

Stranger in My Own Hometown:
Chips Moman and the Forgotten Story of American Studios

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Introduction

Memphis is a city of contradictions. Miles from the National Civil Rights Museum, the location where Martin Luther King Jr. was tragically murdered, sits a park and monument dedicated to Nathan Bedford Forrest, a founding member of the Klu Klux Klan. Beale Street, one of present day Memphis' biggest tourist attractions, is a shell of its former self. It was largely destroyed and remodeled during President Nixon's urban renewal program of the 1970's in an effort to create a more aesthetically pleasing, family friendly environment.¹ Perhaps the most shocking paradox lies in the fact that despite Memphis being the epicenter of some of the most influential music of the 50's and 60's, many of the recording studios that fostered this unique sound have been pushed to the margins of local history. The premiere example of this can be seen at 827 Thomas Street, which was the former site of American Studios. Started by famous Stax producer Chips Moman in 1962, American Studios is best known for its five-year string of Billboard Top 100 songs, producing 122 hit records from 1967 to 1972.² Moman and his house band, The Memphis Boys, worked with a whole spectrum of artists, ranging from the

¹ Robert Gordon, It Came from Memphis, (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 249.

² Rob Grayson, "Sandy Finds her Calling," WKNO-NPR, 1 February 2013, 1st edition: np.

previously unknown Box Tops in 1967 to the world famous Elvis Presley in 1969. Yet despite their significant accomplishments, to this day the site of American Studios remains without commemoration.³

The goals of this paper are threefold. First, this paper will argue that despite having equipment and amenities that paled in comparison to their larger counterparts, American managed to attract artists famous and obscure alike due to the respect and admiration Moman and the Memphis Boys had achieved throughout the music community. Second, this paper will assert that, following its closure in 1972, American Studios fall into obscurity was due in large part to the tumultuous relationship Chips Moman had with Memphis' media outlets, and fellow musicians. Lastly, this essay will explore the theme of remembrance and will argue that while American Studios may not be worthy of a museum (in the vein of Stax) it is deserving of commemoration of some sort.

Chips and Stax

The story of American Studios is impossible to tell without first telling the story of its founder, Wayne Lincoln "Chips" Moman. Moman was born June 12, 1937 in LaGrange, Georgia. Moman's initial exposure to music was thanks to his mother who purchased him a Gene Autry model guitar.⁴ This guitar stoked his interest in music, especially black gospel music that he would listen to beneath the covers at night.⁵ At the tender age of 14 Chips hitchhiked to Memphis in search of work as a musician, but he

³ Roben Jones, Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 101.

⁴ James Dickerson, Goin' Back to Memphis: A Century of Blues, Rock 'N' Roll, and Glorious Soul, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996) 116

⁵ Ibid, 116.

found himself doing numerous other odd jobs just to stay afloat. He did everything from chopping onions in Texas to painting houses and service stations, but it never stopped him from working on his musicianship claiming, “When I got a chance to play in bands, I just did it. Some people got to play it, can’t help it.”⁶

In 1960, after establishing himself as a legitimate musician by working in studios out in California, Moman returned to Memphis where he had a fortunate encounter with Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. Jim Stewart called on Moman to play at his initial studio, Satellite Records, in Brunswick, Tennessee and he stayed on as a producer after that when Stewart and Axton started Stax records in Memphis.⁷ The result was nothing short of magical. Moman oversaw the production of some of Stax’s earliest hits: “Last Night” by the Mar-Keys, Carla Thomas’s “Gee Whiz”, and William Bell’s, “You Don’t Miss Your Water.” However, things quickly soured between Chips and Jim for reasons that still aren’t fully clear. Some people, like Estelle Axton, claimed that Moman quickly learned he was building a company in which he had no equity. “I had twenty five percent—I thought” said Moman. “They owed me my share of a million dollars they’d made that year—’61, ’62.”⁸ Wayne Jackson, a trumpet player in the Mar-Keys, was sitting in the hallway and overheard the argument. Jackson, too, acknowledged it was over money saying, “Chips didn’t feel like he was getting his share of the royalties. They exchanged words, and Jim said, “If I fucked you, prove it.”⁹

Other people close to the situation believed Moman and Stax musician Steve Cropper were becoming increasingly hostile towards one another as Jim Stewart

⁶ Ibid, 117.

