

S I D E M E N

DRUMMER HAL BLAINE

SAXOPHONIST KING CURTIS

BASSIST JAMES JAMERSON

GUITARIST SCOTTY MOORE

DRUMMER EARL PALMER



unbearable intensity – so much so that historians are still trying to make sense of what happened during those years in the Sun studio.

But what happened and what it all means is right there on the records. Listen to the tender, single-string fills on “I Love You Because,” evoking Big Bill Broonzy; the aggressive chording and deft double-string-curling-into-single-string solos that launched “Good Rockin’ Tonight” into the ozone; the amazing textures Moore conjured from chordal vamping and double- and single-string fills, rendering the heartbreak palpable in “You’re a Heartbreaker.” Then there’s “Mystery Train,” pure and simple a work of art by all involved, and from a guitarist’s standpoint, still something of a rock & roll Rosetta stone.

Read into those vital, groundbreaking sessions what you will, but a number of facts never change. Chief among those: Scotty Moore, making the most of his gift, a Gibson guitar and the advent of electricity.

## EARL PALMER

*By Max Weinberg*

**G**OTO NEW ORLEANS IF YOU WANT TO HEAR hot drumming. Like the gunslingers of the Old West, the Gulfport drummers are legendary. And one of the best is Earl Palmer. For his drumming on such classic hits as Fats Domino’s “The Fat Man,” “I’m Walkin’” and “Blueberry Hill,” Lloyd Price’s “Lawdy Miss Clawdy” and Little Richard’s “Lucille,” “Good Golly, Miss Molly” and “Rip It Up,” Earl Palmer is renowned in the history of New Orleans rock & roll.

Earl grew up near the French Quarter but spent much of his childhood on the road, dancing in a vaudeville act with his mother. As a kid, he loved to bang the drums around, and by the time he could reach his bass drum pedal, he’d found his calling. When he left the army in 1945, he’d already spent many of his twenty years behind the drums.

The turning point in his career came shortly after World War II when he joined the band of local trumpeter Dave Bartholomew. Theirs was the swingiest group in New Orleans, and they began to see a lot of action in Cosimo Matassa’s J&M recording studios. After they backed Fats in 1949 on his successful “The Fat Man,” word hit the street that this band was hot and the drummer made it smoke.

Earl’s time is solid, his syncopation subtle and his drumming emotional. One of his most soulful performances is on Fats’ “Walkin’ to New Orleans.”

Earl’s beat is simple, dignified and reinforces the song’s sentiments, “I got no time for talkin’/I got to keep a-walkin’.”

Parading is a way of life in New Orleans, and its street rhythm was captured on those early records. Nurtured by that heritage, Earl’s rock & roll drumming contains all the vitality and drive of a handful of street musicians who inspired the second-line march.

As Hal Blaine related to the 1960s West Coast style, so Earl Palmer did to the development and success of the 1950s New Orleans sound. The musicians on these New Orleans classics – Earl, Salvador Doucette on piano, Lee Allen and “Red” Tyler on saxes, Frank Fields on bass, Ernest McLean and Justin Adams on guitars and Dave Bartholomew on trumpet – were among the first generation of rock & rollers.

In 1957 Earl left New Orleans and moved to Los Angeles. He quickly established himself in Hollywood, where he later played on records by Frank Sinatra, Diana Ross, Bonnie Raitt, Randy Newman, the Temptations and the Righteous Brothers. On the Righteous Brothers’ sessions, Earl worked for Phil Spector and won acclaim as the drummer on “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’,” as well as Ike and Tina Turner’s “River Deep, Mountain High.”

In 1982, when he was elected secretary-treasurer of Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians, Earl was prohibited from playing for money, and his drumming became limited to an occasional benefit or impromptu jam session. Viewing his executive work as a challenge, Earl became as committed to his union title as he had been to laying down all those great tracks.

When I interviewed him in 1983 for my book *The Big Beat: Conversations With Rock’s Great Drummers*, the union hall was deserted as Earl began to talk about his life in the South. As the memories drew into focus, his eyes lit up, and it seemed as if he’d never left.



H A L L O F F A M E 2 0 0 0

# T I M E I S T I G H T

H O U S E B A N D S A N D T H E S O U N D S  
O F M O T O W N A N D S T A X

B Y R O B B O W M A N



WHEN THE BEATLES FIRST SIGNED WITH PAR-lophone in 1962, the notion that a self-contained rock & roll band would actually play on its own records was a pretty radical concept. By definition, the musicians who made up the rank and file of such groups had neither the reading skills nor instrumental technique deemed necessary to make quality recordings. This industry wisdom and practice had been passed down from Tin Pan Alley and had, in turn, been subsumed as the everyday norm in the fields of country, rhythm & blues and, of course, rock & roll.

