

Transforming Southern Soul:

An Examination of *Stax Fax* and Stax Records During the Late 1960s

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In the early 1960s Deanie Parker moved from Ironton, Ohio to Memphis, Tennessee in order to finish high school and be with her mother, who was living in the city at the time. She attended Hamilton High School, where future star Carla Thomas would also graduate from, and became the lead female vocalist for a student band.¹ Encouraged by the school's glee club instructor, the group took part in a Beale Street music competition for which the first place prize was an opportunity to audition for Stax Records. "And we won that prize," Parker recalls, "So that was how I managed to get into Stax Records and to learn what it was they did in that old Capitol Theater that had been converted into a recording company. Which was behind Satellite Record Shop on McLemore at College."² Though Deanie would not go on to become a hit musician, she would become an integral part of Stax Records. In 1965 Jim Stewart, the president of Stax, hired Deanie as the company's first publicist. The ultimate goal of her job was to package and advertise the product (the songs and artists of Stax) to both the DJs who played their music and the general public as a whole.³ In the fall of 1968 a new marketing tool was developed that would aid her in this endeavor, Stax's very own magazine called *Stax Fax*. As Robert Gordon states, it was something that "kept Stax on the coffee table when it wasn't on the turntable."⁴ This magazine would become a primary agent of change as well as a symbolic one at a critical time in Stax's history as it promoted the new music and new image for the company between 1968 and 1970.

¹ Deanie Parker, interview by author, June 30, 2017, phone interview.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013), 228.

Even decades after the label's heyday, *Stax Fax* still grants us the ability to observe and understand what was happening at one of the most influential record companies in the United States at a critical time in its history. The years between 1968 and 1970 were a time of change for Stax and soul music across the nation. The music being made was moving away from when artists like Sam & Dave or Otis Redding performed in tailored suits to the new style of the Seventies, when Isaac Hayes triumphantly walked onto a stage cheered by 100,000 people in nothing but pink pants and gold chains.⁵ It would also become more connected with the African American community as it promoted black empowerment through music and economics. *Stax Fax* itself changed along with these greater movements, as time passed it went from being only four pages long to over 30, and would feature full length articles on Stax artists and important social issues. An understanding of *Stax Fax* affords us a new way to see how Stax Records both changed and remained the same at this decisive juncture. *Stax Fax* served two main purposes throughout the time it was published from 1968 to 1970. The first was as a means to promote and market the artists and new music Stax was producing in the late 1960s, the second was as a tool for communication that connected the company to both the local community as well as to the national political and cultural changes.

These linked purposes are clear from both studying the magazine as well as from interviewing those who created it. Deanie Parker explained that the purpose of *Stax Fax* “was two fold...The first reason that *Stax Fax* was created was because we needed a [marketing] piece to promote out artists and our music...the second reason... was we

⁵ *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*, directed by Robert Gordon and Morgan Neville (Concord Music Group, 2007), DVD.

were providing, even then, an opportunity for high school youngsters in the city to do something constructive after school.”⁶ Al Bell, the Executive Vice President of Stax at the time, also states that “in that publication (*Stax Fax*) you would read about our artists but it wasn’t just about our artists. It was about what was going on in the African-American community.”⁷ These two purposes of *Stax Fax*, as well as how the magazine represents the changes occurring at Stax during the time, will be expanded upon by examining the evidence found in the issues and by weaving it together with the broader stories of Stax Records, the Memphis Sound, and Soul Music as a whole. This will be achieved by providing a synopsis of what was happening at Stax just before the release of the magazine. Then the marketing side of *Stax Fax* will be explored by examining the music, artists, and national business organizations promoted in the issues. Finally the idea of Stax working as a part of the Memphis community will be discussed by addressing the ways that it served the community, how its audience received it, and the societal issues that were examined in the magazine.

Stax Fax emerged from a vibrant and tumultuous moment in the history of Stax Records and soul music. By the time *Stax Fax* was first released in 1968 Stax Records had been in existence for seven years, only three of which did it have a dedicated head publicist in the presence of Deanie Parker.⁸ Parker was brought on by Jim Stewart in order to help promote Stax’s products in the marketplace. Until 1968 Stax Records was only in the business of producing music, not distributing or even promoting it, due to its

⁶ Parker, phone interview.

⁷ Al Bell, interview by author, July 19, 2017, phone interview.

⁸ Rob Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (New York, NY: Schirmer Trade Books, 1997), 3.

business deal with Atlantic Records.⁹ Atlantic, a larger company that had greater resources, was able to more easily promote and sale music than Stax was able to. In this partnership Stax was able to focus only on creating hit music while Atlantic was trusted with getting it played and sold. This deal did not last forever, and- after its end- Al Bell and Deanie Parker became responsible for creating a new marketing and publicity for Stax as it rebuilt its catalog.

Despite Stax's inexperience in promoting music it did have the distinct advantage of being home to a great wealth of talent. Otis Redding, Rufus and Carla Thomas, William Bell, Eddie Floyd, the house band, Booker T. and the M.G.s, along with Sam & Dave, who were loaned to Stax from its partner in Atlantic, were regularly producing hits for the Memphis based company. Helping this success was the trend between the 1950s and 1960s that saw more and more white kids listening to what was known as "black music."¹⁰ Bell realized this in his time at Stax, and so understood the importance of properly presenting music that had originated from or been inspired by black culture. Should this be done correctly, what was once disregarded as "race music" could become a part of and even influence mainstream music.¹¹

Stax records and its artists exploded onto the national stage in a relatively short amount of time, especially considering that they were outsiders in the music industry. Southern soul music was made and distributed by independent labels like Stax who were not a part of the major labels at the time such as Columbia, Decca, RCA, and Capitol.¹²

⁹ Bell, phone interview.

¹⁰ Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1995), 58.