⁷ Roben Jones, Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 15.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

assigned Cropper more responsibility. Regardless of the true reason behind the clash, Moman left Stax that day and never came back. Despite his tough, country boy exterior, deep down Moman was a sensitive man, and the difficult end to things at Stax had impacted him a great deal. “What happened to me at Stax caused me to lose my house. I lost everything that I had. I remember that year...for Thanksgiving, my wife and child, all we had was a box of corn flakes and some milk. You don’t forget those things.”¹⁰

Building American Studios

In 1964 Moman was able to recoup some of the Stax royalties he so badly desired after his lawyer, Seymour Rosenberg, convinced him to sue Stax. Stewart and Axton, wishing to avoid a messy lawsuit, agreed to settle for \$3,000, and with that Moman had the money he needed to start his own studio.¹¹ Moman was partnered with his lawyer Seymour Rosenberg and they purchased a small strip-mall like building on the corner of Thomas Street and Chelsea Avenue. This newly purchased building was known as American Studios, but the success that eventually became synonymous with American did not happen overnight. In fact, in the first year Moman managed to lose his share of American Studios to Wayne McGinniss, another partner, who bought it for “\$300 or \$400.”¹² His loss of ownership can easily be accredited to his still present depression over how things ended at Stax, an indiscretion that led him to drink and take pills. Moman himself readily admits to this saying “I was just barely getting by.”¹³

¹⁰ Bob Mehr, “Chips Moman: the missing man of Memphis music,” The Commercial Appeal, 13 July 2008, 1st edition: np.

¹¹ Peter Guralnick, Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom, (New York: Harper and Row, 1986) 292.

¹² Ibid, 291.

¹³ Ibid.



Figure 1: Picture of American Studios. Date unknown.¹⁴

Momans demeanor changed in 1965 following an incident that challenged Chips and his enormous pride. Leroy Daniel, a good friend of Momans had told him that Quinton Claunch and Rudolph Russell, the owners of Goldwax Records, had openly questioned Momans mental health. This was a slight Moman did not take lightly and when Claunch and Russell came to the studio asking him to cut a record with James Carr, Moman responded by demanding \$5,000. Much to his surprise they agreed to pay the fee and Moman, always in need of money, was ecstatic. This helped Moman put his depression behind him and realize his true talent as a producer. The next record Moman produced was a hit by The Gentry's entitled "Keep on Dancing" which sold over a million records, and gave Moman the money and bargaining chip he so desperately

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Sound_Studio

needed. Chips traded half the interest in the Gentrys' hit for half ownership of the studio.¹⁵

While the newly rejuvenated Chips Moman certainly helped matters at the studio, there was still one issue that was preventing American from making serious hits—they had no house band. Chips did not have to look far to find his house band. Stan Kesler, a producer at Goldwax, had organized a well-respected rhythm section that had played on nearly all of the Goldwax records to date. The group consisted of Reggie Young, Tommy Cogbill, Gene Chrisman, Bobby Emmons, and Mike Wood. This new rhythm section dubbed themselves the 827 Thomas Street Band, and would later change their name to The Memphis Boys. In addition, Moman had recruited his old partner, Dan Penn, whom he had worked with at Muscle Shoals in the period of time before he opened American.¹⁶ With the arrival of The Memphis Boys, American Studio finally had the necessary components to become the hit-makers that they were later remembered as.

Humble Beginnings and The Box Tops

If there were any doubt that Moman and the Memphis Boys weren't the real deal, a close examination of their work ethic and studio accommodations would change that. The building that housed American Studios paled in comparison to the other studios around the country. It was in a run down part of town and shared walls with numerous other businesses. To make matters worse the inside of the studio was no better, if not worse, than the outside. Ed Kolliss a sound engineer who worked at American in the early days recalls the rugged interior saying, "We had echo chambers that were just

¹⁵ Ibid, 293.

¹⁶ Ibid.

rooms, burlap over newspaper, bare rafters.”¹⁷ They were even forced to use Celotex insulation on the walls as a form of primitive soundproofing. The recording equipment was fairly basic, as well. Dan Penn mentioned that they had “two Ampex mixers for a board, a mono machine, maybe two mono machines, and that was about it.”¹⁸

The lack of sophisticated equipment was inconsequential, it turned out, as over the following five years American drew well-established artists and helped unknown performers achieve fame. This success stemmed from the American groups genuine appreciation for good music, as well as an unrelenting work ethic, two things that the musicians of the era respected and admired. The two sessions which best exemplify these traits are the initial Box Tops records and when Elvis recorded his 1969 “Back in Memphis” album.