Naturally, there were exceptions, although most of these were confined to the domain of independent labels. Elvis Presley had made his earliest Sun recordings with the same band that backed him on live gigs. Rhythm & blues artists Louis Jordan, James Brown and Ray Charles regularly recorded with their justifiably revered road bands. That said, the majority of seminal rock & roll, pop and a significant percentage of R&B recordings of the late 1940s through the mid-1960s were cut by hired guns, better known as session musicians. This year the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is formally recognizing their significance by inducting five of the greatest session musicians to ever set foot into a studio – Hal Blaine, King Curtis, James Jamerson, Scotty Moore and Earl Palmer.

# STAXX

## SOULSVILLE U. S. A.



Superior session musicians were and are a breed apart. There is an occupation that expects its members to sight-read musical notation quickly and accurately; to instantly transpose a part from one key to another; to play in a wide range of styles and to emulate the licks, techniques and stylistic nuances of other notable instrumentalists; and, in some genres such as rhythm & blues, to be able to continuously develop appropriate and catchy grooves, riffs and lines for recording after recording. The latter involved what Memphis Horn trumpeter Wayne Jackson has termed "slate memory," where one creates a part, plays it for however many takes are necessary to get a satisfactory recording and then "wipes the slate clean" to begin working on the next tune.

The 1960s development of self-contained bands did not completely spell the end of session musicians, however. Country music, easy listening and movie soundtracks still relied nearly exclusively on hired hands. In the case of blues and eventually soul music, a number of small, independent record labels including Chess, Brunswick, Motown and Stax and later Malaco, Philadelphia International and Sugar Hill developed house bands where the same set of musicians were hired for virtually every session the company recorded, consequently giving all the records emanating from these labels a recognizable sound and identity. A few regional studios not necessarily tied to specific labels, such as American Sound in Memphis, Fame and Muscle Shoals in Northern Alabama and Criteria in Florida, also developed house bands, each of which acquired a formidable reputation for cutting an inordinate number of rock, pop and rhythm & blues hits.

STEVIE WONDER  
CUTTING SOME  
TRACKS WITH  
THE FUNK  
BROTHERS, 1966

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While all of the above cited house bands were significant, the session musicians at Detroit's Motown and Stax in Memphis not only developed instantly recognizable sounds, they, in effect, created their own subgenres of music. *Motown* is a term that critics and fans alike use categorically to refer to a particular style of Sixties and early-Seventies soul music. The *Stax sound* of the same time period, for all intents and purposes, served as the basis for the genre best known as Southern soul. Recordings made in the second half of the 1960s by non-Stax artists such as Aretha Franklin, Clarence Carter and Wilson Pickett, in effect, were predicated on the sound of Stax filtered through instrumentalists and vocalists who were not affiliated with Stax. As the creators of the archetypal sounds of nearly diametrically opposed specific subgenres of contemporary black popular music, the Funk Brothers at Motown and Booker T. and the MG's at Stax make intriguing counterpoints to one another in terms of aesthetics and technique.

Initially hitting *Billboard's* national charts in December 1960 with the Miracles' "Shop Around," Motown and its subsidiaries achieved unprecedented success over the next ten years. All told, in the 1960s the company placed seventy-nine singles, averaging one every six weeks, on *Billboard's* Top Ten pop listings. Every one of these records featured one or another permutation of the company's house band, fondly referred to by insiders as the Funk Brothers.

While a variety of musicians appeared on one or another early session, by late 1962 the house band at Motown had coalesced around keyboardists Joe Hunter (who departed soon thereafter), Earl Van Dyke and Johnny Griffith, bassist James Jamerson, guitarists Eddie Willis, Robert White and Joe Messina, drummers Benny Benjamin and Richard "Pistol" Allen (augmented in 1964 by Uriel Jones), vibist Jack





Brokensha and percussionists Jack Ashford and Eddie "Bongo" Brown.

The guitarists came from a variety of backgrounds: Eddie Willis was largely a funky rhythm & blues player, Joe Messina had made a name for himself as a radio and TV session player and Robert White was an alumnus of the road band that had backed the Moonglows. Most of the other members of the Funk Brothers had deep-seated roots in Detroit's vibrant late-1950s jazz scene. For these cats, Motown sessions were simply a way to pay the bills, at least in the beginning. Earl Van Dyke once told writer Allan Slutsky, "All we wanted to do was play jazz, but we all had families, and at the time playing rhythm & blues was the best way to pay the rent."