¹¹ Bell, phone interview.

¹² Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), 5.

This, along with being located in a secondary city like Memphis, caused great difficulties in marketing and distributing the music created at Stax. The deal with Atlantic helped Stax a great deal in this regard as it took the pressure off of the small, independent company from promoting itself.

Along with the success experienced by both the label and its artists Stax was also fortunate in terms of the social dynamic that made up the company. Many of the people who made up the personnel at Stax Records throughout the years, from the business side of things to the artists themselves, declared that the record was a seeming oasis of sanity and tolerance in a desert of segregation and racism that was Memphis in the mid 20th Century.¹³ As Parker remembered, “I don’t believe anybody in the building with who I worked with at Stax Records, black or white, made any deliberate attempt to institutionalize anything that was inequitable, that was discriminatory...you know we respected each other enough to work together.”¹⁴ Stax represented integration in a segregated city, though it also became seen as a symbol for black empowerment in its later years.¹⁵ Not even the sidewalk just outside of Stax was spared from racial discrimination and segregation. Once during a recording break Steve Cropper, the white guitarist for Booker T. and the M.G.s, took a breather outside with Otis Redding, Stax’s black superstar. The simple act of a black man and a white man sharing a sidewalk together violated the expectation of the segregated system, and as a result a police officer passing by threatened both men to get back inside the recording studio.¹⁶ Though the city which it existed in was heavily entrenched with segregation politics Stax itself

¹³ Gordon and Neville, *Respect Yourself*, DVD.

¹⁴ Parker, phone interview.

¹⁵ Hughes, 67.

¹⁶ Parker, phone interview.

became a place in which blacks and whites were able to collaborate in the creation of something special.

Unfortunately the good times were not to last forever as from late 1967 to 1968 Stax would suffer several major setbacks, both economically as well as culturally. On December 10, 1967 the plane carrying Otis Redding and the Bar-Kays went down near Monona, Wisconsin. In total seven lives were lost, including four of the Bar-Kays (the oldest being only nineteen) and Otis Redding, who was already a star and Stax's most successful artist at the age of 26.¹⁷ The effect was lasting on Stax, both emotionally and from a business standpoint. The company had lost its greatest talent and an entire generation of up and coming musicians in one tragedy.¹⁸

On top of losing Otis Redding Stax also lost its entire music catalogue after Atlantic was bought by Warner Bros. Stax Records was left out of the deal, and Atlantic was able to keep the rights to all of the music it had created, as the contract between the two was more than just a distribution agreement, it was a master purchase.¹⁹ This meant that Atlantic owned all rights to the music it had distributed on behalf of Stax throughout the 1960s, including unreleased Otis Redding recordings. On top of losing its very own catalogue of music Stax also lost Sam & Dave as they were owned by Atlantic and only loaned out to the Memphis studio.²⁰ By the spring of 1968 Stax was a record company with no records to sale and without its two most successful acts.

Then, in April of 1968, Stax suffered another psychological blow shared by the entire city of Memphis as well as the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King's assassination

¹⁷ Gordon, *Respect Yourself*, 165-169.

¹⁸ Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 327.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gordon, *Respect Yourself*, 176.

was a shock felt by the entire nation but was perhaps most jarring for the artists and employees of Stax Records. The affect of these sequential events on Stax Records and its artists was devastating. As Bell remembers at the time, “Otis was gone, Sam and Dave gone, our catalogue gone, and the industry declared us dead and we were dead, literally. There was nothing left.”²¹

This was the situation in which *Stax Fax* was first created and distributed in during the fall of 1968. With no music to sell, the loss of tremendous talent, and located in a city of civil unrest it is a wonder that Stax did not go under then and there. Yet the company pushed on to not only remake itself but to also experience a new level of success during the early 1970s. This transformation was due largely in part to Al Bell, who spearheaded Stax’s rebirth and creation of a new image in the late 1960s. Dr. King inspired Bell to pursue economic forms of empowerment for Black Americans that would begin at Stax. Bell had come to Stax in 1965, his expertise as a disc jockey made him invaluable as he knew how to get music made by African-Americans played on radio during the years of segregation.²² After the death of MLK, Bell believed that Stax could be a symbol for African-Americans, showing that it was possible for blacks to make a good living despite segregation and racism. For this to be accomplished, Stax would need to rebrand itself and to begin creating music that was not owned by Atlantic. Bell’s response to this problem “was to go into the marketplace with strength,” so he devised the “Soul Explosion” as a solution.²³ Undeterred by the setbacks suffered in 1967 and 1968, Bell planned on putting Stax back on its feet by immediately creating an entirely

²¹ Bell, phone interview.

²² Bowman, 83-85.

²³ Gordon, *Respect Yourself*, 188.

new catalogue. Producing and releasing 28 albums all within eight months of each other would accomplish this goal, as this new music would become the catalogue for Stax, providing for the company a source of constant revenue.²⁴

Stax Fax was created to help in this endeavor as a primary means of communication through which Stax could market its artists and newly released music in the crucial post-Atlantic era. As Deanie Parker explained, “We realized that we needed more tools than just a human being on the road promoting the product, and that another potentially powerful element that we could add to our box of promotional tools is what would have been a printed piece.”²⁵ Parker would give the name to the magazine as well as develop the format for it, but the process of creation involved input and influence from Al Bell, Jim Stewart, and Estelle Axton. Parker remembers it as an “awesome, awesome, laborious experience,” during which she was learning about promotional practices both at Memphis State as well as from Al Abrams, who had worked as the head of publicity of Motown Records in Detroit.²⁶

The first issues of *Stax Fax* were only four pages long and featured newly released or popular albums that had been recently released. As time passed they would become longer with more detailed articles that featured Stax artists as well as pieces on current events. A glossy finished cover replaced the old paper one and colored pictures and texts would be placed where black and white ones used to be. Both the magazine and the company underwent a period of change throughout 1968 to 1970, but much remained the same in both of them. While the music Stax recorded after 1968 was undoubtedly

²⁴ Gordon and Neville, *Respect Yourself*, DVD.

