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John Bass: Well, cool. Just on behalf of the Mike Curb Institute for Music, Crossroads to Freedom project, and Rhodes College, thanks for coming over here today, and sharing your stories.

Winston Stewart: It's my pleasure.

John Bass: If you wouldn't mind, just to begin if you would state your name for the record.

Winston Stewart: My name is Winston Stewart.

John Bass: Okay, great. If you don't mind telling us, when were you born?

Winston Stewart: I was born October 22, 1950 in Memphis, Tennessee in Orange Mound Tennessee.

John Bass: So you were born and raised in Memphis.

Winston Stewart: Correct.

John Bass: Okay. Tell us a little bit about growing up in Memphis, your neighborhood, schools.

Winston Stewart: I lived in Orange Mound. Grew up in that community which was at the time, a large predominantly black community. I went to Melrose School. I went there for 12 years, high school, junior high, elementary. And I had friends and family.

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We were like a village growing up there. Everybody knew each other. It was a small community. It was a large community, but it was small for us because on the street, we were like family. The next-door neighbor, everybody knew everybody and so we just shared and had fun that way.

John Bass: Was music part of your life growing up? What were some of your first interactions with music?

Winston Stewart: Actually, my interaction with music was first with my sister. My oldest sister, and only sister, was taking piano lessons, and my mom some kinda way, bought her a piano. Don't ask me how. We had a piano in the house. Didn't have a TV, but had a piano. And she was taking lessons and I remember sometimes –

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playing with piano with her. But she was taking classical lessons and it was interesting, but it really didn't do anything for me. I had an uncle that was actually a Baptist preacher, and he would come to Memphis and he would sit at the piano, and he would play and sing. And he just had so much fire and so much energy when he played, and at the time I was probably 8-9-10 years old. Who knows? I was very young but he just blew me away. And I would watch him play and he would be looking around and singing and laughing and just doing this and never hit a wrong note. I said, "Wow." So that really excited me and I think to this –

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day that actually encouraged me and gave inspiration to become a pianist because I use that a lot in the style that I play. And I try to be exciting and I tried not to hit the wrong notes and just by hitting all the black keys – I later found out that's what he was doing. [Laughs] That's what he was doing. But that's what really got me introducing to really like the piano. From there, I guess I never took piano lessons at that point as a child. When I went to school, started at Melrose. When I was in eighth grade, I decided to play saxophone. So my freshman year – well, freshman year – the first semester, I joined the band first time out. And by the end of that semester, they put me in –

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the high school band. I was playing in the concern band on the saxophone. And from there, the band director asked me to start learning other instruments, oboe. I started playing oboe and clarinet, and played some trumpet, pretty much – oh, and I tried the bassoon. But, actually, that band director was killed in a plane – not a plane wreck, in a car wreck in my junior year, and so I didn't pursue too many more instruments after that.

John Bass: So the band was your sort of formal music education.

Winston Stewart: Formal music education, right, in high school.

John Bass: But you continued to – did you continue to play piano for fun or what?

Winston Stewart: My piano playing was really far as few in between. What happened, I was playing –

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saxophone and a friend of mine wanted to form a band. That band was called the **Spangles**, at the time. It consisted of members of school and the neighborhood. And so he formed a band and I was playing saxophone. Now one of the brothers was playing, at the time, tuba, which he eventually got a base. *[Laughs]* But at the time, it was a tuba and drums, guitar, and trumpet. That's what the band consisted of. And so after did a few gigs, gigs were like around the city, community center, places like that. And it was brought up that we needed an organ.

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We needed a keyboard. And my aunt stepped in and said, well, she would help us get one. I said, "Wow." So we went to the music store and my aunt signed for the organ. And there was an organ and a speaker, and actually I ended up playing it. I think it was really the bandleader was thinking that someone else was gonna play it that kinda had experience with playing piano. I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was that my aunt was buying it, and it was gonna be mine. *[Laughs]* So I started playing the organ and saxophone at the time. And, in fact, I was able to play the notes on the organ at that.

