

# Royal Studios and the Creation of the Hi Sound

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To say the city of Memphis has a legacy of music is an understatement. From the home of the blues and to the birthplace of rock n' roll, from Elvis to Al Green, Memphis has served as a conduit of musical ideas, shaping and influencing upcoming artists with the legacies of their forerunners. The concentration of music in this city led to the development of many recording studios. In turn, these studios shaped Memphis's musical output. It is difficult to imagine rock and roll without the recordings created at Sun Studio in the fifties. In the following decades, soul music was nurtured at Stax and then Royal studios, creating a worldwide phenomenon. In many ways, Memphis's recording spaces – and the producers and engineers that worked them – facilitated the growth of Memphis music. This is especially the case with Royal Studios.

Unfortunately, many of the most successful of Memphis's recording studios were forced to close by the late seventies. Sun Studios began its decline after Elvis Presley left the label and AM Phillips lost interest. The label was sold to Shelby Singleton and Mercury Records in 1969, and the studio was sold to an auto parts company, then converted back into a recording studio in 1987 and reopened as a museum. Stax met a similar fate in 1975, after several years of distribution problems with Atlantic Records and later CBS Records. Bankrupt by December of 1975, the Stax label was sold to Fantasy Records. The studio was then sold to the Southside Church of God in Christ in 1981, demolished in 1989, and rebuilt and reopened in 2003 as the Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

Royal Studios managed to avoid bankruptcy or closure, despite losing its resident Hi Records label in 1977. How did Royal Studios persist through this bleak period for the Memphis recording industry? Through a combination of management expertise, skilled musicianship, and a unique studio environment, Royal Studios has remained a functioning part of Memphis music and a

living monument to Memphis's musical heritage. From its humble beginnings as a movie theater in 1915, Royal became a studio that would produce a generation of talent and redefine the soul and R&B genres.

### **The Early Days of Hi**

The Shamrock Theater, constructed in 1915 at 1320 South Lauderdale, was one of Memphis's earliest moving picture theaters. The Rex Theater, an open-air theater located nearby on McLemore Avenue, moved into the Shamrock building in the early 1920s. When the Rex Theater converted to sound around the same time, it changed its name to the Royal Theater. It remained the neighborhood theater until closing 1955.

The building sat dormant for two years before Joe Cuoghi and his partners decided to rent the building for sixty dollars a month and convert it to a recording studio.<sup>1</sup> The Hi label had been started a year earlier by Bill Cantrell, Quentin Claunch, and Ray Harris. Cantrell, Claunch, and Harris had experience working for Sam Phillips at Sun Studios; Harris had even cut a few records on the Sun label, including "Come on Little Mama" and "Greenback Dollar."<sup>2</sup> The Hi Records founders sought to emulate Sun's success with their own rockabilly label. Joe Cuoghi and John Novarese, the owners of the Poplar Tunes record store, Memphis's largest record store, partnered with the three Phillips alumni and three other silent partners – including Joe Cuoghi's lawyer, Nick Pesce – to start the Hi label. After converting Royal from a theater to a recording studio, it became their main facility.<sup>3</sup>

Management experience at Poplar Tunes gave Cuoghi the music industry experience he needed to lead the Hi label. He and John Novarese opened the store in the late 1940s.<sup>4</sup> Both a record store and a distributor to other small record shops and jukebox vendors, Poplar Tunes attracted the attention – and later endorsements – of Memphis radio legend Dewey Phillips, to Cuoghi's chagrin.

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1 "Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios: Home of the Memphis Sound," accessed on July 16, 2013. <http://royalstudios.com/history/>

2 Larry Nager. "Hi Records: History," accessed on July 16, 2013. <http://hirecords.com/history.html>

3 Larry Nager. *Memphis Beat: The Lives and Times of America's Musical Crossroads*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 206.

4 Ibid.

Robert Gordon notes a testimony from an employee of Poplar Tunes: "Dewey had made Joe Cuoghi legendary, a household name. But Joe Cuoghi didn't want to be famous. He used to hate whenever Dewey would come in to the store because he created such chaos."<sup>5</sup> Cuoghi's business acumen and clout with record dealers allowed him to steer Hi Records to early success.

Carl McVoy recorded Hi's first single, a cover of "You Are My Sunshine." Before its release, Joe Cuoghi bought out the three silent partners in the label, making himself the majority shareholder, and replaced Bill Cantrell as president. Unfortunately, there were issues with the distribution of McVoy's hit, and the label owners had to sell the record to Phillips International.<sup>6</sup> Sixteen more singles were recorded by different artists at Hi, but none of them were hits.<sup>7</sup> Though Bill Cantrell, Ray Harris, and Quentin Claunch originally intended for Hi Records to be a rockabilly label that would ride on the coattails of Presley's success, the hits would not come in the fifties. Then, in 1959, Joe Cuoghi began "moving the Hi Sound toward R&B and concentrating on instrumentals made for juke boxes and teen dances."<sup>8</sup> Cuoghi had the pull with Memphis record dealers to get Hi's singles on jukeboxes, but he needed a plan for national recognition.

In the late 1950s, Cuoghi signed Hi to a national distribution deal with London Records, and soon after Hi produced its first hit, recorded by the Bill Black Combo, "Smokie Part 2." Bill Black was a recognized musician; he had been the bassist for Elvis Presley. When "Smokie Part 2" was released, it reached number one on the R&B charts and placed on the pop Top 20. The Bill Black Combo recorded eighteen more records in the Top 100, and eventually played with the Beatles during their first American tour.<sup>9</sup> Reportedly, pianist Joe Hall was called into the studio to do the session. After recording a lick that was a staple in the band he played in regularly, Hall left. This lick transformed into "Smokie Part 2," but Joe Hall returned to playing piano for Willie Mitchell, future producer and engineer for Royal.<sup>10</sup> Music historian Peter Guralnick writes, "'Smokie' was not

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5 Robert Gordon. *It Came From Memphis*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 18.

