

Al Bell. My Testimony.**Episode 1:****Al/Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Al tells the story:

In 1959 Al left Little Rock to work in Midway, Georgia, with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) workshops. Al led workshops at Midway and participated in a number of marches.

As the story goes, the SCLC is marching through the streets of Savannah. Dr. King's people are trained for non-violent resistance, which is critical to the day's event as racists have come to disrupt the peaceful protest.

Al describes walking on the front line of the protestors, on the left flank. Ahead on the sidewalk is a tall racist white man shouting at the protestors. Al ignores him, and the man gets more and more agitated in his verbal abuse. Finally, when Al gets within several feet the man spits on him.

In a split second a switchblade knife comes out of Al's pocket, and he breaks out of the pack and lunges for the white man, ready to do real damage. Two of Dr. King's people—a large man and a woman—charge into the crowd after Al, and physically drag him out of there.

That night in Savannah. Dr. King and Al sit alone.

Dr. King says, "Alvertis, this movement is about passive resistance, and you crossed that line today. I can't have that. I've been hearing what you've been teaching and talking to these students about, and you sound like you have a lot of Marcus Garvey in you."

Al looks at him and says, "Who is Marcus Garvey?"

King replies, "If you don't know who he is, you need to study him. He created the Universal Negro Improvement Association and rallied his supporters to fight for economic independence. That kind of talk is all well and good, but the Conference is all about passive resistance. When you pulled that knife out today you violated our cardinal rule, and you broke up the march."

Al nods at him and says, "I understand and respect that, Reverend. But you and I both know about the Bible. Jesus had a man named Peter with him as a disciple, and he carried a sword. My little switchblade knife doesn't compare to that sword."

Dr. King breaks out in laughter.

Al the DJ.

DJs and radio are a key fundamental to our story.

The communal conveyance of radio in a community- especially in the black community- was a fundamental. Radio was the bully pulpit for the community-- it was in cars, on portable transistors, was the life source of parties, played throughout the parks, playgrounds, school dances... radio

was everywhere. And when the radio found that hit that spoke for the time... that was the hit that everyone was chasing.

Al's catholic (small "c") education in the music business- provides a comprehensive view to the industry and to our story.

While in his senior year of high school, while still just seventeen, Al landed a radio show on Little Rock radio station, KOKY. In addition to DJ'ing, Al was student council president and president of the National Honor Society on campus. After entering Philander Smith College, Al continued doing gospel, jazz, and eventually morning--and afternoon--drive-time rhythm and blues shows on KOKY. This schedule would continue throughout his college years. Al was hosting record hops and promoting concerts including those by the Staple Singers who would later sign with Stax. Al's ubiquitous energy was already well in evidence.

In 1961 Al is hired by Dick "Cane" Cole to host the 6 to 10 a.m. morning show at WLOK in Memphis. Al brings a different style to town and in the process galvanized 'LOK and Memphis black radio in general. While most of the local black jocks typified the then-standard frenetic high energy of personality DJs, Al has a calm, commanding demeanor on the air, studiously avoiding the high-energy typical of disc jockeys of the era and steadfastly refusing to talk over the beginnings and endings of the records. And when Al came on and said "This is Al Bell" replete with the ringing of a bell in his big, booming deep voice, "he had all the ladies listening."

The black music business in the early 1960s.

The black music business in the early 1960s is regional. It is small and territorial and a business dependent upon relationships and the reality of the economy and way of life of smaller markets.

DJs do NOT make much money but... if they are good... they know what's up in the area- what was happening in clubs and recording studios. WLOK was Memphis' first home for Al.

Al, doing two shows a day, makes less than \$10 a week- hardly enough for one man, let alone a family. To make ends meet, DJs are entrepreneurial and, from the label's side, for a little bit of money here or there to key DJs, a hit- and a relationship that might lead to many hits- can come out of a small investment.

This is the community of radio and DJs and labels and artists... the community of music.

It is not uncommon that a DJ might have a recording contract. Sometimes it's a way for a record company to ensure the DJs loyalty towards the record company. WLOK's Program Director Al Perkins had started as an artist. Rufus Thomas never stopped his DJ job at WDIA.

How is the radio sausage made...

Every hour at WLOK was divided into five minutes of news and weather, eighteen minutes of commercials and thirty-seven minutes of music. They had around 200 different commercials and jingles to chose from. It was a soul music only station.

Later most stations had only forty songs on their play list and then some dropped to only twenty songs. The songs stayed shorter and had a shorter time on the list.

Al details relationships of independents and major labels, with distributors, with promoters, with artists... with the community.

We will show about the realities from the label side- how a label had to not only make a hit... it had to promote it to radio... promote the record to the stores and into the community... and eventually, if everything went right, the label would have to get paid from the distributors (collections... never easy).

It was a well known that "you never get paid on the first hit": meaning you had to have a hit in the pipeline that distributors would want for the distributors to pay what was due on earlier hits.

The grind of having to work this system has stress and specifics and particulars.

And if you get a big hit, the next situation inevitably becomes:

a regional hit was taken over by a larger label for national distribution.

Inside the time, the record world is a business of singles- not albums.

Each week radio stations got 500 single records from record companies all around USA (= 26,000 per year). This was before the LP-era and only about 20 LPs arrived every week. The station's play list consisted of 60 songs and five of those were exchanged every week.

Al and Memphis Radio.

As a DJ, Al was an ardent booster of local music, constantly providing much-appreciated exposure to virtually any Memphis R&B 45. Not too surprisingly, most Memphis record labels and their artists quickly held Al in high regard. With Al leading the way, WLOK's ratings improved significantly and the station changed from a dawn-to-dusk operation to a 24-hour R&B powerhouse rivaling WDIA in influence. (Radio was not on all day. Important to note when FM becomes an alternative... playing longer records... which is important for "Hot Buttered Soul.")

In this section it will be important to identify the role of black radio as being an important voice and connecting apparatus for the community within its broadcasting range.

It is also important to note that Memphis was the site of the first black appeal radio station, WDIA, beginning broadcasting in October 1948. Stax artist Rufus Thomas was a DJ there.

While at WLOK Al developed close ties with Stax, spending a lot of time at the Satellite Record Shop to keep his finger on the listening tastes of Memphis's black populace. "That was one of my yardsticks for determining what to play on the air as a disc jockey," relates Al.

"One day David Porter took me by the Stax studio- for the first time- and I opened that door and it was the highlight of my life and the shock of my life. I looked in Studio A and I saw two white guys and two black guys [this wouldn't be true as Lewie Steinberg was still a member of the MGs at this time] standing in that studio making that music that I had been hearing. I was blown away, in sheer awe," said Al. "At a time like that -- we had just gone through '57 in Little Rock and segregation permeated the land -- I couldn't imagine two white guys and two black guys playing that funky music," said Al.

"At that moment, I knew the importance of Stax; I knew the potential of it."

Al takes his show to D.C.

Al gets a bigger opportunity. Al goes to D.C.'s WUST in Washington, D.C., where Al continued his ardent support of all-things Memphis.

David Porter has the story of advising Al to take the job in D.C.- so Al could play more Stax music in D.C.

"I went into Washington and did something contrary to everything that was being done programming-wise [there]. They were busy with all that East Coast doo wop. I went in [playing] Stax Records. [At the time] Stax product was basically selling [only] in the south. In no time at all I established Otis, Carla, and Rufus [in the Washington area]. Booker T. and the MG's [were already] getting some play in that area.

On the weekends I would go by bus into Baltimore and Philadelphia and promote the product myself at my own expense, which really got the ball rolling and aided [for example] Otis getting into the Howard Theatre. My southern romanticism integrated into that great music made me one of the top disc jockeys in Washington."

Relationships are formed with Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun from Atlantic and Milt Gabler- who becomes a mentor to Al.

Gabler imparts his knowledge of record making as well as the importance of publishing.

Al's First Record Labels.

In D.C., Al establishes first the De'Voice and then the Safice label. Industry veteran Milt Gabler mentors him during the first operation. Future Stax star Eddie Floyd is an integral part of the second label.

Al starts bringing Floyd and others to cut Safice sessions in Memphis at Stax with Booker T. and the MG's and the Marquee (later Memphis) Horns..

Booker T. and the Mgs.

Stax was THE label in 1965 because of Booker T. and the MGs.

There was nothing cooler, hipper, more soulful than Stax, and at this point, all records feature at least the backing of Booker T. and the MGs.

As the soul of Stax, and the fundamental for a southern sound that is spreading and being evangelized by Al, Booker T. and the MG's, and the Marquee Horns, the integrated house band at Stax, were a manifestation of the impulse towards integration- and the organic manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream.

Al comes to Stax.

Stax Records is the hippest, hottest label in the world.

Al comes to Stax in later September 1965 or early October 1965 to work radio promotion. Atlantic Records and Jerry Wexler agree to pay \$100/week- half of Al's salary. There is an incentive agreement for Al to get some ownership.

Even though Stax is the hippest thing around, Stax is in debt. Al changes this.

Stax had a distribution agreement with NYC-based Atlantic Records (Atlantic made a distribution deal with Stax. After costs for promotion and marketing, Stax made 12%. Atlantic made 88%.

Atlantic put no money into Stax). This was initially a handshake deal that was formalized in contractual form in May 1965.

Record making at Stax. The Stax family. The Rhythm Section.

Rhythm sections are to be explained. Motown had the Funk Brothers. Los Angeles had the Wrecking Crew. New York had a wealth of professionals without a name. As did Chicago. James Brown had his rhythm section (with two drummers, like Motown). Muscle Shoals had its own thing too. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones... all were rhythm sections too- they were emulating their heroes.

We will play examples here and Al will talk about them, e.g.:

Motown: Martha and the Vandellas "Dancing in the Street"

Stax: Booker T. and the MGs: "Hip Hugger"

Cincinnati: James Brown: "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag"

Chicago: The Impressions: "People Get Ready"

Los Angeles: Lou Rawls: "Love is a Hurting Thing"

New York: Solomon Burke: "Got to Get You Off My Mind"

New York had polish. Detroit was urbane. James Brown had the funk. Chicago had church. Los Angeles had pop.

Stax had grit. Stax had humor and swagger. Stax was young and hungry and ready. Stax had...

Soul.

Now, this may seem like we are drilling down too much. No. THIS is where we show that having the right band, the right arrangement, the right lyric, the right voices... any one thing missing in this mix of ingredients is the difference between a hit and a miss.

When there's a community of these elements all together, cloistered like they were in Memphis (things were dissipating at Motown as their little cloister were a few years- and life lessons- ahead of Stax)... you get hits and you can get momentum and that's what Stax had.

Stax becomes a hit factory.

When Al starts, Stax is at the end of a beginning. Stax had some hits. With Al's arrival comes a new energy for the company. It turns now into a real business.

At this time, 1965, Stax signs its distribution deal with Atlantic. Jerry Wexler sent Tom Dowd to Stax to get the studio in better shape and soon, after Tom came back with a hit on Rufus Thomas, Atlantic "loaned" Sam and Dave, who they had just signed, to Stax.

