson: People told us that going on a show with James Brown, this is what people around here had said, that we had talked to, supposedly had performed with him before, they said that he would, in order to make himself look good, he was going to hurt our show. The band wasn't gonna really play

behind us the way he wanted. Now, we had a rehearsal with them, and the first show, the band messed up. It was really lazy that

[33:00]

the groove wasn't there, and I'm thinking, "This is what I heard."

Jones: We'd already been told this, so we're going, "Okay, here it is."

Johnson: After the show was over, James came out onstage in his robe and some pants and some house shoes. He told the band, he said, "I wanna see all the band downstairs in the dressing room, Astors, I wanna see you downstairs in the dressing room."

Jones: That was in that little practice room?

Johnson: Yeah. We were like, "Oh, what's going on?" So we get down to the, he told us to bring your music, bring your drums, and we got down to the dressing room and he said, "Everybody's here?" He said, "Look, these guys got a show to do. The way you're playing the music, no way they can do the show. He said, "Now, we're gonna rehearse, nobody is gonna take a break between the show", because we had about an hour between the time for the next show to start, there were three shows during the day.

Interviewer: This was the Famous Flames, was the band?

Jones: No, the Flames was the backup.

[34:00]

Johnson: That was his backup singers. It was just the James Brown Orchestra, with three drums.

Jones: And he assigned one of the drums to us personally. He said, "Okay. This is your drummer."

Johnson: They worked on music until we got the groove and got the feel, and those guys could play. By the time we came out of that dressing room for the second show, man, we're talking about a band kicking behind you.

Interviewer: I mean you got James Brown's group behind you, it's no problem.

Johnson: Yes, but with that first show you couldn't tell it was it.

Jones: It was probably like in the afternoon, and you're with the famous Apollo Theater.

Johnson: That wasn't at the Apollo.

Jones: Okay, that was at the Howard. We gotta talk about the Apollo.

Interviewer: Yeah, I want to hear about the Apollo.

Johnson: But, yeah, we got to doing, what was that? Seven days or ten days?

Jones: We did

[35:00]

seven days at the Howard.

Johnson: Seven at the Howard,

Jones and Johnson: And seven at the Apollo.

Johnson: And ten days at the Uptown.

Jones: Seven at the Regal.

Johnson: After that first seven days with James Brown, they knew us, we knew them, it was just...His organization was like an organization. I have to really state that. Everybody had a job, and everybody had to do their job to the max, otherwise they got fined. You didn't have, just like that little piece of paper sitting over there by that seat. We weren't on that bus because we had, by then, we had a Chrysler Station Wagon, but if you were on the bus, you were assigned a seat, and if they found a piece of paper by your seat. It was a \$25 fine. Everything that you did wrong, I don't care what it was,

[36:00]

whether it was on stage, off stage, at the hotel, or what have you, he had a fine for everything, which really kept everybody in order, because if you made a mistake it cost you money. Especially onstage.

Jones: Could cost your job.

Johnson: Yeah. Onstage, he would fine, this was the entertaining part of the thing, when he was on the stage doing his performance, you know how the drummer, when he would go down on his knees and stuff like that and everybody would have to accent the drums and everything had to be right on. If anybody made a mistake, and with the show, when you hear so much, you can tell when somebody made a mistake, wed would run to the wings and watch it, because he been doing his slide going across stage and every time he'd would do that, that was like \$10, and then he would point to who it was.

Jones: Didn't want to see this.

[37:00]

Both hands in the air like that, it was his job.

Johnson: Who's that he fired? One of the drummers?

Jones: Drummer? No, I think it was a keyboard player or something.

Johnson: Somebody got drunk right in the middle of the song, of course they didn't leave until after the show, he played until the show was over, but after the show was over your bus fair and everything was waiting for you.

Jones: And he had them waiting in the wings.

Interviewer: Everybody wanted to play with him.

Johnson: Right. Because he paid good money, he had a very good...He had people out two or three weeks ahead wherever he was going to make sure that everything was right, to make sure that his record was being played.

Interviewer: He was a business man. He wanted to be in charge of all it.

Johnson: This is what was nice about working with him, because you didn't have to worry. You knew what to do, you knew how to do it, and all you had to do was do your job, and you had no problem. And no problem would happen.