While the Gentry’s hit song helped Moman reassert control of American, it was the work he and his producers did with The Box Tops which proved to the music industry that this studio was the real deal. The Box Tops—originally known as the Devilles—were a local Memphis band that consisted of Danny Smythe on drums, Gary Talley on guitar, Bill Cunningham on bass, and John Evans on keyboard. However, the Box Tops were without a lead singer after the original one joined a new band. Dan Penn recruited the Box Tops to play at American, and he asked Evans to recruit a local kid by the name of Alex Chilton, whom Evans recommended to fill the vacant singing role in the band. Upon singing for Penn and the other band members Chilton was a hit. Now that Penn had assembled a complete band he was put in charge of producing a hit song for the Box Tops, much to their surprise. Their surprise stemmed from their belief that Penn was

¹⁷ Roben Jones, Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 15.

¹⁸ Ibid.

primarily a songwriter and sound engineer, not a producer.¹⁹ Penn quickly proved his skills as he twisted “knobs and made studio adjustments for about half of the song...the studio was still moaning: Penn had to get on his knees to change the routing of cords through a patch bay.”²⁰ The resulting song, “The Letter” was the record that redefined the Memphis sound. “The Letter” peaked at #1 in September 1967 becoming the first No. 1 pop hit ever recorded in Memphis, by Memphis artists.²¹ Had American only produced one hit for the Box Tops it would have been enough, yet it was their follow up effort that exemplifies their commitment.

The follow up to the first Box Tops record was collaboration between Dan Penn and his longtime friend from Muscle Shoals, Spooner Oldham. A few months had passed since “The Letter” and the record company in New York was demanding a second hit. However, neither Oldham nor Penn could come up with anything. Spooner Oldham recalled the exasperation of this period saying, “Dan approached me and said ‘Spooner, people have sent me songs, but I really don’t like any. All I know to do is you and I just try to write them a song.’”²² After consecutive nights with no luck, both Oldham and Penn headed to a café at daybreak where they reflected on the direness of their situation saying “We were getting really tired and considering the possibility of cancelling everything.”²³ Suddenly, Oldham layed down on the table and exclaimed “I could cry like a baby”, to which Penn yelled “That’s it, Spooner!...suddenly the air had changed! Just that fast.”

¹⁹ James Dickerson, Goin’ Back to Memphis: A Century of Blues, Rock ‘N’ Roll, and Glorious Soul, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996) 154

²⁰ Ibid, 155.

²¹ "The Hot 100 - 1967 Archive | Billboard Charts Archive." *Billboard*. Billboard, n.d. Web. 25 July 2014.

²² Robert Gordon, It Came from Memphis, (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 162.

²³ Ibid, 165.

Both Oldham and Penn returned to the studio and kept playing and playing until they had come up with a record, and when The Box Tops arrived the next morning, they not only had a record, but as Penn said “a hit record.”²⁴

The Box Tops records proved to the American Studios producers that they had what it took to create a popular song using previously unknown musicians, but it was their work with Elvis Presley in 1969 that proved they were capable of revitalizing a career, as well.

The Rise and Fall of The King

It is nearly impossible to discuss the city of Memphis without Elvis and his world famous estate, Graceland, coming up. It was Elvis, the shy, humble 18 year old who entered Sun Studios in 1954 to and did a cover of Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right” which was later played by local WHBQ disc jockey Dewey Phillips. The response was immediate—hundreds of calls and telegrams came in, and Phillips played the record consecutively the whole night. Elvis’ rise to stardom helped put the Memphis music scene on the map, and he experienced continued success throughout the 1950’s.²⁵ In 1956 he released his first self-titled album that achieved incredible commercial success with hit songs such as “Heartbreak Hotel” and “Blue Suede Shoes.”²⁶ Critic Robert Hilburn praised Elvis’ album for covering the R&B songs of Little Richard, and Ray Charles in a completely unique way. Hilburn described these songs “as the most revealing of them all. Unlike many white artists...who watered down the gritty edges of the original R&B songs of the 50’s, Presley reshaped them. He not only injected the tunes with his own

²⁴ Ibid, 166.

²⁵ "Elvis Presley Records "That's All Right (Mama)"" *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 25 July 2014.