CUT at 0:06:55 – Begin Segment 2

John Bass: And this was still in high school?

Winston Stewart: This was still in high school. This was like junior high – I mean, not junior –

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my junior year in high school. So I really started playing organ then, and I just taught myself because I would need to know some songs in order to gig and I could pick up by ear pretty much the chords and pick 'em out, and just started playing organ. And then eventually, I left the saxophone alone. From that band, I went and joined another band called the **Trademarks**. That was in Memphis. And then from the Trademarks, went to the Brothers Unlimited. By then, I was just about out of high school, but I was really trying to play professionally, so that's all –

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I was doing was playing music. And from the Brothers Unlimited, I was gigging with them. And one night, we were playing and the Bar-Kays' producer, Allen Jones and at the time, the bandleader, James Alexander, came and visited the club we were playing. And they called me over on the break and asked would I be interested in playing with the Bar-Kays. I said, "Maybe." [Laughs] Yes, I was. So I was interested, and so from that point – well, it took a minute for me to really make my mind up to leave the group and I was dedicated to the guys, and I liked the guys that was working with at the time. So, anyway, I joined the Bar-Kays.

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John Bass: So I definitely wanna talk about the Bar-Kays a little bit, but at this time when you joined the Bar-Kays and when you were in high school, were you guys aware, and were you listening to the things coming out of Stax or was it – growing up in high school here in town, what were you guys listening to?

Winston Stewart: Right. Well, now growing up in high school, we were in competition with the Bar-Kays. Now my experience playing with the Bar-Kays didn't come until after high school. But during high school, we all knew each other. We formed local bands for each high school. The Bar-Kays were for Washington, the **Spangles**, from Melrose, and there were a few other groups, one from Hamilton. Anyway, so and we would have competition, battle of the bands. So we just kinda had that –

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– but we knew each other from that point of view.

John Bass: And so when you joined the Bar-Kays, were they the one that sort of hit it a little bit more than the other band?

Winston Stewart: Oh, yes. Yeah, at the time, the Bar-Kays, I believe they had – yeah, they had released "Soul Finger," and it was a hit record. In fact, when I was asked, it was after the plane crash. Right. We have to go back in history now, yeah.

John Bass: So, yeah. Obviously, after the plane crash –

Winston Stewart: After the plane crash.

John Bass: – and things had reformed. And James Alexander was the leader who sort of brought you into that.

Winston Stewart: Yes.

John Bass: So with that, I guess you went over to –

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Stax and recorded there, or trace your early career with the Bar-Kays.

Winston Stewart: Wow, early career with the Bar-Kays. From the time of being asked and then – I went to Chicago to see the group perform because I really hadn't seen the group perform. I really didn't know too much about the group. This was the new group, their newly reformed group. Went to Chicago, spent some time up there and watched 'em perform, performed with them. And then from there, made the commitment, "Okay, yes, let's do this." So at the time, I believe – yeah, the Bar-Kays were – man, man, man. We weren't in the studio at the time. We were –

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preparing for the road. We were getting the road show together. We were doing gigs, and we were preparing to go into the studio because we did wanna do the next album. Our early years with Stax, we did – oh, man, we did a "Black Rock." We did, "Do You See What I See?" Wow. We would hang around Stax all day – all day and all night. If weren't doing sessions, I know what I was doing. I was learning everything I could from everybody else that I saw there. There were places in Stax where you can go and kinda hide out –

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I would go to. There was a Studio C where I could go into and just practice. I would go and set instruments up and just practice. Aside from recording for others, we would have our time in the studio. We would go in. Our producer Allen Jones at the time, and even some of the other writers and producers around Stax, they would come in and help out with us in recording, trying to do what we were trying to do.

CUT at 0:13:41 – Begin Segment 3

John Bass: So was this late '60? This was right outta high school _____?

[Crosstalk]

Winston Stewart: This was early '70s.

John Bass: So this was after King was shot.