[38:00]

Jones: Now we're gonna talk about the Apollo. We had pulled into New York to do the Apollo for seven days with James Brown, Pearl Bailey's show had just closed, so you know we're going to the Apollo and everything was good and James Brown... this is just the ultimate, right? Apollo Theater, looking at the marquis, our name's up there with James Brown, this is a dream, we dreamed about this moment right here. So, first show at the Apollo Theater, it was about one or two o'clock in the afternoon, go out, the James Brown Band is hitting, you know, everything is fired up, and we did our best, you go like, "The show is over," and you get like one hand clap. Said, "Man, we don't believe this." We go off, James Brown come out and do his stuff. I'm talking about everything is hitting, everything is on the money. He throwing his cufflinks in the audience, they're throwing them back on the stage.

[39:00]

I said, "I ain't ready for this."

Interviewer: Yeah, he talks about that. He said, "When they're throwing your clothes back, you got work to do."

Johnson: That's how cold New York was at that time. Maybe it still is with entertainers, but see, what you see on amateur night is a different thing than what you see when they were doing the professional entertainment. You had to come on with it as a professional, or you got booed the same way they boo those amateurs.

Jones: Big time. You know, you're supposed to be the best of the best.

Johnson: I mean, you had to have your clothes together and everything. If you come up there looking tacky, or sounding tacky, you got booed, they had no problems with booing.

Jones: Oh, we didn't get booed, we just got a [slow claps].

Johnson: Yeah, we didn't get booed.

Jones: Because it wasn't about, what, ten people in the audience at that time in the middle of the day, you know, we're going like, "Man, ain't nobody out there."

Johnson: But before the week was over, there were lines wrapped around the-

Jones: three lines around the wall and around the building-

Johnson: waiting for the show to end so they can get in for the next show.

Jones: There were all kinds of people coming up that back step, we met the Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger,

[40:00]

And people was just coming back to be a part of that, and that parlor was beautiful.

Interviewer: The Rolling Stones came to see you guys at the Apollo with James Brown. Did you talk to them about the show afterwards?

Jones: Yes, but you see, being with Queen Booking Agency, that was a thing that they had, and they had so many artists that were on the roster. If you were anywhere in the area, they would prefer to just visit, stop in, you know, show your face in the place, because...The original Temptations, at the Howard Theater, we were onstage and doing our routines, and I did a spin, and I looked in the wings, and there they are. The original Temptations. They come to see us, come to see the show, and we got a chance to meet them, and that's the way it was.

Interviewer: Now, the song "Candy" that you guys had such a hit with, that you weren't such a fan of, you know, I was listening to it, I've been listening to it a lot, and it's a very

[41:00]

interesting song because you guys are doing this sort of very smooth and fresh and sort of vocal group sound over, sort of, rough Stax R&B track, which is actually the beauty of that track. What was the idea? How did you get the idea to sort of put the vocal group over that foundation?

Johnson: It wasn't really our idea, that was a Steve Cropper, Isaac Hayes situation. They created the whole concept that the Grand Canyon sweep type of.

Jones: William Tell.

Johnson: All of that was their creation. We were just the group that they used to put that together. This is why at first, it was like...I don't know. To me, it was kinda like bubblegum.

Jones: But we got a lot of that response. A lot of people thought we were white guys, they thought we were a white group,

[42:00]

seriously.

Johnson: And if you listen to the lyrics, you start talking about eyes so bright, sky blue, you know.

Interviewer: That's white people there...

Johnson: Okay now, you said it.

Jones: Honeybees flying all around your head...

Johnson: This is what people sort of thought of us, until they actually see the group.

Jones: We were the clean-cut guys.

Johnson: It worked out great for us. That's the one thing about all the different things that we did here at Stax - background work, songs that we recorded. My favorite song is, "What Can it Be?" To me, I think we did the best singing, maybe I did my best singing on lead, and the harmony and everything. That and, "Daddy Didn't Tell Me," harmony-wise,

[43:00]

the harmony was so great in those two songs. Those are two of my favorites, but all the work that we did here, all the people that we worked with, times that we were in the studio, when people talk about Stax being a family, it was just that. That's how we felt. You know, we sit around and we come up with ideas, go across the street to the little, uh what it was?

Interviewer: Big Star Grocery?

Johnson: No, to the little...

Jones: I know, that's where David Porter worked.

Johnson: Yeah. Down the street. But right across the street, what you call those places? It was a little restaurant, the Oliver House. Straight out of the front door, right across the street. We go there to get sandwiches or what have you, everybody would sit down and talk, socialize, and what have you, and we'd come back and go to work

[44:00]

and, if you were at the studio, you might be sitting around and they need somebody to do a harmony part or a background part, and, they say, "Curtis or Sam, come on in here, and do this, and play this", or what have you, it was not about how much money you were going to get for the session or how much they're going to pay for it, it was just a part of everything, we were all just a part of everything, when there was money to be made, you made some money. When they needed you for something you did whatever you needed to do to make it happen.