6 "Joe Cuoghi," accessed July 22, 2013. [http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe\\_cuoghi.htm](http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe_cuoghi.htm)

7 Nager, "Hi Records: History."

8 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 206.

9 *Ibid.*, 207.

10 Peter Guralnick. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. (Boston: Little, Brown

just a financial success; it set a direction for the company for a number of years, as Hi became known as the 'house of instrumentals,' raising to stardom not just Black and Reggie Young (the guitar sound behind the Bill Black Combo) but future Nashville session man Ace Cannon and his honky-tonk sax."<sup>11</sup> Hi's early success in 1959 also attracted the attention of Memphis's premier bandleader at the time, Willie Mitchell.

### **Willie Mitchell the Bandleader**

Born in Ashland, Mississippi, in 1928, Willie Mitchell quickly developed an impressive résumé. While still in high school, he moved to Memphis and played in Tuff Green's Rocketeers and Al Jackson, Sr.'s big band. Mitchell contributed on B.B. King's first recordings and, while attending Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, studied the Schillinger method of composition.<sup>12</sup> While there, he began to form his own seventeen-piece band. Mitchell attended Rust College for three years alongside Onzie Horne, the future musical director for B.B. King and Isaac Hayes and band director of Manassas High School. He played society gigs with his band and, at one point, backed up Howlin' Wolf of Sun Studios fame.<sup>13</sup>

Mitchell's musical education, already thick with experience, continued in the 1950s. He was drafted into the army in 1950, serving as a radio operator. His musical talents led him to the Special Services, where he played with Vic Damone in an eighteen-piece band. After his tenure in the army was up, Mitchell played burlesque gigs in Buffalo, returning to Memphis in the middle of the 1950s. Rebuilding his band, Mitchell booked gigs at Danny's Club, the Manhattan Club, and the Plantation Inn. His skill as a bandleader made him a common name in Memphis music. Ernie Barrasso, the co-owner of the Thunderbird Lounge, said in 2004, "[The Manhattan Club] was a hole, a real dump, but it was open all night. Willie Mitchell played there, and nobody has ever had a

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and Company, 1999), 301-302.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Schillinger's system of musical composition utilizes geometrical and mathematical analysis of music to produce art that is held to be separate from genre and subjective tastes. Schillinger believed that the formal rules contained within conventional music theory were too restrictive on an individual composer's creativity. (from Nicolas Slonimsky, "The Schillinger System of Musical Composition by Joseph Schillinger," *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (July, 1946), 465-470, accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/739202>)

<sup>13</sup> Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 300-301.

better band than Willie Mitchell."<sup>14</sup>

Mitchell's horn section included many Memphis greats, including Charles Lloyd, Booker Little, George Coleman, Frank Strozier, and his younger brother James Mitchell. His rhythm sections boasted the jazz pianist Phineas Newborn, Jr., bassist Lewis Steinberg, and drummer Al Jackson, Jr., as well as the Hodges Brothers, who would later become his session players at Hi. Guralnick writes, "To young whites like Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, Jim Dickinson and Packy Axton, who made the [Plantation Inn] their second home, bands like Willie's were the pinnacle of cool and provided a level of musicianship and formal elegance to which they could scarcely aspire. To Memphis's fledgling 'music industry' these bands, with their natural reservoir of reading musicians, were a resource to be tapped."<sup>15</sup> And tap they did, as Mitchell began to write out lead sheets for Sam Phillips in the mid-fifties.<sup>16</sup>

Mitchell gained some producing experience around that same time with the Home of the Blues record label. He worked with the "5" Royales and Roy Brown, but national fame eluded them. Mitchell still had his heart set on becoming a recording artist, and in 1961, he got his chance. Hi Records offered him a position on the label, and Mitchell began recording and releasing instrumentals at Royal Studios.

Willie Mitchell's first big Hi Records single was "Sunrise Serenade," with the B-side "Easy Now," released in 1962. He attained more success with "20-75," which reached the #31 U.S. singles spot in 1964.<sup>17</sup> After a few years of recording for the Hi label at Royal, Willie began to notice that the sound of all the artists – Bill Black, Ace Cannon, himself, and other instrumentalists – sounded the same, but the audio engineer at Royal brushed off his complaints. So in 1965 or 1966, when he had sold enough records to afford it, Mitchell bought out the engineer and began experimenting with the equipment.<sup>18</sup> In 1968, Mitchell engineered and produced "Soul Serenade."<sup>19</sup> It peaked at

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14 Chris Davis, "The Swinging Sixties," *The Memphis Flyer*. April 15, 2004, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/the-swinging-sixties/Content?oid=1113954>

15 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 301.

16 *Ibid.*

17 "Chart Histories: Willie Mitchell," accessed July 23, 2013, <http://www.ukmix.org/forums/viewtopic.php?p=2434669>

18 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

#23 on the U.S. singles listing and stayed on the charts for fifteen weeks.<sup>20</sup> This was a favorable sign marking the first – but certainly not the last – time that Willie Mitchell the producer and engineer would dent the charts.

### **Willie Mitchell, Producer and Engineer**

Mitchell had gotten his first taste of producing back in the mid-fifties while working on the Home of the Blues label, and when he signed to Hi in 1961, he continued to produce other acts. As early as 1962, Willie Mitchell signed Syl Johnson to Hi Records.<sup>21</sup> In 1964, he produced Bobby "Blue" Bland's album, *Ain't Nothing You Can Do*, for the Memphis label Duke.<sup>22</sup> In 1965, Don Bryant – a previous member of the Four Kings, the vocal component of the Willie Mitchell Orchestra – recorded "Don't Turn Your Back On Me" at Royal. Though it was unsuccessful, Bryant decided to remain on the label as a songwriter.<sup>23</sup>

In 1966, Don Robey, Duke/Peacock and Backbeat Records executive and producer, approached Willie Mitchell about producing O.V. Wright.<sup>24</sup> Mitchell consented, and Wright's "Eight Men Four Women" reached #4 on the Billboard R&B charts in 1967. Mitchell continued to produce Wright as he was passed from the Back Beat label to ABC/Dunhill. Wright eventually joined the Hi label in 1976.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, Mitchell often did horn arrangements for other labels, including Goldwax. Understanding the need for a cohesive sound across all of Hi's work, Mitchell installed the young Hodges Brothers, who had been playing in his band, as the session musicians at Royal. Al Jackson, Jr., while not gigging or playing sessions with Booker T. and the MGs at Stax, was a session drummer at Royal. His friend and pupil Howard Grimes also began playing regular sessions at Royal. Mitchell's connections with other Memphis labels, Goldwax and Stax among them, kept

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19 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 303.