For a brief period Atlantic used the Stax studio to record a few Atlantic artists such as Wilson Pickett and Don Covay at Stax. In 1965 Pickett cuts three hits at Stax including "In the Midnight Hour," "634-5789 (Soulsville U.S.A.)," and "Don't Fight It."

The little studio, with the heppiest young band in the world, was now a destination.

Jim would finish up a session and bring a mix over to be played on the local stations... with Al and Jim Stewart listening to a mix in Jim's car to check it out.

Wilson Pickett.

Wilson Pickett had big hits at Stax, but the Stax folks didn't like being seen as just a house band rhythm section.

Jim told Jerry Wexler and Atlantic that the Stax studio was too busy to accommodate outside sessions and consequently would no longer be able to do them. Steve, Duck, and Jerry Wexler felt that the real reason why Stax closed its doors to outside sessions was that Jim Stewart was not happy "giving away" the Stax sound.

"[Jim] was vague," recalls Wexler. "I knew that Pickett had irritated him. Pickett was always bum-rapping Steve Cropper, claiming that Steve had stolen the song ['In the Midnight Hour'], but I never could get any exact reason. I got a feeling after a while that the real reason was that Jim had some feeling about hits coming out of the studio that were not on Stax [yet were recorded] with his band and his facilities. They really didn't want anybody else there 'cause they didn't want hits coming out of there with their imprimatur that they didn't get the full benefit of."

Hayes and Porter. Sam and Dave.

Al Bell, who arrived at the company just a few months before the final Wilson Pickett session, echoes Wexler's suspicions: "We had that policy to preserve the sound that we had developed. That was our identity, our trademark, our trade secret, and we preserved it in that fashion. The other thing was there really wasn't that much time, because the studio was constantly being used. When it wasn't being used, it was supposed to be available for in-house producers and writers, because what made Stax tick was that freedom, the ability to go in that studio whenever a guy had an idea and get it with no restrictions, no clock to watch, none of that. Just to be able to record and record until you got it. If it took all day or it took all week, we had that freedom to do it"

A couple of months prior to the first Pickett session, Atlantic had made a rather unique arrangement with Stax. Wexler offered to loan Sam and Dave to Stax for as long as Atlantic distributed the Memphis company.

Sam and Dave, in essence, would be full-fledged Stax artists, with Stax being paid the same money for every Sam and Dave record sold as they were for records by their other artists. The only difference was that Wexler insisted that Stax split the publishing with Atlantic on any songs written by Stax staff songwriters for Sam and Dave. This latter proviso would turn out to be a wise move on Wexler's part.

Al has the story of how “Hold On, I’m Coming” was created from David Porter waiting for Isaac Hayes...

When Hayes and Porter wrote and initially rehearsed the songs with Sam and Dave, the melodies would be set in a comfortable, lower key. But when it came time to record, Hayes and Porter would intentionally raise the key. “I had the main thrust as far as getting him to project,” laughs Porter. “Sam used to hate me for that. I would stand in front of the mike and push him in the direction that I wanted him to go for the effect of the song. I always kept him reaching. That was part of the magic. It was high for him but he had some of the greatest pipes that I ever knew. Often times when I would push him I would be amazed at what he was doing.

“I felt if you were right above where you could be [comfortably], then the anxiety and the frustrations and the soul of what I thought needed to be captured out of those songs would come through. I always noticed with the Motown records, the singers were so comfortable, the melodies were so comfortable. I wanted us to have a little different kind of edge and I thought that gave us that. . . . Struggling for you to get there would only enhance you to get the soul. Even though they would get pissed at me pushing them like that, they would attempt to do it and it would work. I didn’t think you were really doing the record with any soul unless there was sweat.”

The Thermometer.

Stax had made 100 records over five years, is a force in the marketplace, has had many hits, and yet is \$90k in debt.

As part of his motivational strategy Al drew a thermometer which he placed in the entrance way of the building which charted a goal of selling 3.5 million units in the next year. The top of the thermometer metaphorically exploded into heaven. The company achieved this goal within 9 months and was quickly growing from a Mom and Pop cottage operation into a nationally recognized R&B powerhouse.

Al has a cataclysmic, larger-than-life affect at Stax. Booker T. describes his energy and presence as being akin to the Otis Redding of the front office. Stax is still very much a mom and pop organization as is evidenced by the fact that Al initially shares a single desk and phone with company owner Jim Stewart. Al was indefatigable. Virtually everyone around Stax at the time tells stories of Al on the phone from early morning to late in the evening, talking about the latest Stax releases to key disc jockeys across the country. He would start with the morning jocks on the East Coast and then proceed across the country following the time zones, by midnight discussing records with the evening DJs in California. With his background as a disc jockey, he was tailor-made for the job, having already developed a number of relationships over the years as well as understanding the language and psychology of black disc jockeys in the 1960s.

According to William Brown, Stax didn’t really start until Al got there. Up to that point there had been oodles of talent but no substantive marketing. Steve Cropper agrees, stating that before Al, very few Stax releases really got heard outside of the mid-South.

Legendary black disc jockey and program manager of WVON in Chicago, E. Rodney Jones, affirms the above: “He was definitely different. You’re talking about a man that had tremendous radio experience. He knew the needs of the people in radio and how best Stax could serve them as well as how they could serve Stax. It made a hell of a difference. Some of the radio stations then, man,

didn't even have a damn water fountain. In those little towns in the South, it was really ridiculous. It was atrocious. But Stax Records through Al's ingenuity and know how came to the aid of so many stations it was unbelievable."

The Memphis River Culture of promotion.

Al felt that Chicago and Memphis were connected by what he termed "Mississippi River Culture." One of Al's promotion objectives was to establish Chicago as the company's "break-out" market.

"My attitude," recounts Al, "was to take the middle and force New York and Los Angeles [to play our records]. I felt that I had to do that 'cause I wasn't based in a major metropolitan area. I had to have strength so that when I walked into those markets I would have respect. I wouldn't have to speak in soprano; I could speak in bass."

"If you appreciate the cultures and what the rivers represent to the cultures in this country and the kind of music that Stax was coming up with, it would just be logical to look for exposure along the Mississippi River, because it was Mississippi River Culture as far as music is concerned."

"My approach to marketing," Al continues, "was and still is looking from a sociological standpoint. Even though I employ some of the techniques of the industrial scientist in marketing, it is more social science."

"The people from Mississippi and New Orleans traveled along the waterways from the Gulf up the Mississippi River. That caused us to work the product that was born in Memphis, Tennessee, that was indigenous to the mid-South area, in Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City and even Detroit, Michigan. For most of the people in Detroit were people that had left Mississippi, Alabama, or Georgia and had gone to Detroit for jobs in the automotive industry. So, what you really had in those particular cities was Southerners. Chicago may as well have been in the suburbs of Mississippi. By and large, the majority of the African-American population in Chicago was from Mississippi or you could trace their roots back to Mississippi." Once a record began to take hold in Chicago or Detroit, Al could then piggy back on that success and work the product on both the East and West Coasts.

The family environment of record making: the Big 6.

In this period, Stax created an equitable arrangement that incentivized the most key musicians and songwriters with a production royalty. They were collectively known as the Big 6 and consisted of the four members of Booker T. and the MG's as well as Isaac Hayes and David Porter. This was set up and regular Monday morning board meetings were initiated.

The Big 6 and other company song writers got together and decided which songs should be recorded and which needed further work. While these meetings were thought of by both Hayes and Porter and the MGs thought as a waste of time, the long term investment of the meetings pays off when these writers assert themselves further on down the road.

Al coins the phrases "The Soul label for your swinging turntable" and "The Memphis Sound" in his efforts to create a brand for Stax.

The Beatles, Dylan... all want in on Stax.

Brian Epstein visited Stax to discuss the possibility of the Beatles recording their next album, "Revolver," in Memphis. It seems that Jim Stewart wanted more money for the Beatles to use his

studio than they were willing to pay. The Beatles ended up recording "Rubber Soul" at Abbey Road in London in October 1965.

Bob Dylan came to an Otis Redding at the Whiskey A Go-Go with an acetate of "Just Like a Woman."

Otis said the song had too many words.

Stax was what all the hip white folks yearned to be a part of.

Stax grows.

Expansion-oriented from the start, one of the first things Al did was launch a gospel label, Chalice. Gospel was a smaller market- in keeping with Al's thoughts on having many different "smaller" hits... while still working for the blockbusters.

In November 1966 a pop label, Hip, was launched, followed by Enterprise Records in early 1968.

Stax conquers Europe.

In March and April 1967, partially through the auspices of Otis Redding's manager, Phil Walden, a Stax/Volt revue toured Europe. This tour was extremely successful and gave everyone at Stax a sense of just how popular their music was in Europe and the potential there existed for crossover success in the United States.

Al talks about how Otis was, in America, known for Bama-music, but when Otis and company got to Europe, Stax was accepted as GOOD music- not some regional novelty.

Isaac Hayes, recording artist.

This expansion created the great success of Isaac Hayes.

Asked to make his own record, Isaac finally, in a jam session, wrote "Precious Precious" with Booker, Al Jackson, Jr. and Duck Dunn... as a 19 minute jazz opus. Neither the long or the edited three minute version sold much.

The album was a feeling out for Isaac. He had extended jams with the group. These jams were ready for FM radio's all night format. The album, "Presenting Isaac Hayes" is a precursor of what's to come, and the urging of Al to get Isaac to start to consider the possibilities of stepping into the spotlight will, a year later, allow Isaac's extended uniqueness, to come together in "Hot Buttered Soul."

Stax at Monterey Pop.

In June of that year Otis Redding and Booker T. and the MG's with the Marquee Horns triumph at the Monterey Pop festival as part of a long-term strategy to sell Redding's records to a pop as well as an R&B audience.

End of Episode.

Episode 2:**Otis Redding dies.**

Otis Redding dies in a tragic plane crash in December 1967. His posthumous single "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," released seven months later would be his first release to reach #1 on the Pop charts.

Stax and Atlantic.

In January, 1968, a month after Otis' death, Stax is informed that Atlantic is being folded in with Warner Brothers and Elektra Records and being sold to Kinney. Atlantic offers to buy Stax at a price that Jim Stewart felt was insulting. Stewart then tried to renegotiate the distribution deal with the new owners but at a higher royalty rate.

Dr. King in Memphis.

There was a changing focus for Dr. King's final two years of life. Dr. King realized capitalism was the root cause that kept African Americans in second class citizenship (it was also the cause of slavery to begin with).

Dr. King turned against the Vietnam war which turned LBJ against King—King's efforts in Chicago for fair housing had been a failure.

Into this came the Memphis sanitation workers strike in February, 1968. Two sanitation workers were crushed to death in a garbage compactor where they were taking shelter from the rain. This, together with many racial and working-class injustices, prompted Martin Luther King Jr. to join a citywide march on March 18 to honor these men, supporting the Memphis sanitation strike, and address the human rights violations that led to their deaths. The march ended with police action, but another was scheduled.