²⁵ Parker, phone interview.

²⁶ Parker, phone interview.

different from its old sound it was still being made by the same artists and retained much of what made previous Stax songs hits. *Stax Fax* itself always retained the key features it started with, as each issue would feature an executive message from both Jim Stewart and Al Bell, a section that spotlighted certain albums, and an artist of the month.

The Soul Explosion was Stax's plan for recovery from losing its catalogue and *Stax Fax* was the way in which it would be promoted, Stax planned to send the catalogue to music business insiders as well as the DJs who were needed to actually play the music on the radio. "It really did...start with mailings to the people on whom we depended to play our records, to distribute the product and what have you," said Parker.²⁷ Although its purpose grew, it retained its original role as a communication tool with distributors on what songs and albums the company wanted to be played.

However, before production and marketing for this momentous event could begin, Stax needed immediate income, a process made clear in the early issues of *Stax Fax*. Stax released six singles between the months of May and July in 1968.²⁸ One of the songs was by Booker T. and the M.G.s and was aptly named "Soul Limbo," as Stax as a whole was teetering on the edge of failure and was about to undergo a shift in their image. Aware of how close to failure they were, Bell helped to put the song together along with Steve Cropper.²⁹ Another was Eddie Floyd's single, "I've Never Found a Girl." Both songs were hits for a struggling Stax as "Soul Limbo" reached the top-ten charts for R&B and the top-twenty in pop, while "I've Never Found a Girl" made it to the number two-spot in

²⁷ Parker, phone interview.

²⁸ Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 150.

²⁹ Bell, phone interview.

R&B.³⁰ The importance of both of these songs to a then floundering Stax can be seen in the coverage they received in *Stax Fax*. Each song, along with the cover art, had a place in the featured albums section of the very first issue of *Stax Fax*.³¹ Their inclusion in the first issue makes sense, as Stax would still be promoting its two most successful songs at a period when its catalogue was exceptionally limited. Yet in the featured releases sections for the issues of March, April, and May of 1969, a full year after the release of the songs, they appear again, taking up valuable space from newer release.³² This suggests that the importance of both songs goes beyond just their success on the charts.

Both “Soul Limbo” and “I’ve Never Found a Girl” represented the musical transition at Stax in early 1968 as clearly as it did the business changes. Back to being fully independent, Jim Stewart knew that his studio would need a new partnership with a larger corporation, one willing to take a chance on Stax when it had no music to sell. The success of songs like “Soul Limbo” and “I’ve Never Found a Girl” convinced many in the music industry that Stax was not a lost cause. *Stax Fax* was a key contributor in this. Due to its independence, Stax had lost its primary means of distributing the music it was producing. Al Bell and Deanie Parker now became even more critical to Stax’s success than they were before as they now had to market Stax on their own. *Stax Fax* became a crucial tool in helping them achieve this task.

Apart from changes in administration and contracts, the sound coming from Stax’s music and artists would also change in 1968. Eddie Floyd’s “I’ve Never Found a Girl” is a good example of how the new soul would sound that came from Stax in the

³⁰ Gordon, *Respect Yourself*, 190-191.

³¹ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely fall of 1968), found in archives of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

³² *Stax Fax*, March, 1969, April, 1969, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

1970s. It still had the funk and raw groove that southern soul music was known, but the pace at which the vocals were sung and the instruments played had slowed. This was in stark contrast to older Stax hits like “Hold On I’m Coming” and “Knock on Wood” which were sung at break neck speeds. “Soul Limbo” also represented much of the old while heralding in the new. It was groovy with an even tempo but still had the same influences of blues and jazz that Booker T. and the M.G.s originally came from. Booker T. and the M.G.s embraced some stylistic changes to their act, especially to their appearance as Steve Cropper and Donald “Duck” Dunn both let their hair grow out in the popular 1970s fashion, yet they still maintained much of the sound that had lead to their original success.

Despite the fact that both Floyd and the MGs had scored earlier hits, *Stax Fax* celebrated their newest released as the Soul Explosion began. This made sense- since much of their catalog had been lost- and it also signaled a larger focus on new material throughout the newsletter. Between the fall of 1968 and the spring of 1969 the music industry was flooded with Stax albums and singles being released regularly.³³ Two of the most advertised productions were Isaac Hayes’ album, *Hot Buttered Soul*, and Johnnie Taylor’s single, “Who’s Making Love.” Hayes’ baldhead became a marketing tool for *Stax Fax*, as it was a prominent feature of his that set him apart from others when afros were new and stylish.³⁴ A shot of his head was used as the cover art for his new album and can be found all throughout the issues of *Stax Fax*, including in the June 1969 issue in which it takes up the entire back cover.³⁵ This indicates that both Hayes and Stax were

³³ Ibid., 216.

³⁴ Gordon and Neville, *Respect Yourself*, DVD.

³⁵ *Stax Fax*, June, 1969, Stax Museum.

attempting to differentiate themselves from the marketplace in order to make their appearance, and sound, unique. Johnnie Taylor's song, meanwhile, appears in each of the issues of March, April, and May of 1969.³⁶ Both of these songs represent how the style of music was being changed at Stax as each were experimental in their own unique ways.