20 "Chart Histories: Willie Mitchell," <http://www.ukmix.org/forums/viewtopic.php?p=2434669>

21 "Syl Johnson: AllMusic," accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/syl-johnson-mn0000046784/biography>

22 Ben Sisario, "Willie Mitchell, Soul Music Producer, Dies at 81," *New York Times*, January 6, 2010, accessed July 25, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/arts/music/06mitchell.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/06/arts/music/06mitchell.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0)

23 Nager, "Hi Records: History."

24 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 302.

25 Ray Ellis, *O.V. Wright: Giant of Southern Soul*, "Part One: From Gospel to Soul to Gospel," accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.ovwright.org/giant.html>

him informed of the ebb and flow of the music business.<sup>26</sup>

Mitchell's biggest star yet came in 1968, when Gene "Bowlegs" Miller – a trumpeter, bandleader, and session player at Stax – introduced him to Ann Peebles. Twenty-one and fresh from St. Louis, Peebles had sung with Miller's band at the Rosewood Club.<sup>27</sup> When Mitchell recorded her, he was impressed, as well. He offered her a contract, and her first single "Walk Away" reached #22 on the R&B charts in 1969. Mitchell paired her with Royal's songwriter Don Bryant, and the duo began writing together.<sup>28</sup> Her fourth single, "Part Time Love," broke the R&B top ten at number seven in 1970.<sup>29</sup> Peebles's astonishing success could only be topped by her 1973 album, *I Can't Stand the Rain*. The titular track was written by Peebles, Bryant, and Memphis DJ Bernard Miller, and it managed to hit number six on the R&B charts.<sup>30</sup>

In the late 1960s, Mitchell was touring the country on the success of his 1968 hit "Soul Serenade." While in Midland, Texas, the singer opening for him caught Willie's attention:

I went and got me a beer and was sitting at a table – we'd had about a 900-mile drive from Memphis, left at two, got in some time in the afternoon – and this singer did, you know, hard songs like Sam and Dave, that kind of stuff. Then he called for 'Back Up Train.' I said, 'Really? I didn't know you had done that. How old is the record?' He said 'Well, the record is about two years old now, and I ain't really had anything since. It don't have but three changes to it.' So he began singing 'Back Up Train,' and I'm listening, and, God, he was singing soft, and I said, 'This guy has got the style, he got the sound to really be something.' So I called up Joe [Cuoghi], and I said, 'Joe, I found a singer down here, and I want to bring him back to Memphis'. . . I said, 'Why don't you come on back to Memphis with me?' I said, 'You can be a star.' He said, 'How long would it take?' I said, 'Probably a year and a half.' He looked at me, and he said, 'Well, you know, I can't wait that long.'<sup>31</sup>

After the gig the singer, Albert Greene, caught a ride with Mitchell and his band to Little Rock. He and Mitchell struck up a conversation during the overnight drive and struck a deal; Mitchell would drive Greene to Memphis and give him \$1500 to pay his debts back in Flint, Michigan, if Greene

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26 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 302.

27 Ibid., 303.

28 "Ann Peebles: AllMusic," accessed July 22, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/ann-peebles-mn0000921002/biography>

29 Nager, "Hi Records: History."

30 "Ann Peebles: AllMusic."

31 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 303.

would return and record with him.<sup>32</sup>

Willie Mitchell's producing of the rechristened Al Green created a Memphis soul legend and solidified Hi's place as the next step in Memphis music. For years Mitchell had been on the lookout for a singer like Al Green. "I wanted to cut a record that would sell black and white, combine the two, you know, in a *pleasant* kind of music. With O.V. Wright and Bobby Bland, their style was too strong in one direction, it was too rough. I wanted to add more class to it. O.V.'s music was a little more laid back; Bobby's had a little more spark to it. But I was trying to get a combination of the two."<sup>33</sup> Though his first album, *Green Is Blues*, was generally received positively, Green's second album, *Al Green Gets Next To You*, was his first overwhelming success.<sup>34</sup> The first single off the album, a cover of the Temptations' "I Can't Get Next To You," was released as a single, reaching #11 on the R&B charts in 1970.<sup>35</sup> The combination of Green's smooth, sultry vocals and the solid backing of the Hi rhythm section was a recipe for success, and Willie Mitchell was the base that held them together. Hi had found its top-selling artist.

Willie Mitchell's talents as a musician and producer attracted the attention of music executive Jerry Wexler in early 1970. Wexler offered him a position at Atlantic Records. Alarmed, Joe Cuoghi incentivized Mitchell to stay by appointing him to vice-president. Then, in July of that same year, Cuoghi died of a heart attack outside the Memphis airport.<sup>36</sup> Mitchell bought out Ray Harris and Carl McVoy, becoming executive vice-president, and Cuoghi's lawyer Nick Pesce became president.<sup>37</sup>

In the last half of the 1960s, Mitchell had been experimenting with the sound at Royal. After buying out the audio engineer, he spent many days familiarizing himself with the Royal's recording equipment. Around this time, Mitchell also began to redesign the actual recording space, covering the walls and ceiling in burlap and generally experimenting with the textures of sound. In 1969,

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32 Ibid., 303-304.

33 Willie Mitchell, quoted in Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 302.

34 "Al Green Gets Next To You: AllMusic," accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/gets-next-to-you-mw0000101242>

35 "Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios: Home of the Memphis Sound," accessed on July 24, 2013. <http://royalstudios.com/history/>

36 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 306-307.

