

Date: 2005-02-25

Interviewee: Jesse Motley

Interviewer: Interviewer

Location: N/A

Collection: Stax Museum Oral Histories

[0:00]

Interviewer: And sign it... what is it... print your name. Right there.

[Laughing]

My mind is racing. Ok.

[1:00]

Jesse Motley: What is the date?

Interviewer: Today is the 25th... Good Morning Mr. Motley, how are you today?

Jesse Motley: Good morning, just fine

Interviewer: Very good, and you are a member of the...?

Jesse Motley: Jubilee Hummingbirds

Interviewer: Okay

Jesse Motley: Lead guitarist

Interviewer: And do you mind telling us your date of birth?

[2:00]

Jesse Motley: Eight, twenty-fourth, of thirty-seventh.

Interviewer: Thirty seventh. Where were you born?

Jesse Motley: I was born in Memphis, and Douglas, Lamar street.

Interviewer: How long have you been a part of the Jubilee...

Jesse Motley: Well I was with a group called the Travelling Stars up until '67.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Jesse Motley: And in '67 I joined the Hummingbirds

Interviewer: Okay, what's your role in the Hummingbirds?

Jesse Motley: Huh?

Interviewer: What instrument do you play?

Jesse Motley: I play lead guitar.

Interviewer: How long have you been playing lead?

Jesse Motley: I've been playing lead since I was 8 years old.

Interviewer: Oh, where you pick that up?

Jesse Motley: Well, I guess it was just a gift

Interviewer: It was a gift?

Jesse Motley: A gift, yeah. Never been to school for music, but I picked it up and I've been playing it ever since.

Interviewer: Playing it ever since. That's your favorite instrument, do you know how to play any others?

[3:00]

Jesse Motley: I play harp also.

Interviewer: Really?

Jesse Motley: Harmonica.

Interviewer: Oh okay

Jesse Motley: I got harp on one of my son's "Motley Brothers" CD.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Jesse Motley: And I play harp on one of they cuts.

Interviewer: Really? And you've been playing that since you were a child?

Jesse Motley: Ever since I was 8.

Interviewer: Ever since you were 8.

Jesse Motley: And I'm 68 now, so for 60 years, I been doing it.

Interviewer: That's amazing. For these next few questions I'm going to ask you, feel free to talk, whatever comes in your mind, or however much you want to talk about, then just...

Jesse Motley: Well I would like to say that, during the time when we were recording with Stax, I had become a part of the base player Robert King, and me and him become as brothers out there on the road,

[4:00]

We just wouldn't do anything without the other, if one had to something new and they would do it too. We worked with Booker T., Sam and Dave, Isaac Hayes, and all of us we used to drink coffee right across at that little coffee shop all the time, and we were recording here, and I have some of the recordings here on us that they never did release on us until roundabout, out in California, this CD was released on us which we never knew nothing about it.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Jesse Motley: Stax went out of business

[5:00]

before they released this which, they release something of Moses Nightingale because they wanted us over in Pops during that time, but we wouldn't go. We stuck to Gospel, and so from that up until now, on this CD they say the Jubilee Hummingbirds guitar players was unknown, but I am here to tell the world that I am here in living color, and Mr. King was here in living color, he just couldn't be with me today.

Interviewer: Alright, so what extent do you think Soul music gets its roots from Gospel?

Jesse Motley: Gospel, Gospel is the root of Soul music,

[6:00]

it really is. It's the roots of Soul music.

Interviewer: So how would you define Soul music?

Jesse Motley: Well Soul music is a thing that you would be doing something, doing something, and you would start a song off, and you would really sing what you feel in Soul music, you would sing what you feel. In Gospel you would just sing the things that have happened to you or the things that you go through, this is what is called Soul Music.

Interviewer: So, excuse me, how did you get involved with Stax Records?

Jesse Motley: Well back in the day,

[7:00]

Claus Bryson was the manager of the group, and somehow or another, anyway, then Clyde was the manager of the group, and they got in touch with Al Bell, and started to hang around the studio and they found out that we were with Booker T., and all of us were there together. They found out that we were singers, and so they wanted to record something on us, and they recorded on us. The story Dr. King calls our, "Freedom song", they recorded it and Stax would

give Dr. King one of the 45's before he got killed, and "Press my down pillow", so those were the they released right away on us.

[8:00]

Interviewer: How did the, I guess you could say, the political climate of the South back then, how do you think it affected the music that many of the Stax artists, the lyrics, and the feeling of the music, how do you think that affected the music?