Jones: And you felt happy to do it

Johnson: yes, just for being a part of it. It was really, a lot of the time just being in the studio, being able to be here when Sam and Dave singing, "Hold On, I'm Coming," Otis Redding, you know, "Fair, fair, fair, fair..."

Jones: You knew when he was on that bus, cause the bus driver came up in there with the band.

Interviewer: What's that? Tell me about that.

Jones: Well yeah, you know, we were around there, we were in the area, and we would know that they were recording this band,

[45:00]

And every now and then, when you come in, you could hear them back here in the studios, recording and stuff. But just knew that there was this band in town, and there was this guy that was driving slash vocalist of the band that ended up being Big O. He had gave, who's, Lil' L a tape to listen to see what he thinks, and hey. The rest is history.

Johnson: And there were so many occasions like that, people ended up just stumbling in, just like the story of, I think, great story with David Porter riding the bicycle over there across the street delivering groceries. Coming over here, and I remember seeing him standing outside the studio when he was out

there coming over with this steno pad, this spiral steno pad, where he had these lyrics down, he's trying to show to people, of course with him not being a part of the organization,

[46:00]

they wouldn't look at it, and sorta brush him off. The one person whose attention he got, who was also trying to get in the door at the time, was Isaac Hayes.

Jones: Do you remember being in North Memphis, and we went by America Studios one night, Isaac Hayes was in there, we'd been working with Isaac at the Plantation Inn, these other clubs and stuff, and tell him about, "Hey, we're at this studio down in South Memphis. Maybe you can come on down, cause this is gonna happen." Because I knew Isaac from another situation, I knew him from a personal dealing with my father. So I knew about him, said, "Hey man, come on, take advantage of this 'cause this gon' be something."

Johnson: But at first they wouldn't let him in the door. They wouldn't let David in the door. Because they had Booker T. But Isaac was hanging out in the front of the studio with tennis shoes which, I never will forget, his little toe

[47:00]

peeking outside. He was just trying to make it happen. Booker T went off to school, Marvell had been doing a lot of sessions, a lot of things, Marvell had to leave. And some kind of way they decided to call Isaac in, "Is Isaac hanging around out there?" Get Isaac in here and let's put down something. I think they had one on piano, and they wanted Isaac on organ or something like that or vice versa, I don't know which, but they brought him in...

Jones: And he never left.

Interviewer: He just stayed and stayed.

Johnson: And I believe, if I remember, like I said, my memory is a little vague in these areas, but I remember him and David doing a lot of talking while he was outside of that studio,

[48:00]

and once he got inside the studio, as far as I can remember, he reached out to David, and started those songs, those lyrics that David had, you know, "Let's go over some of those. Now that I'm at the studio we can work on, "and the rest of that is history.

Interviewer: What was it like when you were at the "Hold on, I'm Coming" session? What was the feeling like in there?

Johnson: It was like being in a concert.

Jones: What I tell you about the chill bumps? You know, you can tell when something's really happening. You'd get in those sessions, but you could feel that they had something.

Johnson: The sessions were like live, because nowadays everything is done with tracks-

Interviewer: I don't like it that way.

Johnson: -it's electronically and digitally done nowadays. Then, it was just live, and as they worked on the songs, they'd say, "Yeah," or "Put this in there and do this right here, punch

[49:00]

this part right here." They go over two or three or four times, and like with people like Sam and Dave and all those people like that, it didn't take them but a minute to start feeling the thing. Really, when they heard it, when they really looked at what the song was about, they started already forming the impressions of how they're going to do this thing, and how they're going to get into it, and after two or three takes, they would be so strong until you want to get up there and shout really.

Jones: You asked us about our definition of soul?

Johnson: That was soul, that was raw soul. And that's how, we'd just feel it together.

Interviewer: You can hear it on the records, man. That was my definition of soul, too.