37 "Joe Cuoghi," accessed July 22, 2013. [http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe\\_cuoghi.htm](http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe_cuoghi.htm)



Mitchell found the sound he had been searching for.<sup>38</sup> This intimate, in-your-face sound would make the Hi label instantly recognizable when listening to Royal-recorded artists like Green or Peebles.

Al Green was the first artist to record in the redesigned studio.<sup>39</sup> Green recounts the recording process for his second hit:

I was toting my song around in my pocket for days on end, saying, 'Hey I got a song.' And wasn't nobody listening to me. And finally, at the end of the session, I says, 'Well, I *still* got a song.' And so Willie said, 'Al, what *is* your song?'<sup>40</sup>

Green's song, "Tired of Being Alone," was a huge success due to its creative writing and the extraordinary sound that would become characteristic of Hi releases. It reached #11 on the U.S. singles chart in 1971 and remained on the charts for a total of nineteen weeks.<sup>41</sup>

Green and Mitchell's most concerted effort yet came later in 1971 with "Let's Stay Together." Co-written with Al Jackson, Jr., the single rose all the way to the #1 spot on the U.S. Pop and R&B charts. It also launched a chain of successful singles that would break the Top Ten consistently for five years.<sup>42</sup> From 1971 to 1975, Green sang and Mitchell produced and engineered a number one hit each year. According to the Royal Studios website, "This was more than Stax artists' Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, and Booker T. & the MG's achieved during their entire combined careers... In his career with Hi, Al Green would sell more than 20 million records."<sup>43</sup> But this best-selling singer would have a spiritual crisis in the latter half of the 1970s that would take him away from secular music, at least for a time.

In 1974, a woman who had been involved with Al Green poured boiling grits on him as he bathed and then committed suicide with his gun. While recovering in the hospital, Green came to the conclusion that the incident was a sign that he should return to gospel music.<sup>44</sup> He continued to

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38 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

39 Ibid.

40 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 209

41 "Chart Histories: Al Green," accessed July 24, 2013.

<http://www.ukmix.org/forums/viewtopic.php?p=848752#p848752>

42 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 209-210

43 "Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios: Home of the Memphis Sound," accessed on July 24, 2013.

<http://royalstudios.com/history/>

44 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 210

release R&B albums produced by Mitchell for the next few years (*Al Green Is Love*, *Full of Fire*, *Have a Good Time*), but by 1976 "he had bought a church in Memphis and had become an ordained pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle."<sup>45</sup> Green stopped working with Mitchell in 1977 and constructed his own studio, American Music. There he produced his next two albums, *The Belle Album* and *Truth and Time*, but neither managed to garner much success.<sup>46</sup> With the support of his family, Green began focusing solely on gospel and announced the end to his secular music career.<sup>47</sup>

Green's departure from Hi Records was indicative of the hard times that the label began to experience in the late 1970s. With the advent of disco, soul music – the staple of the Hi catalogue – was beginning to lose its popularity. Atlantic Records offered \$9,000,000 to purchase the label, but Mitchell, Novarese, and Pesce declined.<sup>48</sup> Then, in 1977, the label was sold to record executive Al Bennett. An Arkansas native, Bennett had been partial owner of the Nashville-based Dot Records before selling the label. Bennett then bailed Liberty Records out of its financial crisis. Moving to the West Coast, Bennett built up the Liberty label before selling it and launching another label in 1976, Cream Records. Bennett purchased "Hi, its studio, and its two publishing divisions."<sup>49</sup> Hi's record distribution was taken over by Cream from London Records, and Willie Mitchell stayed on as a producer and vice-president in charge of artists and repertoire.<sup>50</sup> After a few years of working for the now-stagnant label, Willie Mitchell retired from Hi Records, purchasing the deed to Royal Studios on the way out. He launched the independent Waylo Records in 1982, which signed artists like Billy Always and blues singer Lynn White and cut Ann Peebles comeback album in 1989.<sup>51,52</sup> In 1985, Mitchell produced Al Green again for the first time since 1976 with his gospel album *He Is The Light*.<sup>53</sup> Mitchell also produced, recorded, and engineered the Scottish band Wet, Wet, Wet's

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45 "Al Green: AllMusic," July 23, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/al-green-mn0000607448/biography>

46 Ibid.

47 Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 210.

48 "Joe Cuoghi," accessed July 22, 2013. [http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe\\_cuoghi.htm](http://www.rockabilly.nl/references/messages/joe_cuoghi.htm)

49 Walter Dawson, "He's Trying To Get In 'Hi' Gear Again," *The Commercial Appeal*, June 19, 1977

50 Walter Dawson, "Los Angeles Recording Firm Is Purchaser Of Hi Records," *The Commercial Appeal*, May 18, 1977

51 Maria Granditsky, "Ann Peebles Bio (Part 3)," accessed July 25, 2013, <http://hem.bredband.net/funkyflyy/peebles/bio3.html>

52 Pete Lewis, "'B&S' Classic Interview: Willie Mitchell By Pete Lewis: October 1987," *Blues & Soul Online*, accessed July 22, 2013, [http://www.bluesandsoul.com/feature/492/bands\\_classic\\_interview\\_willie\\_mitchell\\_b](http://www.bluesandsoul.com/feature/492/bands_classic_interview_willie_mitchell_b)

53 Ibid.

album *The Memphis Sessions* in 1987. Almost two decades later, the band's lead singer Marti Pellow would return to record his solo album – *Moonlight Over Memphis* – with Mitchell. From the 1980s through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>, Mitchell recorded Buddy Guy, Tom Jones, Keith Richards, Pops Staples, and Rod Stewart, among others.<sup>54</sup> In 2003, Al Green and Willie Mitchell were reunited once again when Green returned to secular music with his album *I Can't Stop*.