April 4, 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King is assassinated in Memphis, the evening before the second march. The night that Dr. King is killed, Al is in the studio at Stax recording a song by Shirley Walton entitled "Send Peace and Harmony Home."

The assassination of Dr. King had a profound effect on everyone at Stax as well as the city of Memphis and the country. Isaac Hayes said, "It affected me for a whole year. I could not create properly. I was so bitter and so angry. I thought what can I do? Well, I can't do a thing about it so let me become successful and powerful enough where I can have a voice to make a difference. So I went back to work and started writing again."

Stax leaves Atlantic.

Jim Stewart severs the distribution deal with Atlantic effective the first week of May 1968. At that point, Stewart found out that the contract he signed back in May 1965 was a master purchase as opposed to a master lease agreement. That meant that Atlantic retained the rights in perpetuity to distribute any Stax recording that they had distributed up to that date. That effectively meant that Stax lost its entire back catalogue.

Combined with the death of Otis Redding the previous December and Atlantic recalling Sam & Dave who had been on loan to Stax, the company found itself effectively gutted and starting from scratch.

"We woke up one day, and Otis was gone, Sam and Dave was gone, and we did not have a catalog. We had nothing," said Al. "It was being written that Stax is dead, Stax is over. The industry was saying we were dead. But I didn't accept that."

Post-King, Johnny Baylor comes to Stax.

Dr. King's murder brought threats to the Stax community. The area surrounding the offices at Stax gets rougher. Stax now has to be mindful of this and getting the area to be safe affects the entire ecosystem.

Two local thugs, Sam Armour and "Chicken," attempted to shake down Stax. The offices no longer felt safe for employees.

Al, through Mack Guy (a driver whom Al had working for him), hired Johnny Baylor and Dino Woodard from New York to provide security. Baylor was 38 years old at the time. Born in Jefferson County, Alabama, Baylor had been in the U.S. Army from 1949-1952 as either a PFC or a corporal. Dino Woodard says that Baylor was a Ranger (the Rangers were the predecessors of the Green Berets) during the Korean conflict.

Baylor had been a sparring partner for Sugar Ray Robinson and Baylor and Woodard took care of the local shake down issues. They would become more ingrained in the Stax community over the next few years.

Baylor will go from security to working for Isaac Hayes to promotion to collection to having his label (Koko) distributed through Stax. For this specific period of time, Al credits Baylor's abilities with helping keep the label afloat and ongoing.

Stax goes to Gulf and Western.

As Atlantic and Warner Brothers now had teamed up to start a "major" music corporation like CBS. This was the start of a new era- an arms race really- of corporate record business. Being an undercapitalized label with no back catalog was a tough possible position for Stax. Stax Records needed cash and distribution for new releases. Al enlisted the aid of Clarence Avant, whom he had met through the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA). Avant was just then embarking upon a career as a "deal" maker. "Clarence knew his way around New York City," stresses Al. "He knew the decision makers in the music business. I didn't. So I needed to relate to someone who knew their way around the turf."

After a series of unfruitful discussions with MCA, MGM, and ABC, in the early months of 1968 Avant arranged for Stax to be sold to Gulf and Western effective May 29th, twenty-three days after the date the Atlantic/Stax distribution deal was to conclude.

"We needed money to operate. I had a dear friend who became our angel in Clarence Avant. He was a master sales person, but more importantly, he was respected throughout the big business world, particularly in the entertainment world. I spoke to him about our situation, and Clarence knew Charlie Bluhdorn at Gulf and Western. Clarence took this little company that had no master tape catalog, this little company that had lost his flag ship artist, this little company that no one believed could be raised from the dead, and sold that company to Gulf and Western for us." Gulf and Western already owned Dot Records, Famous Music, and Paramount Pictures. Acquiring Stax was simply another piece in the puzzle as the Los Angeles-based corporation continued to diversify its holdings.

At this point Al is given a 10% stake in Stax. Gulf and Western design the new "finger snapping" logo for what was effectively a relaunch of Stax.

Finger Snap: Stax Rebuilds on a Brown Paper Bag Business Plan.

As the sun arose in Memphis on May 6, 1968, Stax had been effectively gutted. For all intents and purposes it was a new record company poised to issue its first few records.

Three singles were released in May, one more in June, and a further three in July. Of those seven releases on either Stax or Volt, three--Booker T. and the MG's "Soul Limbo," Eddie Floyd's "I've Never Found a Girl (To Love Me Like You Do)," and William Bell and Judy Clay's duet on "Private Number"--were bona-fide chart hits. It was an auspicious beginning. All were cut on the company's newly acquired Scully 8-track recorder.

The SCLC convention in Memphis, August, 1968.

In August the annual SCLC convention take place in Memphis.

With Dr. King's passing and Stax now going through ann existence without Otis or Atlantic, the SCLC convention also marked a change for the non-violence movement.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy is selected to take over from the deceased Dr. King as the leader of the SCLC. Abernathy delivers the "I Am Somebody" litany that started as a poem written in the early 1940s by Reverend William Holmes Borders, Sr., senior pastor at the Greater Wheat Street Baptist Church and civil rights activist in Atlanta, Georgia.

"I Am Somebody" would later be used as a calling card by Rev. Jesse Jackson including at the Wattstax concert in Los Angeles in August 1972.

Furthering the mission.

The legacy of black pride, black power, black culture and black economic empowerment was something Al felt a responsibility for.

Stax's next wave of music would reflect this responsibility.

The Staples Singers.

Stax was more consciously than ever now blending music and a responsibility to the community. The Staple Singers were signed to Stax by Al whom they had known since the mid-'50s, when he used to play their records on his gospel radio show out of Little Rock; Al also occasionally booked the band for a week at a time in the surrounding area.

"Ever since I've been in the record business," muses Al, "one of my hidden desires was to record the Staple Singers. I was just so in love with their singing style. I used to play their music on the air a lot as a jock when I was in Little Rock. The minute I got to Stax and got an opportunity to reach out for them I did. I always believed that the Staple Singers could be one of the biggest acts in the world."

In September, 1968, Steve Cropper paired the Staples with a Homer Banks composition, "Long Walk to D.C.," - after "Resurrection City" with the Poor People's Campaign's sit-in, run by Jesse Jackson, in Washington.

On Sunday May 12, 1968, demonstrators led by Coretta Scott King began a two-week protest in Washington, D.C., demanding an Economic Bill of Rights. May 12 was Mothers' Day, and five thousand people marched to protest 1967 cuts to Head Start, as well as other elements of mounting racist realities.

"The songwriters at Stax knew we were doing protest songs," recounts Mavis. "We had made a transition back there in the '60s with Dr. King. We visited Dr. King's church in Montgomery before the movement actually got started. When we heard Dr. King preach, we went back to the motel and had a meeting. Pops said, 'Now if he can preach this, we can sing it. That could be our way of helping towards this movement.' We put a beat behind the song. We were mainly focusing on the young adults to hear what we were doing. You know if they hear a beat, that would make them listen to the words. So we started singing protest songs. All those guys were writing what we actually wanted them to write. Pops would tell them to just read the headlines and whatever they saw in the morning paper that needed to be heard or known about, [they would] write us a song from that."

Homer Banks had been waiting for just such an opportunity. "At the time I was caught up in the cultural revolution," he emphasizes. "They were a group that was really open for that type of material." Unfortunately, "Long Walk to D.C." did not chart. But, in the Staples's case, massive success would be only two years away.

Another early Cropper-produced Staples Singers' recording was a Randy Stewart song called "When Will We Be Paid." The song addresses the issue of reparations. In 1968.

Stax Fax.

Stax Fax was a fan magazine designed to promote the company. Each issue contained record release information, general artist news, a profile of the artist of the month, and an executive message.

Stax Fax was part of a movement to empower black voices in print- Soul! Magazine, published in Los Angeles by Regina Jones started in April, 1966 and The Black Panther newspaper began in April, 1967.

Stax Fax also contained articles on topics such as black identity and struggle, college students cheating, the National association of Television and Radio Announcers (NATRA), sex education, racism, smoking, the lack of exposure for R&B artists on television, Reverend C. L. Franklin, black reporters leaving black newspapers for white media jobs, abortion counselors, Operation Breadbasket, and so on.

The first issue came out in early fall 1968; the eleventh and final issue was mailed out just over a year later. During that period, the magazine grew from four to forty pages with a glossy cover. Originally designed as a tool to develop a national fan club for Stax, Stax and Stax Fax grew at such a rate that a national fan club quickly became a non-viable proposition.

Stax Fax even regularly printed articles on other label's artists. It was clearly a unique publication.

Don Davis. "Who's Making Love?"

In the fall of 1968 Al, in what would prove to be a decisive and controversial move, had brought a producer from Detroit, Don Davis, into the Stax family. Al had been introduced to Davis in 1967 by former Memphian and member of Carla Thomas's graduating class, Detroit disc jockey Wash Allen. "I was talking to Wash about Carla Thomas," asserts Al. "Carla hadn't had a big hit [in a while] and I was trying to find somebody out of that end of the country that could produce a big hit on Carla because I felt Carla could potentially be like Diana Ross. I thought her appeal was on that level. The term I used at that time was cross-fertilization: Memphis and Detroit. . . . To me it seemed if one could come up with a cross-fertilization of Memphis and Detroit, musically you would have *the* thing in the marketplace. You'd have the guts on the bottom with Stax and have the middle and top, the lyrics, and everything else that Motown had."

Don Davis, it was hoped, would bring some of the Motown energy to Stax.

However, when Taylor would soon produce Johnnie Taylor's monster hit "Who's Making Love," it created some friction as the Big 6 had passed on the song. The Big 6 were a coop, but when Davis came, they didn't allow him to be part of the profit sharing. When "Who's Making Love" became a hit, this had reverberations.

Taylor, "the Philosopher of Soul," was a huge talent who Al believed in and Davis had delivered with a song that had hilarious reactions- as Al will describe.

Davis had well over a dozen other hits for various Stax artists. He also brought the Dramatics to the company.

Al Becomes an Owner, the Soul Explosion and Gettin' It All Together.

In early 1969, Jim and Al buy Estelle Axton out and Al assumes a 50% ownership of Stax Records. In the meantime, Al and everyone else at Stax were in an absolute frenzy attempting to ready 27 albums for simultaneous release in May. This audacious move was orchestrated by Al with the singular purpose of creating an instantaneous catalogue to replace what had been lost in the termination of the Atlantic distribution deal.

To put the size of this release in perspective, the company had issued only 43 albums in total from inception through the dissolution of the agreement with Atlantic.

In February Herb Kole was hired away from Atlantic as vice-president of merchandising and marketing to help prepare for the massive release.