²⁶ Slaughter, Todd; Anne E. Nixon, *The Elvis Archives*, Omnibus Press; 2004.

vocal character but also made guitar, not piano, the lead instrument in all three cases.”²⁷

However, as quickly as Presley’s career took off, it was just as soon put on hold as he was drafted into the Army in March of 1958.

It was during Presley’s two-year stint in the Army where he was introduced to amphetamines for the first time. Soon Presley became “practically evangelical about their benefits”—not just for energy, but also for weight loss as well. His use of amphetamines became an immediate crutch for him as they enabled him to stay awake longer, something he had trouble with given his lifelong issues with insomnia. His need for prescription drugs soon matured beyond mere amphetamines and he began taking a myriad of uppers and downers: Tiunal, Desbutal, Escatrol, and the powerful tranquilizer Placidyl. (cite) The uppers helped prepare him for his performances while afterwards the downers helped him relax and sleep. They also made him very easily manipulated, something his controlling and selfish manager, Colonel Tom Parker, used to his advantage.

Colonel Tom Parker was perhaps the best and worst thing to ever happen to Elvis Presley. On the one hand, he was a visionary genius with regards to promoting and advertising the enigma that was Elvis. Parker signed merchandising deals that turned Presley into a brand name, selling everything from Elvis themed charm bracelets to record players. On the other hand, Parker became increasingly self-serving throughout his tenure with Elvis, and used his power to benefit himself monetarily and personally. Parker’s contract with Elvis gave him 50 percent of most of the singer’s earnings from

²⁷ "From the Man Who Would Be King." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 06 Feb. 2005. Web. 25 July 2014.

recordings, films, and merchandise, and he regularly ostracized people who challenged his control over Elvis.²⁸

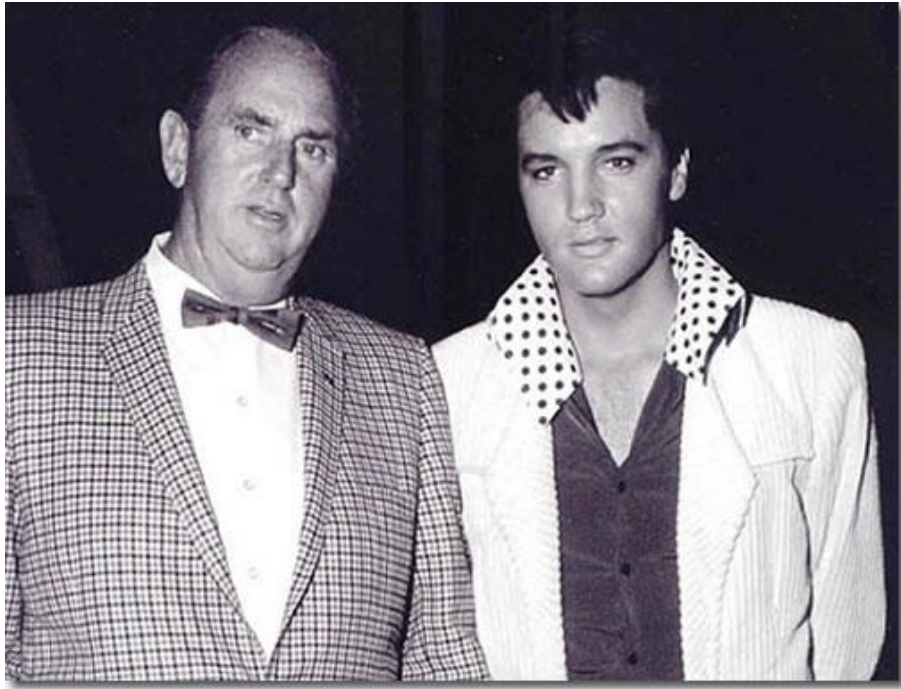


Figure 2: Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis in 1966²⁹

By the mid 1960's, however, the Colonel had failed to adjust his marketing to appease the new, younger audiences and Elvis had slipped into irrelevance. In the early 1960's Elvis starred in a string of cheesy and altogether unpopular movies. These movies often starred Elvis in a tropical locale, depicting him as a clean-cut character who sang romantic or funny songs in order to get a girl. Critic Greil Marcus in his book *Mystery Train* wrote about the tacky music Elvis sang in those films saying,

²⁸ Peter Guralnick, *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1999)