Like the Motown crew, Booker T. and the MG's came together in 1962. At the time, their membership consisted of bassist Lewie Steinberg, guitarist Steve Cropper, drummer Al Jackson Jr. and keyboardist extraordinaire Booker T. Jones. In 1964 Steinberg was replaced by Cropper's childhood friend Donald "Duck" Dunn, with whom Cropper had come of age playing in an all-white band infatuated with the late-Fifties R&B of Ray Charles, Hank Ballard and, especially, the "5" Royales. Neither Cropper nor Dunn could read music, nor did they have the slightest interest in jazz. In contrast, Jackson and Jones were veterans of Memphis's leading black R&B-cum-jazz ensembles led by Al Jackson Sr. and Willie Mitchell. While these groups included some jazz-oriented numbers in their repertoire, their sound was more gutsy, down-to-earth and dance oriented than the jazz styles being played in Detroit. For all four members of the MG's, coming to work every day to craft the incendiary sounds that served as the backdrop for the tes-

tifying of Otis Redding and Sam and Dave was roughly akin to dying and going to heaven. In fact, Cropper has often stated that playing Stax sessions was like going to church every single day of the week. The soul grooves emanating out of the company's studio at 926 E. McLemore were exactly where the house band's collective hearts and musical aesthetics were at.

Up in Detroit, playing jazz at bars such as Phelps Lounge and the Chit Chat Club, the Funk Brothers got a chance to work on the music that was nearest and dearest to their hearts.

When they entered the basement studio at Motown's 2648 West Grand Boulevard headquarters, they collectively transformed into the finest consummate pop craftsmen the world has ever seen, creating unending variety within what was a fairly constricted but oh-so-winning formula.

The Motown sound began with a large ensemble, a typical

TOP: THE STAPLE SINGERS WITH BOOKER T. AND THE MG'S; ISAAC HAYES (AT PIANO) AND THE STAX HOUSE BAND



session having anywhere from nine to twelve players, excluding horns and strings. Before the tape started rolling, the three guitarists would usually huddle, coming to an agreement as to who would play which part. More often than not, Joe Messina would play the backbeat, Robert White would work out some other rhythmic chording pattern (often doubling the piano part), while Eddie Willis would lay down his patented funky fills. Voicing would be crucial, with one guitarist playing high up on the neck, a second guitarist confining his part to the mid-range, while the third guitarist played in first position. Earl Van Dyke on the piano and Johnny Griffith on Hammond B-3 organ similarly cooked up lines that divided the sonic spectrum in half (Van Dyke typically taking the mid-range and low end). In tandem with the guitarists, the complete range of pitch registers was filled from top to bottom, in the words of Van Dyke, sounding "like one big chord voicing." Aiding and abetting this density of sound were the acoustic properties of the low-ceilinged, incredibly cramped, handcrafted Motown studio.

Overall, Stax recordings tended to have the completely opposite, "less is more" aesthetic. "The rule of thumb was sparseness," Booker T. Jones emphasized, "making as much sound as you could with few notes." The Stax rhythm section consisted of four, sometimes five players, all of whom tended to play spare lines, staying well out of the way of the vocalist and leaving lots of empty space in each bar. This sense of sparseness was often compounded by the doubling of bass and guitar or bass and the left hand of the piano. The company's recordings emphasized the low end of the sound spectrum and a concomitant relative absence of high frequencies. Until the late 1960s, there were generally no strings, and the horns routinely played unison lines, usually taking the place of what at Motown would have been background vocalists. The near absence of cymbals on Stax recordings effectively served to eliminate a broad band of high-end transients that was ubiquitous on 1960s AM pop

ROBERT WHITE,  
 JACK ASHFORD,  
 BOB COUSER AND  
 EARL VAN DYKE  
 (L TO R), 1964

hits by black and white artists. Just as was the case at Motown, the acoustic properties of the cavernous Stax studio reinforced the overall aesthetic of the house band, creating a roomy, reverberent presence that is instantly recognizable.

In addition to taking completely different approaches to density, the house bands at Motown and Stax had very different conceptions when it came to the articulation of time. While there were a number of different drum grooves employed for specific records at Motown, the most common one (especially on Holland-Dozier-Holland productions) that distinguished Motown from its competition involved eighth notes on the hi-hat, all four beats played with relatively equal intensity on the snare and a bass drum part that followed James Jamerson's astonishingly innovative bass lines.