"Who's Making Love" was an upbeat funk song that was more sexual than anything ever released from Stax before. The song's sexuality was so pronounced that it proved to be difficult to market, a particularly difficult challenge during the Soul Explosion. "Who's making love to your old lady," Taylor asks in the song, "While you were out making love." The song was certainly risqué and overt with its sexuality, however Taylor refused to back down, as in an article in *Stax Fax* he poses the question, "What's wrong with making love?"³⁷ Jim Stewart recalled that stations would refuse to play it because it was too funky, which was code for meaning it was too black. Despite the difficulty it getting it on the air, "Who's Making Love" was a major success, as it became Stax's best selling song yet with over two million copies sold.³⁸ Its success paved the way for more that sounded like it as Stax began making more hits that were funky and risqué. It was also following the broader pattern Soul music was taking toward the start of the 1970s. According to Brian Ward the music became more sexual with a new danceability quality to it.³⁹

While Johnnie Taylor was moving towards more funk and "black" sounding music, Isaac Hayes was actually moving in the opposite direction by exploring "white" music. *Hot Buttered Soul* was a jump for both Stax and Isaac Hayes himself. It was the

³⁶ *Stax Fax*, March, 1969, April, 1969, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

³⁷ *Stax Fax*, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ward, 251.

second album he released after being a long time writer for other artists like Sam and Dave and Booker T. and the M.G.s. One of the more famous songs on the album was “By the Time I get to Phoenix,” which was originally a country song by Glen Campbell.⁴⁰ Hayes’ song was strikingly different from “Who’s Making Love” in almost every respect. The song is slow and solemn, and lasts for over eighteen minutes. The strings and horns of the song remind one of slow ballroom dancing rather than the funky stuff that made people want to move.

Hayes was not only exploring what was considered “white” music; he was successfully speaking to white audiences as well as other sectors that Stax had not previously reached. Hayes broad appeal is alluded to in the August 1969 issue of *Stax Fax* as it includes a fan letter written by a pastor of a church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The letter begins by stating that the man was reading a book while his radio happened to be on. Though he was focused on his reading, the man found himself stopping to listen to the radio as Isaac Hayes’ voice came through in “By the Time I Get to Phoenix.” The man found himself incredibly moved by Hayes’ performance, resulting in his writing of the letter to Black Moses himself. “It is a difficult task,” the man writes, “today to break into another person’s life with all of the hang ups, obsessions, and interests that each of us have. To break through all of that and to overcome the noise of modern life is extremely difficult- to do it with beauty is rare.” The pastor goes on to rave about Hayes talent and his ability to express it in such a profound and beautiful way. He ends by thanking Hayes for sharing his talent and comparing what he has done with music with what the pastor tries to do in his services. “I now own a copy of your album

⁴⁰ Ibid.

and intend to use it in some way in a Sunday Service,” the pastor states, finally wishing Isaac success in his career.⁴¹ Stax was seeking to reach a broader audience with its message, and for a pastor in Michigan to not only hear it but also be moved by it, shows that the company was still growing despite the setbacks of 1968.

The change in music being made at Stax was not an anomaly experienced only in Memphis, instead it was part of a larger trend in soul music across the United States. Peter Guralnick notes that soul music had followed the same trends of the Civil Rights movement, as it experienced success when huge strides were being made towards desegregation but seemingly faced an identity crisis after the assassination of Dr. King.⁴² Soul music, especially in the south, was inspired by the experiences lived everyday by the individuals who wrote and performed it. As segregation and racial bigotry was profound and unavoidable all throughout Memphis, it only makes sense that soul music would chronicle and walk hand in hand with what black Americans were experiencing at the time. As Deanie Parker says, the experience of working in Memphis at the time “was a bitch. That’s what it was like.”⁴³ Southern soul had come to be seen as a symbol for integration in the United States as it had influences from country, R&B, and gospel as well as being made by both blacks and whites together in the same studios.⁴⁴

Then in the late 1960s times began to change. The struggle for desegregation became the struggle for black empowerment and Al Bell saw Stax as a way to promote economic empowerment for African Americans.⁴⁵ *Stax Fax* featured pictures of its artists

⁴¹ *Stax Fax*, August, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁴² Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 2-3.

⁴³ Parker, phone interview.

⁴⁴ Ward, 218.

⁴⁵ Gordon, *Respect Yourself*, 189.

not just to market and popularize their images, but also to show that even in Memphis, Tennessee it was possible for African Americans to experience success and to encourage others to strive for it as well. “We...were very proud of the fact that we were a predominately African American organization. And it was important for others. We knew it was important for others, especially others who looked like us, who were African Americans to see other African Americans doing something distinctly different and productive and profitable,” remarks Parker on the use of pictures.

Just as important as marketing specific recordings was marketing the larger images of Stax artists as well. As head publicist, it was Deanie Parker’s job to package and sell the products that Stax was making, including the images of its artists. Memphis, though it was home to a wealth of talent, was not and still is not in a great position for disseminating information. It is a secondary city compared to the exposure found in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Atlanta. “Ed Sullivan never called for Albert King and Dick Clark never called for Johnnie Taylor,” remembers Deanie, “And so the pictures, getting the pictures on the album cover, on *Stax Fax*, was very important to us. Otherwise nobody would have known our artists.”⁴⁶

Pictures of the artists are found all throughout the multiple issues of *Stax Fax*. On the front of most of them, in fact, can be found a huge picture that features the chosen artist of the month. According to Parker, the decision for naming artist of the month was made by the productions and promotions department and depended mostly on who was touring or would be releasing a new album or single soon.⁴⁷ The first artist of the month was none other than Eddie Floyd, and of course made mention of his newest release at

⁴⁶ Parker, phone interview.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

the time “I’ve Never Found a Girl.”⁴⁸ But the article of Floyd did more than that, as it describes his physical appearance as well as the highlights of his career. Much like a late night interview of any artist, *Stax Fax* provides readers with all the basic information needed about Floyd. Including his hobby for drag racing, for which he remarks, “I understand Hank Williams Jr. has some cars that he races there [Lakeland Races, near Memphis]. I’d like to race my car against his sometime- it’d be like soul versus country!”⁴⁹