Johnson: Al Jackson would start with a beat, you know, we're gonna put it right here, and Doug was with the bass, and of course Steve would come in with the guitar part, and Booker T or Isaac would come in with the keyboards, and they set the pace

[50:00]

with the rhythm track, and from now, next thing you know, you got, in thirty, forty-five minutes, you got a hit in the making right there in the studio. Starting from pouring the foundation and building it all the way up in the studio, no tracks, no sheet music, you might draw if you doing some different stuff, maybe the horn lines and stuff. They'd come in and say, "Well we're going to do this here," but because we were only doing two tracks in the beginning, we couldn't go back and overdub a lot of this stuff, you had to do it all live, so they do it, and put it down with the rhythm, and the vocals, and then come back and put it down with everybody once they get everything together.

Interviewer: And that was the magic of the early Stax records.

Johnson: Yes, it's all created in live, and that's where the soul came from, because everybody could feel it. The only thing you could do is keep yourself still, because you're trying to record, you got your microphone

[51:00]

and stuff, cause you really want cut lose in there. It was just that strong.

Jones: And you couldn't wait until it was over so you could hear it all over again.

Interviewer: And that was what the sessions were like for you guys, too.

Johnson: Yeah, everybody would roll up in the control room, that big speaker- like the way they got it set up over there- sit there and listen to it.

Jones: You know, because if you're in the booth and you're doing the vocals and you got the horns over there, you can only hear so much, and you got your headphones on. But you want to get in the booth to hear it all. The magic of it all.

Johnson: I tell you, it was one of the greatest experiences of my life being a part of this. We didn't realize then what Stax would become or what it was all about, but all I know is that I enjoyed every moment of it. I just wish I had taken a little more time

[52:00]

to save some of the things that we accumulated and some of the memories and what have you, so we could've had more memorabilia and stuff at this time, because we had no idea that we were making history or that we would be part of history. We just were doing what we enjoyed doing, and we loved it and enjoyed it and it was just good.

Jones: Just like the first Wattstax thing they did at the 5/4 Ballroom. That was getting them all together to do it, even before the big Wattstax thing.

Johnson: We didn't do the Wattstax at the Coliseum.

Interviewer: No, but you were there during the riots.

Jones: Oh, we flew away. We took the last plane out. We had [inaudible] of our two days doing the time that Montague was cranking the city up. We came in from Pittsburg, and we flew into LA to do 13 days of promotions of Stax

[53:00]

and get picked at the airport, and go to the hotel and then we go directly to the radio station to be with this guy, Magnificent Montague that was producing this show. And when we were on the radio, people calling in requesting stuff, playing our music and stuff, and after every phone conversation, he wants you to say, "Burn, baby, burn." This is the slogan that everybody in LA is saying this. Burn, baby, burn. When we left LA after the 13 days, we caught the last flight out, and you fly out of LA, and you do the turn and you come back, fly over the city, coming back home.

Jones: It was burning.

Johnson: It was on fire.

Jones: All we could see was a whole section of the city smoking.

Interviewer: Did you realize in that moment that something really serious was happening in this country?

Johnson: Yea, we knew what was happening, because of all the

[54:00]

tensions, before we got out of there, the sirens, the police, the helicopters and all the stuff that was going on. We knew something, we wanted to get on out of there, because we didn't know exactly what. We didn't realize that it was a riot and we didn't realize the details over it, but we knew whatever it was, we needed to get out of there.

Johnson: It was a lot of tension in the city at that time. We did this high school, I was up on the stage, and some guy says, "Man, I want that watch."

Jones: He tried to pull him off the stage and take his watch. We went to another school, we had to go between this fence, the kids were on the sides of the fence, so they were like trying to reach through the fence to get to us or whatever.

Jones: We thought it was a good thing.

Johnson: We didn't realize that violence was involved, we were used to the crowds on the East Coast and everybody, because the guys that got the, who was that? You or Stanback?

[55:00]

At the Regal?

Jones: At the Regal Theatre with James Brown. We decided to go out the backdoor to go down to the Walgreens with Billy Stewart, to get something to eat. And so we gon' go out the backdoor, and the crowd is out there, and out of all these people in the crowd, I haven't seen my mother in a year or so, she lives in Milwaukee, so she just came over with my aunt to see the show, and these kids jump us, grabbing us, tearing our clothes off. My mom, "That's my son!" I said, "Man, you got to be jiving, man, we're talking about tearing us apart, pulling clothes off, doing all damn else. And we were fighting for life to get back in there.

Johnson: I wasn't a part of that, I told them not to go out.

Jones: My mom was so proud, "That's my son!"

Johnson: I told them to not go out there.

Interviewer: You knew.

Johnson: Yeah. Every time you opened the door, and this was like the backdoor of the theater, because we

[56:00]

went out through the back.