Mitchell adopted his two sons, Archie and Lawrence "Boo" Mitchell, before they reached school age. Archie and Boo were actually Willie's grandsons before then. Archie is the son of Ivonne Mitchell, and Boo is the son of Lorrain Mitchell. They developed an interest in the recording industry early in life. Boo and Archie had their first paid recording session on Al Green's song "As Long As We're Together," which was released on his 1989 gospel album *I Get Joy*. Green heard the two of them playing synthesizers and asked for them to play on the track, which later won Best Soul Gospel Performance at the 1990 Grammy Awards.<sup>55</sup> Boo realized at an early age that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps; he and Archie would work in the studio during evenings in high school. The pair has extensive experience recording, engineering, producing, songwriting, and even performing as members of a rap duo called the M-Team. Archie and Boo assisted Al Green's 2003 comeback album, as well as releases from artists like John Mayer, My Morning Jacket, and Solomon Burke.<sup>56</sup>

When Willie Mitchell passed away in early 2010, operation of Royal Studios was passed down to the other members of the Mitchell family. Boo and Archie primarily manage the musical side: producing, engineering, and recording a wide range of musicians. Oona Mitchell, their sister, has taken up the role of administrator. Lorrain and Ivonne Mitchell are still putting in many hours at the studio, working behind the scenes to keep everything running smoothly.

How did Willie Mitchell manage to keep the studio open throughout the rough decades that

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54 Pierre Perrone, "Willie Mitchell: Memphis-based producer, arranger and songwriter for Al Green, Ann Peebles and Wet Wet Wet," *The Independent*, January 8, 2010, accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/willie-mitchell-memphisbased-producer-arranger-and-songwriter-for-al-green-ann-peebles-and-wet-wet-wet-1861135.html>

55 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

56 Andria Lisle, "'Everything's coming full circle' as Willie Mitchell's sons carry on his Memphis music legacy," *The Commercial Appeal*, February 5, 2008, accessed on July 25, 2013, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2008/Feb/05/family-tradition/>

spelled doom for other Memphis studios? "Under normal circumstances, people probably would have closed the place or the business, but he wasn't a quitter," Boo said in a recent interview. "We did some cool stuff in the eighties. People would still call looking for the Memphis sound every now and then."<sup>57</sup> Willie's determination to keep Royal operational helped lead the studio out of one of its most difficult periods and into another two decades of renewed interest. Today, musicians from across the world continue to visit Royal, seeking that iconic Hi Sound. But what constitutes the Hi Sound? Other than a few flowery descriptions written in album reviews, the concept seems to elude most, though the sound is a distinctive one. The Hi Sound, discovered and manufactured at Royal, unifies all of the work that has been created behind the studio's doors.

### **Defining the Hi Sound**

When Willie Mitchell created the Hi Sound in the late 1960s, there were three components to it. Firstly, the audio equipment, with which he had become familiar after years of practice, gave Mitchell the background he was seeking. The equipment was the canvas upon which Mitchell recorded his masterpieces. Add to that Mitchell's revamping of the recording space as he experimented with acoustics, eventually arriving at the unique layout that remains today. The final ingredient in Mitchell's musical amalgam is the group of musicians that consistently recorded at Hi: the Hodges Brothers, Al Jackson, Jr., Howard Grimes, and the Memphis Horns. When Mitchell combined these three components, he created a sound that has been described as "intimate,"<sup>58</sup> with a solid, heavy "bottom,"<sup>59</sup> and decorated by impressive horn, organ, and guitar arrangements. Mitchell "didn't want to use chords that everyone else used," instead opting for a lot of jazz chords, "creat[ing] a style of being silky on top and rough on the bottom."<sup>60</sup>

Buying out the previous sound engineer in the late sixties allowed Mitchell the opportunity to begin familiarizing himself with Royal's equipment. Mitchell gained an affinity for the tube

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57 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

58 Nager, "Hi Records: History."

59 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 304.

60 Pierre Perrone, "Willie Mitchell: Memphis-based producer, arranger and songwriter for Al Green, Ann Peebles and Wet Wet Wet."

circuit recording equipment. When solid state eight-track recorders were introduced in the late 1960s, Mitchell tried them out, but was disappointed in the quality of the sound. To modernize the studio while maintaining the quality of tube equipment, Mitchell acquired an Ampex tube-amplified eight-track machine made in Texas, which is still located in a corner of Royal. Boo Mitchell explained, "it's the nature of tube gear that it's warmer and fuzzier, and that also gave his records more bass."<sup>61</sup> With an array of recording technology "in which he could place an almost mythical belief," Mitchell was able to concentrate on redesigning the recording space.<sup>62</sup>

During the fifties and sixties, the trend in recording was to create a more live sound. Studios like RCA's Studio B (see **Image 1**) in Nashville were built without a heavy concern for acoustics. When Bill Porter became engineer in 1959, he noticed the problems with the room's acoustics and attempted to correct them with his fiberglass "Porter Pyramids."<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, at Royal, Willie Mitchell was moving against the current of popular engineering opinion. Padding the walls and ceilings with burlap, he sought to minimize the reflections on each track (**Image 2**). "People were starting to put wood and stuff up in their studios," Boo recollected. "He went 180 in the other direction and was killing reflections."<sup>64</sup> By isolating and focusing the sound of each instrument, Mitchell could achieve the intimate sound he was looking for. He often attributed the heavy bottom of his recordings to the slope of the floor; "As you go down that slope, the music gets bigger, it separates."<sup>65</sup>

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61 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

62 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 304.

63 Michael Fremer, "Mr. Natural: Recording Engineer Bill Porter Part 1," *Analog Planet*, May 1, 2009, accessed July 25, 2013, <http://www.analogplanet.com/content/mr-natural-recording-engineer-bill-porter-part-i-0>

64 Mitchell, Lawrence "Boo," interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 22, 2013.

65 Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 304.

