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## The Social and Economic Impact of the Stax Legacy on the Soulsville Community

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### Introduction

The story behind Memphis' role in the proliferation of soul music relies heavily on Stax Records, a soul music powerhouse during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The sound of Stax found a niche in the soul and R&B music markets, and Stax served as a medium for championing social issues. On a global level, Stax Records defined Memphis soul music as the "Memphis Sound" and is remembered today as a symbol of racial integration. On a local level, Stax maintained an intimate relationship with the surrounding community, now known as Soulsville U.S.A.<sup>2</sup>

Although mentioned by Robert Gordon and Peter Guralnick in their books on Memphis music, it was only through the work of Dr. Rob Bowman, a professor of ethnomusicology who spent more than a decade researching Stax, that definitive historical and musicological accounts of the soul label were compiled.<sup>3</sup> Bowman's book entitled *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* offers a detailed study of the label's life, exploring its significance as both a local focal point and a business. Despite touching on Stax's relationship with its surroundings, Bowman

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<sup>1</sup> Aside: Throughout its history, numerous Stax recordings charted on *Billboard* magazine's music charts. The soulful Stax sound often found itself charting in the R&B classification, since no soul chart existed at the time. For a detailed analysis of Stax soul music, read Bowman's dissertation *Stax Records: A Historical and Musicological Study* (diss. Memphis State University, 1993), 319-409.

<sup>2</sup> The Soulsville U.S.A. community generally refers to the area that surrounded Stax Records (roughly) bounded by Interstate 240 to the east, Mississippi Boulevard to the west, South Parkway to the south, and railroad tracks to the north. See Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995).

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

Bowman, *Stax Records: A Historical and Musicological Study*.

Robert Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2003).

does not focus on the direct social and economic impact of Stax Records on the local community.<sup>4</sup>

Stax Records contributed positively to the atmosphere within the community, a community that was largely responsible for the success of Stax. The presence of Stax instilled pride and feelings of social cohesion among community members while also serving as an economic springboard for local musicians. Modern (21<sup>st</sup> century) revitalization efforts rooted in the history of Stax continue to impact Soulsville. These efforts have altered the social and economic landscape of the community, with mixed results. Given all of this, the opportunity has presented itself to combine research on the past with an analysis of modern efforts.

### Purpose

This paper aims to analyze the local social and economic impact of Stax Records and current Stax-based revitalization efforts, collectively referred to as the Stax legacy. This will be done using a range of human and textual sources, particularly first-hand accounts from Stax personnel, community members, and historical works which provide necessary background information. Throughout the analysis of Stax Records, the various forces affecting its impact on the community—incentives and other choice-determining mechanisms—will be considered, since unlike modern efforts, the impact of Stax Records was not guided by premeditated purpose. Throughout the analysis of modern efforts, community impact will be evaluated in light of intentional goals and objectives. Ultimately, past and present will be tied together to better understand what Stax meant and still means to Soulsville—especially to its youth.

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<sup>4</sup> Here, impact encompasses both the tangible and nontangible influence of Stax on the community (i.e. the tangible implications of Stax Records' physical presence or its intangible effect on the mentality of surrounding community members).

To better understand the social and economic impact of the Stax legacy, it becomes necessary to first present a brief, contextualizing overview of the record label's founding. This paper will then proceed to analyze the impact of Stax Records, broken down into two time periods, 1961-1967 and 1968-1975. Following this will appear an assessment of modern Stax preservation projects and revitalization efforts, their origins, intensions, and impact. Attention will be given to elements of change and continuity as they connect or fail to connect the past and present impact of the Stax legacy. This paper will also consider avenues for the future development and promotion of the Stax name and of Soulsville, since modern revitalization efforts have extended missions beyond their current operations.

### The Beginnings of Stax

Stax Records, initially named Satellite Records, was the product of the brother-sister duo Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. A white bank teller with a passion for music, Stewart dreamt of trying out his hand in the recording business; this dream was made possible in 1957 by the financial support of his sister—his future business partner.<sup>5</sup> Founded initially in in a Memphis garage, Satellite Records eventually came to 926 E. McLemore Avenue in 1960.<sup>6</sup> Here, Stewart and Axton thriftily rented an old, run-down movie theatre. Stewart converted the theatre into a recording studio, while Axton transformed the lobby's candy counter into a small record shop as an additional source of income.<sup>7</sup>

Through his promotional visits to the local radio station WDIA, Stewart developed a friendship with Rufus Thomas, a well-known black singer-songwriter in the Memphis R&B

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<sup>5</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 99-101.

<sup>7</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 6-9.

music scene.<sup>8</sup> This relationship led to the recording of “Cause I Love You” by Rufus and his daughter Carla Thomas, a tune that would play a decisive role in the musical direction of the label. Stewart, focused initially on recording only music he enjoyed (country and pop music), proved unsuccessful in these predominantly white genres.<sup>9</sup> The immediate local acclaim of “Cause I Love You” demonstrated to Stewart the potential of black music and encouraged him to pursue recording black music with all of his resources and energy.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the song’s regional success caught the attention of Atlantic Records, a powerful promotion-and-marketing force well-established in the music industry.<sup>11</sup> This precipitated a distribution arrangement between the mom-and-pop label and the distribution giant. With the success of “Cause I Love You,” Satellite Records began receiving national recognition.

Another early tune with great significance for Satellite Records was entitled “Last Night.” Recorded by an ensemble later known as the Mar-Keys, “Last Night” reached number two on *Billboard*’s R&B charts late in 1961.<sup>12</sup> With such success and with Atlantic distributing the Satellite label, it was discovered that a California-based organization was already named Satellite Records.<sup>13</sup> To avoid copyright and legal difficulties, Stewart and Axton renamed their label “Stax,” a creative combination of the “St” in Stewart and “Ax” in Axton.<sup>14</sup>

### Stax: 1961-1967

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 103.

<sup>10</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 24-27.

<sup>13</sup> Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 28.

Prior to Stax's arrival, the old Capitol theatre stood vacant, outdated in the face of technological advancement and replaced by newer media establishments.<sup>15</sup> As a large, functionless structure, it was an eyesore on McLemore Avenue. When Stax moved in, Stax added a sense of stability to the space. The theatre again became a functioning element in the community. People gathered around McLemore Avenue for Stax and its music.<sup>16</sup>

When Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton as white business owners came to 926 E. McLemore Avenue, they were entering an environment in the midst of a demographic transformation. The greater South Memphis region encompassing Stax Records had for some time been transitioning away from a racially mixed population and was becoming homogeneously African American.<sup>17</sup> Already in 1950, more than half of the population in the area was African American, with three out of every four persons being African American in 1960 when Stax arrived.<sup>18</sup> By the time Stax filed for bankruptcy in 1975, the region had virtually completed the transformation and was ninety-five percent African American.<sup>19</sup>

A striking characteristic of Stax Records as a white-owned business was its ability to integrate peacefully and productively in a largely African American neighborhood during the Civil Rights era. Don Nix agrees in his autobiography, writing that “the corner of College and McLemore became a place where blacks, whites, shopkeepers, and teenage rock 'n' rollers all got along.”<sup>20</sup> The interactive nature of the record shop, run by Estelle Axton, contributed to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>16</sup> Don Nix, *Road Stores and Recipes* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Johnson and Cathy Marcinko (with associates), *Rich Man, Preacher Man, Soul Man: A History of South Memphis* (Memphis: Special Collection in the Benjamin Hooks Library, 2005), 96. See Appendix B.