Winston Stewart: This was after King was shot, right.

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This was after King was shot. This was early '70, late '69-early '70s.

John Bass: And you may not be able to talk much about this, but this something I'm curious about when you were there. You hear the mood around Stax changed after King was shot. Did you have any experiences with that? Were you in any before that?

Winston Stewart: I was there before King was shot, and after King was shot, I don't remember the mood actually changing. And mind you, even before King was shot, Stax was integrated. It was integrated. Black musicians, white musicians. It didn't matter. We were just there for the music.

John Bass: And then that continued, you felt.

Winston Stewart: And that continued, yes, mm-hmm.

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I'm quite sure there may have been some tensions here and there, but it did not break down the morale of Stax to me. It didn't.

John Bass: That's really interesting. And so I guess you went and played Wattstax?

Winston Stewart: Played Wattstax.

John Bass: Talk about that a little bit.

Winston Stewart: Yeah, I played Wattstax. Didn't what we were doing at the time, didn't know the bigness of Wattstax. Just remember this big production, this big show that was gonna go on and _____

Coliseum. We had a tour bus, so we got on that tour bus and went out to California. Prior to that, we had rehearsed maybe two or three weeks on our show. We constantly rehearsed probably at least eight-ten hours a day –

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for our stage show and prepared our uniforms for that show.

John Bass: They were pretty fantastic.

Winston Stewart: Yeah. Believe it or not, our uniforms were handmade a lot, in fact, by us. I did a lot of the _____ work myself with the chains and someone would stick – actually we had coins and quarters and half dollars. We actually stuck holes in 'em and put chains in it and put 'em together. But we prepared for that show. I just remember just getting there and it was like just awesome, just an awesome time. We got to the hotel and the next thing I know, okay, “Bar-Kays, your time is –

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“such and such and such and such.” And we dressed in the locker rooms. I remember that. We wanted to use horses to come out on, but they wouldn't let us do that. I think Isaac took the idea and was trying to do it, too, but, anyway. So, actually it was time for us to come on and it was like we walked out there and it was like it was just phenomenal. It was just breathtaking. It was amazing. I remember in my experience, I got up on the organ because they had two organs, one stage left, and one stage right. The one I normally played was not working, and it was like, okay, it was time to kick off the song, and I had the beginning. I was like, “Oh, no,” so I ran to the other side and cranked up the organ. That's probably you don't see me in the footage because I went to the other side.

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But Wattstax, that was, oh, I think I was maybe 19 or 20 at the time when that happened.

John Bass: Y'all's performance is one of the highlights of that, the film and all the footage and things. Talk about, if you don't mind, being with the Bar-Kays and when Stax goes bankrupt in the mid-'70s, how does that change? 'Cause you guys continued to play –

Winston Stewart: Mm-hmm.

John Bass: – into the '80s and things. So how did that change the dynamic of everything?

Winston Stewart: Yeah. Well, we foresaw what was gonna happen with Stax in two ways, by what was happening to Stax and by what was happening to us in that we weren't really getting the exposure that we wanted.

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We weren't getting the music that we wanted produced. We weren't getting it. We weren't getting it. So I guess when that happened at Stax, we were prepared for it. At the time, we had rented a place in Midtown, and we had started writing songs to submit to shop to other labels, which we did. We did about seven or eight songs and submitted those to PolyGram Records, and they were accepted. We signed the deal with PolyGram and left Stax.

John Bass: Were you guys still based in Memphis, or –

Winston Stewart: Mm-hmm.

John Bass: – you relocated or –

Winston Stewart: No, we stayed –

John Bass: You continued to be in Memphis?

Winston Stewart: Yeah, we never relocated. We stayed here in Memphis. We had a studio on Detric, and at one point, we had –

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two studios, one off Detric, and one off of Lamar – somewhere off Lamar, Willette, somewhere like that, Rayner Street. I'm sorry. That's where it was, yeah.