²⁹ <http://www.elvispresleymusic.com>

“One must look long and hard...for even a glimmer of style.”³⁰ Another critic, Lester Bangs, summed up these years rather humorously writing, “Elvis was into marketing boredom when Andy Warhol was doing shoe ads.”³¹

For years Elvis failed to realize just how silly these movies made him look and the damage it did to his reputation amongst modern listeners. This was due, in large part, to Tom Parker who used Elvis’ fierce loyalty to him to dictate much of what he did. Parker recognized that despite the movies being poorly written and accompanied by awful songs, they never failed to make money; something the gambling obsessed Parker needed. This all changed in 1968 when Elvis was introduced to 21 year old L.A. producer, Steve Binder. This meeting arose because Binder was tasked with helping produce a NBC music special featuring Elvis.³² In this meeting Binder pointed out to Elvis just how far removed he had become from mainstream music saying “the movies had made Elvis an anachronism in his twenties, as musically relevant to the 60’s as Bing Crosby.”³³ Binder and his partner Bones Howe remembered the Elvis that existed before the fame and fortune, listening to records, flirting with girls, and obsessing over making the best music possible. They suggested Elvis sing more relevant and socially conscious music, to which he eventually relented. The resulting NBC special was nothing short of spectacular. Elvis seemed more relaxed and he hit a level he had not found since his seminal Sun recordings.³⁴ Following his hit NBC special, Elvis pulled Binder aside and

³⁰ "Where to Start with Elvis Presley's Uneven Yet Charismatic Film Career." · *Gateways To Geekery · The A.V. Club*. A.V. Club, n.d. Web. 25 July 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Alanna Nash, *The Colonel: The Extraordinary Story of Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis Presley*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 233.

³³ Ibid, 234.

³⁴ Ibid, 243.

said “Steve, I will never sing a song that I don’t believe in, and I will never make a movie that I don’t believe in.”³⁵ Despite wanting to continue working with Binder, the two became distanced in large part because of Tom Parker’s worry that Binder may steal Elvis away from him. As a result, every phone call Binder placed for Elvis was completely ignored.

The Revival of the King

Despite the deterioration of his relationship with Binder, Elvis never forgot the promise he made him to make music only he believed in. Presley followed through with his promise to Binder by deciding to record his next full-length album not at the Nashville studios of RCA, with their “factorylike approach to recording, but in Memphis, at Chips Moman’s American Studios” which was renowned for its “soulful cache of studio musicians and...hit making synthesis of pop and rhythm and blues.”³⁶ Even Presley’s manager, always the copyright obsessed micromanager, supported Elvis’ desire to record at the non-RCA American Studio, in part to “feed the ferocious beast that had become his gambling habit, and to reinvent and validate Presley to a new generation.”³⁷ This fixation on validation was important because before heading to American, Elvis agreed to a four-week engagement at the International hotel in Las Vegas. Elvis would be tasked with performing two shows a night, seven nights a week. This would be Elvis’ first live show since 1961 and both Parker and Elvis knew they needed new, hit songs if they wanted to attract a younger audience.

³⁵ Ibid, 245

³⁶ Ibid, 249.

³⁷ Ibid.

Upon arriving in Memphis, however, Elvis and his entourage as well as Moman and the American crew realized this was not going to be a walk in the park. For starters, RCA, Elvis' record company, insisted on allowing an RCA team of producers sit in on the sessions and required the songs they had written to be considered. While Moman did think a few of the RCA songs were good, he believed the majority were very poor saying "There were a lot of bad songs in there, and I told them if I had to cut all of those songs, I didn't want to do it."³⁸ Besides the constant annoyance that the RCA producers provided, there was also a debate over who would own the publishing rights to the songs, given that RCA had always vehemently refused to allow another producer to benefit from Elvis' music. Due to Elvis' fame and star power, RCA had never faced the problem that a producer like Moman presented. Most producers were happy enough to merely work alongside Elvis and gladly took whatever compensation they were presented. Chips, to his credit, was not like most producers. In the middle of recording "Suspicious Minds", Moman was pulled into the hallway by two RCA producers who demanded that Moman relinquish his publishing rights. If he agreed they would offer him a kickback of some of the royalties later on. Moman refused saying "No, I'm not gonna give you a piece" and when they threatened to pull Elvis out of the studio and end the whole production Moman replied frankly "You can take your damn tapes and get the hell out of my studio."³⁹

³⁸ Ibid, 250.