The study area examined by Johnson, Marcinko, and associates includes portions of the larger South Memphis area that extend beyond the immediate Soulsville community defined earlier.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nix, *Road Stores and Recipes*, 8.

integrating Stax within the community. Axton would play requested records for patrons, providing a hands-on, engaging environment uncommon in most record stores.<sup>21</sup> This prompted a heightened level of interaction in the record shop and turned it into a hub for the local community, fostering relationships between community members and Stax.

In particular, the youth of the neighborhood flocked to the record shop. For these future singers, songwriters, instrumentalists, and staff members, it became a stepping stone for entering Stax and in turn the music industry. Booker T. Jones, who lived several blocks from Stax, remembered hurrying over when school let out; he spent many hours of his free time in the shop, which “was important to [him] as a young kid.”<sup>22</sup> Jones became a famed Stax organist and ended up playing in Stax’s house band.<sup>23</sup> Like Jones, David Porter, a young grocer working across the street from Stax at the time, frequented the record shop and became the first salaried songwriter for the fledgling record label; his career would span the entire label’s history.<sup>24</sup> Youth in the community were not only welcome in the record shop: they also became members of the Stax family and were essential to its continued success.

Just as Stax maintained an interactive atmosphere within the record shop, so too was the atmosphere in the recording studio. The open doors at Stax welcomed local talent, gave musicians a chance to prove themselves, and paved the way for rising stars to land their own record deals. Stax’s policy of holding informal auditions on the weekends was especially popular in the early days of the label. Steve Cropper, a white guitarist and producer for Stax, held these

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<sup>21</sup> Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> Quote from Booker T. Jones. Permanent Exhibit. Stax Museum of American Soul Music. 926 E. McLemore Avenue, Memphis, TN, 38106. Visited July 1, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

open auditions on Saturdays.<sup>25</sup> Cropper remembered locals walking in and “we [at Stax] used to listen to them and it was good for everybody to have that sort of relationship with the people who lived there [in the surrounding community].”<sup>26</sup> Through those open auditions, the Stax studio gave community members access to resources to propel them into the music industry, a foot-in-the-door opportunity for those with musical gifts.<sup>27</sup>

In its early years, the small corporate structure of Stax led to a close-knit work environment. Stax did not have the resources to hire a large number of employees for task-specific purposes.<sup>28</sup> As a result, many people at Stax fulfilled many tasks. Musicians learned how to record and produce the music they made. Local Deanie Parker, initially responsible for the label’s publicity, became increasingly involved with other administrative tasks.<sup>29</sup> Such a work setting added to the versatility of local Stax employees and contributed to expanding their human capital. Furthermore, the small-scale atmosphere contributed to feelings of social cohesion at Stax and even in the community. The size and operations of Stax fit well within the scope of the surrounding residential and small-business-oriented community. Locals who worked at Stax developed ties to each other and to the community as a part of Stax; this led Stax to become perceived as a true community entity, rather than just a business located in the community.<sup>30</sup>

The modern day image of Stax as a bastion of racial integration has been championed by the story of the famed quartet known as Booker T. and the MGs (Memphis Group). With a career

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<sup>25</sup> Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

<sup>26</sup> Quote from Steve Cropper. Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

<sup>27</sup> Although these open auditions did not produce any major local artists, they did attract significant songwriter potential. Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-8.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with Shirley Coleman, July 12, 2011.

spanning more than a decade, this ensemble consisted of the local black organ/pianist Booker T. Jones, the black drummer Al Jackson, the white guitarist Steve Cropper, and the white bassist Donald “Duck” Dunn.<sup>31</sup> At a time when race relations were turbulent, particularly in Memphis, Jones and his band mates experienced a positive multiracial environment rooted in the music they were making, a socially unique and powerful experience. Years later, when recalling their experiences, many of those at Stax would comment that “we didn’t see color.”<sup>32</sup>

Although individuals like Jones experienced this positive social atmosphere at Stax, Stax Records did not extend this influence outside its walls. Wayne Jackson, a white trumpeter for Stax, insists neither he nor any other white musician actively interacted with the community outside of Stax Records.<sup>33</sup> “Black and white employees tended to go their separate ways after work,” further suggesting a lack of relations between the white people at Stax and the neighborhood.<sup>34</sup> In the accounts of locals recalling the days of Stax, the sense of community pride they felt seemed to rest in the black people at Stax, particularly those from the local community. The community was grateful for the opportunities its members had and for their success through the white-owned Stax enterprise.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, Stax did not spur wider community integration or drastically alter local racial interaction.

On an economic front, the most obvious impact Stax Records had on the local community was its ability to generate jobs. In addition to opportunities for musical employment involving the

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<sup>31</sup> The bass player Lewis Steinbeck briefly preceded Dunn in the MGs.

<sup>32</sup> This quote appears often in displays at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music from various Stax personnel, including Booker T. Jones and Estelle Axton.

<sup>33</sup> Personal interview with Wayne Jackson, July 13, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman interview.

likes of David Porter and Booker T. Jones, Stax hired local youth like Deanie Parker for administrative work.<sup>36</sup> Both musical and nonmusical work experiences developed the skill sets and marketability of those employed at Stax. Artists like Jones grew to become professional musicians, thanks to the resources provided by Stax. Most continued to work in the music industry, even after Stax Records officially closed its doors. Deanie Parker worked at Stax until the label closed, learning valuable organization and administrative skills that would continue to serve throughout her career.<sup>37</sup> Working at Stax was more than a job for the local youth it attracted—it was a springboard for future career-oriented success.

Stax experienced a unique market advantage—it conducted business operations in the heart of the market itself; it produced black music directly in a black community. Stax would play records for eager youth and could, based on their reactions, forecast records' potential for success.<sup>38</sup> Frequent requests for a record signaled to Stax the marketability of that record. In this way, Stax was first notified of the potential in the Mar-Keys' song "Last Night." Upon hearing the tune over the radio, locals flocked to the record shop to purchase the record.<sup>39</sup> Sure enough, "Last Night" was a hit. In this way, local youngsters came to function as in-house consumer analysts. This provided Stax with an incentive to maintain its open and amicable social atmosphere. Access to an in-house, consumer-based litmus test served the Stax business well throughout the existence of the record shop.

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<sup>36</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Kate Miller. "Soulsville: A Catalyst for Revival in a Neighborhood with the Blues." *Memphis Business Journal* (Memphis) May 31-June 6, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Purchases made in the record shop provided much-needed revenue for the label, particularly during the early years of Stax and prior to its possessing vast distribution capabilities. Those same youngsters who visited the record shop to browse also bought records. Al Bell, Stax's first black executive, recognized that "the major buyers of records, period, are your teens and young adults, those twenty-five and under."<sup>40</sup> The inviting social scene at Stax attracted sales; a clear positive correlation existed between the social atmosphere and the economic condition at Stax.

Especially in its early years, Stax did not have the tools to capture distant talent; Stax relied on its home-grown stars—"by virtue of [Stewart and Axton] having established a business in the area, they had access to an untapped resource for some of the greatest undiscovered talent."<sup>41</sup> With accessible resources, Stax's relationship with the community served as a microcosm for the larger music market; Stax was the middleman in a cyclical, community-based market. Stax took in local musicians—accessible resources—and developed them into record-producing musicians—product—which Stax could then sell back to the community in the form of records. The social image Stax advertised through its openness to informal auditions was directly rooted in the economic incentives and limitations it experienced.