CUT at 0:20:15 – Begin Segment 4

John Bass: And so you continue – well, before, 'cause I do wanna get into a little bit about you're, obviously, now a pretty accomplished church musician, but is there anything, any other stories, being with the Bar-Kays, being with Stax that you can think of that you'd like to share?

Winston Stewart: Wow. I have to think of something. *[Laughs]* I would have to think of something. There are a lotta stories, man. A lotta stories that they just flash by me right now. My, I guess, time with the Bar-Kays with Stax to probably about –

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25-30 years of my life was dedicated to that, from the time I finished high school and dropped out of college. I say for the NBA, but it was for the Bar-Kays. *[Laughs]* Man, it's a lotta stories that I could just come up with and talk about, but they just flash by me just like that right now. Yeah.

John Bass: One thing I'm curious about, Ben Cauley, was, of course, the only person that survived the plane crash. Did he remain sort of active with you guys at all?

Winston Stewart: Yeah. Ben remained active with us. In fact, Ben and I, we were pretty close friends. I still smile now because of the jokes that we used to do with each other.

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We remain active. I think at a point, Ben just personally just was ready to just kind of give up the road. It became his time to just give it up.

John Bass: So recently, I guess since the early '90s, you've devoted to becoming a church musician, primarily.

Winston Stewart: Mm-hmm.

John Bass: Tell us a little bit about that and how did being in the Bar-Kays for so long, being that kind of musician, how did it help you in this new line? What were the crossovers there?

Winston Stewart: Yeah. Well, at that point in the early '90s, I wanted to settle down. I wanted kids, and I wanted to get married, which I did. And so life on the road was –

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like been there, done that. I had gotten it out of my system. Everything I wanted to do, or coulda done, I think I did, and it was good. It was fun. It was fine. But I've been there, done that now. And so I was ready for a new experience in life, and I think just my

rededication and becoming reacquainted in with my Lord, with Jesus, did that for me. I told the group that that, “Well, okay, I’m –” I went back to school. I said, “I’m not gonna really hit the road too much now.” I got a job, and just stopped playing. I stopped writing, and just –

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started just studying Gospel music because that was a different genre for me to kind of comprehend being a R&B, brought up R&B. Okay, the core structures were different, so I just studied on my own for about seven-eight-nine years, just picking up on it, playing at coach. I landed a gig at a church. The first time I played, I remember a whole year went by and I played 12 times. I said, “Wow, I played 12 times,” ’cause I was playing once a Sunday, one Sunday out of the month. But that changed rapidly. The next year I was full-time there and so I was playing a lot. And so I think that I just touched and put on my heart just to kind of give back, music, what he had given me –

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what gifts he had given me. What I learned in the Bar-Kays in terms of performance, in terms of how to express the music, how to express the gift, I think helps. And what I do now, now that I try to make it like a rehearsed thing, I definitely depend upon the Holy Spirit to lead me in what I do, but I also know that skillfully and professionally some of the things that should be done in order for someone to receive and accept the music that you’re doing. And I learned that from the Bar-Kays just from that experience of the Bar-Kays, not from the Bar-Kays, but just from the fact that you have to go out on stage and perform your best night after night after night –

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no matter how you feel, no matter if you have a cold. I remember we performed in Germany. I had the German flu. I was gigging. I laid down in the corner somewhere and they said, “It’s time to gig.” I got up and went and gigged, and came back and just fell back down. I was dying, I felt. But that’s what you give. And so, anyway, so I studied Gospel music. And after that ten years of studying, I decided to start writing, too, and back in the studio. And so I finally got a studio at home now and I’ve down four Gospel jazz CDs, and I just completed the fifth one.

CUT at 00:26:48 – Begin Segment 5

John Bass: Very cool.

Winston Stewart: And it's amazing because now I can express without – professionally, you have to – your next meal comes –

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from your music when you're a professional. Now I'm not really a professional. I don't depend upon it for my meals, and so I can really enjoy and do it the way God puts in my heart to do it.

John Bass: So you feel more freedom now than you did.

