

THE COMPLETE STAX / VOLT SINGLES: 1959-1968

by Rob Bowman



Stax Records was one of the most unique and important record companies in history. In juxtaposition with Motown it represented one of the two mainstreams of Black American music in the 1960s, namely that of the newly emergent sounds of Southern soul music.

It's a curious twist of fate that the rocking sounds of white Memphis in the fifties indirectly set in motion the beginnings of Stax Records. Stax was founded by a white banker and semi-pro country fiddler by the name of Jim Stewart. The success and excitement enjoyed by Sun Records owner Sam Phillips was not lost on Stewart. In fact, it made a life of banking seem rather drab indeed.

Stewart was born in 1930 in Middleton, Tennessee (pop. c. 800), about seventy miles east of Memphis. At the age of eighteen, following a path well worn by many rural Mid-Southerners, he came to the Bluff City with the idea of furthering his musical interests. Heavily influenced by the Texas Swing of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, Stewart picked up the odd playing job around town while working for Sears during the day. As a member of the Canyon Cowboys, he could be heard regularly playing his fiddle on a morning show on Memphis radio station WDIA.

By late 1950 he had moved into banking with First Tennessee. Shortly after this improvement in his fortunes, Uncle Sam came a-calling. Following the requisite two year hitch, Stewart returned to the bank and got a playing job in the house band at the Eagle's Nest. When Stewart was still in the house band, Elvis Presley would often play the intermissions at the club.

"I got interested in recording then as Elvis got to be a giant," recalls Stewart. By 1957 Stewart had recorded a couple of songs on tape by local DJ Fred Byler. He tried taking them around to Sun as well as to a few other local concerns and found that with the exception of Erwin Ellis, a barber who also owned Erwin Records, nobody was willing to give him the time of day. Undaunted, under Ellis's guidance Stewart started a label and released the record himself as Satellite 100. At the time he was equal partners with Byler and a guitarist named Neil Herbert. After subsequently recording a superb rockabilly record by Don Willis ("Boppin' High School Baby" / "Warrior Sam") and a couple of undistinguished country pop records by Donna Rae and the Sunbeams and Ray Scoff, Herbert and Byler both lost interest.

At this point Stewart's sister Estelle Axton (coincidentally employed by First Tennessee's rival, the Union Planters Bank) stepped into the picture as an equal partner, mortgaging her house to finance the purchase of an Ampex mono recorder. The whole operation was for about a year relocated to

Brunswick, Tennessee, before eventually moving to its permanent home in an old Memphis neighborhood movie theatre at 926 E. McLemore.

THE SINGLES

What follows is the complete track listing for this collection. This list may also prove useful as the only known complete chronology/label copy list of all Stax/Volt A-sides issued up until May 1968, including all R&B A-sides issued on the Satellite label and all Rufus and Carla Thomas Asides issued by Atlantic or Atco through their distribution deal with Stax. In addition, B-sides which hit the Billboard charts or which received significant airplay nationally are included. Also included are B-sides which were originally issued or were intended to be issued as A-sides, plus several B-sides which over the years have taken on legendary status in their own right.

With no systematic paperwork existing to document those singles issued prior to mid-1966, a consistent Stax/Volt release chronology, correct identification of A-sides to all releases and accurate label copy were pieced together using a variety of sources. For the 49 singles that appeared on the Billboard charts prior to mid-1966, A-side was easily determined. For all post-1966 releases, for which Atlantic label copy sheets exist, A-side identification and label copy were readily available. For the rest, a number of sources were used to obtain some or all of the necessary information pertaining to each record.

These sources include: Atlantic Records' correspondence with its foreign licensees of the period; Atlantic royalty reporting cards and master tape request forms; interviews with former Stax/Volt artists and producers; information from the files and vaults of Fantasy Records in Berkeley, California; record reviews and local sales reports from the music trade magazine Cashbox; and most importantly, each of the original singles themselves, gathered from numerous record collectors in the U.S., Canada and the U.K. (Note: Matrix numbers, which for many record labels are the best clue for determining A-sides, proved to be an unreliable instrument when applied here, with numerous Stax/Volt releases, including some of the labels' biggest hits, featuring the higher matrix number on the A-side.)

Such an endeavor could not have been attempted without the cooperation of a great number of people, to whom thanks are extended. First and foremost among these is Rob Bowman of Toronto, Ontario, who conducted all of the artist/producer interviews, supplied several of the rarest single labels, and served as chief consultant when determining the bonus B-sides. Roger Armstrong of Ace Records in London, England, must also be thanked, for making available information gathered during his extensive research at Fantasy Records' Stax/Volt vault. In addition, Brian "Weems" Williams of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Eddie Richardson of Memphis, Tennessee, Allen Blasco of Leawood, Kansas, Martin Koppell of Toronto, Ontario, Jeff "The Chef" Loshinsky of New York City and Peter Gibbon of London, England, must be thanked for making their extensive record collections available to this project. Each of these individuals possessed at least one single owned by none of the others; thus, it is not hyperbole to suggest that the assistance of each was essential to the completion of this project.

Steve Greenberg

Use these links to access each volume:

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Extra-special thanks to all of the former Stax artists, musicians, producers and staff who kindly provided information and reminiscences for this project.

This collection was mastered from the original Stax/Volt mono single masters. However, in a few cases these tapes were lost and original disc sources were used. Analog to digital mastering was done with a specially modified and restored Ampex 350 full track mono machine with original tube electronics. All equipment in the transfer process was chosen specifically to re-create the Stax sound on today's stereo systems without compromise.

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