In 1967, traces emerged of a newly developing orientation about the Stax label. The music at Stax began to take on a socially-oriented flavor. New themes like the promotion of black empowerment became visible and audible. With a growing emphasis on black pride, locals who

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<sup>40</sup> Quote from Al Bell. Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul: The Story of Black Music* (New York: Pocket Book, 1971), 108.

<sup>41</sup> Quote from Deanie Parker. Brian Dakss, "Soulsville USA" *CBS News*. 16 January 2005. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/01/14/sunday/main667145.shtml?tag=mncol;lst;1>> Accessed July 31, 2011.

worked at Stax were able to project their voices in the Civil Rights movement. Through them, Stax gave the community a national voice and influential role. Local songwriter David Porter used his position and resources at Stax to pen songs addressing national audiences on social issues. Perhaps best-known is the tune Porter co-wrote entitled “Soul Man.” Its lyrics convey a sense of struggle and the ability to overcome obstacles—a motivating voice championing black empowerment. The appeal of “Soul Man” was enormous. In a short time the tune reached the number one spot on the *Billboard* Top R&B singles chart.<sup>42</sup> This song and its wide-spread popularity represented Stax’s expanding vision and how Stax would impact the local community in the coming years.

#### Stax: Background to 1968-1975

In January of 1968 the media giant Warner Brothers bought Atlantic, triggering a clause in the agreement between Stax and Atlantic that called for the redistribution of their contract.<sup>43</sup> Stax terminated its contract with Atlantic and struck a deal with the conglomerate Gulf and Western to buy Stax.<sup>44</sup> Under contract with Atlantic, “Stax had done none of its own manufacturing or marketing” (excluding the small-scale marketing conducted through the record shop).<sup>45</sup> The sale to Gulf and Western now gave Stax greater flexibility by providing it with “the financing needed to underwrite the establishment of a freestanding independent record company.”<sup>46</sup> Stax could now more-easily expand its operations.

This transition in 1968 marked the beginning of a new era for the Stax label. Stax grew to become a major force in the music industry; its expanding business efforts heightened the

<sup>42</sup> *Top Ten Rhythm and Blues Singles 1948-1986* (New York: Billboard Publications, 1989) (no page number).

<sup>43</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 138.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

community's sense of pride in the record label and Stax's economic impact on the community. Stax increasingly geared its efforts towards a national audience, propelling the people of Soulsville into the Civil Rights and black empowerment movements. At the same time, externalities complicated the relationship between Stax and the local community.

#### Stax: 1968-1975

Stax could not remain resilient to escalating racial tension in Memphis, despite its previous success as an integrated company in a nonintegrated community. The death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, shortly after the redistribution, prompted tension in the previously peaceful social climate surrounding Stax. Throughout Memphis, fires were set to white businesses, and although Stax was spared, the attitude from the local black community towards the integrated label took a turn for the worse. Specifically, the community's attitude towards the white people at Stax changed. Suddenly, some locals saw the white presence of Stax in the neighborhood as a negative. White Stax bassist "Duck" Dunn recalls being threatened by gang-related forces; Steve Cropper even had a knife drawn on him outside of the studio.<sup>47</sup> These occurrences prompted black employees to feel the need to protect the white people at Stax and even motivated Stax to temporarily hire guards.<sup>48</sup>

The symbolic notion of a Stax as a white-owned business sparked feelings of disconnect between Stax and the community; however, the community's perception was not entirely accurate. The executive structure of Stax had changed following the deal with Gulf and Western. Al Bell, a black promotional man who first joined Stax in 1965, was given a ten percent stake in

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 146-7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 146-8.

Stax, a promise fulfilled by Stewart and Axton for his hard work and devotion to the label.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the coming years, Bell gained greater influence at Stax, ultimately becoming executive vice president, second only to Jim Stewart.<sup>50</sup> The increasing presence of Al Bell visibly pushed the label towards a greater social conscious. This executive restructuring eventually eased the community's negative feelings and reduced its social backlash.

In 1972 the entire Stax roster traveled to California to hold an all-day tribute concert in the Los Angeles Coliseum, an effort for which Bell was largely responsible. Known as Wattstax, the concert "generated a total of \$73,363," and this sum was distributed between organizations including "the Watts Summer Music Festival, Martin Luther King Hospital, the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee."<sup>51</sup> As a philanthropic event, Wattstax raised significant funds for black-oriented national organizations. As a symbolic gesture, it commemorated the devastation of the 1965 Watts riot in Los Angeles, "both the largest and costliest urban rebellion of the Civil Rights era."<sup>52</sup> Stax employee Larry Shaw:

Sure, Stax could have just given the Watts Festival \$100,000. But, this way we have a prototype for something that can be done by many other record companies in many other cities, and it involves the community rather than being a handout. A successful all-star concert like this also focuses pride in a community image.<sup>53</sup>

More than 100,000 black people attended the concert to see artists including Rufus Thomas, Carla Thomas, and the Bar-Kays (different from the Mar-Keys). Stax gave these members of the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Gordon and Morgan Neville. (2007). *Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story*. [Documentary film]. New York: Concord Music Group.

Estelle Axton had sold her stake in Stax earlier; Stewart and Bell became chief executives.

<sup>51</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 268.

<sup>52</sup> *Watts Riot: Background*. Civil Rights Digital Library.

<[http://crdl.usg.edu/events/watts\\_riots/?Welcome&Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/events/watts_riots/?Welcome&Welcome)> Accessed July 22, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 268.

community a role in this effort geared around black pride and empowerment. Through these artists, Soulsville was given clout, having produced this talent. This talent spoke to the national black community, and the words it spoke came from Soulsville. Pride in the label was perpetuated by Stax's successful ability to control and oversee an event of such magnitude, despite widespread doubts. In recognition, Stax and in turn the community even received laud from a California senator in the *Congressional Record*.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, sales from Wattstax audio recordings and songs like "Soul Man" accomplished another message they championed; they served as a means for Stax and its artists to achieve financial success. Higher levels of income amongst those at Stax meant higher levels of personal expenditure. This in turn directly benefited the local economy. In the earlier days of Stax, Stax's local economic impact encompassed the teens who bought doughnuts at the corner bakery on their way home from the record shop.<sup>55</sup> Later, local establishments including the Four Way Grill, a soul food restaurant, were frequented by increasingly wealthy Stax artists like the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes, and the Bar-Kays.<sup>56</sup> Stax artists began visiting "the big [commercial] stores nearby" (comparable to modern department stores).<sup>57</sup> There, the artists would both buy expensive goods and pay in cash. For some who remember these days, even just shopping at those large stores was impressive, much less buying luxury goods with cash.<sup>58</sup>

The success Stax and its local artists attained largely did not alienate them from the community, since they continued to care for their relationship with the community and to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>55</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Buser. "Four Way Cooking Again." *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) February 21, 1985.