Jesse Motley: Well it played a big part in it because I come along back in that day when you couldn't go, water fountains what said "White Only", and the cafe's said "White only", you know, in the front, black couldn't go in the front, which Dr. King opened up the doors for us to go in, and to have these different things and have these different freedom to all,

[9:00]

To go in and enjoy. It brought about a great change, it was a great change in that, it was a great change. It was just like Stax went out, everything just went dead and turned over and started a new leaf, and then turn over for this generation today needs to know about that back then, what we had to go through, and how we had through it. We couldn't ride on the front of the busses, we had to ride on the back of the bus when we got on the bus, and we had color restrooms, they was around back. Everything for the black was around back.

[10:00]

Until then it was brought up front, when we started to march. Dr. King marched for sanitary workers, and they struck, and went on strike. It was just a whole lot of, I would say, stuff here in Memphis that really it was just turning over. It was turmoil for a while until it settled back down and leveled out. Until it's up to where it is now.

Interviewer: Okay with you saying that, do you think that... I don't know... Memphis, Do you think Memphis has advanced as far as-- when you look back at Stax and see how well the white musicians and black musicians work together?

[11:00]

Jesse Motley: Well then, there wasn't no white and there wasn't no black musicians. Musicians were just musicians when they come into Stax, we're all was one big happy family. Musicians was just musicians. It wasn't no integration between us here, it was just all one big family.

Interviewer: Do you believe that Stax Records and other Soul labels catered to diverse audiences?

Jesse Motley: Yeah they, I wouldn't say they catered to them. I would say Stax was independent, they were bigger than they knew that they were.

[12:00]

They didn't know how big it was.

Interviewer: When do you remember first hearing Soul music?

Jesse Motley: Well I was about, I would say, 15 years of age then when I heard, you know, a semi-soul music. When Soul music really got hot was in the late 50's early 60's. When they really got, you know, when it had become just Soul music.

Interviewer: You think it was Soul music before it was called Soul music?

Jesse Motley: Yeah it was Soul music before it was called Soul music. I would say that, I would say that.

[13:00]

Interviewer: Do you remember the first person you heard singing Soul music, or what you would call Soul?

Jesse Motley: Well I would say that, no I can't remember the first person that was singing Soul music. I can't remember that, at least I can't record it. I about remember it back in the day, but I

can't record it. I can't think of his name now. Little Richard, and Bobby Glen, and there's just a host of them back then. They were like Blues, and Soul, it was mixed up then when I heard it.

[14:00]

Interviewer: Your roots are in the church?

Jesse Motley: Oh yes, deeply.

Interviewer: What church did you attend?

Jesse Motley: I attend a little church in the country, down that Lamar, [inaudible] called it Union Hill. I am a deacon of that church now. It is my home church, from little boy pup. I also play guitar for that church on Sunday morning now.

Interviewer: What was it like going to church back then as a child?

Jesse Motley: Well you could get almost to the church, and hear the old sisters moaning, the deacon singing the old hymns, and you would just have to get in a hurry to get there. You just couldn't wait. Go to church, barefooted, just however you were, you were just, I mean, you was at church.

[15:00]

The singing in there, and the spirit so high until you, we would be riding in back of a wagon going to revival, and the spirit would be so high that we'd get almost to the church and we'd jump off the wagons and run to get there. [laughing] It was church then, it was church. During that time, we didn't have, automobiles were, you know, something that you, when you see them, it would be a surprise to you to see an automobile. It was just mules and wagons then. As the years went on, and I can remember when gas was 15 cents a gallon. [laughing] That was for regular, and hi-test was 25 cents a gallon,

[16:00]



That was back in the 50's.

Interviewer: Gas is not that cheap no more.

[laughing]

Jesse Motley: And you could, you could, fill up a car on ten or fifteen dollars, you'd fill your car up. Now I just look at the automobiles and what gas prices is now, and back then I had worked for a dollar and a half a day, not an hour, a day, from sun-up to sundown. A dollar and a half.