**Image 1:** Facing the Control Room of RCA Studio B, Nashville, TN<sup>66</sup>



**Image 2:** Facing the Vocals Booth at Royal Studios, Memphis, TN<sup>67</sup>



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66 James V. Roy, "Scotty Moore: RCA Victor Studio B Nashville," April 2004, accessed July 25, 2013, [http://www.scottymoore.net/studio\\_b.html](http://www.scottymoore.net/studio_b.html)

67 "Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios: Home of the Memphis Sound," accessed on July 25, 2013. <http://royalstudios.com/gallery/>

Before any of his acoustic experimentation bore fruit, however, Mitchell collected an elite group of musicians that would become one of the tightest session bands in recording history. Many of its members were veterans of the Willie Mitchell band and Mitchell's early Hi recordings. The Hi Rhythm section was assembled around the Hodges Brothers, a trio of musicians who first started playing with Mitchell on his Plantation Inn gigs.<sup>68</sup> The Hodges, with Teenie (Mabon) on guitar, Charles on organ, and Leroy on bass, became as close as family with the Mitchells, often spending the night on weekends before early rehearsals the next day. Booker T. and the MGs drummer Al Jackson, Jr., and Howard Grimes joined the trio as percussionists, trading off on drummer duties or even playing different sections of the drum set simultaneously on some of Al Green's charts.<sup>69</sup>

Many of the Hi label's most successful records also featured the Memphis Horns, with Andrew Love and Ed Logan on tenor saxophone, Wayne Jackson on trumpet, Jack Hale on trombone, and James Mitchell (Willie's brother) on baritone saxophone. The Memphis Horns brought with them the experience of recording with many of Stax's most successful artists, as well as training in Willie Mitchell's band. James Mitchell lent his talents as an arranger to most of the horn parts in Al Green's charts, as well as for O.V. Wright's 1977 album *Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)* and Ann Peeble's *I Can't Stand the Rain*, among other works.<sup>70</sup> Willie Mitchell also arranged horn parts on several of Royal's hits.<sup>71</sup> Along with the excellent musicianship of the Hi rhythm section and the intimate recording techniques of Willie Mitchell, Royal Studios' horn arrangements are a large part of its iconic sound. I will examine some of these horn arrangements in more depth in the following sections to see just how deeply they reflect the Hi Sound.

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68 Gordon, *It Came From Memphis*, 130.

69 Mitchell, Ivonne and Lorrain Mitchell, interview by author, Royal Studios, Memphis, TN, July 10, 2013.

70 "James Mitchell: AllMusic," accessed on July 20, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/james-mitchell-mn0000140065/credits>

71 "Willie Mitchell: AllMusic," accessed on July 20, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/willie-mitchell-mn0000684830/credits>

## Investigating the Hi Sound

In the late 1960s, Willie Mitchell set out to redefine the sound of Royal's productions. From Ann Peebles to Solomon Burke, albums developed at Royal have possessed a consistent and unique sound, characterized by a tight rhythm section, a solid, heavy bass, and stimulating horn arrangements, the latter of which will be analyzed in this section.

Certainly, Willie Mitchell's expertise as a musician and producer influenced every recording issued by Royal Studios. His writing was the product of years of jazz training fused with an understanding of the Stax soul sound, as well as a deep appreciation for Memphis blues; this combination of influences proved fertile ground for the development of Royal Studios' soul and R&B sounds. Larry Nager writes, "Mitchell's polished sound was due more to his formal training and years as a bandleader than to any desire to mimic another style."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the talented Hi Rhythm Band would define the style of many albums recorded at Royal. Could the resultant Hi Sound be responsible for the overwhelming success of Hi Records in the seventies? I have transcribed and discussed several examples of horn arrangements from records developed at Royal in the next sections. By comparing them with their contemporary works, the characteristics that exemplify Hi's horn arrangements will become apparent.

One of the best and most successful examples of the Hi Sound is Al Green's third album under the Hi label, *Let's Stay Together*. The title track starts with a short but memorable instrumental section, shown in Figure 1. Recorded in the key of F major, this introduction section floats through the IV, iii, and ii chords of the key until the V chord on the third beat of measure 4 (the C major chord), resolving in a half cadence.

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<sup>72</sup> Nager, *Memphis Beat*, 209.



**Figure 1:** "Let's Stay Together" by Al Green, Bb trumpet and tenor sax transcriptions, mm. 1-4<sup>73,74</sup>

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for Trumpet in Bb and the bottom staff is for Tenor Sax. Both are in 4/4 time and Bb major. Above the staves, the chord progression is indicated: Bbmaj7, Am7, Gm7, Am7, Bbmaj7, Am7, Gm7, and C7. The Trumpet part consists of a staccato melody with accents on the eighth notes of measures 1, 3, 5, and 7. The Tenor Sax part consists of a staccato accompaniment with accents on the eighth notes of measures 1, 3, 5, and 7.

The chord changes take place on 1 and 3 of each measure, offsetting the horn section its hits on the unstressed beats. All of the hits except for the final one are also on the seventh of their respective chords, providing a sense of tension to the introduction. The progression then finally resolves with the C major chord and the horn section playing the root and third.

The style of playing is staccato, yet full and thick as opposed to being short and abrupt. Throughout the song, the horns are used primarily for punctuation, and this introduction is the closest they get to playing a featured melody. Nevertheless, their use in the early section provides a point of return for the later choruses, where they again serve as syncopated punctuation.

O.V. Wright, another renowned Hi musician, began his singing career as a gospel singer. His breakout single "That's How Strong My Love Is" was released in 1964. After a contract dispute moved Wright from the Chicago-distributed Goldwax label back to Peacock, he was assigned to Peacock's subsidiary label, Back Beat. Under this label, Wright began his R&B career with "Can't Find True Love" and "I Don't Want To Sit Down" in 1965, later that year releasing the album (*If It Is*) *Only For Tonight*. Wright began working with Willie Mitchell as early as April 1967, when Mitchell produced his *8 Men 4 Women*, released on the Back Beat label. But O.V. Wright would not sign to Hi Records until 1976.<sup>75</sup> In 1977, Wright's successful single "Into Something (Can't Shake

<sup>73</sup> All transcriptions provided in concert key.

<sup>74</sup> Al Green, *Let's Stay Together*, Hi Records, SH32070

<sup>75</sup> Ray Ellis, "O.V. Wright: Giant of Southern Soul," *Juke Blues Magazine* 46 (Spring 2000), accessed July 20, 2013,

Loose)" was released. Its Southern soul sound was created by the Memphis Horns, the Rhodes-Chalmers-Rhodes backup singers, and the famous Hi rhythm section, including Grimes and the Hodges brothers.