Tied to this ambitious release schedule were a number of major promotional events, linked by the title "Gettin' It All Together." This title was first used for a Stax television special that aired in selected markets beginning on April 24th. The special was produced by Neal Marshall and directed by Art Fisher for Metromedia stations across the country. Shot before a live audience at WNEW's New York studios, the special was apparently inspired and modeled on Motown's Diana Ross and the Supremes and Temptations's "T.C.B.--Taking Care of Business" special aired the previous December.

Animated films were used to introduce each artist leading a reviewer in *Variety* to state that the "production values were extraordinary." Booker T. Jones served as the show's musical director, wrote the "Gettin' It All Together" theme song, and sang a duet with Carla Thomas on "Yesterday."

Thomas also dueted with Sam and Dave on the duo's "Don't Turn Your Heater Down" and with Dave alone on "Tramp" from the *King and Queen* album she cut with Otis Redding. The latter was part of a tribute to Redding that also included Sam Moore singing "Try a Little Tenderness," and Sam and Dave singing "These Arms of Mine." The show's grand finale was a rollicking MG's-Carla Thomas-Sam and Dave version of "I Heard It Through the Grapevine"! In addition to its New York airing, "Gettin' It All Together" was broadcast in Washington, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Curiously, this appears to be the extent of its exposure.

Following the airing of the special, Stax booked the weekends of May 16-18 and 24-25 at the Holiday Inn Rivermont in Memphis to unveil their new "instant" catalogue. The first weekend was designed to introduce the product to the people at Gulf and Western as well as retailers and distributors. The second weekend was a media junket where Stax flew to Memphis trade paper staff writers, and consumer publication record reviewers and editors. The theme of both weekends followed the special's title, "Gettin' It All Together."

Just a year earlier, following the end of its relationship with Atlantic records, Stax was a record company without a catalog; now, it had launched a gambit that could either save or sink the company. Stax artists performed, label heads Jim Stewart and Al Bell took part in multimedia slideshows to announce each release, while label staff sold this new era of Stax to record wholesalers and the media alike. All told, the price tag of the launch was \$250,000.

Al and Stax had gotten Gulf and Western to pay for the conference. If it hadn't gone well, the reality is that Stax might not have survived.

It went well.

Stax sold over \$2 million in product over the two weekends, not only launching a new catalog, but also a new era for the company that, according to Al Bell, "positioned Stax in the Record industry as a viable independent record company."

Hot Buttered Soul.

Significantly, the most successful of the 27 albums recorded for Al's instant catalog, Isaac Hayes's *Hot Buttered Soul*, had nothing whatsoever to do with the "Stax sound."

No single album had a greater impact on the direction of black music in the first half of the 1970s. *Hot Buttered Soul* was THE transition from Booker T. and the MGs to a new era.

Isaac's first album, "Presenting Isaac Hayes," had been made at Stax with the MGs. "Hot Buttered Soul" was made with the younger Bar-Kays- with Al, Marvell Thomas and Isaac Hayes producing the record at Ardent Studios instead of Stax. Only four songs were cut, an 18-minute version of Glen Campbell's 1967 hit "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," a 12-minute version of Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "Walk On By," a nine minute track Al called "Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymistic," and a relatively short five-minute take on Memphis songwriters Charlie Chalmers and Sandy Rhodes's "One Woman." The length of the songs, the arrangements, the long rap that preceded "Phoenix," and Hayes's vocal style were all radically different from what was going on in mainstream R&B at the time.

This album is a new thing. It sets the stage for album based black music- followed by Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Sly Stone, Funkadelic and others... a true auteur approach with Isaac using the studio and the band to create a genre of music that did not exist before.

Stax Promotion.

Again... Al's catholic education in the record business was a boon because he knew the business as a fan, as a DJ, as a promotion man, as a record producer, as a writer, as a label owner.

The late 1960s saw a seismic change in society and culture and also as the record business- which historically had been mob controlled - was now being corporatized- as was the mob.

Warners and Atlantic had been bought by Kinney, whose business was parking lots in Manhattan. (Beat for emphasis.) Warners' President Mo Ostin started as Frank Sinatra's accountant and with Sinatra's help, Ostin created a national- and ultimately global- promotion and distribution network. Al created Stax's promotion department in his own image, from his own experience. Stax's promo team were both mercenaries and family.

In September 1969, to deal with the company's increased rate of record releases and sales and to be responsible only for Stax, Stewart and Al announced the hiring of six new promotion men. LeRoy Little and Bob Spendlove were hired to work at the National level, while David Ezzell and David "Jo Jo" Samuels were set to work the South, Jack "The Rapper" Gibson the Midwest, and Harold Burnside the East. In November, Gibson, one of the first black disc jockeys in the United States, was promoted to the National level.

Soul Explodes.

Herb Kole, director of merchandising and marketing, announced the sale of one million albums just seven weeks after the Soul Explosion sales meeting in 1969 In the first year with Gulf and Western from June 1, 1968 to June 1, 1969, Stax sold over ten million singles through 32 national distributors.

Change. Booker leaves. Duck, Al Jackson and Steve Cropper stay.

With the success of "Hot Buttered Soul," the emergence of the Staples Singers and all the other hit music combined with the integration of Stax's own promotion team, Al had recreated Stax. Stax was now the second largest independently owned black owned record company in the world. Stax was hot. The record business requires constant reinvention and when Stax started, it was a small label built around a young rhythm section.

As Stax grew, these young people were now adults, with families and careers and change was more upsetting than it was years before.

Booker T. Jones played his final sessions for Stax in May 1969. In June he moved to first Indiana and then Los Angeles. Booker actively tried to entice the rest of the MG's into leaving Stax, relocating to California, and signing with A&M, reasoning that as long as they remained at Stax, they would always be session musicians first, artists in their own right second.

Al, Duck, and Steve remained steadfastly loyal to the company and consequently didn't take Booker up on his offer. The four continued to work together as Booker T. and the MG's through the end of 1970 at which point Booker decided he couldn't even continue to do that as long as the records were being released by Stax. What was probably the greatest house band in R&B history and, without a doubt, the most important instrumental group in soul music ceased to exist.

Growth: the Stax Organization.

Al changed the name to the Stax Organization.

With Stax selling so many records, In February 1970, Stax moved their office staff from the McLemore studio location to a 6900 square foot facility on North Avalon in mid-town Memphis. This was out of necessity but this growth also creates friction.

Al was driving to make Stax a full service record company- like Columbia. Columbia owned record stores, had CBS television... and Al saw the ability to contribute and control the narrative that CBS had. [What narrative?]

However, on the homefront, no longer is everyone in the Stax world all in the same locale. And there is change that inevitably comes over time.

Larry Shaw.

Jan 1970, Larry Shaw comes to the company bringing a "psychographic" approach that mixed sales and black empowerment. Shaw, who as an advertising executive had made Afro Sheen into a household name, was in sync with Al's philosophy of community, black consciousness and profit. He changes the company's finger snapping logo from a white to a brown hand.

Shaw curated Al's creativity, and helped brand "The Memphis Sound"- putting it atop full page trade ads and also in lifestyle magazines like Jet. Stax helped out Soul! magazine as well as Essence (formed in 1970) to help the community of black owned business to survive without having to dependent upon white corporations.

The artwork of Stax during this period reveals a symbiosis between the black community, Stax and the listener. Unlike most record companies, Stax created advertising that highlights both individual releases as well as the artist, the label, and the city and community of Memphis and the south as a whole.

Stax Leaves Gulf and Western.

In a 1969 Wall Street analysts, congressmen and the media charged that conglomerates inflated their earnings by promotional tricks with their accounting procedures. As a result of this anti-conglomerate sentiment, Gulf & Western's stock dropped 30 points in a short period, costing shareholders \$500 million.

The sinking of Gulf and Western stock hurt Jim who had wanted to cash out. Al had different issues. Unhappy not having the ability to dictate the larger agenda Al envisioned and frustrated by distribution concerns and problems, in July 1970 Al & Jim buy Stax back from Gulf and Western. Clarence Avant again helps make the deal by securing a loan from Deutsche Grammaphone in

Europe in exchange for European rights to distribute Stax. (Deutsche Grammaphone's subsidiary label Polydor had distributed Stax through Atlantic starting in 1966.)

"Our sales numbers were very impressive and Deutsche Grammaphone made available to us a loan. It was almost enough for us to acquire Stax back from Gulf and Western. For doing that we would give them exclusive rights for international representation of Stax and a minority interest in the company. The other dollars, which was about \$1 million, we were able to secure through Union Planters National Bank."

Stax next generation: Delivering the word.

In August 1970 Al was convinced by Jesse Jackson to produce the Staple Singers. The Staples had recently covered "Give a Damn" by Spanky and our Gang, and the record had its heart in the right place, but didn't get the totality of soul of the Staples. The Staples needed to establish their uniqueness on record.

"I had gone into Chicago to visit Jesse [Jackson]," explains Al. "He was sick. While there at his home with his family by his bedside, Jesse said to me, 'Mate, you know y'all missin' it with Mavis and them. See, can't nobody cut the Staple Singers but you. You got to understand Mississippi to be able to cut the Staple Singers, you got to understand that harmony that they do, you got to be able to understand the gospel. Now mate, I think you're doing a disservice to Pops and you ain't doin' your company well. If you went into the studio and cut the Staple Singers yourself and devoted the time and attention to them like you're doing to that bald-headed rascal over there, they would be very, very big for you and you'd be getting a good message out here. Culturally, it would be important for us.'

"His argument, on its face, made sense to me," continues Al. "Jesse was very creative and he understands creative people. [He has] a great ear. I respected what he was saying."

Al took the group to Muscle Shoals. When asked why he elected not to record them in Memphis at Stax he responded: "[The MG's] would resist me on a lot of stuff, the reason being because I wasn't a musician. That's why I did all my productions outside of Stax. I wasn't respected internally as a producer. I couldn't direct [the session musicians] internally. They had their own thoughts. I needed to deal with somebody that I could direct."

The first session at Muscle Shoals in August 1970 produced the double-sided hit "Love Is Plentiful" and "Heavy Makes You Happy (Sha-Na-Boom-Boom)." By early 1972 the Staple Singers had become soul music superstars riding the wave of Al produced hits such as "Respect Yourself" and Al's song "I'll Take You There." All of Al's productions were cut in Muscle Shoals rather than the Stax studios in Memphis.

Steve Cropper leaves Stax.

In September 1970 in a move that once and for all signified the changing of the guard at Stax, Steve Cropper handed in his resignation.

Steve felt a need for a change and so Steve went and became a successful independent producer outside of Stax.

Ever since the European tour of 1967, Cropper felt that he had had most of his power taken away from him. The arrival of Don Davis and the diversion of a substantial number of sessions to Muscle Shoals had simply exacerbated the problems. Although he was still the company's primary guitarist and one of Stax's chief producers, he was unhappy. With Booker no longer being a part of the equation, his heart was pretty well gone from Stax.

The Isaac Hayes Era: the era of albums.

Isaac Hayes had become the center- and the symbol- of Stax- and for black America. Al had believed in Isaac- and together they had transformed the business of black music from the three minute single into the double album.