Jones: Same thing happened, well not the same thing, we were getting the same thing at the Howard. Gon' go out the backdoor and just play with the audience, play with the crowd. Open the door.

Johnson: We did some crazy things out there, but nothing wild. We just had fun.

Jones: No, we weren't the Mad Lads. Sorry about that, y'all. It was a good thing. Those are like- those are our sons.

Johnson: We were out there. We started first, they came right behind us. We worked together, we were like brothers. Still love them.

Jones: Seeing them today is just like a family reunion.

Interviewer: One of the guys, he was here on Saturday.

Johnson: That was John Gary.

[57:00]

Jones: That's my brother. He's family, man.

Johnson: John went through a lot of things, but John has always been down-to-earth people. William Brown eventually became one of the best recording engineers in the country, I believe, at one period of time.

Jones: Did you know that Julius was in town in April?

Johnson: I heard he was here. Because he had moved overseas.

Jones: Julius Green? Yeah, he was in Amsterdam. He's travelling all over the world.

Johnson: Former Mad Lad. Stax. Family. And I have to mention Miss Axton.

Jones: Aw yeah, Lady A.

Johnson: She was sweet as anybody you can imagine. I don't know how else to say it. She always treated us great, always. She

[58:00]

was always behind us, she always treated us good, she always tried to do what she felt would help us. I know she did that for everybody, but all I can say is how she actually treated us, how I personally felt being here, you know, it was just comfortable, just so comfortable. She was always sweet. It was always good to see her, good to see her face, cause she had that smile. She could give you a stern look if you weren't doing what you thought she doing, but you knew she wasn't angry, you knew she was doing that to encourage you, because she felt that you weren't doing all that you could do, you weren't living up to your potential, you weren't doing whatever it was you were supposed to be doing up to the potential.

Jones: She was very firm, very fair.

Johnson: But she was sweet. That's all I can say about her, she was sweet all the time.

Jones: Every time we get together for

[59:00]

these special things that they do with Stax, it's like a big family reunion. Like the other night, when we were here.

Interviewer: I could tell when everybody was here on Saturday, just the way everybody...it was like, "Hey, Carla."

Jones: It's family. You know, we got us to where we are, anywhere in the world.

Johnson: It didn't matter how big you were or how small you were, we never were the real big, big artists here. But they never treated us any different. Otis, and Isaac, and Sam and Dave, and Carla, of course- Carla was the queen of this company. She was really the beginning of this company, but we

were never, even then or now, we were never made to feel that, okay, your record never got as big as so and so and so's record or what have you. We were just

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family, just all a part of the thing. Even the people that just worked around the studio, helping out or doing whatever they were doing, they were considered a part of the family. I don't know if any other place, that I've heard people talk about that was like this place. People have studios, you come in and you rent your time and you do your session. I produce records with a label we had out of Buffalo, New York, when we had our own label- Funk Factory Production Promotions Incorporated. With Mercury Records or what have you, and I went through the thing where you set your sessions, hire your musicians, bring your people in, you got so many hours to do this and do that...

Interviewer: And this was the only place that was like that.

Johnson: Yeah. This is the only place I know of, there might be some other places, but even Motown, even though everybody was in-house in Motown, I don't think that

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they had the family type relationship that we had here.

Jones: And that's the way it started off here. Neighborhood situation, you know.

Interviewer: Kids coming in, "I want to make a record."

Jones: And guess what. With the Academy and what they got here now, it is so right on the nose. And when I was in high school, you know, we were talking about how I was still in high school, fifteen years old. I was leaving school, coming to the studio. We were doing what these kids are doing now. We'd come in. We stayed here.

Johnson: And we learned. Not the way they are, but we learned by watching, listening. The people that were here were ready to help us. We'd be all in the studio listening to playbacks and stuff, we wasn't on the session, but nobody said, "Hey, you can't come in here, you're not recording, you not in this session" or whatever. It wasn't that type of thing, we were all family. As long as you didn't get in the people's way who needed,

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Who were directly involved, then hey you're a part of the family.

Jones: There might be some background work. Might be some tambourine stuff going on, whatever. Might be contributor to a couple of lyrics.

Johnson: But let me mention this...

Jones: Oh, you looking at the time thing?

Johnson: I'm just looking, I don't want to talk him to death.

[Video cuts out]

Jones: James Brown thought he was getting a fine from us. He politely left the stage. Stood in the wings and waited until we came off and asked us what'd he do. We said, "No, man. It wasn't you. You didn't do nothing."