As the magazine grew so too did the pictures of the featured artists, though the format of providing a brief biography and a list of recent releases remained the same. The last issue of *Stax Fax* did more than just feature a single picture of the chosen artist of the month, who was Carla Thomas. This issue was not a magazine, but was instead one huge poster with Carla Thomas’ face on one side and the regular articles on the other.⁵⁰ The heading above her article reads, “A lady, a queen, an entertainer... but most of all, Carla.” The article chronicles her many achievements as well as the story of how her and her father, Rufus Thomas, walked into Stax one day to record the records first hit, “Cause I Love You,” which sold over 200,000 copies.⁵¹ It ends with a quote of Carla stating that, “Everything that’s happened to me so far has been very exciting, and the best part of all is that I feel this is only the beginning. I’d like to make a movie someday and a lot of opportunities are opening up in television- both in variety shows and on series. Of course, I intend to continue making records, too.”⁵²

⁴⁸ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely fall of 1968), Stax Museum.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Stax Fax*, November, 1970, Stax Museum.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

Stax faced difficulties with not only distributing its music across the country but also with the public not relating its hits and artists to the record company itself. This explains the oversaturation of pictures found throughout *Stax Fax* of the records artists, including the establishment of an artist of the month. Though Stax artists were not receiving the attention Motown was getting from the media, they were receiving plenty from their own publication. The artist of the month pieces allowed fans of Stax to feel connected to artists they would never get to meet face to face by including interviews that presented them as normal people with hopes, dreams, and aspirations just like everyone else. Even the first release of *Stax Fax* when it was only four pages was dedicated to the artists. The back page was devoted to Eddie Floyd, the artist of the month, while another page offered brief updates on the MGs, Carla Thomas, the Staples Singers, and Johnnie Taylor.⁵³ It was a very humanizing way to disseminate Stax artists to the general public.

While many artists were recognized as artist of the month, one of the most important was Booker T. and the M.G.s, who had helped Stax through its most difficult days with their release of “Soul Limbo.” As the article on the band points out, they were “the top instrumental band in the business,” according to the charts, awards, and honors received by the group.⁵⁴ The group was a vital component of Stax Records as a whole because they were the house band - Booker T. and the M.G.s were featured as the instrumentals in nearly all of Stax’s greatest hits – and because they produced many hits of their own, like the legendary “Green Onions” that helped solidify the label’s fame and notoriety of the “Memphis Sound.” Booker T. and the M.G.s were featured throughout

⁵³ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely fall of 1968), Stax Museum.

⁵⁴ *Stax Fax*, March, 1969, Stax Museum.

the entire March issue of 1969, not just confined to the two pages that listed their backgrounds and achievements.

Stax Records had a long-standing reputation of being a family business in which everyone worked together amicably. This image is further pushed in *Stax Fax*, where in one issue a photo of the MGs, Rufus and Carla Thomas, and others appears under the title “Stax Artists pose for a family photo.”⁵⁵ This was perhaps a stretch to suggest that Stax was one big happy, interracial family as friendships outside of the studio were rare.⁵⁶ However it is crucial to know that this was the image presented to the world, as it signaled cooperation between African-Americans and whites during the years black empowerment was pushed for. Though Stax may not have been a real family, what was real was the willingness of both blacks and whites to work together in creating music. It was important then, that the staple house band, which appeared in nearly everything related to Stax was portrayed in such a fashion. *Stax Fax* not only features the artist of the month section for Booker T. and the M.G.s, but also devotes six more pages just to pictures of the members. This includes baby pictures of Booker T. Jones, Donald “Duck” Dunn, Al Jackson Jr., and Steve Cropper with the title of “Little Stinkers.”⁵⁷ Another page features multiple head shots of the band with each of them saying something to the effect of comical one-liners or silly statements like, “Hey fellow, your eyeballs are showing.”⁵⁸

Booker T. and the M.G.s were in many aspects the lifeblood of Stax Records. Though their importance could not be overstated and they had several Top Ten hits to

⁵⁵ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely summer 1969), Stax Museum.

⁵⁶ Hughes, 73.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

their name, they were often overlooked at the national stage in favor of figures like Isaac Hayes and Otis Redding. The national media, however, did not write *Stax Fax*. Deanie Parker as editor along with her writing staff would have known just how important Booker T. and the M.G.s were to the entirety of the record company. Thus it was important for the general public to know the importance of the group as well, and to heavily suggest that Stax Records had not lost its family style dynamic.

While the vast majority of the articles written and pictures printed were reserved for Stax artists, *Stax Fax* addressed and applauded many other performers that had no affiliation with Stax Records. The non-Stax artists were not chosen at random, but rather reflected the label's larger interests. Some of them were chosen because they believed in promoting the success of African Americans through the music industry. Others were spotlighted because they linked Stax to the larger history of the famed "Memphis Sound."

Nina Simone appears in the April 1969 issue of the magazine. As it was the one-year anniversary of Dr. King's assassination the issue's cover featured a picture of MLK rather than the typical portrait of the artist of the month.⁵⁹ Fittingly, Simone's piece discusses her views on how black empowerment should move forward in the business industry. "Let's face it," Simone states, "MUSIC IS GIVING US POWER! We should dignify this power by looking at ourselves with pride."⁶⁰ The article not only contains Simone's beliefs as to how the black music industry should move forward, but also promotes her upcoming releases. As well, it goes on to state that Simone's goal is to remind the world that the blues first came from black musicians and to reclaim it from

⁵⁹ *Stax Fax*, April, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

white groups.⁶¹ Even though Simone did not record at Stax, spotlighting her work allowed the label to connect their product with one of the most political and prominent black artists of the time.