Comparing "If It's Only For Tonight," the title song from O.V. Wright's 1965 album, to his 1977 "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)," from the album of the same name, the characteristics of the Hi Sound are easily apparent. The horn arrangements on the 1977 album were done by James Mitchell, Aaron Nesbitt, and Willie Mitchell.<sup>76</sup> Figure 2 shows the opening section of "If It's Only For Tonight." Figure 3 shows a partial transcription of measures 21-33 of "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)." The stylistic differences between these two horn arrangements highlight the developments of the Hi Sound that Willie Mitchell put in place after taking over musical direction of the studio. The horn arrangements in O.V. Wright's later work demonstrate a greater appreciation for rhythmic complexity while maintaining a simple harmonic structure.

**Figure 2:** "If It's Only For Tonight" by O.V. Wright, Bb trumpet & tenor sax transcriptions, mm. 1-2<sup>77</sup>

The image shows a musical transcription for two instruments: Trumpet in Bb and Tenor Sax. Both parts are written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Trumpet part begins with a melodic line of eighth and quarter notes, while the Tenor Sax part provides a harmonic accompaniment of quarter notes. Both parts conclude with a dynamic marking of *sf* (sforzando) and a hairpin indicating a crescendo.

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<http://www.ovwright.org/giant.html>

76 "Into Something I Can't Shake Loose: AllMusic," accessed on July 19, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/into-something-cant-shake-loose-mw0000877322/credits>

77 O.V. Wright, (*If It Is*) *Only For Tonight*, Back Beat Records, BLP-61

**Figure 3:** "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)" by O.V. Wright; Bb trumpet, alto sax, and tenor sax transcriptions; mm. 21-33<sup>78</sup>

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)" by O.V. Wright. Each system contains three staves: Trumpet in B $\flat$ , Alto Sax, and Tenor Sax. The music is written in a 2/4 time signature with a key signature of three flats (B $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , A $\flat$ ). The first system covers measures 21 through 26. The second system, starting at measure 27, shows more complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth-note runs and slurs. The third system, starting at measure 33, features a more sparse arrangement with rests and a final melodic phrase in the tenor sax.

78 O.V. Wright, *Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)*, Hi Records, HLP6001

"If It's Only For Tonight" was recorded in G major. The opening section captures the balladic character of the song through the legato style of the descending and ascending trumpet arpeggios and the ending swell. Underneath the trumpets, the tenor saxophone provides padding for the chords. But the quality of the recording is somewhat lacking, with the trumpets producing an echoing aftereffect at certain spots. Rhythmically, the passage is quite simple.

This use of horns and the overall sound of the recording is very different in O.V. Wright's later work, "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)." The song features a belting vocal introduction by Wright, a driving horn arrangement, and the tight Hi rhythm section. Harmonically, the arrangement is not very complicated, with the horns playing mostly in unison in an F minor pentatonic scale. The highly syncopated rhythms, however, add a layer of complexity to the arrangement and accentuate Wright's vocals without getting in the way. Laying out for most of the first twenty measures, the Memphis Horns provide fills in measures 23-24 and 27 before the exciting backgrounds of measures 28-33. The recording quality is also exceptionally better than on Wright's non-Mitchell produced records. "Into Something (Can't Shake Loose)" exemplifies the Hi Sound by combining excellent recording quality with rhythmically interesting and harmonically simple horn arrangements.

To further explore the Hi Sound, let us examine a song done by two different artists on different labels: The Temptations on Motown and Al Green on Hi. The piece, "I Can't Get Next To You," is performed in two very different styles by each group. The Temptations perform it as a funky dance number, trading off between lyrical lines while being supported by the legendary Motown session players, the Funk Brothers. In 1971, Al Green recorded it on his album *Al Green Gets Next To You*, where the song was purposefully slowed down, dramatized, and mastered by the Hi rhythm section. Figure 4 highlights some excerpts from the track.

**Figure 4:** "I Can't Get Next To You" by Al Green, Bb trumpet and tenor sax transcriptions; intro, chorus, and horn soli sections<sup>79</sup>

*Intro (mm. 1-4):*

Musical notation for the Intro (mm. 1-4) for Trumpet in Bb and Tenor Sax. The score is in 8/8 time and D major. Both parts start with a first finger fingering (1) and play a melodic line consisting of eighth and quarter notes.

*Chorus (first appears mm. 25-38):*

Musical notation for the Chorus (first appears mm. 25-38) for Trumpet in Bb, Tenor Sax, Bb Trumpet, and Tenor Sax. The score is in 8/8 time and D major. The first system shows the Trumpet in Bb and Tenor Sax parts starting at measure 25. The second system shows the Bb Tpt. and T. Sax parts starting at measure 32. The Bb Tpt. part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the T. Sax part is mostly silent.

<sup>79</sup> Al Green, *Al Green Gets Next To You*, Hi Records, SHL32062

*Horn Soli (mm. 85-93):*

The image shows a musical score for two horn parts. The top system consists of two staves: 'Trumpet in B' and 'Tenor Sax'. Both staves are in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 6/8 time. They begin at measure 85. The bottom system consists of two staves: 'B> Tpt.' and 'T. Sax.'. Both staves are in treble clef, key of D major, and 4/4 time. They begin at measure 90. The music features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, and rests.

**Figure 5:** “I Can’t Get Next To You” by The Temptations; Bb trumpet and baritone sax transcriptions, mm. 1-2<sup>80</sup>

The image shows a musical score for two horn parts. The top staff is 'Trumpet in B' and the bottom staff is 'Baritone Sax'. Both are in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 4/4 time. The music consists of a few notes followed by rests. The notes are marked with a forte dynamic (*fff*). The top staff has a sharp sign above the final note, and the bottom staff has a flat sign below the final note.