Johnson: Mr. Brown. Everybody, we didn't call him James, if you're in his employ.

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Jones: One of the guys in the group that had serious rapport with him, Richard. He'd go in the dressing room with James, and they both talk real fast, they'd laugh, we would be like, "What are they talking about?" But they knew exactly what they were talking about! We'd go like, "Man, what are they talking about?" Man, we had no idea how they were communicating but they got along real well. We did too, but they got exceptionally well. Now, talking about this place and what it's doing for the kids, and it was a great thing and Deanie has done a tremendous thing.

Johnson: What I'm so impressed, what really just touches my heart about Deanie is that, all three years, we as a group of people that were here after Stax,

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was over and what have you, we went all in different directions, all over the world. I lived in Buffalo, New York for about ten years after this time that we were talking about when we were young, and people went to California and all over the place. Deanie found a way to stay in touch with practically everybody during all those years, even though Stax was gone, nobody had seen, undoubtedly she had this dream all the time. I don't know if it was this particular dream, but she had a dream of pulling these things back together. She would get in touch and let people know, just to let them know that we are doing this and we are going that, but she stayed in touch, so when time for her to really

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start seriously putting this thing together, and it's my belief that all the experiences and the different positions and things that she had with different organizations in the city was really her development, whether it was purposely or whether the good Lord just so let it be, that she would have the experience, expertise, and the type of feeling with the different people that she needed to bring everything together. It took a whole lot to bring all of this together and to develop what she has developed, and she did it and she let us know maybe a year or two before they even started, talking about breaking ground and she would send out little feelers,

[1:06:00]

"Thinking about doing this, thinking about doing that, how do you feel about it? Would you like to be involved with it? If so, how would you like to be involved?" These type of things, wasn't like she did this on her own, it was never a Deanie thing, it was always like a "we" thing. Want your input, want your feel, want your thoughts, want your participation, the whole bit. Always included everybody from the beginning.

Jones: Still does.

Johnson: Yeah, it's just from the heart. She's serious, she's busy, she's worked so hard and so diligently.

Interviewer: She always finds the time to ask me how I'm doing with everything, and how everything's going.

Johnson: And see, she did this when she was back here years ago. Deanie started here, I don't know how old she was, about fourteen, fifteen years old. When she started working in

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the record store, but then she had this feeling, this enthusiasm that Ms. Axton just really latched on to her, and next thing you know, she was more or less the spokesperson for Stax, but she eventually became the public relations person for Stax. She was just, whatever it was she decided to do, she just did it. It wasn't like she had training for it or what have you, "I'm gonna do this, and I'm gonna do well." And she did it, and look, she's still doing it!

Jones: Well, she did have training for it, it's not "training" training. You know, this was school. Coming here was like going to school. It was schooling.

Johnson: She worked with Harold Ford, she worked with Memphis in May, she worked with marketing. She has just done so many things, that really groomed her for pulling all this together.

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And then when it was time to do it, she know what to do, when to do, who to do it with, how to do it, and just did it. And then she still will not take all the credit, without you, without this, without them, without this, we could've not done this. And I tell her all the time, "Deanie, you did this, that was your dream. You never gave it up, you kept on." Being persistent, being diligent, staying with it, until she pulled it together. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever been part of. Being a part of the Stax history is great, but being a part of what she has done with that history to pull all this together, it just fills me up with pride. All the time.

Jones: Same here. She did good. Better than ever.

Johnson: She don't want us to feel that way.

Jones: But we do.

Johnson: But we do, we can't help it.

[1:09:00]

Because without her, we wouldn't be here right now doing this. Here we are at this age, we're thinking that stuff that we did years ago, nobody would ever know. Now, there's a way for our children, our grandchildren, and their children to know what we did and how we did as young people. How can you thank a person for doing that? Making you immortal, in a sense.

Jones: So when you asked us, "Would we mind doing this?" Of course we wouldn't mind, we'd love to do this. We'd do this every year. Whatever it is. Whatever it takes.

Johnson: Whatever you all want us to do. We owe most of our life, to a degree, to this, because ain't no telling where we would have been if we had been out there in the streets doing this or that and the other, it hadn't have been for Stax and the music and the things that we had to do

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which helped us develop our lives and our families and all of this, so I don't have a problem with that. I am glad, I am proud to be a part of this. And thankful for Deanie, and I'll say it again, whether she likes it or not, for just keeping the dream.

Jones: Thank you Deanie.

Johnson: Thank you Deanie.

Interviewer: Thank you guys.

[END]