Stax transformed into a label of albums as well as singles. Album sales meant much more money than singles, and Al's bet of 27 albums had led to incredible success- even though the only album that had really become a big hit was the afterthought:

"Hot Buttered Soul."

Al had seen an ad for "Hot Buttered Rum" from Trader Vic's and his marketing sense was to change "Rum" to "Soul" and to take advantage of what Al thought was a marketing opportunity:

Isaac's bald head.

Isaac became a sex symbol with the photos, and "Hot Buttered Soul" became a phenomenon. Soon thereafter, Isaac's dominance in the marketplace was about to go, ahem, off the chain... with "Shaft."

Oscar. Shut your mouth.

Shaft changed the game.

In April 1971, Isaac Hayes was recording tracks for his soundtrack for *Shaft*, the motherlode of all blaxploitation films as well as cutting tracks for the follow-up double album, *Black Moses*.

The *Shaft* album went to number one on both the pop and R&B album charts, staying on the pop listings for 60 weeks. The single, "Theme from *Shaft*," also went number one pop, although, oddly enough, it only made it to the number two spot on the R&B charts.

The single "Theme from *Shaft*" won two Grammy Awards that year and Isaac also won a Grammy in the "Best Original Score Written for a Motion Picture" category.

Isaac also became the first black person to win an Academy Award on April 10, 1972 in the "Best Song" category. It was a victory for all of black America.

Black Moses.

In November 1971, Stax issued Hayes' *Black Moses* album. It was Dino Woodard who came up with the "Black Moses" tag. "Dino said, 'Man, look at those people out there.,'" explains Isaac. "'Do you know what you're bringing into their lives? Look at these guys from Vietnam man, how they're crying when they see you, how you helped them through when they was out there in the jungle

and they stuck to your music. You like a Moses, man. You just like Black Moses, you the modern day Moses!

"Somebody got wind of that and when I opened in Philadelphia at the Spectrum, 18,000 people, Georgie Woods, who was a local radio personality and a promoter introduced me that night. He said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I bring to you the Black Moses of the music world--Isaac Hayes,' and the whole place stood, people just screaming and it caught on. A writer for *Jet* magazine named Chester Higgins did an article on me and he used the term Black Moses, and then Larry Shaw had the savvy to capitalize on it and entitle the album *Black Moses*.

"I had nothing to do with it. I was kicking and screaming all the way. But, when I saw the relevance and effect that it had on people, it wasn't a negative thing. It was a healing thing, it was an inspiring thing. It raised the level of Black Consciousness in the States. People were proud to be black. Black men could finally stand up and be men because here's Black Moses, he's the epitome of black masculinity. Chains that once represented bondage and slavery now can be a sign of power and strength and sexuality and virility."

End of Episode.

Episode 3:**The Country Preacher. I Am Somebody: Jesse Jackson.**

We start episode two with the ascendancy of Jesse Jackson, Stax records, Al Bell and black empowerment in the early 1970s.

In 1971 Al establishes the RESPECT label as a vehicle to release politically oriented material. The first release is an album called The Country Preacher "Jesse Jackson: I Am Somebody." Stax, via Al, was producing product about and for the culture and black empowerment. Al grasped the importance of the media, and understood how to focus the media on uplifting (social) messages and strong economic incentive for black Americans.

Al is now a quiet, thoughtful force in black America- not just in the record business but also in terms of plotting and executing an agenda to lead black America.

The partnership between Al, Jesse and Stax is furthering of the mission of the civil rights and black power movements of the preceding decade. Jesse and Al felt the same way about black economic empowerment.

Al helped make Jesse a transformational national figure. Jesse was young, energetic and a great speaker. His association with Stax was not unlike that of a recording artist, and Jesse's bona fides are solidified with his association with Stax. Jesse, originally from South Carolina but now a Chicago mainstay, was known as "the country preacher."

In 1966, Dr. King appointed Jesse to serve as the first director of Operation Breadbasket in Chicago. Operation Breadbasket sought to combine theology and social justice, and to effect progressive economic, educational, and social policy in America.

In 1969, Jesse starts Black Expo, with the SCLC.

In December 1971, Jesse resigned from Operation Breadbasket after clashing with Ralph Abernathy and founded Operation PUSH- People United to Save Humanity (later changed from "Save" to "Serve"). PUSH, was an organization dedicated to improving the economic conditions of black communities across the United States.

In the 1970's, PUSH expanded into areas of social and political development using direct action campaigns, a weekly radio broadcast, and awards that honored prominent blacks in the U.S. and abroad. Through Operation PUSH, Jesse established a platform from which to protect black homeowners, workers and businesses.

Video.

1971 after seeing a demonstration of video technology in Spain, Al realizes that cable TV is coming and that content will be needed. Deutsche Grammaphone had shown Al early videocassette technology and Al could see the future.

"Woodstock" has been a studio-saving endeavor for Warner Brothers Films and their synergized family members Atlantic Records (a three times platinum album).

Al makes promotional videos for the Staple Singers for the songs "I'll Take You There" and "Respect Yourself" and begins to think of forming Stax Films.

Elton Hayes.

In mid-October 1971 the Memphis police beat a 17-year-old black student by the name of Elton Hayes (no relation) to death.

The police had originally claimed that Hayes had died in a car accident. When the truth came out, that 28 officers beat Hayes to death, many young black Memphians took to the streets and rioted. At least one person was shot. Mayor Henry Loeb put a 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew on the entire city. "They [the police] were trying to provoke blacks into doing something so they could shoot them like dogs," said Isaac.

Mayor Loeb called for a meeting with "responsible" black leaders, and Isaac Hayes came to the meeting. Isaac took to the streets and tried to help quell the rioting.

Two months later, eight law officers were indicted on murder.

Two years later, all of the officers were acquitted.

Union Planters.

Because Stax had been so prompt (early even) in repaying the \$1 million loan to buy out Gulf and Wester, Union Planters National Bank was trying to find any way it could to be involved with Stax. In Nov. 1971--Al and Jim Stewart borrowed \$2.5 million from Union Planters National Bank for the purpose of buying out the 45 percent of Stax stock still owned by Deutsche Grammophone through their American paper company, Music Ventures. The actual cost of buying DG out was \$4.8 million. Al and Stewart paid the remaining \$2.3 million in cash.

The Union Planters loan was executed November 10, 1971. Stax was so hot at the time that Al and Stewart paid the complete debt off by June 27, 1972, again, several months ahead of schedule. It was Stax's ability to pay off such a large loan so quickly that made both Stax and the expansion-oriented Union Planters Bank so eager to negotiate future large-scale loans. Both corporations would end up regretting this decision.

Johnny Baylor, Part 2.

Baylor helped keep Stax safe after Dr. King's passing. Baylor also helped keep Stax's marketing and promotion together while Al and Jim were busy making the deals to recapture the company. Stax's loyalty to Baylor- and vice versa- was real.

Johnny Baylor was now a road manager for Isaac Hayes. Isaac was very successful and Baylor had a nose for going where the action was. Luther Ingram, Baylor's client, was opening for Isaac and Baylor was a force inside the music business and inside Stax. However, in late 1971, after a falling out with Isaac Hayes that led to an armed confrontation in a Stax hallway between Johnny Baylor's men and Isaac's, Baylor begins to work for Stax doing promotional work.

Stax distributes Baylor's Koko label. Baylor's promotional tactics are very successful. Johnny Baylor was famous as an enforcer and also for making sure DJs played Stax product. And not to forget, Al took care of DJs. Al put money in their pockets and offered opportunity for DJs as Al knew the reality of having to make a living as a DJ. That is not to say that the music industry wasn't

competitive, but it is important to note that Stax/Al cultivated a community, and if Stax needed some community loyalty, Johnny Baylor could offer a reminder.

"They were like the Green Berets," marvels Al. "They could go into a marketplace; Teddy would go to the distributor and take inventory, Jamo would hit the retail outlets, and Dino would be at the radio [stations]. Johnny was the field marshal. They would go into a marketplace and hit everything that needed to be hit."

Baylor and Woodard had some rather effective, if novel, ways of promoting a record.

"They would get results," smiles former Stax controller Robert Harris. "They'd spend four days in town. They'd fly in, go to the hotel and check in, pay four days up front, go to the radio station and let everybody know they were there, leave, and catch a plane and go on to the next town. They wouldn't stay in town but three hours but they got a four-day room. Everyone knew that that [radio station] would play [Stax Records] for four days. They'd call the hotel, 'Well, he's not in right now; he hasn't checked out yet.' They did that across the country and did it quite well. They were effective in their promotion."

Johnny Baylor produced Luther Ingram's "(If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don't Want to be Right" - a huge selling record for Stax in 1972.

I'll Take you There.

In 1971, Al made his way back to North Little Rock to bury his brother, who was shot to death. "I was here for four or five days doing nothing but looking for his murderer," Al said.

After the funeral, Al sat on an old school bus that was in his father's backyard and started to reflect. "I started crying. All I could do was cry," Bell said. "And then I heard, 'bum bum bum bum,' in my head." In February, 1972, Al writes and produces the Staple Singers' "I'll Take You There."

Al took the Staples to be recorded in Muscle Shoals. Al and the Staples felt a different attitude with the Muscle Shoals band than with Booker T. and the MGs- not that they were together/available by this point any way.

The Muscle Shoals fellows worked more collaboratively is how Al and the Staples felt. Songs were not started as grooves first with lyrics and melodies added. With the Muscle Shoals fellows, Al and the Staples talked about how songs were handled more holistically and ultimately, this sound is an evolution and a breakthrough.

The lyrics and message of the song are hopeful, energetic, enthusiastic, and contagious. This is the song from a leader. This is a song that could not have been written without the information of Dr. King or the currency of Jesse Jackson or the immediacy of Al's brother's passing.

I know a place

Ain't nobody crying

Ain't nobody worried

Ain't no smiling faces, lying to the races.

I'll take you there.

The message of Al Bell was a #1 pop and R&B hit.

Reparations... electoral politics... black economic independence... these were now not only issues that were in the consciousness... they were now on the radio gently reminding the world of a responsibility to the greater good of mankind.

For Al, he has ascended to a unique place in the record making pantheon- worthy of the greatest of the greats- writer, producer, record man... and a leader.

Stax and Muscle Shoals... and Ardent... and elsewhere...

Al had come to Stax primarily as a promotion man. Jim Stewart and the MG's were the creative forces in the studio. That dynamic had changed.

"I'll Take You There" and all the other Staples recordings that Al produced were cut in Muscle Shoals. "Mr. Big Stuff" by Jean Knight was recorded in 1970 at Malaco Studio in Jackson, Mississippi. Stax was no longer just the studio at McLemore.

For Jim Stewart, Al's decision to record in Muscle Shoals had larger ramifications: "[Al] never liked the McLemore atmosphere. I always maintained that the minute that studio died and that energy died, the company died. I think history has proven that correct."