<sup>57</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

provide a local source of pride and economic stimulation. As a result of the growing Stax wealth, the community increasingly witnessed instances of black economic empowerment within the neighborhood. This and Stax's involvement in championing social issues like black pride resonated with members of the community.<sup>59</sup> Not everyone, however, was immediately aware of the extent to which Stax addressed these issues. Jewel Bell, in grade school during this time, wrote in his memoirs about initially not understanding the importance of what the people at Stax did. Only when times changed and "Black Power and Pride" became issues did J. Bell begin to understand and take pride in the influence Stax had on the national stage.<sup>60</sup> He writes that he and others were not bitterly envious but that the people at Stax championing black rights were "neighbors, people of the community...and I was proud of them."<sup>61</sup>

As Stewart and Bell sought to grow Stax as an independent record label, they were in need of experience. Gone were the days of jack-of-all-trades; employee specialization swiftly became the norm at Stax. This caused a rift within the Stax community wherein many employees wondered why "local people couldn't be hired to fill key positions, and why the biggest salaries in the company were being awarded to *outsiders*."<sup>62</sup> Here, Stewart and Bell encountered a fork in the road. From a business standpoint, they had to compete with larger, more efficient corporations than Stax and necessarily needed to approach employment with a greater focus on efficiency. On the other hand, they could not afford to alienate the local community. Thus, Stax decided to continue hiring locals whenever practical. Local Mike Williams was hired as a handyman for

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Jewel Leon Bell. *Memoirs* (2005). Stax Museum of American Soul Music Archive. Accessed July 7, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 194-5.

Stax; Williams later managed the mailroom and gained work experience that would propel him into further career opportunities after Stax closed.<sup>63</sup> Even as Stax's operations in the music business grew and mentally distanced its focus from its Memphis location, Stax still continued to serve as a local employer and a means for developing the future careers of local people.

Expansion-minded Stewart and Bell found themselves needing more physical space and wanting to "take over the whole block that housed the Stax studio and offices."<sup>64</sup> Indeed they did, buying out nearby businesses including Slim Jenkins' soul food joint, Gaddy's Beauty Shop, and Jack's Grocery.<sup>65</sup> Gaddy's relocated around the corner, and it seems Jack's Grocery moved several blocks away.<sup>66</sup> No record can be found of Slim Jenkins' joint, suggesting it either went out of business or moved out of the immediate community, possibly bearing a new name. In buying out these establishments, Stax altered the economic organization of the community. One may argue these actions taken by Stax further contributed to community pride as the label expanded.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the current lack of evidence suggesting ill-feeling does not disprove the existence of any negative feelings on the part of the community.

In the last years leading up to 1975, Stax experienced noticeable difficulties. Stax expanded its executive operations beyond Memphis and its recording operations beyond the soul and R&B music genres. These expansionary efforts weakened the company as it spread its resources too

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<sup>63</sup> Stax Museum of American Soul Music.

<sup>64</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 175.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> A Jack's Grocery does currently exist in Memphis on Netherwood Avenue, several blocks from the original Stax site, suggesting relocation; however, the structure is currently closed, boarded-up, rundown, and has a disconnected phone line.

<sup>67</sup> When asked specifically about this in an e-mail correspondence, Rob Bowman shared that his research also did not turn up accounts of ill-feeling.

thinly. Despite obtaining large revenues from its efforts, Stax increasingly spent more money than it could afford.<sup>68</sup> A later distribution deal between Stax and CBS Records also began choking Stax through negligent practices on the part of CBS.<sup>69</sup> Further financial difficulties arose for Stax, and even issues of race factored into its demise. Stax Records officially declared bankruptcy and closed its doors in December of 1975.<sup>70</sup> The Stax building on McLemore Avenue was torn down in 1989; a sole historical marker was erected by the lot where Stax had stood. This was all that remained for over a decade.

### Stax Rises Again: Modern Efforts

The 21<sup>st</sup> century marks a time of struggle for the Soulsville community. Many households consist of single-parent families, and most operate on an annual income of less than thirty-thousand dollars.<sup>71</sup> Evidence of abandonment and neglect can be seen throughout the neighborhood. Loitering and crime remain local realities. But recent efforts rooted in Stax have emerged to combat these community maladies.

In November of 1997 the nonprofit organization Ewarton Museum Inc. (later renamed the Soulsville Foundation) was formed to promote the history of Stax Records and to revitalize the community.<sup>72</sup> It first addressed these goals in a twenty million-dollar project to build a performing arts center and a state-of-the-art museum dedicated to the history of Stax.<sup>73</sup> This produced the Stax Music Academy and the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. The

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<sup>68</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 293+.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 326+.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>71</sup> *Mapping America: Every City, Every Block*. New York Times.

<<http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer>> Accessed July 29, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, "Soulsville: A Catalyst for Revival in a Neighborhood with the Blues."

<sup>73</sup> Pamela Perkins. "Long Road Finally led to Tribute for Stax." *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) April 27, 2003: A1 & A18.

Foundation's vision later expanded to include promoting education for local youth, both through musical and traditionally academic means. Just recently, the Foundation completed a building which will permanently house its latest endeavor, the Soulsville Charter School. These entities have invigorated the Soulsville community's sense of pride and served as catalysts for further community development.

### The Stax Music Academy<sup>74</sup>

In June of 2000, the Stax Music Academy launched its first *Snap! Summer Music Camp*, a fine arts camp in which 75 boys and girls from the local community received instruction in dance, vocal, and instrumental performance.<sup>75</sup> According to a press release:

The Academy has since grown to serve Memphis area youth with music instruction, workshops, various musical ensembles, and unique performance opportunities, in addition to mentoring youth both personally and musically. The skills that they develop and bonds that they form are truly life-changing and in many cases, unavailable anywhere else.<sup>76</sup>

The current scope of the Music Academy provides after-school programming in addition to continuing its *Snap!* series. Local middle school and high school-aged students are targeted by the program.<sup>77</sup> They receive school-year-round instrumental instruction in the constructive atmosphere of the Stax Music Academy building, completed in 2002. The music made at the Music Academy finds its roots in the tradition of the Stax soul sound. The opportunities provided by the Music Academy resemble those from the days of Stax Records when it too promoted the musical development of local youth.

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<sup>74</sup> The Stax Music Academy expands the definition of Soulsville to include all of the 38106 and 38126 Memphis zip codes. This definition extends some beyond the original Soulsville boundaries mentioned earlier.

<sup>75</sup> *Overview*. Stax Music Academy Information Packet, 2010.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Iona Green and Joshua Careenlee, current employees at the Stax Museum, were among the first participants in the early programming of the Music Academy. They laud the program as enriching and eye-opening for underprivileged, local children. The Music Academy “keeps kids out of trouble” emphasizes Careenlee and provides a structured, organized learning environment.<sup>78</sup> For those like Green and Careenlee, participating in the Music Academy even provided an avenue for further involvement with the Soulsville Foundation’s operations. In particular, Green plans to work with the Foundation in the long-run and improve the community that raised her.<sup>79</sup>

Geared largely toward financial accessibility, the Music Academy offers a variety of scholarships to local youth. In the *Snap! After School '08- '09* session, more than 85% of the students who participated received some level of financial aid, while more than half of the participations received the highest need-based aid totaling 90% of the program cost.<sup>80</sup> Such a focus promotes a sense of inclusion and attempts to dispel the appearance of exclusiveness.

Despite these efforts to expand scholarship options, one may well argue the Music Academy is still exclusive. Truth be told, the number of local participants has vastly fluctuated throughout the years. Complete need-based aid covering the entire program cost still does not exist; this financial barrier prevents some of the community’s youth from participating. Furthermore, one must possess a basic level of musical ability to participate in the Music Academy. In the sense that any and all local youth cannot participate, the Music Academy is exclusive. Interestingly, Stax Records was not much different—it *especially* required previous

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<sup>78</sup> Group interview with Iona Green and Joshua Careenlee, July 20, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Green and Careenlee interview.

<sup>80</sup> *What Great Things are Happening at the Academy?* Stax Music Academy Information Packet, 2010.

musical education, yet, accounts collected from community members do not indicate the community perceived Stax as exclusive.