Interviewer: That's something

Jesse Motley: A dollar and a half a day, but you had, during that time, you had

[17:00]

a house, a place to stay, and you had a roof over your head. You didn't have refrigerators, you have didn't refrigerators then, but we would kill hogs and hang the meat up in the barn... after we put it in the salt box, we let it stay so long, pull it out and hang it in the barn. We raised sorghum, we strip sorghum and we had to go to the mill and grind the sorghum, the juice, and then cook the molasses off, then we had lamp lights, no electricity. We had to buy lamplights and a wood stove, cook stove. We would cut wood in the summer,

[18:00]

and stack it up and cook during the winter. I came through all of that, but to where I am now, and sometimes I sit down and just reminisce over that what would come through, you know, but I still held on to Gospel. I never changed, I never wanted to go over into Pops or Blues. I wanted Gospel, and he had brought me through all of this, up until where I am now. I have my health and strength, and I am 68 years old, but I still gets around some of these young ones I look at. I still have health and strength, and I have had a struggle,

[19:00]

but I laid there, and he said I wouldn't make it, I wouldn't play no more, but I still got up, and I'm back to playing, and I'm back walking, and I'm back talking just as I was. So I say to the young people, take care of yourself, and if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.

Interviewer: My dad says that. I was listening to you talk about how you used to cook the sorghum and make the molasses. Everything seemed like you took time, and sweat behind it, and you think maybe that's why music, I'm not saying that music isn't great today, but it just seemed to have so much more feeling and meaning back then, you know,

[20:00]

people took their time.

Jesse Motley: Yeah because it's the things that they go through with, the thing that they had to go through with, in other words they were singing their feelings. They were singing their feelings on what Gospel really was. They would sing the feeling, that's why you get a feeling. They would, my mother used to be in the kitchen making bread, and she'd start to hum in the tune and I would look at her, and she would have tears coming from her eyes because she was singing what she felt, what she felt she was singing. Gospel is a, it is something to hold onto,

[21:00]

and I'll tell any of these younger generation, if you like Gospel, hold onto it, Soul music is what you can feel and, don't get me wrong now, for Gospel is something that it has deep meanings, Soul music has a deep meaning to it, but I just never want to do that, Soul music, mine was just to Gospel. Soul music was something that you felt just like you did Gospel, you know, it would keep you going. It's just how you were treated or mistreated. That's what it's about.

Interviewer: How do you feel about Gospel Music today, you know like,

[22:00]

the younger generation of Gospel music, like Kirk Franklin, and...

Jesse Motley: Well they are singing Gospel music, they have upgraded it, but me, I'm from the old school and I can't get away from it, and to me a lot of, lot of, lot of, so-called Gospel now is not the real thing. You have, they used to have a saying that said "Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby." [laughing] And so we have imitations and everything. Some Gospel is imitation and some Gospel is real.

Interviewer: It kind of almost seems like it crosses the line. You can barely tell if its Gospel or if it's R&B, almost at times.

Jesse Motley: Yeah, but when you find somebody singing Gospel

[23:00]

who have been born again, then you can feel them without seeing them. You can, it's like God told Nicodemus, he said, "look out the window," he said, "stick your hand out the window," he said, "what do you feel?", he said "I feel the wind", but he said "that's the way the Holy Spirit is" and from the heart reaches the heart. He said "You can feel it, but you can't see it."

Interviewer: So, is there anything else you want to share with me?

Jesse Motley: No, but I will say this, the guys at, the Hummingbirds, there's four of them living,

[24:00]

and four have passed and went on, and I would like to say that me and King is still, we are still like brothers, wherever we meet, whenever we get together.

Interviewer: What were the names of all of the Hummingbirds

Jesse Motley: It was Clyde Ison, Roosevelt Ison, Reverend Whitaker, and Eddie Hubbard, Clarence Johnson, Robert King, and me, of course, Jesse Motley. That was the group during the time it was Stax.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

Jesse Motley: Alright thank you, Jubilee Hummingbirds, they were formed back in the day.

[25:00]

Course, far as I can remember back. Walter Rogers, a guy who formed the Jubilee Hummingbirds, and they went, and group called the Harmony Echoes, and The Jubilee Hummingbirds, some of them split up and the Echoes they merged in with the Hummingbirds and the made one group called the Jubilee Hummingbirds and of course that's where it comes from, this was in '67, I joined them, end of '67.

Interviewer: Where they from Memphis also?

Jesse Motley: Yeah, they was from Memphis. Well some of them homes were Holly Springs, and some home in Arkansas, and Me, I was born in Memphis,

[26:00]

but I was raised up in [Inaudible] Mississipp' [?], and we all came together and made the Jubilee Hummingbirds.

Interviewer: How long have you been living in Memphis?

Jesse Motley: I've been living back in Memphis ever since '60.

Interview: Ok.

[26:35]