³⁹ Roben Jones, Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 213.



Figure 3: Chips Moman and Elvis Presley at American Studios.⁴⁰

The RCA producers and Tom Parker, realizing Chips was not going to back down, ran straight to Elvis, hoping to convince him to leave. Elvis, feeling rather pleased with the session, responded coolly with “I know you’re doing your job, but how about letting me and Chips handle the session.”⁴¹ Seeing no alternative they were forced to allow Elvis to proceed with his work at American.

The squabble over the royalties only further exemplified the independent, musician-oriented environment that existed at American. Moman and the rest of his crew were there to make good music and refused to have their style or approach dictated by anybody from outside the studio. They were not entranced by Elvis’ aura. They viewed

⁴⁰ <http://www.memphisflash.de/2014/01/kult-from-elvis-in-memphis-at-american-sound-studio-1969/?lang=en>

⁴¹ Roben Jones, Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010) 213.

the session through the same lens as the previous ones. It was simple: Elvis needed a successful album, and American had a reputation for producing a plethora of hits. Moman himself claimed he was not scared saying “He was just one more act.” Bobby Emmons of the Memphis Boys echoed that sense of indifference saying “We were not awed to distraction even with Elvis because of the stature of some of the artists we had been cutting.” Perhaps the most noteworthy quote from the musicians present for that day came from Wayne Jackson, the leader of the Memphis Horns, who ridiculed Elvis for doing silly songs saying “Elvis had been doing stuff like ‘Teddy Bear’ and that was lightweight...Elvis was not a top-chart rock and roll guy. All he did was those dipshit movies.”⁴²

Despite the early issues between Moman, RCA, and Parker the resulting album, entitled “Elvis Back in Memphis” was an incredible success. “Suspicious Minds” became Elvis’ first number-one-single in seven years and was the last he would ever have.⁴³ Elvis’ engagement at the International Hotel in Las Vegas was an astonishing success, also. In total the show grossed roughly 1.5 million dollars with over 101,500 people attending.⁴⁴

Whether it was with the Box Tops or Elvis, Moman and company proved time and time again that they were hit-makers. They loved their craft and making good music came above everything else. This isn’t to say that money was not important to Moman and the rest—they were not monks. People have desires, they need to support their families, and so forth. However, what sets American apart is that they weren’t

⁴² Ibid, 202.

⁴³ Alanna Nash, The Colonel: The Extraordinary Story of Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis Presley, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 251.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 254.

willing to sacrifice their reputation to earn that money. Moman and company could have easily produced an entire record of the suggested Elvis RCA songs, thus not risking the loss of Elvis' business. Instead they stood tall and demanded that RCA show them the respect that they had earned as well as allow them to perform their craft the way they wished to. The way in which Elvis responded to his management team after they requested he leave shows the belief and respect he had in them (a surprising moment given his history of kowtowing to Parker's wishes).

The Beginning of the End

The only thing as meteoric as the rise of American Studios was its fall. In 1972, after achieving an unheard of amount of hits, Moman closed American Studio and left for Atlanta. The reasons behind the closure of American are not concrete—everyone seems to give you a different answer. However, Chips himself claims that the sole reason behind his decision was due to lack of recognition from local and national music awards shows. Moman did receive a producer of the year award from the Bill Gavan Radio Program Conference held in Atlanta in December 1969, following his immensely successful work with Elvis.⁴⁵ Other than that award, the recognition from his peers was almost nonexistent, which is rather surprising given the string of hits he had from 1969-1972. When discussing his lack of recognition Chips lamented, “For me, it just kept getting more and more aggravating. At the time when Memphis was the hottest thing going, the city didn't seem to really care.” His frustration expanded beyond Memphis

⁴⁵ James Dickerson, Goin' Back to Memphis: A Century of Blues, Rock 'N' Roll, and Glorious Soul, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996) 164.

when he discussed being overlooked for the music business awards after having a year with “eighty or ninety Top Twenty records.”⁴⁶

It was clear that the lack of recognition he received locally and nationally impacted him in a serious way. He dedicated his life to the Memphis music industry and when no awards came his way, or worse, went to a Stax record he felt underperformed his, he was hurt. Reggie Young of the Memphis Boys echoed Momans frustrations saying “here we were, and we’ve cut a hundred something chart records, but there would be a mediocre Hi record or Stax record that would get the press. In our little circles we would come up with all sorts of scenarios as to why were not in the paper on Sunday or whatever.”⁴⁷

Forgetting American Studios

Following the closure of American Studios in 1972 the history and importance of the studio has largely been ignored locally and nationally. However, often times there are reasons for that. History always has a narrative, and that people with an agenda usually dictate the narrative. In the case of American, I believe that Momans antagonistic relationship with the local media outlets, fellow musicians and producers has impacted the way his studio has been remembered.