The Music Academy seeks to develop the musical capabilities of its participants. It accomplishes this partially by connecting local young people with professional musicians who both serve as mentors, musical role models, and friends.<sup>81</sup> Grammy-nominated saxophonist Kirk Whalum works with Music Academy musicians as an Artist-in-Residence, in addition to serving as CEO of the Soulsville Foundation. Even original Stax artists have worked with the Music Academy and its youth, like Isaac Hayes and Booker T. Jones. Just as Stax Records was capable of doing, the Music Academy develops the musical talents of those in the community by providing connections to larger music industry forces.

#### The Stax Museum of American Soul Music

Completed in 2003, the Stax Museum of American Soul Music stands at 926 E. McLemore Avenue on the site of the original Stax studio and record shop. Covering 17,000 square feet, this state-of-the-art tribute to Stax Records displays more than “2,000 exhibits, videos, instruments, items of stage clothing, records, and other items of memorabilia.”<sup>82</sup> The Museum contains a replica of the original recording studio, and its gift shop sports the name of the original record shop—the Satellite Record Shop.

Much like the arrival of Stax Records in 1961, the Museum has contributed positively to Soulsville as a physical entity. Before construction, the site that had once been Stax Records was

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Stax Museum of American Soul Music Press Release, 2011.

an empty lot with a lonely historical marker. Nearby were abandoned apartment buildings which for some time had become “a haven for drugs and crime.”<sup>83</sup> Through the efforts of the Soulsville Foundation, these properties were acquired to build the Museum; this space has since become an active and stable part of the community.<sup>84</sup> Community members cite the Museum as an important player in the fight to deter loitering and crime in the neighborhood.<sup>85</sup> For local community members who remember the days of Stax Records, the signs of a resurrected Stax prompt renewed feelings of pride in their community.

Although never directly involved with Stax Records in the 1960s and 1970s, local Shirley Coleman grew up working down the street from Stax during its final years. Now working next-door to the Museum, Coleman has run her beauty shop and miniature convenience store in the same building on the same corner of McLemore Avenue for over thirty years. Despite the Museum’s impressive structure and its role as a landmark in the community, Coleman believes the greatest impact the Museum has made lies in it conveying “the history” of Stax Records.<sup>86</sup> For those like Coleman who remember the days of Stax, witnessing this new emphasis on a history encompassing the neighborhood has triggered overwhelming feelings of pride. The community, her community, is finally receiving recognition for both the musical and social contributions that took place there. A victory for Stax is a victory for the entire community believes Coleman, recalling how the community embraced Stax Records as a local entity many years ago.<sup>87</sup> Even those in the community who do not remember the days of Stax Records express renewed feelings of community pride. Community youth are glad to see the history

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<sup>83</sup> Drew Jubera. “City Promoting its Past” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Atlanta) November 24, 2001: A12.

<sup>84</sup> The Stax Music Academy stands adjacent the Stax Museum and on the same general property.

<sup>85</sup> Personal interview with Rev. Dr. Reginald Porter, July 11, 2011.

Coleman interview.

<sup>86</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

advertised by the Museum attracting greater attention to the community.<sup>88</sup> Prior to the efforts of the Soulsville Foundation, no substantial force attracted outsiders to the community. Now, visitors from across the globe come to the Museum in the community, a standing testament to the story of Stax and the community that nurtured Stax. “People now come to our community to see what happened here,” boasts Coleman; she is elated to see the story of Stax mean so much to so many people, both locals and visitors.<sup>89</sup>

Since 2003, the Stax Museum has attracted more than two-hundred-and-fifty thousand visitors, many coming from foreign countries including Vietnam, Canada, England, and France. Coleman’s close proximity to the Museum increases her exposure to these incoming tourists, but this does not reduce her optimism. For those like Coleman, tourists are a welcome sight and a source of pride. Yet, not all community members feel the same. During the Museum’s planning stages, locals raised concerns at the prospect of heavy, commercialized thru-traffic harming the neighborhood. In an interview with *The Commercial Appeal* shortly before the Museum’s inception, local Halbert Davis voiced his enthusiasm about the Museum’s eventual impact on the Memphis economy but added he hoped it would not come at the expense of the neighborhood’s character.<sup>90</sup> Such fears were founded in the notion that increased tourism may distort the neighborhood’s sense of community. Worries arose that a neighborhood like Soulsville, consisting of primarily residential, small-business, and church properties, did not readily possess the resources to handle a large influx of temporary outsiders. When newly asked about his current feelings, Davis was unable to comment, but his wife felt she could speak for him. She

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<sup>88</sup> Green and Careenlee interview.

<sup>89</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>90</sup> Pamela Perkins. “In a neighborhood reborn, ‘libations’ open Stax muse.” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) May 3, 2003: B1 & B2.

offered that overall the Museum has “been for the better” socially and added a sense of visual appeal to the community.<sup>91</sup> Others, however, still feel otherwise.

In comparing the impact of Stax Records and the Museum, Reverend Reginald Porter of nearby Metropolitan Baptist Church maintains that the Museum “is not the same kind of neighborhood anchor” that Stax was during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>92</sup> He says the Museum “is good for the neighborhood [and] it has generated a lot of excitement,” but the atmosphere has changed.<sup>93</sup> Porter does not condemn tourism but indicates skepticism at the thought of it directly benefiting the community atmosphere. And his feelings are not restricted to issues of tourism. Porter identifies the Museum’s admission fee as a barrier to entry for some members of the community, a community turn-off.<sup>94</sup> The Museum has responded to this sentiment by waiving the admission fee on Tuesdays in an effort to attract more local residents and to combat any perception of exclusivity. Still, Porter feels the current atmosphere lacks a feeling of social cohesion comparable to that from the days of Stax.<sup>95</sup>

Porter maintains that the Museum is “a business,” and as a business-oriented operation, some locals do not consider the Museum to be a “neighborhood entity” as they did Stax.<sup>96</sup> Such a statement seems paradoxical—the Museum is a nonprofit operating through the Soulsville Foundation and Stax Records was a business, yet in the eyes of those like Porter, these institutions are perceived differently. Coleman’s comments seem to agree with Porter. She shares

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<sup>91</sup> Phone interview with Mrs. Halbert Davis, July 1, 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Porter interview.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> In regards to these feelings, it must be pointed out that even Stax reached a point in its later years when it could no longer freely entertain the time of all local community members. Also, visible parallels between the past and present atmosphere on McLemore do exist. The current Satellite Record Shop gift shop is open and free to enter for everyone, just as the original Satellite Record Store once was. All the same, things are not as they once were.

<sup>96</sup> Porter interview.

that the Museum *recalls* strong feelings and emotions linked to Stax.<sup>97</sup> She does not say the Museum *creates* such feelings, as Stax had the power of doing. These comments hint at the notion of a stronger connection between likeminded community members and Stax, rather than between community members and the Museum. And in a way, Porter is correct in that the Museum, although technically a nonprofit, focuses on attracting revenue to stay open—just like a business. Perhaps these efforts are more noticeable now than they were during the days of Stax.

Tourists spend money, money which enters the Museum and funds jobs in the community. The Museum hires local youth like Iona Green and Joshua Careenlee for various positions including maintaining the gift shop. Job opportunities at the Museum allow neighborhood youth to work locally and in a positive, constructive atmosphere. Green and Careenlee feel that among other alternatives, working for the Museum has been the best experience possible.<sup>98</sup> Through their work, they have grown to take stock in their community image and history. Their work gives back to the community by contributing to its preservation and promotion efforts. All the while, working at the Museum develops skills and talents Green and Careenlee can later use in their future careers or in other ways throughout the community.