By late spring 1972-- For Jim Stewart, Stax had simply stopped being fun. The company that he had started on a wing and a prayer so many years earlier had changed drastically. With the demise of Booker T. and the MG's Jim had ceased feeling comfortable working at the studio.

In fact, Stewart had not produced a single session between 1967 and late 1971. At that point he briefly reentered the studio to produce, in tandem with Al Jackson, the Soul Children's *Genesis* LP and the Emotions' "My Honey and Me" single. He found that the sound and aesthetic of Stax that he had helped forge, nurture, and loved so dearly had become a dim memory to most of the company's current personnel.

Expansion.

In light of its recent success, Stax began further expansion.

While Stax continued as a small company, but now had corporate multinational sized revenues. Al had his eyes on Stax becoming a bigger entity.

Warners and Atlantic and Elektra were now with Warner Brothers films. CBS was the the largest label and were a part of a television and radio network.

Al Bell saw that between the growing black independent film scene and the success of "Woodstock," there was an opportunity to define Stax in film.

Black independent films were a furthering of black independence. "Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song" had come out in April, 1971, (predating "Shaft" by two months) and the "Seetback's" soundtrack album, released by Stax, featured the then unknown Earth, Wind & Fire (whose leader, Maurice White- along with brothers drummer Freddie and bassist Verdine- were high school class mates with Booker T.).

While "Shaft" was handled by MGM and Isaac following up on "Hot Buttered Soul," Al came up with a unique strategy that would take advantage of Stax's marketing to help the "Sweetback's" (and the soundtrack). To attract publicity for the film without spending significant money, the Stax soundtrack was released before the movie; it performed well, reaching No. 13 on the Billboard Top R&B Albums chart.

Initially, the film was screened in only two theaters in the United States. It went on to gross \$15.2 million at the box office (\$100 million adjusted for today). This was not MGM's money. This was black independent economic empowerment.

Huey P. Newton celebrated and welcomed the film's revolutionary implications, and "Sweetback" became required viewing for members of the Black Panther Party. According to Variety, it demonstrated to Hollywood that films which portrayed "militant" blacks could be highly profitable, leading to the creation of the blaxploitation genre.

In February 1972, Stax announced plans to invest in a forthcoming Broadway musical, "The Selling of the President." According to a Stax publicity release, this was the first time a black record and music publishing company was a major investor in a Broadway musical. Based on a best-selling book by Joe McGinnis and directed by Robert Livingston, "The Selling of the President." opened at the Schubert Theatre March 29, 1972. It quickly failed after five performances. On April 17, 1973, Stax was assigned a one-half interest in the music compositions from the play written by Jack O'Brien and Bob James. A soundtrack album was scheduled for release but, when the musical closed, the album was scrapped. Stax lost a total of \$176,000 on the Broadway play. A company press release at the time stated that this was to be the first of "numerous moves by this Company into the leisure-time areas."

February also marked the release of the first country album by Stax and black singer O.B. McClinton.

Kickbacks.

In November November 1971 two Stax executives- Ewell Rousell, vice president of sales and Herbert Kole, vice president of merchandising and marketing- were accused of piracy. Both had access to the master tapes and connections at the pressing plants for records and art, and Stax alleged that they manufactured illegal albums and sold them for profit: about \$380,000 profit. Rousell and Kole also forced a kick back from local and national photographers hired for album covers and promotional shots: another \$26,000.

"Jim and I decided not to prosecute them. You go your way we don't want to send you through these kinds of problems. You've got family, kids. We're supposed to turn them into the bonding company, the bonding company would have given us our money back, and then the bonding company could have caused them to be prosecuted. We let them go, and several other people, at that point in time."

CBS.

CBS wanted into the black music marketplace. Clive Davis, CBS' President , had had success with Sly Stone and was now in business and having success with Gamble and Huff and their Philadelphia International roster.

Stax was now on the radar of CBS. To cut to it: Al and Clive Davis were going to be a great team- Davis would supply the distribution, Al would do promotion.

Stax had the economic empowerment that came from access to black markets. CBS wanted what Stax had: a conduit into the black community and the accompanying stream of revenues.

Al was now the sole owner of Stax. In October 1972, Al bought out Stewart's remaining interest in the company, and from June through October 1972 Al was negotiating a deal for distribution with CBS Records and Clive Davis.

Al's vision: Stax had created a unique pipeline within the "mom and pop" retailers. CBS provided access to the "rack jobbers" - the record buyers in department stores such as Macy's and thereby through CBS, Stax could start selling a greater number of albums as opposed to singles. CBS also promised, most importantly, that they could stock stores quickly- a huge selling point. Al also saw this deal as facilitating the company expanding further into the areas of rock, country and pop. Black music had been, up until *Hot Butter Soul*, a business dependent on singles, which were not nearly as profitable as full-length albums.

Davis was also cognizant of the blaxploitation phenomena and the subsequent success of black soundtrack albums such as *Shaft*. In conjunction with Bruce Lundvall, he logically concluded that CBS should move aggressively into R&B in the same fashion that Davis had done so successfully with rock some five years earlier, starting at Monterey.

Davis saw Stax as a means for CBS to fully break into the African American market and successfully compete with Motown. Al had originally proposed that CBS buy 50% of the company, but Davis discussed it with CBS's corporate attorneys, who saw anti-trust problems, so a national distribution deal was worked out instead.

"A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group"

CBS, THE major label, knew that other major labels were not involved in black music. With the success of *Hot Buttered Soul* and Stax's success selling albums, CBS and President Clive Davis were interested in Stax. Proving the concept to Davis' corporate bosses was the first step.

In late 1971 Logan Westbrook, a six-year industry veteran most recently employed at Mercury Records as National R&B Promotion Manager, was appointed as Director of Special Markets (a CBS euphemism for R&B). Westbrook's mandate, as he articulated it in his 1981 book *The Anatomy of a Record Company: How to Survive the Record Business*, was to "create a black marketing staff to penetrate the black market."

Leaving no angle unexplored, CBS executive Larry Isaacson commissioned his alma mater, the Harvard Business School, to conduct a study and make recommendations as to whether CBS should, and how they might best, become a dominant force in soul music. Submitted to CBS on May 11, 1972, and formally titled "A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group," this report has since become known simply as *The Harvard Report*.

The report, in hindsight, is a corporate manifesto on breaking the backs of independents. The report said that Stax and CBS were "soul foes" for the lucrative black music marketplace.

The report included, "Especially dangerous to CBS is the expansion of such companies as Motown, Atlantic and Stax into the pop field because a dominant position in soul has provided these companies with the financial and management resources, and the consumer visibility to broaden their product line and move into other and related markets."

Unbeknownst to AI, CBS was putting through a corporate mandate that would limit the growth potential of Stax at the same time they were going to distribute Stax.

End of Episode.

Episode 4:

WattStax.

On August 20, 1972 the Wattstax Summer Festival was staged at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Tickets were \$1 so as to be affordable to the community. The show featured virtually every artist on the Stax label and was also designed to help Stax gain a greater presence on the West Coast, to create the first major product for Stax films and to benefit the Watts community still reeling from the impact of the Watts rebellion from 1965.

Motown had moved to Los Angeles at this time and was diversifying into film also, albeit in a much more traditional way by working through the existing studio system.

All together, *Wattstax* was a perfect example of Al combining community good, marketing acumen and expansion of Stax as a company.

Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH had organized a boycott of Schlitz. Schlitz signed a corporate covenant promising that blacks would become 15% of the company's workforce. The agreement with Schlitz included 286 jobs for blacks; \$10-million in black banks; \$15- million in black insurance companies; \$7-million to black contractors; \$1-million for black advertising companies and publications. Both companies agreed to use black doctors, lawyers and other consultants and professionals.

Schlitz agreed to sponsor *Wattstax*, allowing the revenues to go to the Watts Summer Festival, Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital, the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, Operation Push and the Watts Labor Community and Action Committee.

(show the Rufus Thomas Schlitz Malt Liquor ad.)

"*Wattstax*" remains a cultural milestone.

PUSH EXPO '72.

In the last week of September, 1972, Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, Luther Ingram, and Johnnie Taylor gave concert performances (donating their usual fees) at Jesse Jackson's annual PUSH EXPO at Chicago's International Amphitheater, around the year's theme, "Save the Children."

Black Expo's goal was to dramatize black business, culture and consumer power. The five-day exposition consisted of exhibits set up by 500 black and white businesses, daily workshops on education, politics and economics, and nightly entertainment.

Al's friend Clarence Avant produced a film about the event for Paramount Pictures with the Jackson 5, Bill Withers and Isaac Hayes performing.

At PUSH EXPO '72, the Stax booth continuously showed excerpts of "*Wattstax*," and Stax also donated \$2,000 for what was dubbed the "Stax Art Award," a competition involving 600 pieces of art by 200 Black artists from three continents.

Most importantly, PUSH EXPO allowed a platform for black owned business and it marked a coronation for Jesse Jackson, who had a month earlier hosted Wattstax.

The 1972 Black Expo was to have been the fourth annual event sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Instead, it is the first annual black business and cultural trade exposition under the auspices of Operation PUSH, aStax and AI supplied personal and financial support for the expo.

PUSH was designed to execute boycotts and picketing to obtain what it called covenant with companies for increased hiring and promotion of blacks, addition of blacks to business boards, deposits of funds in black banks and purchases of supplies from black suppliers.

The New York Times reported, "Mr. Jackson said the group had succeeded in negotiating more than \$100-million in benefits for blacks with some major American companies. He listed several other corporations and industries that he said would become the objects of drives by PUSH in the next year."

"The immediate goal is acceptance by the major corporations of the quota system as a principle," Mr. Jackson said. "Instead of a quota zero, which was the quota by which we were excluded from job opportunities," he said, "we are insisting that as a matter of principle, that a very minimum hiring policy should be determined in relation to the size of the black population—the importance of our consumer purchasing power to a particular industry."

The Times continued: In an interview, Mr. Jackson, who is constantly introduced at meetings as "the country preacher," said that as part of the economic thrust of PUSH the organization was trying to establish a data bank on one million black consumers detailing their buying habits. Such a system, he said, could also be used to assist in black boycotts of a company's products.

Hundreds of thousands visited the Expo at the International Amphitheater on the city's South Side. The symbolism of black economic empowerment and the promise of this was enormous.

Television.

Films were not the only area that AI was looking to expand into. The January 4th press release boasted that "The Stax Organization is moving heavily into the television musical variety field." The initial effort was developed in partnership with Merv Griffin Productions. On December 12, 1972 the first of a planned six 60-minute shows, *Isaac Hayes and the Stax Organization Presenting the Memphis Sound*, was taped at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas in front of an audience of 2,000. When the program aired in April 1973, American television audiences were treated to performances by Hayes himself, the Emotions, Albert King, Johnnie Taylor, Carla Thomas, Luther Ingram, and the Staple Singers. Isaac, seated at the piano, provided the narration that linked the appearances by each artist.

Johnny Baylor, part 3.