Winston Stewart: I have more freedom now, exactly.

John Bass: And so was there a big learning curve?

Winston Stewart: Yes. Yeah, big learning. It was. In fact, during that interim time from high school till even that time, I would go back to school. I went back to school for engineering. I went back for information technology. I got a degree in that. But I would go back for music, which I'm in school now at the University of Memphis studying jazz performance just to keep learning –

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just to keep learning. So the curve for Gospel was more in the jazz and the core structures and how they were placed. And I think I took that put my own twist to it with the knowledge I already had to try to create something that was still simple, yet intricate. I use a lotta nines and chords, a lotta nine and sixes. You know what I mean, just to make 'em fat and so, okay, you may not hear it, but it's there. But I don't want it to overwhelm someone. Just let it be there.

John Bass: I believe from that run, you did the music for a project that we were actually involved with –

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the Herbert Brewster –

Winston Stewart: Oh, okay.

John Bass: We were there filming and as part of research we were doing. And what was your approach to that particular – we have a connection to that, so I'm curious.

Winston Stewart: Right. I know. That was what we called Sears & Roebuck, when it's like just simple and easy. That was a no-brainer. A friend of mine actually we was familiar with Herbert Brewster's music, shared the music with me. I listened to it. I read it. I looked at it. And I was semi-familiar with it, anyway, and so at that point, it was just a matter of putting it together. That's my years with the Bar-Kays for raising that, that happens quickly, too. That's kind of my niche. I can do that very quickly. Working with musicians, arranging, putting it together. I can do like that. And that creativity just comes to me just naturally.

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John Bass: What was the balance there between taking Brewster's? Did you try to stay as true as possible to Brewster, or did you try to balance that with some of your own things?

Winston Stewart: No, strictly Brewster.

John Bass: Strictly Brewster on that?

Winston Stewart: Yeah, strictly Brewster. That way that was for me to learn as well. That was for me to learn exactly what he was doing. And then I could apply it to something new that I'm doing. I kept it strictly Brewster 'cause it's something to learn from that, from the old school. It's something to learn, so that's what I'm about, learning.

John Bass: That's great. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you just a few questions about at the college we're really interested in engaging with Memphis and learning as much as we can about Memphis and having that reflect on a lotta things we do. What does being a Memphian mean to you in general?

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Winston Stewart: Wow. Being a Memphian, I think we're a special class of people in terms of music. I think Memphis musicians have certain special innate gift due to the region, probably due to just the area, due to the Mississippi and stuff, no telling. You know what I mean? Due to being close to Mississippi, no telling. I think we have that by traveling a lot, people outside of Memphis, they relish – they like

what they hear and what they see in Memphis musicians. By us being here, we may not see it because we live it all the time.

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Overseas, Memphis music is very well accepted, and notable. I think we have a niche here, our own style of music.

John Bass: Did it come across as that at something like Wattstax, even those weren't all Memphis-born-and-raised musicians there, it was sort of Wattstax putting this on. Did it seem like something special at the time that Memphis was going to Los Angeles and playing the coliseum or so? Or was it just something you were doing?

Winston Stewart: No, it was special, and you could tell it was special. It was different. The style and the quality and the sound of the music was different. And those who weren't Memphis-born, they wanted to be. *[Laughs]* They wanted the Memphis sound. I remember a couple a bands –

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well, one of the bands from California was backing up Rufus Thomas. But they came to Memphis in order to learn and in order to get what we have here. It was still Memphis influenced.

John Bass: So you believe it's beneficial for musicians to either be from Memphis or come here.

Winston Stewart: Oh, sure.

John Bass: There is something that they can get here.

Winston Stewart: Oh, sure, yeah.

John Bass: What is the Memphis sound?

Winston Stewart: *[Laughs]* What is the Memphis sound? I bet that question has been asked so many times.

John Bass: Sure. I'd love to hear what you think about it.

Winston Stewart: And it cannot be defined. Memphis sound is what it is. It is what it is. Memphis sound is just that. I don't think it can be described.