In addition to generating jobs, the Museum asserts that, “based on the theory that each visitor to the community spends an additional 60 cents per dollar in the community on food, transportation, lodging, and other services, the Stax Museum has generated an additional estimated \$4 million” in revenue for surrounding businesses.<sup>99</sup> Yet such a statement leaves questions unanswered, particularly the definition of *community* where visitors supposedly spend

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<sup>97</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>98</sup> Green and Careenlee interview.

<sup>99</sup> Stax Museum Promotional Brochure, 2011.

this extra money. If *community* here refers to the greater Memphis economy, such estimates may be accurate. As far as the Soulsville community is concerned, the real number is far less.

Soulsville does not offer extended lodging or transportation services for Museum visitors, much less restaurant options or other tourist-related goods and services. For this reason, the community remains largely unequipped to capitalize on the presence of the Museum. So far, the benefits nearby businesses receive from the Museum are severely limited.

There is one local restaurant in particular that has noticeably benefited from the Museum. The Four Way Restaurant, a soul food joint that emulates the Four Way Grill from the time of Stax Records, stands a few minutes' drive from the Museum. The current owner of the Four Way, Willie Bates, has lived in the neighborhood his entire life and vividly remembers the days of Stax Records. He reopened the Four Way in 2001, several years after the original Four Way Grill had closed and shortly before the Museum opened. The Museum is good for business says Bates, and this stems from the mutually beneficial relationship between it and the Four Way.<sup>100</sup> The Museum staff regularly refers hungry tourists to the nearby soul joint, attracting new customers to the Four Way. Bates does not track the percentage of his customers who are tourists—his restaurant serves a constant stream of both regular locals and tourists. Nonetheless, he has noticed increased business since the Museum opened.<sup>101</sup> Aside from the visitors the Four Way serves, it also caters events held at the Museum, either hosted by the Museum itself or by third-parties. Bates remains optimistic about the future of the Museum, the Four Way, and the

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<sup>100</sup> Personal interview with Willie Bates, July 16, 2011.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship between the two community establishments; after all, soul food and soul music unescapably go “hand-in-hand.”<sup>102</sup>

Just as was once with Stax Records, the Stax Museum serves as a focal point in the local community. The Museum has acted as a catalyst for further revitalization efforts, particularly those aiming to attract businesses that *can* capitalize on the Museum’s presence. Across the street from the Museum, a commercial shopping center stands near completion. This structure is a project of the LeMoyne-Owen College Community Development Corporation (LOCCDC), a local neighborhood organization that works alongside the Soulsville Foundation. Named Town Center-Soulsville U.S.A., the new shopping center aims to attract local businesses and facilitate a greater level of local economic cohesion, seeking to provide goods and services for both locals and tourists. With some portions still unfinished, the Town Center already houses the Salon de Sol beauty shop, the LOCCDC planning offices, a Stand for Children center, and an outpost of the Memphis Health Center with plans for a grocery store. Still a work in-progress, the full effect of the Town Center on the community will only be better understood in the coming years. As far as jobs go—the most obvious eventual impact—the Town Center has large potential for employing community members, even more than the Museum hires.

A burning question surrounds the potential impact of the Town Center: as an establishment targeting both local and visiting consumers, how will the operations of the Town Center affect the social atmosphere of Soulsville? Views on this issue are mixed. Some local youth express excitement at the potential of the Town Center.<sup>103</sup> They feel it will bring much-

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Green and Careenlee interview.

needed businesses to the area and not harm the community atmosphere, especially if it attracts businesses like grocery stores and restaurants. Although largely optimistic about other aspects of current revitalization, local Shirley Coleman doubts the Town Center will live up to its goal of promoting a positive social atmosphere.<sup>104</sup> As a local business owner who works directly across the street from the Town Center, Coleman's feelings are rooted here in doubts surrounding the future success of the shopping center in general.

When asked about the architectural design of the Town Center, Coleman shakes her head and maintains that "they didn't ask me."<sup>105</sup> She refers to her input and opinion concerning the project, not her permission. Structurally, Coleman feels she could have designed a better building layout, one more inviting and socially appealing.<sup>106</sup> In her eyes, layout and architecture will prevent the shopping center from fully promoting social involvement and engagement. The disconnect Coleman perceives lies largely in the parking layout of the new space. Coleman believes an unintentional barrier was created when parking spaces were built behind the complex rather than in the front. Under such scrutiny, the Town Center seems to have separated the space it wished to unify. "No one will want to park in the back and walk to the front" hypothesizes Coleman.<sup>107</sup> At least on the part of locals, Coleman feels this will limit the level of community activity at the Town Center. Coleman adds that in addition to functionality, appearance will hinder the structure's future success.<sup>108</sup> Besides its inconsistent architecture with the surrounding area, its close proximity to the street evokes a feeling of claustrophobia. She argues the LOCCDC "could have opened up" the Town Center and made it more inviting by pushing the

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<sup>104</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

shopping center back from the street.<sup>109</sup> Instead, the space seems to repel people. For these reasons, Coleman remains doubtful of the Town Center's future success. "But they didn't ask me," she concludes, taking a seat from looking out through her screen door.<sup>110</sup>

Coleman's parting comments raise more questions concerning the level of community communication with current Stax-influenced revitalization efforts. It turns out key players involved in revitalization efforts are themselves from the local community. Jeffrey Higgs, executive director of the LOCCDC and responsible for the Town Center, grew up in Soulsville. Similarly, Deanie Parker, the Soulsville native and former Stax-employee, has been largely responsible for leading the Soulsville Foundation and continues to remain active in current initiatives. As for community residents not directly involved in these efforts, opportunities exist for them to share their opinions. Regular open meetings were held during the planning stages of the Town Center, sometimes attracting as many as 200 community members.<sup>111</sup> In one meeting, plans for housing development were altered at the urging of community members.<sup>112</sup> It seems Coleman was not without opportunity to voice her opinion.<sup>113</sup>

The Museum itself stands as a multi-million dollar establishment on what was once an empty, abandoned lot. Revitalization efforts continue to consume nearby properties to accommodate projects like the Town Center. The demand for land surrounding the Museum has skyrocketed,

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

The LOCCDC owns property further behind the street, and a plan like Coleman's would have been possible, given the financial resources.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Miller, "Soulsville: A Catalyst for Revival in a Neighborhood with the Blues."

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> According to Mr. Higgs, finances limited the layout and architectural design of the Town Center, thereby limiting the feasibility of certain community recommendations like Coleman's.

and rising demand has driven up local property values. Coleman herself was offered more than one-hundred thousand dollars for her property's close proximity to the Museum, a figure exceeding the original worth of the land and building.<sup>114</sup> Across the street from Coleman's beauty shop stands an old, unused building adjacent to the Town Center. Before the Museum and Town Center existed, this property would likely have been valued at less than one-hundred thousand dollars.<sup>115</sup> Recent offers by the LOCCDC for the same property surpassed a quarter-of-a-million dollars.<sup>116</sup>

Although some locals have benefitted enormously as a result of increasing property values, this trend raises questions concerning possible community displacement and gentrification.<sup>117</sup> Current efforts verbalize that they are aware of such possibilities and make every effort to prevent this from happening.<sup>118</sup> Only time will tell if they are successful or not.