In Birmingham, Alabama on November 30, 1972 Johnny Baylor was detained by the FBI after stepping off a plane flight from Memphis. While going through security in Memphis it was discovered that Baylor had \$130,000 in cash and a check from Stax for \$500,000.

Memphis authorities phoned ahead to the FBI in Birmingham. Three days earlier Al had requested a check written out to him for \$150,000. He then asked Pollack and Dino Woodard (the latter for security purposes) to go to the Union Planters branch at 100 North Main where the loan officer in charge of the Stax account, Joseph Harwell, was based and cash the check in denominations of 50 and 100 dollar bills.

This check was charged to a Stax account labeled "loan to officers," which, according to the IRS, was never paid back. Pollack testified in court that this was extremely unusual. Presumably this is where the cash originated that was being carried by Johnny Baylor on the Memphis-Birmingham flight.

Baylor was taking cash to the DJs across the country- those who had supported Stax and whom Al was worried would be put off by Stax's distribution with CBS Records, which did not have a warm place in the hearts of the DJ community.

Was it payola? Yes. It was part of a system of loyalty and community which Al had engendered.

Baylor testified in court that he did not remember where all the cash had come from, that he had carried thousands of dollars with him from city to city since the beginning of 1972, and that he had just won \$50,000 in three days betting on horse races. On the morning of November 30th, Pollack cut a check for Baylor totaling \$500,000. This check was originally charged to the Stax "loan to officers" account. It was subsequently charged as a royalty payment before being moved to a promotional fees account.

"Johnny Baylor kept Stax going and he had made us a lot of money," said Al. "We owed him the money, and we paid him."

Partee.

Stax forms Partee for comedy-records Clay Tyson, Moms Mabley, Timmie Rodgers and, most importantly, Richard Pryor's breakthrough album "That Nigger's Crazy."

Richard Pryor was a star of the "Wattstax" film, playing the Shakespearean narrator. His Stax debut should have been a huge hit for Stax. More on this later.

1973.

On February 9, 1973, Stax had been informed that it was under investigation by the US Attorney's Office and the IRS in Memphis in regards to Johnny Baylor's association with the company.

Clive's son's bar mitzvah.

In April 1973, following questions raised by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Newark, New Jersey, CBS initiated an internal audit. Both CBS and the U.S. Attorney were particularly concerned with the activities of Clive Davis's righthand man, David Wynshaw.

The federal prosecutors in Newark were interested in a range of issues, foremost among them being payola and the consequent ties between the music industry and organized crime. Wynshaw was found to have set up a number of companies in partnership with Patsy Falcone whom Fredric Dannen describes, in his excellent book *Hitman*, as "an associate of the Genovese family" crime

syndicate. It turns out that Wynshaw and Falcone's "companies" defrauded CBS of tens of thousands of dollars.

Davis was asked to fire Wynshaw in April, and eventually Wynshaw faced criminal charges, being sentenced to a year in jail for conspiring with Patsy Falcone to defraud CBS.

Davis was fired by the company six months after signing the Stax distribution deal because of reports that he used funds from CBS for personal expenditures, including an expensive bar mitzvah of his son. (Davis, for his part, continues to insist that the "official" reason for his firing was only a convenient excuse and that, in reality, his quick ouster was a matter of personality conflict.)

In addition to this untidy mess, CBS was in a near panic over rumors that a Federal Grand Jury probe, operating under the moniker "Project Sound," suspected that the giant corporation might have been involved in payola with a number of black radio stations.

If this proved to be true, CBS's valuable television and radio licenses could be in jeopardy. Leaving no stone unturned, while cleaning out Wynshaw's office, CBS uncovered papers that led them to conclude that Clive Davis had also engaged in unscrupulous activities.

On May 29th, CBS shocked the music industry by terminating Davis. Wasting no time, Davis was immediately and unceremoniously escorted by company security first to his office to pick up his personal effects and then out of the building. That same day, Davis was served with a Civil Complaint alleging \$94,000 worth of expense-account violations over the six years that he had been president. On June 24, 1975, Clive Davis was indicted by a Grand Jury for six counts of tax evasion based on these same expense-account violations. He pleaded guilty to one count and was fined \$10,000 in September 1976. Fourteen months later, he privately settled the civil case with CBS.

Without Clive Davis, CBS kills Stax.

The fallout from the firing of Clive Davis had devastating effects on Stax Records. The deal with CBS was highly unusual by industry standards at the time and was only truly understood by Al and Clive Davis. Davis's successors were not happy with the deal and felt that CBS was paying Stax way too much for their product. They wanted to re-negotiate the contract. Al was adamantly opposed to this.

The net result was a rapid acceleration of the breakdown in relationship between the two companies. In many ways the breakdown was the result of two very different corporate cultures that did not understand their different modes of working.

CBS developed national campaigns for their releases and if a record did not show strong potential after an initial period of time, the company ceased working the record.

In contrast, independent labels in the black record business such as Stax responded in a targeted fashion to regional radio play on its releases, responding often over months to activity in different parts of the country. Independent labels in the black record business also served Mom and Pop record stores in the inner city directly, selling singles in small quantities to each shop on a repeated basis.

For a company such as CBS, this kind of activity did not generate enough profit to be worth its time. Consequently, Stax's existing market began finding it difficult to obtain Stax product.

On August 27th Stax, through East Memphis Music, borrowed another \$530,000 so that they could purchase larger office space. The company's new digs, located at 2693 Union Avenue Extended, were purchased from the First Evangelical Church. Al elected to keep the chapel, which became the site for a few of the more interesting company meetings, and then proceeded to add an additional wing. Stax's management staff moved out of 98 Avalon to their new more spacious abode in late September.

Payola Investigation.

Nine months after Johnny Baylor was stopped at the airport, in August 1973 Stax found itself the subject of another investigation. A Newark Grand Jury looking into payola and underworld influence in the record industry requested that Stax executives appear before it. At the same time, District Court Judge Frederick Lacey required Stax to turn over data to the U.S. Attorney's Office relating to the 1971, \$406,737 Herb Kole/Ewell Roussell kickback scheme.

Lacey was openly censorious towards Stax for not informing the proper authorities of Kole's and Roussell's activities suggesting that the record company's main concern was to "conceal as much as it could from the public."

In the summer of 1973 an IRS officer visits Al as part of the IRS investigation into Stax that was triggered by Johnny Baylor being discovered with \$180,000 at the Birmingham airport November 1972. The IRS agent uses racist comments such as "how does a nigra make so much money"

1974.

January 1974 Stax began to realize CBS wasn't getting their product into stores

Feb 1974 Jim Stewart pledges his personal property to secure UP loan—Stax executives take a 50% pay cut.

April 1974 CBS begins withholding 40% of all monies due Stax, naturally leading to severe cash flow problems. This, in turn, lead to Stax borrowing large sums from Union Planters National Bank using their publishing companies, East Memphis Music as collateral.

May 1974 the Truth label was formed to try to circumvent CBS deal.

Summer 1974—CBS tries to get Al to let them take Stax's top artists and Al could have an exec job at CBS—would be the company's house Negro.

[This comes out of nowhere]Gerald Truman, Chairman of the Board of Portman, was scheduled to be in Memphis on July 8-9. "It is very possible," wrote Malone, "that Portman will advance funds for Stax to pay their CBS debts in full." Malone's memo also mentioned Stax's "newest star" Lena Zavaroni, claiming that her record sales were steadily increasing. On July 17th Malone sent a memo to two other UP executives, Crawford Irvine and Tim Cook, which concluded that although all loans to Stax, East Memphis, and Lynn were "off program . . . we do not believe there will be any loss on these loans and feel they should be classified as standard."

Truman's visit to Memphis really opened Al's eyes to CBS's role in undermining Stax. "He said," recounts Al, "'You don't get it Al. . . . You understand South Africa [but] you don't understand what they're saying to you at CBS. They're saying [Al knocks the rhythm of the following words on his desk and then says] 'Hey big chief, hold them down, keep them down.' Unless you understand that, then you're gonna continue to have a problem with these people.'"

Despite similar statements from John Burton, Al had been skeptical until now. "That one hit home," continues the charismatic record company owner. "It was the first time it had been brought to me where I could see it from an international perspective. I had been offered this money [by CBS] to make this deal and to really just front Stax off and take a little override and become a corporate VP [of CBS]."

"When I refused this deal is when they really started raising hell. That's when they started squeezing my vital organs. They wanted [Stax]. They would have paid the artists, paid the producer and given me an override. I'd have become a corporate VP, fly all over the place and speak on behalf of CBS and tell folk how great CBS was."

"They wanted me whenever they got ready to negotiate with these artists, as these terms and conditions were whispered to me, to come in on those negotiating sessions and explain to these artists that CBS would be good to them and they shouldn't be in there asking CBS for all of these ridiculous amounts of money and things. I should help them negotiate on behalf of CBS and let [the artist] know they should be grateful and all that kind of good stuff. That was gonna be my role. I'd be the house nigger. I would have the full support of their television network and everything else to support me in my continued evolvment as a leader.

"I would have been the biggest nigger in America. That's what Gerald Truman was telling me. He saw me not reading what was going on . . . He banged that away as he stood on my desk beating the drum--'Hey big chief, hold them down, keep them down.'"

July 1974, after being turned down by Al, CBS ceases remitting ANY funds to Stax.

Although UP was attempting to help Stax with its problems with CBS, Al was growing increasingly wary of its president, Bill Matthews. His suspicions were born out one summer's evening when Matthews asked Al to meet him after hours at the bank's headquarters.

"We were sitting there," recounts Al. "He says, 'Listen, I have to get some cash flow into this bank.' Something had been done where some kind of music foundation thing had been set up [the Beale Street Development Foundation], and the bank was going to be the repository for the funds. He wanted me to put together a blues album and bring it to him. I got excited. I said, 'Oh yeah and we can do this and that, a television special [and so on].' I went on with this whole Beale Street thing. He said, 'Nah, nah, nah, just get some master tapes, put them together and bring that down to me.' He was going to give me 'x' amount of dollars and he wanted me to put '1x' in the bank and take '1x' and get it back to him. I said, 'What are you talking about man? I can't do any mess like that. That's illegal!'"

"He said, 'Nigger, I didn't ask you to do it, I told you to do it!' I just wasn't going to be what he wanted me to be. He wanted me to be his *boy*. I think somewhere in there he actually said that."

A short while later Al and Matthews met for breakfast at Shoney's Restaurant. "He says," continues Al, "I want to let you know that the things that I want you to do, I want *you to do* because I want you to be my man. But, you just know I don't have no problem busting a black company."

From Al's vantage point, this was a direct threat, the import of which was not lost on him.

Sept 1974 Stax had to let Isaac Hayes go as the company cannot pay him what is owed under his contract.

Sept 1974—Al licenses the soundtrack album for *Ipi'n Tombia* (a South African stage production). This was part of Al's pan-African vision. Al was several years ahead of the game in terms of world music

Woman to Woman.