Perhaps the most obvious example is the way he ended things with Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. Some can point to this event as a way to show Momans greed and self-interest. While not claiming to be covetous, Moman himself has said he has always worried about money, which is how he earned the nickname “the Front Money

⁴⁶ Ibid. 165.

⁴⁷ Bob Mehr, “Chips Moman: the missing man of Memphis music,” [The Commercial Appeal](#), 13 July 2008, 1st edition: np.

Kid.”⁴⁸ This very loud and messy falling out with the two founders of Stax may explain why his name and subsequent studio is mentioned only briefly in the new Stax museum.

Another factor contributing to the nonexistent remembrance of American is the fact that Moman continued his career in Nashville after exiting Memphis.

Throughout the 70’s and 80’s Moman produced famous country records with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Ronnie Millsap. It is not hard to believe that local Memphis musicians and recording studios took his decision to flee to Nashville as a punch in the gut. Memphis was, after all, the home of Momans greatest successes and if not for the chances local Memphians gave him it’s unlikely he would have flourished the way he did.

If Memphians disliked Moman after he jolted for Nashville, then the way he handled his 1985 return unfolded certainly did not help matters. In 1985, then Mayor Dick Hackett and First Tennessee chairman Ron Terry, ready to revitalize the floundering Memphis music industry, offered Moman a studio and financial incentives to return to Memphis and start making hits.⁴⁹ Things started off fairly well, with Moman producing the “Class of ‘55” album featuring Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, and Carl Perkins. Momans next recording venture, with Ringo Starr, was a disaster, and things quickly turned sour between Moman and the local media. The Commercial Appeal ran an article criticizing Ringo Starr, essentially claiming he was old news and no longer relevant, a statement Moman did not take well. Moman retaliated, staging a protest in front of the Commercial Appeal offices. Ringo eventually abandoned the project and Moman left Memphis, this time for good. It’s hard to believe that this colossal failure of a

⁴⁸ Robert Gordon, It Came from Memphis, (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 168.

⁴⁹ Bob Mehr, “Chips Moman: the missing man of Memphis music,” The Commercial Appeal, 13 July 2008, 1st edition: np.

studio didn't upset a good deal of Memphians. The community had urged Moman to return, and provided him with the financial incentives and attention he always desired. However, it appears Moman only wanted the positive aspects of media attention, and not the negative ones. As a prominent producer in a city as musically obsessed as Memphis, Moman needed to have some thicker skin. A somewhat disparaging article about Ringo Starr was not the end of world, but Moman treated it as such.

Commemorating American

“I was coming back through Memphis around 1990, been down in Alabama, and I thought I'd slip over to the old American and see where we'd made all the records. I drove up there and I couldn't find it. The building was nowhere to be seen. I pulled my car up there and sat for a little bit and said, Yeah, there was the control room and here's where we was when we were putting the jet plane on 'The Letter'. Here's where it all happened. It was real strange to see that place gone—as much as had gone down over there. I felt kind of empty, useless, kind of sad. And glad, too, like this is where we done it, thank God for this little place. But that's Memphis. I'm sure the Stax people feel the same way. Memphis scraped them away.”

--Dan Penn, “It Came from Memphis”

After closing the studio in 1972, the original building that housed American Studios was torn down and turned into a beauty shop. Eventually that building

was also torn down and the lot lay dormant until the 2000s when a Family Dollar was built. There is no plaque or marker to identify the significance of the plot of land or differentiate it from anyplace else. American had not received the same treatment that Stax was given when, in 2003, the Stax Museum of American Soul Music was constructed where the original Stax records had lain.⁵⁰ Yet this leaves one wondering—is American deserving of a similar commemoration, and if not, what commemoration is appropriate?