Simone's mention of white thievery of the blues resonated strongly with another artist who *Stax Fax* mentioned twice in 1969. Both mentions of Elvis Presley involved direct links to what the magazine- like many at the time- calls "the Memphis Sound." The idea of a Memphis Sound was used to distinguish the music that was being made in southern studios, like Stax Records and Sun Studios, from the rest of the music industry. It also became attached to the Civil Rights Movement and the push for integration.⁶² This was because the Memphis Sound was seen as a particular music that was being made by both blacks and whites together despite the laws of segregation that still existed. Not only was it a mixing of races in making the music, it was also a mixing of music. Elvis was a part of this as he was a white, rockabilly artist that heavily mixed his own style of music with what was traditionally seen as black music.

In the April issue of 1969, *Stax Fax* credits Elvis for promoting the Memphis Sound. It also applauds RCA for doing the same thing with Elvis' records.⁶³ In the later May issue, *Stax Fax* goes into greater detail of the good Elvis is doing for the Memphis Sound. The article in that particular issue even compares Elvis to Otis Redding and claims them both heralds of what was the new Memphis Sound.⁶⁴ Though an unaffiliated artist with Stax Records, it was clear that Elvis' popularity meant that the Memphis

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 45.

⁶³ *Stax Fax*, April, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁶⁴ *Stax Fax*, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

Sound was popular, and thus by extension, so too should be Stax. The article ends by stating that “the Memphis Sound is soul music,” and includes a quote from Booker T. saying that “Anyone in any type of art form can have soul in his art as long as he feels it and projects that feeling to others through his art.”⁶⁵ This signals that Stax, rising in popularity during the late 1960s, was promoting the Memphis Sound as black music with white participation, not the other way around.

The tradition of the Memphis Sound goes back before Elvis and the creation of Stax Records, or even soul music for that matter. As *Stax Fax* said on the topic of Otis and Elvis, “They’ve taken the old blues and rearranged them. They’re still the same blues, but more fitting for the younger people.”⁶⁶ The Memphis Sound was something that had been evolving for a long time under the pressures of race, segregation, and culture. As Robert Gordon notes; “Memphis has always been a place where cultures came together to have a wreck: black and white, rural and urban, poor and rich. The music in Memphis is more than a soundtrack to these confrontations. It is the document of it.”⁶⁷ The blues have always been associated with Memphis, and rightfully so. In many ways they were the foundation for all of the other types of music that would come out of Memphis after them.

Stax Fax acknowledges this tradition of the blues- and its association with Memphis- by going all the way back to celebrate the grandfather of the blues himself, W.C. Handy. On June 8, 1969 Memphis held its first annual W.C. Handy Blues Festival that was headlined by Stax artists. Rufus Thomas, Carla Thomas, Albert King, the Bar-

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1995), 9.

Kays, and Booker T. and the M.G.s all performed at the festival.⁶⁸ The level of recognition given to the tradition of music created by W.C. Handy is quite remarkable. Instead of simply promoting the event in *Stax Fax* and other forms of media, Stax sent its own artists to perform in honor of the blues legend. “Music always has been a basic bag for building togetherness,” states *Stax Fax*, “The first Handy festival was a groovy testimonial to that truth.”⁶⁹ Handy is also mentioned in an article detailing the celebrations for Memphis’ 150th anniversary. To dedicate the event, Congress authorized the creation of a medallion that bears the profiles of three men, Hernando De Soto, Andrew Jackson, and W.C. Handy. A Beale Street music festival accompanied the reveal of the medallion with none other than Rufus and Carla Thomas headlining the event. The article then claims that “If blues is your bag and if you dig soul, Memphis, on June 8, is home base.”⁷⁰ *Stax Fax* demonstrated that, despite its setbacks, the company was still a successful part of Memphis musical history and the broader soul landscape.

Stax Fax marketed not just the music and artists of the company or those related to it, it also was a tool through which to celebrate its continued survival and success. The Executive Message of each issue was often the medium for conveying the label’s prosperity, suggesting that they were directed to business insiders as much as the general public. In the very first issue of *Stax Fax* Al Bell stated that, “*Stax Fax* is- at least I intend it to be- a personal letter to all out friends in the music business as much as it is a general

⁶⁸ *Stax Fax*, August, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Stax Fax*, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

‘behind the scenes’ business letter.”⁷¹ The message being sent to these friends was a fairly simple one: Stax was not done yet.

One of the Executive Messages was labeled simply as “Stax/Volt: Waxing Prosperous with Mushroom Growth in 1968.”⁷² The headline was backed up by statistics showing that Stax had shattered expectations for its sales goals, shipping out 10,000,000 singles and 1,000,000 albums since June of 1968, along with \$750,000 in sales of 8-tracks and cassettes.⁷³ This was the ultimate affect Al Bell wanted the Soul Explosion to have, not only did it create a new catalogue for Stax to work from but it also generated sales that would keep the company moving forward. It also fulfilled what both Bell and Stewart declared to be their number one priority, which was making hits and popular music.⁷⁴

Stax continued this forward thinking and movement throughout 1969 and 1970, a progress that can be tracked through the steady stream of Executive Messages written by Bell and Stewart. In the May Issue of 1969 the Soul Explosion is addressed as upcoming as well as Stax having its first TV special, first soundtrack album, and fastest selling gold album.⁷⁵ This Executive Message would also call 1968 “the most rewarding year in the history of Stax Records.”⁷⁶ It is clear that Bell and Stewart were not going to allow the setbacks experienced between 1967 and 1968 to deter them from growing the company and pushing it into new territory. 1968 was not the year that Stax began to die; it was only the year that it began to change into something new.

⁷¹ *Stax Fax*, undated, (likely fall of 1968), Stax Museum.

⁷² *Stax Fax*, undated (likely summer of 1969), Stax Museum.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely fall of 1968), Stax Museum.