Released outside of CBS, Stax has a #1. In the midst of all these financial and legal problems, there was one bright moment for the label. In May, Jim Stewart signed Shirley Brown, a singer with a set of vocal chords that could challenge Aretha Franklin. It was Stewart's first active signing of an artist to the company in several years, part of Jim's general renewed level of activity occasioned by his decision in February to personally guarantee to UP Stax's debts.

Jim Stewart signed her to a contract and decided to produce her himself. It was the first time he had been in the studio in a couple of years.

"I went back into the studio," smiles Stewart wanly, "hopefully to start some sort of a revival of the company as a small-scale kind of situation. It worked pretty good but, of course, the bank had other things in mind and was not going to allow us to regroup and do that. So, they [eventually] shut us down."

Arthur Taylor.

"Arthur Taylor said to me, 'We won't argue with you about the merits of your anti-trust suit Al. We just have more time than you and more money than you.' That's the head of a major corporation making that statement! They were very careful with how they dealt with this situation. A lot of this stuff was oral. It was over dinner, walking down a street."

CBS Bleeds Stax Dry.

October 8, 1974 CBS files a restraining order against Stax from selling its product on the new Truth label through independent distributors. It was apparent that CBS was attempting a hostile takeover of Stax.

Stax countered on October 25th with a \$67 million antitrust suit that, in effect, charged CBS with attempting a hostile takeover. Stax's counter-complaint and a supporting affidavit from Al stated that CBS had violated the distribution agreement on a number of occasions in a number of ways. In late winter or early spring in a meeting with Irwin Segelstein, Goddard Lieberman, Ron Alexenburg, and Bruce Lundvall, CBS had insisted that Stax "reduce the number of recording artists and record producers then under contract to Stax to those recording artists and record producers who had

achieved so-called 'national acclaim' and release, transfer, and assign certain recording artists ('cotton patch artists') and record producers to the new 'Truth' label."

Al's affidavit further contended that, in late July or early August 1974, he met with Ron Alexenburg and Walter Dean (executive vice-president of the CBS Records Division) in Los Angeles. At that meeting Alexenburg "insisted that Stax reduce its full-service record company to a 'label' or production company."

Union Planters National Bank Has... Issues.

Nov 1974 Union Planters' finances are out of control—US Comptroller of Currency issues a "Cease and Desist" order to UP.

Frightened that CBS's claims against Stax would ultimately lead to the New York behemoth seizing the label's assets, leaving UP holding the bag regarding their own considerable stake in Stax, UP president Bill Matthews decided that immediate action was necessary. On a number of occasions he suggested to Al that UP take over Stax's antitrust suit. Much to Matthews's chagrin, Al was having none of it.

In November, Union Planters further tightened the noose around Stax's neck. Due to Stax's inability to meet the payment requirements on their East Memphis loans, the bank acquired the right to vote the 100 shares of East Memphis stock that they held as collateral on those loans. Pursuant to that right, Union Planters elected Roger Shellebarger as chairman of the board of the publishing company.

In plain English, UP took over East Memphis, subject to a repurchase agreement whereby Stax could regain control of it if they paid off their complete debts to the bank. As it was now transparently obvious that Union Planters was the enemy, in December UP ceased to be the main depository for Stax's money, and Ed Pollack opened up a number of accounts at the Commercial and Industrial Bank branch located next door to Stax's Union Avenue offices.

Union Planters National Bank Takes Over the Publishing Company.

Al began to believe that it had been Matthews and Roger Shellebarger's goal all along to take over Stax; acquiring East Memphis was simply their first step in a much more sweeping plan. UP files suit against both Stax and CBS.

CBS Stops Pressing Stax Records.

End of 1974 Stax was cut off from all of their regular pressing plants since CBS had not been paying them.

1975.

Jan 1975 Stax was unable to meet its payroll. Started paying its employees every other week.

Feb 28, 1975 Stax settles its differences with CBS, under extreme duress, out of court.

CBS agreed to relinquish its rights to distribute Stax product if Stax repaid its debt to CBS by August 31, 1976. The exact total of the debt was undisclosed, but it exceeded the original \$6 million loan CBS had made to Stax in 1972. CBS agreed to cut the loan in half if it was paid by the agreed upon deadline.

Stax, in turn, agreed to let CBS keep \$4.26 million worth of record inventory that was currently stored in CBS' warehouses. Finally, if Stax failed to pay the debt by the agreed upon date, CBS could once again decide to exercise the right to distribute Stax product, although they were not obligated to do so.

King Faisal.

Al and Stax came very close in March, 1975 to connecting with a very unlikely sugardaddy, Jordan's King Faisal.

Working through intermediaries, Al and Burton had initiated dialogue with representatives of the king, and a tentative agreement had been reached whereby Faisal would make available to Stax an astronomical amount of money. King Faisal's motivation was his interest in supporting African American economic empowerment in the most general sense. In the third week of March, John Burton boarded a plane heading to Beirut.

"All it required at that time," sighs Al, "was just an eyeball meeting and the deal would have been done. I remember talking to him from Beirut while we could hear gunfire on the outside."

Burton never met the king, because--in an incredible twist of fate, as far as Stax was concerned--Faisal was assassinated by his nephew on March 25th.

Back in Memphis at 2693 Union Avenue Extended, the disappointment was so thick that it could be cut with a knife.

By April 1975 the company had lost Isaac Hayes (to ABC), the Emotions (CBS), the Dramatics (ABC), the Staple Singers (Warner Brothers) and Richard Pryor (Warner Brothers). In August 1975 Stax lost Johnnie Taylor (CBS).

All of these had hit records... with Johnnie Taylor's "Disco Lady" becoming the first certified platinum single (two million copies sold).

John Burton was drafting a plan to raise \$25 million through the private placement of Senior notes with a 15-year maturity. Unfortunately, nothing came of this plan.

July 1975 Al's father, Albert Isbell, contributes \$50,000 of his own money to try to keep the company going.

Same time effort to get a Chicago investment group to put in \$10 million, talk of Stax moving to Gary, Indiana.

Late August company's phones disconnected for a few days.

Same month Al indicted on 14 counts of fraud.

Al Bell Defense Fund chaired by E. Rodney Jones—claims Al is being “legally lynched”—being administered by the Guaranty Bank and Trust Company in Chicago

Jim Stewart tried yet one more route to raise the money that Stax so desperately needed to weather the storm. Stewart wrote a letter to one Allan Weston in Memphis. The letter proposed that Mr. Weston arrange a \$50 million loan for Stax. The repayment scheme was rather complex. Stewart suggested that the loan would be repaid via a pledging of U.S. Treasury Bonds that would mature each year between 1994 and 2005. Stewart wrote, “Upon notification that \$50,000,000.00 in U.S. dollars has been deposited in Manufacturers Hanover Trust, NYC, c/o a stated trust number, we will arrange for Manufacturers Trust to act as an escrow agent and coordinate the simultaneous transfer of the \$50,000,000.00 for Stax’s use, and in pledging \$41,000,000.00 in U.S. Treasury Bonds to any account designated by the depositor of the funds. Bonds will remain in Stax’s name for income tax purposes.” According to Stewart’s letter, the bonds would have a value of over \$92.5 million in ten years. Unfortunately, Weston did not, or could not, arrange such a loan.

Late September Stax closed the studio down for a couple of weeks, and Al, Stewart, and John Burton travelled to Switzerland where they spent a month attempting to raise funds. “We were there with Dr. Mustapha Samy, a personal secretary to Anwar Sadat,” recalls Al. “He was trying to pull together some of his international connections to raise moneys for us at that time. We came really, really close on a couple of occasions but nothing ever materialized. I got a great education in international dealings with Dr. Samy.”

Oct 1975 Al Jackson murdered in his home.

Late Nov UP starts foreclosure proceedings on East Memphis Music

The end.

On December 19, 1975, an enforcer who worked for Union Planters barged into Stax.

“He jumped up on the receptionist’s desk and said, ‘You’ve got fifteen minutes to get out of the building. I said to the federal marshal, a black guy, ‘What is this all about?’ He said, ‘It’s involuntary bankruptcy.’ I said, ‘How much?’ He said, ‘Nineteen hundred dollars.’ I said, ‘Well, I’ve got that much money in my pocket.’”

But the process had begun. Al was told to lead the way to the master tapes.

“My blood went to my head,” Al continues, “but I started on through the building. By this time, as I’m going back to the tape vault trying to make a decision as to whether or not I’m going to go off on these people, because it was really nasty, really nasty—I stopped and went into the bathroom near studio A and washed my face in cold water just to cool down.”

“As I came out, the black federal marshal had positioned himself by the door so when I opened it, he said, ‘Hey man, be cool. They’re trying to off you.’ I said, ‘Oh, that kind of party. The guys from the bank wanted to kill me that day.’

“I walked them all through the place, very diplomatic, and explained every bit so they would understand that I wouldn’t be intimidated. I asked them if I could get some things out of my office

and all they would let me take was a little leather attaché case and a little legal pad and my phone book. Nothing else. So we come to the back of the building, toward the guard station where they had all these black guys with guns- they had recruited them from the security firms so they'd be all black guys- and they had a film crew too."

Al was escorted from the building at gunpoint.

"On one side of me is the federal marshal, on the other side is the guy that's over these security people that are all out here, and on both sides there's more security people," Al continues. "We're walking and there's this guy that's standing in front of me so if you're on the street you can't see him and he commands me, 'Stop! Open that attaché case and let me see what you have in there.' I thought, God dawg, this is the moment."

The man was asking Al to put his hand into the bag, to take his visible hand and put it where its actions would be concealed.

"I instinctively dropped the attaché case and grabbed the fence and just held up on the fence. I said to myself, If he kills me, they'll see that I'll be on this fence, because I knew he wanted me to open up that attaché case so he could say I was reaching for a gun."

Epilogue.

Al went to court with a choice: defend the company or himself. He took the counsel to defend himself.

Al was exonerated on all charges.

Stax was sold at bankruptcy court while Al was on trial. There was no way for Al to repossess Stax.

That same year, in 1976, CBS had the first double platinum record (two million sales) with Johnnie Taylor's Don Davis produced "Disco Lady."

Earth, Wind and Fire became CBS' flagship act of the 1970s, selling 90 million albums.

The Emotions made multiple gold albums, produced by Maurice White from Earth, Wind and Fire.

Clive Davis started Arista Records in 1975 and did ok.

The recorded music business, once twice the size of the film business, is now propelled by the catalogue business.

Isaac Hayes was never paid back the money owed by Stax and had to forfeit his copyrights.

In 1977, Stax's master recordings were sold to Fantasy Records for \$1.3 million. Fantasy Records in California bought the Stax catalog from Nassi & Associates.

Concord Music bought Stax's masters for an undisclosed amount in 2004 (?).

In 1981, Union Planters Bank deeds the Stax Records building to Southside Church of God in Christ for \$10.00. It was demolished shortly thereafter.

In 2019, Concord Music was purchased by the Michigan Teachers' Pension Fund in 2019 for a reported \$1 billion.

The end.