Local Museum employees Iona Green and Joshua Careenlee both recommend other youth become involved with the Museum and the entire Soulsville Foundation.<sup>119</sup> This is not only beneficial for the individual but also for the larger community. In fact, Green and Careenlee feel the future success of the Museum will rest in its ability to attract local youth involvement.<sup>120</sup> Participation by local youth in the efforts of the Museum and the Foundation ensures the continuation of strong ties between these entities and the community. Youth involvement will

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<sup>114</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>115</sup> This generous estimate was calculated by the author by taking into account surrounding land value, building value and utility, and the opinions of interviewed persons. The author also consulted *Mapping America: Every City, Every Block*. New York Times. <<http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer>> Accessed July 29, 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>117</sup> Here, *some locals* refers to those who sold their properties for projects like the Town Center.

<sup>118</sup> Personal interview with Jeffrey Higgs, July 25, 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Green and Careenlee interview.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

prevent the Museum from becoming alienated from the community, giving it a continued internal local influence. By engaging in the Museum's efforts, local youth will learn about Stax Records and develop pride in the history of their community. As the years pass and the number of locals who remember the days of Stax declines, youth will play a critical role in preserving the feeling of community pride. The Soulsville youth have the power to keep the Stax story young and alive.

### The Soulsville Charter School

The Soulsville Charter School was founded in July of 2005 and initially shared building space with the Stax Music Academy. Newly completed in the summer of 2011, a 47,000 square foot school building now houses the Charter School. The Charter School serves as “an academically rigorous college preparatory school that is committed to preparing all students for success today, in college, and beyond.”<sup>121</sup> Like the Music Academy, it targets children from the Soulsville community. In addition, the Charter School admits students from outside the community; the criteria for admission are as follows:

1. Previous attendance at a “high priority” school,
2. Previous attendance at a charter school in the same district.
3. Zoned to attend a “high priority” school, or
4. Below proficient test scores on the Math and/or Language section of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) exam.

The 2011-2012 school year will mark the first time the Charter School will be at full capacity of 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students. The enrollment figures for the fall of 2011 currently stand at a student population of 480 with approximately one-third of students coming directly from

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<sup>121</sup> Soulsville Charter School Information Packet, 2008.

Soulsville.<sup>122</sup> Preliminary data suggests students who attend the Charter School raise their standardized test scores and proficiency levels in subjects like Math and Reading.<sup>123</sup>

The Charter School has brought a renewed presence of youth around the area that once was Stax Records. “The children are back,” declares Coleman; her proximity to the Charter School makes her particularly aware of this new presence.<sup>124</sup> Charter School students even visit Coleman’s miniature convenience store, which reminds her of the days when local youth would stop by the corner bakery for doughnuts after visiting the Satellite Record Store.<sup>125</sup> For her, children are a welcome presence and contribute to the atmosphere of McLemore Avenue. All the same, current conditions do not completely parallel the days of Stax. Porter points out that those students not from the community are driven or bused to the Charter School. Once students are at the Charter School, they stay on-site, mostly indoors throughout their studies and activities. These factors, he muses, take away from a feeling of openness that surrounded Stax Records and the interaction of children there on McLemore Avenue decades ago.<sup>126</sup> Nonetheless, the children *are* back.

The Charter School has existed for only several years and is still very much a work-in-progress with long-term goals. For these reasons, it becomes difficult to insightfully assess the Charter School’s impact on the community, since doing so would only generate a premature analysis.

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<sup>122</sup> Personal interview with NaShante Brown, August 5, 2011.

<sup>123</sup> *Results*. The Soulsville Charter School Website. <<http://www.thesoulsvillecharterschool.org/results.html>> Accessed July 7, 2011.

<sup>124</sup> Coleman interview.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Porter interview.

Coming years will better demonstrate its level of community impact, such as how many local youth it will send to college.

### What of the Future?

Unlike Stax Records, current efforts of the Soulsville Foundation have specific economic and social goals in mind—promoting community revitalization, preserving the arts, and furthering holistic academic achievement among local students. These goals and the impact of current efforts have been evaluated. Room remains to consider how these goals may be carried out in the future and to speculate about their future impact.

The Stax Music Academy seeks ways to improve and expand its programming options. It looks to reach more youth in the Soulsville community and to continuously develop the musical abilities of its student participants, fueled by a desire to “emulate the spirit of the original Stax Records.”<sup>127</sup> It can accomplish these goals by raising funds for full scholarships and by offering introductory music programming. This will make more local youth eligible to participate and perhaps suppress views of exclusivity.

The Stax Museum seeks ways to increase the functionality and accessibility of its museum space. It has initiated advertising efforts to attract parties, receptions, and even hosted its first wedding. The Museum also hopes to increase its accessibility to outside visitors by partnering with transportation services, particularly those which can link the Museum to Downtown Memphis and other tourist veins. The focus of these goals away from the Soulsville community begs the question: aside from the sense of pride it invokes, will the Museum’s

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<sup>127</sup> *Future of Stax Music Academy: How Do We Get There?* Stax Music Academy Information Packet, 2010.

operations cause it to lose touch with the community? Without a continued local internal presence and community-oriented mindfulness, the answer may be yes.

To be accepted as a community entity and not just an entity in the community, the Charter School will need to focus on attracting more local youth. If successful in this and able to continue its so-far successful academic operations, the Charter School will likely develop a stronger bond with the community. Readyng local youth for college would improve their future prospects, and even though some would be drawn away from the community, others would foreseeably stay in Soulsville and attend LeMoyne-Owen College. Education has the greatest potential for improving the social and economic conditions of Soulsville, more than the other Soulsville Foundation entities.

The Town Center needs to attract both local consumers and tourists. Focusing too heavily on locals will cause potential economic gains to go unrealized. Focusing too heavily on tourists will harm Soulsville's social atmosphere and alienate revitalization efforts from the community. For these reasons, the Town Center should seek to attract a café. A café would provide an informal and inviting social atmosphere, suitable for both locals and outside visitors. It would cater to people interested in a quick drink or snack and to those hungry for a regular meal.<sup>128</sup>

A café would complement the nearby Museum and Music Academy. It could serve as a stage for displaying special exhibits from the Museum, attracting people to the café and prompting patrons to visit the Museum. Additionally, the atmosphere of a café would lend itself

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<sup>128</sup> Aside: Such a café should not focus on soul food. This way, it would complement and not uproot the nearby Four Way Restaurant. Both businesses would have their own niche and could coexist peacefully, both benefiting from the presence of the Museum and other Town Center businesses.

to hosting musical performances by the Stax Music Academy, providing youth with more performance opportunities and connecting their endeavors further with Soulsville.

### Conclusion

The history of Stax Records and Stax's involvement in the Soulsville community continue to generate feelings of pride for community members. Pride in Stax further stems from both the perception of it as a community entity and from the opportunities it provided members of the community. The local employees at Stax experienced economic success and social empowerment, which in turn contributed positively to the community image. Locals did and still do claim ownership of the record label. They are eager to associate themselves and the community with Stax so as to connect with its fame and history.

The tangible economic impact of Stax Records on the community did not measure up to its symbolic, intangible ability to invigorate the community's atmosphere with feelings of pride. Although Stax propelled members of the community to national and global musical fame, allowing them to rise up beyond the limits of the neighborhood, only a small number of locals achieved such status. As the operations of Stax grew in scope, so did its role in the economic restructuring of the community; however, this impact was temporary. Stax did not influence the overall economic condition of the community beyond its existence.<sup>129</sup> Nonetheless, Stax *was* able to capture the talent of the community in a way that no other force did.