⁷⁵ *Stax Fax*, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The Executive Messages were not just used to showcase how well Stax was doing, they were also used to thank the people outside of Stax who had made its recovery possible. The first issue's Executive Message is actually one whole thank you note to the Music Operators of America, whose industry helped soul music find larger audiences.⁷⁷ Another issue's Executive Message was another huge thank you note to *Billboard*, as "the extensive tape coverage *Billboard* has run is a very valuable service in this growing field." It praises the industry's leading trade magazine by saying its "charts are unsurpassed, covering such diverse areas as pop music, R&B, easy listening, classical L.P.'s, folios, and country music."⁷⁸ NATRA, the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers, is another organization that is often mentioned in *Stax Fax*. In the August issue of 1969 the magazine calls NATRA "foremost among public-spirited music business organizations."⁷⁹ For Stax, NATRA was a crucial part of crafting its national image. It represented two key aspects of the company that *Stax Fax* was trying to convey to its readers. The first being business and publicity as NATRA members combined reached a wide audience of 15 million listeners each day; the second being community involvement, in this capacity the national organization helped "ghetto youth" stay off the street by sponsoring youth programs.⁸⁰ When the Soul Explosion finally dropped in May of 1969, Stax's thank you the promoters, media, and DJs who had helped Stax along the way was to invite them on a tour of Stax, where they were greeted by the labels' artists.⁸¹ After the Soul Explosion became an established success in the summer of 1969, the June

⁷⁷ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely fall of 1968), Stax Museum.

⁷⁸ *Stax Fax*, April, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁷⁹ *Stax Fax*, August, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Stax Fax*, May, 1969, Stax Museum.

issue of the magazine simply features pictures of both Bell and Stewart above the words, “All we can say at this time is... THANK YOU.”⁸²

At the same time *Stax Fax* was applauding certain aspects and organizations of the broader music industry it was always criticizing others. The Simone article from April, 1969 not only addresses how the black music industry should move forward, but also that some black records are simply not good enough. In Simone’s own words, “There are a lot of trashy records out by black singers which makes me angry.”⁸³ In another article, local radio deejay for WDIA Chris Turner remarked that there still existed an unfair relationship between white business owners and their black employees. He believed that radio station owners should be more proactive in hiring African Americans so that they could foster “pride and self-identity” in black listeners.⁸⁴ These criticisms of the music industry aligned themselves with similar beliefs being espoused by the growing Black Power movement of the time. *Stax* would remain committed to the idea of integration and the image of an interracial family, however beginning in the late 1960s, as can be seen in *Stax Fax*, soul music was becoming a symbol for the struggle of black empowerment.

Aside from marketing and promoting the artists, music, and success of *Stax*, *Stax Fax* was also created as a way in which to give back and to communicate with the African American community. This was done in a number of ways as the magazine began to grow and develop into something much larger than it was ever planned to be. As Deanie Parker said, the most direct way it achieved this was by providing an opportunity

⁸² *Stax Fax*, June, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁸³ *Stax Fax*, April, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Country Soul*, 94.

for local school children to have a productive way to spend their free time, “It was a contribution to the young people in the inner city community.”⁸⁵ However it achieved giving back to the community in another indirect way as well. *Stax Fax* itself represented the community beyond just Memphis that was listening to and felt a part of southern soul. This is to say that it created its own space for people who felt touched by the music being made at Stax, and gave them a medium through which popular ideas and current events that affected them could be distributed through.

Parker remembers that the experience of coming to Stax in their off time was a good one for the kids. “They were learning how to get to work on time because they made a commitment to help us prepare thousands of *Stax Fax* for mail and you know they were getting paid while being mentored.”⁸⁶ The process of preparing *Stax Fax* was a rigorous one as well. Everything had to be done manually, from insuring the colors were correct to making sure that each page had the right amount of spacing between the texts. Parker remembers it as a “wonderful experience,” though the “challenges were many, and with great variety.”⁸⁷ Not only was it a wonderful experience for Parker, but it was also a transformative one for many of the kids who helped out. “Some of those kids I here from even today,” says Parker, “One is an attorney, one went on to be a writer, they went on to do some really productive things in life.”⁸⁸

Another, less direct way, that *Stax Fax* touched the community was by creating a medium through which stories and ideas pertaining to those people could be transferred over large distances. Mark Anthony Neal examines how black popular music has been a

⁸⁵ Parker, phone interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

way in which both celebrations and critiques of the black community have been distributed. In his work, Neal suggests that music is not only a tool for communication within communities, but also a tool that constructs communities.⁸⁹ Southern soul music can be seen as a part of this idea as it was a way in which the southern black community united from sharing the same experiences. As *Stax Fax* grew, it began to not only advertise the artists, but also to include articles that its audience would find interesting and relatable. Parker mentions that as the mail list grew, “we realized that it would be helpful if perhaps we were to include some stories that had some social content. Some stories that were enlightening, some stories that were controversial.”⁹⁰ Bell saw *Stax*’s monthly newsletter as a way to not only entertain readers, but also as an opportunity to provide information for the African American community. “What I wanted to do with *Stax Fax* was to get out information to the black readers that they were not getting in other places, and information that they didn’t have, to get the truth out to them,” remarks Bell.⁹¹ This is how *Stax Fax* grew to include not only current events happening in popular culture, but also socially provocative pieces.

These pieces included topics such as “Is Sex the Cause of Racism?” An article that suggests that sex has at least a large part to play in racism, and at most is the main contributor to it. The main point of the article is that white men feel threatened by black men when it comes to competing for the attention of white women. This is because of the stereotype that black men are good lovers, a myth designed to strip their humanity away from them leaving them with nothing but the most basic desires, most notably sexual

⁸⁹ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said:*

⁹⁰ Parker, phone interview.