CUT at 00:33:43 – Begin Segment 6

John Bass: That's interesting – go ahead.

Winston Stewart: Right. And I think it becomes – I guess it becomes or reflects all of those –

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oh, man, all those things that influenced up on it – oh, man, just from everything. I lost my thought. I had it, but I lost it. But don't worry about.

John Bass: I think it's interesting, too, 'cause now you're studying jazz, and I'm not from here. I came here in 2000, but I've become really interested in the jazz tradition from Memphis. I think it's something that's really under-researched and is really important, especially the pianists that have come here from _____ James Williams, Donald Brown.

Winston Stewart: Right.

John Bass: There's a great quote that Harold Mayburn says that he considers himself a blues pianist who knows how to play jazz.

Winston Stewart: Okay.

John Bass: If you listen to Mayburn, he's a fantastic jazz pianist.

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But a lot of times Memphis sound or Memphis music gets sort of pigeonholed into, right, we're the home of the blues and the birthplace of rock and rock 'n roll, or Stax or something like that. But how do you think the Memphis sound translates to jazz or to other – it seems to me like the categories or something that other people put on Memphis.

Winston Stewart: Right. And –

John Bass: You being a musician in all these other areas, how do you see the –?

Winston Stewart: That's a good question, because Memphis sound and jazz are kind of two separate things to me. It seems like they're put up as two separate things. You don't mention jazz when you mention the

Memphis sound. You always think about Stax or you think about Hi, or you think about strictly blues. But on the jazz scene –

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maybe I think is underrated. I think it's underrated maybe because the culture doesn't embrace jazz as much. That's probably _____ 'cause I don't think the culture embraces the jazz side of the Memphis roots as much as it could or is it even aware of. But there's fantastic jazz roots here in Memphis, and blues, but jazz, yeah.

John Bass: Was there much jazz – we've done a lot of research on Manassas High, and sort of the jazz tradition from there. Was there much going on at Melrose in terms of jazz when you were there?

Winston Stewart: Some, somewhat. When I was at Melrose, **Tup Green** was the band director and Tup Green was a bassist.

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And I believe Hank Crawford was that jazz sound was kind of ticking underneath. But like I said, after passed that kind of went away.

John Bass: Just a few sort of final thoughts on sort of today and going forward, what is Memphis sound today?

Winston Stewart: Wow. *[Laughs]* I don't know. I don't know.

John Bass: Is it still a thing or is it something that was great once and then – or is it still something that's around?

Winston Stewart: Memphis music is still around. I think that's reflective of a lot of the older music is still around, be it Memphis or be it Motown or whatever –

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the older music still around. I don't know what a Memphis sound is right now. I don't know if there is an emerging Memphis sound for the 2012-2013 year coming up. I'm quite there probably is within the music community, but will that ever be expressed or made know? I don't know. I don't know. Hopefully, it will. Hopefully, it will, but I don't know.

John Bass: I guess just following on that, what are your hopes for Memphis music? Like 15-20 years, what do we say about Memphis music? Is it still Stax, or what is the thing people will talk about?

Winston Stewart: Yeah, I think this will be talked about forever. I think what happened with Stax, and just the Memphis scene –

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the music scene of Memphis is – I don't think it'll ever change. I think that's it. I don't think it's gonna change. There may be something new that comes on and ride the coattail of it, but that'll never go away. It just won't. It won't go away.

John Bass: Well, is there anything else that I didn't cover that you'd like to talk with us about?

Winston Stewart: I think we've just about covered it all.

John Bass: Okay.

Winston Stewart: Yeah.

John Bass: Well, great. Well, we certainly appreciate you being here and sharing your time and your stories with us.

Winston Stewart: Yeah, I appreciate it.

John Bass: It was an honor to meet you.

Winston Stewart: Thank you.

John Bass: Thanks.

Winston Stewart: My pleasure. All right. [Laughs]

John Bass: It's fascinating.

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