To attempt an answer of this question it would be wise to examine the importance of the American Studios building. Unlike Stax Records, American Studios was not drawing most of its talent from the immediate neighborhood, opting instead to pick up artists from across the entire city and country. Stax and its proprietors Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, however, were very much a part of the neighborhood and pulled most of their talent from the immediate area, using local kids such as Aretha Franklin and Booker T and MG's.⁵¹ This leaves the impression that the physical location of Stax was important because had it not been located in South Memphis it's very likely the incredible hits that were produced there would have never happened. American Studios location was rather unimportant it was the producers and house band that were crucial. Many of the musicians who went to American were from out of town and had numerous other studios at their disposal, yet they were enticed by the opportunity to work with Chips Moman and the Memphis Boys.

⁵⁰ "Stax." *History » Museum*. Stax Museum, n.d. Web. 25 July 2014.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Given the relative lack of importance of the building itself, attempting to commemorate American Studios in a similar vein of Stax would be unwise. Instead, it should be the producers and the musicians who are commemorated and it appears that Memphis, despite its tumultuous relationship with Moman, is attempting to do just that.

This August a plaque will be dedicated at the former site of American Studios commemorating the work of Moman and all the artists he produced. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this plaque dedication was that local American studio enthusiasts drove it. Eddie Hankins, a clinical pharmacist at Le Bonheur Hospital and DJ at WEVL radio, began organizing a group of people to help spearhead the American Studios commemoration late last year. He highlighted the initial difficulties of dedication saying, “This was something I had thought of a few years ago, and everybody I approached said ‘Oh, great idea, but I just don’t have the time’.”⁵² Eventually Hankins was successful in assembling a group consisting of Rhodes professors Charles Hughes, who wrote the text that will appear on the marker, John Bass, and Chairman of the Shelby County Historical Commission, Jimmy Ogle. Hankins has also reached out to former members of American Studios like Bobby Wood, Reggie Young, Gene Chrisman, Bobby Emmons, and even Chips Moman, all of whom are expected to be in attendance August 13 when the plaque is officially dedicated.⁵³

Robert Gordon, author of numerous books on the Memphis music industry, said that whatever musical achievements Memphis had “are in spite of the city, not because of it.”⁵⁴ Memphis has always seemed more interested in destroying its history

⁵² Personal interview with Eddie Hankins

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Robert Gordon, It Came from Memphis, (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 249.

rather than preserving it. The destruction of Beale Street in the 1970's under President Richard Nixon's urban renewal program, or the abandonment and subsequent demolition of Stax are two good examples. Chips Moman, Dan Penn, Spooner Oldham, the Memphis Boys, and everybody that worked at American Studios are just another number in the long list of Memphis projects that have slipped, or been beaten, into obscurity. Was American Studios a particularly attractive building? No. Did Moman and company upset some folks, and burn some bridges? No doubt. However, Memphis cannot stand idly by and watch some of its most important people, organizations, and buildings be buried by the sands of time.

While things have been tense for decades, recent developments have shown a potential reparation of the relationship. Chips Momans election to the Memphis Music Hall of Fame earlier this year also shows signs of an inching towards accepting Moman back into the community. A plaque and the Hall of Fame election is a start, albeit a small one. At the very least it will serve as a commemoration of the extremely talented musicians and producers who performed there as well as start a long dormant conversation about the studio and its place in Memphis history.

The plaque should also serve as a stark reminder to Memphis and its inhabitants that, regardless of how messy our history may be, it can not be ignored or pushed aside. Moman surely ruffled some feathers in his time here in Memphis, and he is not without fault in this situation, but that should not overshadow the incredible amount of time and effort he poured into making the music business thrive here in the Mid-South.

Limitations of and Suggestions for Further Research

Undoubtedly the largest constraint encountered throughout the research was a simple lack of time. While the six weeks allotted to compose data and present the findings was generous, it was not sufficient enough to allow for the difficult process of finding and interviewing the numerous individuals that worked at American. Everybody from Chips Moman to Dan Penn to the Memphis Boys had long careers that scattered them across the nation. Additionally, the central figure in the American Studios story, Chips Moman, has become increasingly weary of interviews later in his life, it seems. Any further writing on American Studios ought to prioritize, and would greatly benefit from, interviewing Moman.

Also, a more in depth examination and comparison of the histories of the various recording studios in Memphis would be useful. The meteoric rise and fall of the Memphis music industry made for some fascinating stories, from the rebirth of Stax to the still-operating Royal Studios.

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