⁹¹ Bell, phone interview.

ones.⁹² This is made even more interesting because Stax was beginning to promote an image that was far more sexual than it ever had been. Johnnie Taylor's "Who's Making Love" had paved the way for more sexualized songs and images. Isaac Hayes' image was also changing to a more overtly sexualized one, as he often performed shirtless and had the stage persona of a smooth talking lover. Another article has the headline of "Beethoven Was Black and Proud!" a claim not actually supported by *Stax Fax*. Rather it was a piece about a black radio announcer who made the claim, the article in *Stax Fax* said only that we know Beethoven was Dutch, as well as a ladies man.⁹³ While Stax did not directly support the claim, it is still included in its monthly newsletter possibly to stir debate as well as to foster pride in the black community for their own musical traditions.

Other topics were more political than social, such as one that focused on the debate surrounding abortion as well as other methods of contraception. This article covers both sides of the debate, going back to Bell's belief that *Stax Fax* was not there to tell readers what to think, only it was to inform them. Included in the article is the story of a reverend from Cleveland, Ohio who was advising women with unwanted pregnancies on how to proceed with their decisions. Due to abortion being illegal at the time in Ohio, he sometimes recommended the women take vacations to England where they could receive an abortion. On the other side of the argument the article mention the Catholic Church as well as black militants, an unlikely pairing. The Catholic Church opposed abortions because it believed them to be murder, while black militants saw legalized abortions as a plot to restrict the African American population on America.⁹⁴

⁹² *Stax Fax*, April, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁹³ *Stax Fax*, September, 1969, Stax Museum.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

The article concludes not by offering an opinion, rather it only includes a poll taken showing that 90% of doctors favored revising abortion laws while only 23% wanted “abortion on demand.”⁹⁵

Though articles such as these were not the original purpose of the magazine they were still a consistent part of it, and were used to both inform black readers as well as to promote Stax’s new image of being more involved in societal movements like black empowerment. Such controversial topics on society and race made the magazine, as well as Stax itself, targets for people who were already upset at the idea of blacks being successful and wealthy. As Parker’s name was on the back of each issue as the editor, she received a lot of nasty letters. “Some terrible people wrote us and said ‘don’t send this racist ass material to my house anymore. This is shit, this is garbage, we don’t want to know about no niggers and all of this,’” recalls Parker.⁹⁶ Some of these letters even made it into the issues of *Stax Fax* itself, as one printed letter called the magazine “a black manifesto.”⁹⁷ Stax was changing in such a way that it was unapologetic for being seen as promoting black empowerment and other social movements. By including this negative letter in *Stax Fax*, it sent the message that the company understood how some whites might perceive this new direction but that they would continue on doing what they believed was right.

Despite letters such as these most of the feedback received was positive. “For the most part people loved it,” Parker says about receiving fan mail, “it was amazing. You

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Parker, phone interview.

⁹⁷ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely summer of 1969), Stax Museum.

know, so it did in fact achieve its purpose.”⁹⁸ Mail came in from many people in support of Parker, the magazine, and Stax itself. Those who wrote back to Parker included the director of the Memphis Sesquicentennial newspaper, an associate publisher with *GO* magazine, as well as fans from Sweden, England, and West Germany.⁹⁹ All of them offered praise for what Stax was doing, as well as for the entertainment factor that was a part of the new format of the issues. One letter from a music distributor mentioned, “Stax presentation, was the finest ever presented before my eyes. I might add, from the conversation of others, it was also their finest.”¹⁰⁰

Stax Fax had great success in reaching wide audiences as well as in its promotion of the artists and music at Stax Records. Its two main purposes were to market the products of the record company and to provide a way for Stax to give back to the community. *Stax Fax* achieved its purpose of marketing Stax Records by providing a tool in which the music insiders who distributed the albums and singles could know what the company wanted to be played. This is evidenced by the fact that Stax’s assets went from being worth \$0 in 1968 to \$67 million by the mid-1970s.¹⁰¹ It also helped the general public stay up to date with the artists and get to know them on a certain level, as well as providing a platform for the rest of the nation to see how successful the Soul Explosion was. It also gave back to the community in two major ways. The first was by providing young people with a learning opportunity, the other was that it disseminated information relating to the community on a regular basis.

⁹⁸ Parker, phone interview.

⁹⁹ *Stax Fax*, undated (likely summer of 1969), September, 1969, Stax Museum.

¹⁰⁰ *Stax Fax*, September, 1969, Stax Museum.

¹⁰¹ Bell, phone interview.

It was not to continue forever. The last issue of *Stax Fax* would be published in November of 1970; its main feature being the huge poster of Carla Thomas that it could fold out to be. *Stax Fax* was not only a primary tool that helped changed Stax and promote the Soul Explosion, it can also be viewed as a symbol for Stax Records itself. 1968 was far from the end of Stax as it enjoyed some of its most successful, and funkiest, times afterwards. *Stax Fax* would not be a part of the greatest successes enjoyed by the record company during the 1970s. The magazine itself was a bridge between the two eras of Stax Records. On one side was Otis Redding and Sam and Dave, on the other was Isaac Hayes, *Shaft*, and the struggle to prove that African Americans could become successful, even in a segregated Memphis, Tennessee. As *Stax Fax* continued it got to be bigger than it, and any of the personnel creating it, were. In the end it reached too far, becoming too expensive to maintain as new forms of communication became popular.¹⁰² Stax itself went much the same way as its magazine did. By the mid 1970s the company had grown past its origin of being a family business and had taken on expenses it could not hope to afford. Still, Stax remains one of the most influential record companies in the United States, and *Stax Fax* offers a unique opportunity to understand how it changed from 1968 to 1970.

¹⁰² Parker, phone interview.

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