The horn parts in the Temptations original take on this song are almost entirely absent. The short horn section at the beginning of the intro is rhythmically and harmonically simple. It conveys a sense of announcement, capturing the audience’s attention with two huge F major chords before the resolution to a short, accented C major chord. Throughout the rest of the song the horns are absent, perhaps so as not to distract from the vocal work of the Temptations themselves.

In the Al Green version, the horn arrangement does not shy away from playing with the vocalist. The four-bar introduction melody played by the horns is an echo of the hook line of the

chorus. Once again, the horn arrangements are not harmonically complicated, but do exhibit a good deal of rhythmic complexity. Most passages fit into a D minor pentatonic scale. The chorus sections, first seen at measure 25, support Green's vocal work – particularly the latter half of that section, which serves as a fill between his lyrical lines. The horn *solis* that begins in measure 85, reminiscent of a big band's horn section *solis*, contains for the most part unison voicing until the final two measures, where the D major chord heralds the return of the vocalist. Again we see that the horn arrangements are rhythmically complex, carrying the melody in the introduction and *solis* sections, but not distracting from Green's vocal work in the chorus. From measures 32 to 38, the trumpet fills the space between Green's statements, maintaining the tension without overcomplicating or overshadowing the melody. The horn's primary purpose in these charts is to add flavor, echoing and supporting the vocalist when necessary, and developing the melody when it is not. The musicians at Hi managed this with a relatively simple harmonic arrangement and interesting rhythmic passages.

Willie Mitchell's sons, Archie and Boo Mitchell have carried on the tradition of operating Royal Studios and continuing the tradition of the Hi Sound. Despite the Hi label leaving Memphis, the sound has remained. Artists from across the country have continually sought out the studio to capture that sound for their own releases. Among these artists is guitarist and singer John Mayer, who recorded a portion of his *Continuum* album at Royal Studios. By comparing the track recorded at Royal to another track from the same album recorded at another location we will be able to further identify elements of the Hi Sound as it relates to horn arrangements.

For this purpose, let us look at "I Don't Trust Myself (With Loving You)" in Figure 6, recorded at The Village in Los Angeles, and "I'm Gonna Find Another You" in Figure 7, recorded at Royal.

**Figure 6:** "I Don't Trust Myself (With Loving You)" by John Mayer, partial Bb trumpet transcription<sup>81</sup>

Figure 6 shows three staves of musical notation for a partial Bb trumpet transcription. The first staff is labeled "Trumpet in B $\flat$ " and begins at measure 91. The second staff is labeled "B $\flat$  Tpt." and begins at measure 93. The third staff is also labeled "B $\flat$  Tpt." and begins at measure 97. The music is written in 4/4 time and consists of eighth-note patterns.

**Figure 7:** "I'm Gonna Find Another You" by John Mayer; Bb trumpet, tenor sax, and baritone sax transcription, mm. 19-32<sup>82</sup>

Figure 7 shows three staves of musical notation for a transcription of "I'm Gonna Find Another You" by John Mayer. The first staff is labeled "Trumpet in B $\flat$ " and begins at measure 19. The second staff is labeled "Tenor Sax" and begins at measure 19. The third staff is labeled "Baritone Sax" and begins at measure 19. The music is written in 6/8 time. The first staff includes chord symbols A7, D, and D $\sharp$ dim7. The second and third staves include chord symbols A, E, A, D, Dm, A, and E9. The Tenor Sax and Baritone Sax parts feature triplet markings.

81 John Mayer, *Continuum*, Aware Records, 7901916

82 Ibid.



The first excerpt, from Mayer's soft funk/blues "I Don't Trust Myself (With Loving You)," contains some highlighted trumpet work. The full figure does not begin until around the 3:45 mark, where Figure 5 begins. Until this point, most of the horn arrangement on the track has been buried underneath layers of other instrumentation, serving as padding for the chords (a simple Am-C-F progression for most of the verse and chorus). The trumpet figure here is rhythmically complex, but it lacks any variation. It essentially decorates the vocal and guitar work that take center stage in this song.

By contrast, the horn parts on "I'm Gonna Find Another You" were arranged by Willie and Boo Mitchell and recorded at Royal.<sup>83</sup> They exhibit the full, yet intimate quality of the Hi Sound, and continue the model we have seen of rather simple harmonic structure coupled with rhythmic complexity. Most of the arrangement fits into an A dorian mode, though there are a few spots where the writing becomes more harmonically complex, such as in beat four of measure 23, where the horns play an arpeggio around a D# diminished seventh chord. Once again the horns are in unison for most of the arrangement. The Mitchells only insert full, semi-complex chords where they best collaborate with the other sections of the ensemble – particularly at the end of vocal lines, like measures 25 and 29 – and never pull the listener's attention too far from the vocal melody. The horn arrangement also maintains the same level of rhythmic complexity as earlier Hi hits, though not to the detriment of the rest of the ensemble.

The Hi Sound has continued to permeate Royal Studios, influencing every album recorded there. Though the horn arrangements are a part of this complex and intimate sound, the Hi Rhythm band, the expert production techniques of the Mitchell family, and even the architectural design of the studio have all contributed to this iconic quality. The horn arrangements have demonstrated themselves to be consistently rhythmically complex but harmonically simple, especially when backing the vocalist or another instrument that develops the melody.

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83 "Continuum: AllMusic," accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/continuum-mw0000544035/credits>

## **Conclusion**

In the 1960s, Willie Mitchell became an integral part of Hi Records and Royal Studios, and in turn a major force in American popular music. His experience as a jazz musician and Memphis bandleader gave him the musical background to write first rate music and arrangements, and to sell a good amount of records on the Hi label. As a producer, Mitchell supported talented artists like O.V. Wright, Ann Peebles, Syl Johnson, and Al Green that would build the Hi label. His ear for musicality led him to take custody of Royal Studios and transform its average recording space into a unique facility with an extraordinary vibe, making Royal Studios one of the greatest and longest-enduring recording studios in the country. The Hi Sound, created by Willie Mitchell, has left a lasting impact, not just on the studio or on the body of work produced by Hi Records, but on the sound of music that spans from the 1960s to today.

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