Varying opinions exist surrounding the nature of the modern impact preservation, promotion, and revitalization efforts have had on the Soulsville community's social organization and atmosphere. In particular, the effect of growing tourism on the community has sparked

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<sup>129</sup> Note the interestingly parallel conditions surrounding the physical presence of Stax Records and the Soulsville Foundation entities in the community.

debate. Older community members differ on their opinions concerning tourism, while younger members tend to view the influence of tourism in a positive light. In regards to preservation efforts, older members of the community feel they renew old feelings of pride within the community, while younger members feel proud also of modern Stax-inspired establishments.

Modern efforts have thus far only had a limited economic impact on the community. Aside from sparse employment opportunities, the relationship between the Museum and the Four Way Restaurant, and scattered property value hikes, most of the Soulsville community has not benefitted economically. Until complementary efforts like those of the LOCCDC are extended in conjunction with those of the Soulsville Foundation, the full economic benefits attracted by the Museum will continue to largely escape the surrounding neighborhood.

I believe the lasting impact of the Stax legacy lies in its interaction with local youth. Stax Records embraced the local youth and provided them with the tools to establish stable (often lucrative) careers in various capacities. It gave locals like Deanie Parker, David Porter, and Booker T. Jones access to and a voice in the outside world beyond the confines of Soulsville. They took the skills and values they learned at Stax and applied them throughout their lives; the impact of the record label on these people persisted even long after the label ceased to exist. All this happened despite the fact Stax Records lacked an initial mission statement focused on involving community youth.

Unlike Stax Records, involving local youth is a mission for efforts of the Soulsville Foundation. The Stax Museum hires local youth, providing them with both economic opportunity and the opportunity to become further vested in and familiar with the history of Stax

Records. The Stax Music Academy provides a constructive atmosphere where local youth can develop their musical talent, much as Stax Records once did. The Soulsville Charter School offers an academically stimulating and rigorous setting—prospects for its impact on local youth are optimistic. Its impact, like that of the Music Academy, will be better realized in the future.

In a way, the impact of the Stax legacy on the Soulsville youth has traveled full-circle. During the time of Stax Records, Stax developed the musical and nonmusical abilities at local young people, propelling them into careers that ultimately led them away from Soulsville. Now, these people are drawn back to the Soulsville community. Some have become engaged in current revitalization and preservation efforts. Others now share their talents and experience with local youth. Would it not be interesting if this developed into a continuous cycle when current youth grow up?

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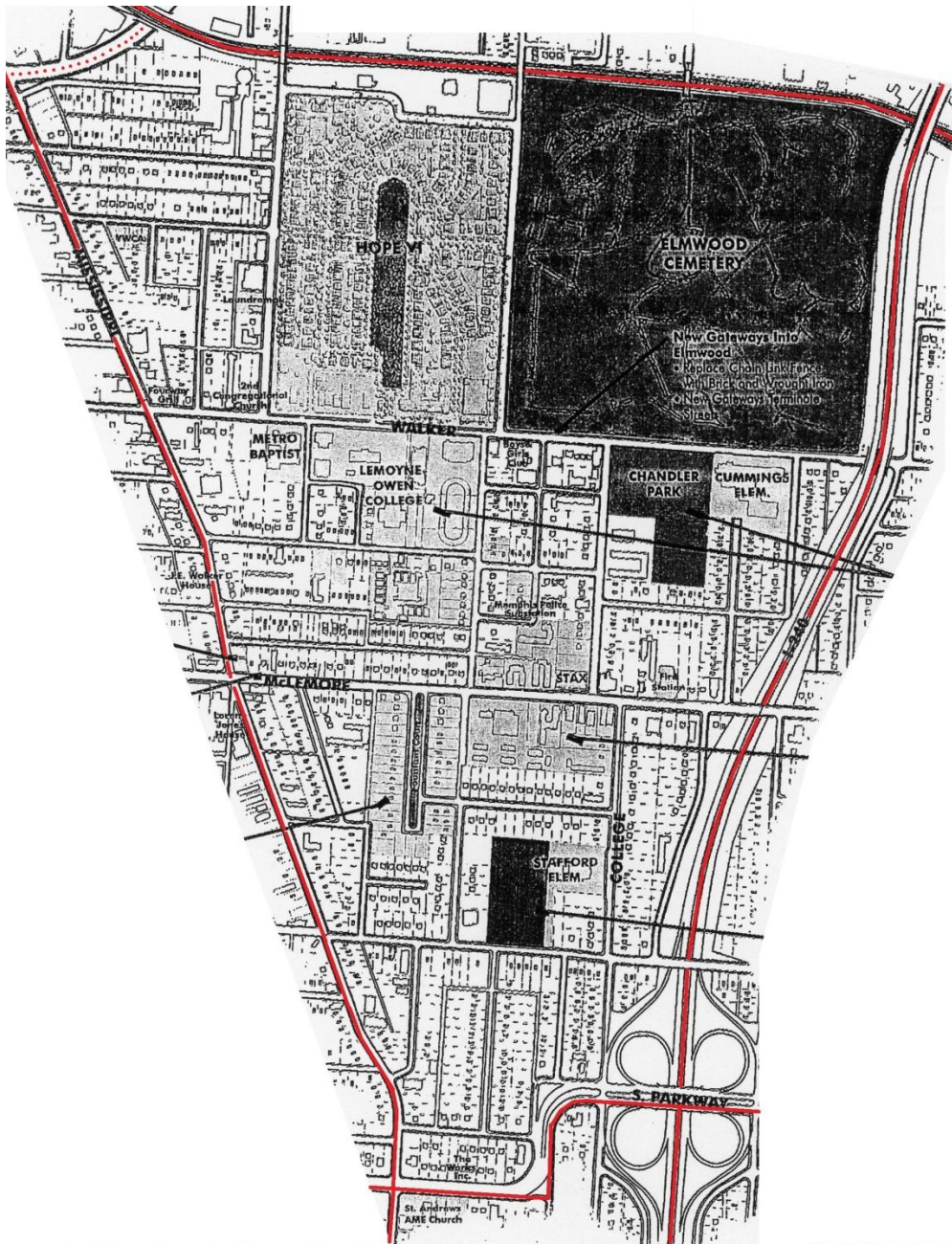
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Appendix A: Map of Soulsville U.S.A. community in Memphis, TN.



Original: "Soulsville, U.S.A. Revitalization Plan: Anchors. Looney Ricks Kiss. Architecture Planning Interiors Research. February 8, 2000. Edited by author.

Appendix B: Excerpt from Judith Johnson, Cathy Marcinko, and associates.

African American Population of Study Area, 1900-2000

Year	Study Area Population (CTs 41, 44-50, and 58-59)*	% African American
<b>1900</b>	<b>15,772</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>1910</b>	<b>27,270</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>1920</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>
<b>1930</b>	<b>42,965</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>1940</b>	<b>54,013</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>58,025</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>1960</b>	<b>50,245</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>1970</b>	<b>46,323</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>1980</b>	<b>33,581</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>28,310</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>18,856</b>	<b>95</b>

\*For 1900 to 1930 figures for City Wards are given which geographically are not exactly comparable to the study area as defined by Census Tracts.

Appendix C: The Stax Music Academy



Picture by Joshua Cape (8/5/11)

Appendix D: The Stax Museum of American Soul Music



Picture by Joshua Cape (8/5/11)

Appendix E: Town Center-Soulsville U.S.A.



Picture by Joshua Cape (8/5/11)

Appendix F: The Soulsville Charter School



Picture by Joshua Cape (8/5/11)