The net result was a flat four sound, the crucial component being a minimized or absent backbeat. Integral to the total effect was the way all members of the band neither played ahead nor behind the beat. Rather, the Funk Brothers sound was predicated upon all parts being played right in the middle of the beat.

In contrast, the essence of the Stax sound was based around a laid-back feel where the kick drum part would play squarely in the middle of the beat on one and three, while Jackson and Cropper, beginning with the recording of Wilson Pickett's 1965 hit "In the Midnight Hour" (recorded at Stax although released on Atlantic), would play way behind the



beat on two and four. This gesture made any uptempo record cut at Stax in the late 1960s instantly identifiable and, ultimately, defined the magic of the Stax groove.

The layering of instruments one upon another, creating a composite timbre out of the collective sounds involved, was another major ingredient of the Funk Brothers sound. The percussionists were often integral in crafting this effect, doubling one or another of the other players' parts. A typical example occurs on the Supremes' 1965 hit "Stop! In the Name of Love" where the main riff is played in unison on both the verse and chorus by vibes and organ. Similarly, on most classic Motown hits the tambourine either doubles the ride pattern being played on the hi-hat, or some combination of hand clapping, foot stamping, tambourine, hi-hat and snare will all play the same part.

Though there was much less use of added instrumentation at Stax, timbre figured prominently in the label's house band sound. "You can have one thing going [on the lower keyboard]," stressed Booker T. about the organ's diversity, and "you go to the upper keyboard, and it's a totally different sound. . . . Steve got a lot of different sounds out of a Telecaster without changing any settings - just by using his fingers, his picks and his amp. The two of us could get so many sounds happening that we sounded like a big group."

In many ways the sound of the Detroit-based Funk Brothers was that of the industrialized and heavily urbanized North – loud; intensely propulsive; and dense in terms of completely filling in the high-, mid- and low-end pitch registers, the layering of timbres on top of each other, and the rate of activity of the collective parts in every bar; yet, sophisticated at the level of harmonic sequence and chordal voicings. While gospel music was often cited by Motown artists and front-office alumni as being central to the Motown sound, the density of the Funk Brothers' grooves was also due to Berry Gordy's affinity for Phil Spector's Wall of Sound and the house band's predilection for harmonic complexity rooted in their collective backgrounds as jazz players.

Even more indicative of the industrialized North were the conditions under which the Motown musicians toiled. Gordy's company was systematically structured both in terms of workplace environment and corporate organization with a goal to maximize profit and minimize expense. In the North, time was money and there was hell to pay if the Funk Brothers were unable to complete three or four songs during every three-hour session for which they were contracted. Essentially run like a factory, the Motown work force was compartmentalized, with horn charts being written in advance of a session and vocals being overdubbed after the rhythm track existed in finished form.

In contrast, the sound of the MG's was that of the then largely agrarian, fraternal, small-town South – laid-back; a low level of density in all domains; and an affinity for simplicity manifested in the group's approach to harmony and chordal voicing. The dominant influences were clearly Southern gospel and blues. Such an aesthetic was reinforced by the very different conditions within which the MG's worked. In the South, time was not money. Much more important were notions of community and process. Consequently, the musicians at Stax were paid by the song. If it took two hours to nail it, great! If it took a day and a half, no one was too bothered about it. While this was undoubt-



edly a less remunerative system for the session musicians, it fostered a relaxed atmosphere where the MG's, arranger-producer-pianist Isaac Hayes and the Memphis Horns could collectively work a groove over and over until it fused and reached the point of molten-hot, gospel-infused ecstasy. Horn charts did not exist at Stax until 1969, and through most of 1968 nearly all sessions were cut "live," with the rhythm section, the horns and the vocalists singing and playing together as if onstage. A sense of immediacy, spontaneity and community is palpable on the recordings made in this fashion.

TOP: FUNK BROS., '66;  
WHITE, DAN TURNER,  
VAN DYKE, URIEL JONES,  
JAMERSON, DJ MARTHA  
JEAN STEINBERG, CA. '66

Out of the economic imperative of the geo-social mindset in which they worked, the Funk Brothers operated as craftsmen who were product oriented. The composition was everything.

In Memphis, the magic was in the process, the product be damned. The song itself was not nearly as important as the performance. This difference is significant when one looks at the aesthetics embedded in each company's recordings.

In the final analysis, the house bands at both Motown and Stax were among the greatest in the annals of American music. Each created an astonishing volume of glorious and distinctive music that, while defining two very different aesthetics, has more than withstood the test of time. The legacies of these two sets of session players will continue to inspire fellow musicians and fans alike.

