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Abstract
This paper explores the role of Isaac Hayes and the 1969 LP *Hot buttered soul* in the transformation of the political economy of the black popular music industry. An argument will be made that the radical nature of *Hot buttered soul* led to unprecedented cross-genre sales and consequently made it possible for artists such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and Parliament/Funkadelic to create album-length works. The net result was that, in addition to transforming the political economy of black popular music, the artistic possibilities of black popular music were irrevocably changed.

Keywords: Isaac Hayes; Stax Records; soul music; rhythm and blues; political economy.

It is a commonplace within popular music histories that in the 1960s Stax Records developed a unique, readily identifiable sound. I contend that the “Stax sound”, for all intents and purposes, served as the basis for the genre known as “southern soul”. This sound was nearly exclusively produced and consumed via the 7” 45 rpm record. As Stax owner Jim Stewart (1986) told me, in explaining the fact that two of the label’s first albums, Carla Thomas’ *Gee whiz* and the Mar-Keys’ *Last night*, failed to chart despite the fact that they were follow-ups to massive hit singles, in the first half of the 1960s “you couldn’t sell black LPs”. Jerry Wexler (1986), co-owner of
Atlantic Records, told me exactly the same thing. Such was industry wisdom at the time.

Precisely summing up the sound on the several hundred 45’s issued on Stax and its subsidiary Volt in the 1960s is a nigh-on impossible task. One can, though, delimit in general terms the main features of the Stax sound in the 1960s, all of which stand in stark contrast to the musical practices of Detroit’s Motown Records, Stax’s main rival in this period. The Stax sound consisted of (1) an emphasis on the low end; (2) the prominent use of horns which often took the place of background vocals; (3) pre-arranged horn ensembles often serving as bridges in place of the more typical “improvised” guitar, keyboard or sax solos heard on many popular music recordings (this concept was originated by Otis Redding); (4) a “less is more” aesthetic manifested in sparse textures, the absence of ride cymbals on a lot of vocal recordings, unison horn lines and the absence of strings until late 1968; (5) a mix that placed the vocalist in the middle of the sound box rather than way out in front; (6) a prominent gospel influence as heard in the juxtaposition of organ and piano, the extensive use of the IV chord and, most importantly, in the deployment by vocalists at Stax of extensive timbral variation, pitch inflection, melismas and highly syncopated phrasing all in the service of emotional catharsis; (7) a limited harmonic vocabulary largely restricted to major chords; and (8) a delayed back beat.

The sound of Stax was to change dramatically in the late 1960s, largely due to the efforts of Al Bell. Born in Little Rock in 1940 to a family that stressed middle class values that foregrounded hard work, achievement and economic advancement, Bell got his start in the music industry as a disc jockey, initially at KOKY in Little Rock in the late 1950s. After stints at Memphis and Washington stations, Bell came to Stax in the fall of 1965, initially as a promotion man. Within three years he would co-own the company, by October 1972 he owned it outright. A larger-than-life character, Bell transformed Stax from top to bottom. Described by keyboardist Booker T. Jones as the front office equivalent to Otis Redding, Bell took what had been a mom and pop, cottage industry enterprise and in a few short years guided it to the level of rhythm and blues powerhouse. In the process Stax tremendously expanded its output, for the first time devoting considerable energies to the release and marketing of LP’s in addition to its staple diet of forty-fives. Al Bell did not believe the myth that the black consumer would not buy LPs.

Prior to Bell’s arrival, Stax had been unable to sell substantial quantities of its 45’s or LPs in key non-Southern markets such as New York and Los Angeles.

“The problem we had then was that Stax was viewed as a company that was coming up with that ‘Bama music’”, stressed Bell (1983).

We had a problem in getting the product played outside of the South, across the Mason-Dixon line. When you got into the bigger urban centers, they were doing the Motown stuff. Being a jock I knew that and then traveling all over the place, I knew what was happening to us in the record stores and what was happening to us at the radio level and on the street level with our music. I started looking to diversify the company and, at that time, I was talking to everybody in
Al Bell’s desire to diversify the company’s sound and thereby eliminate the ‘Bama stigma that had plagued his early marketing efforts would eventually have an impact on much more than the sound of Stax and the consequence economic fortunes of the company. In 1969 he made a move that would ultimately transform the political economy of the entire black music industry in giving songwriter Isaac Hayes (who along with David Porter had penned and produced such classic southern soul records as “Soul man” and “Hold on! I’m comin’”) free reign to record the solo album of his dreams.

The Hayes album was part of a campaign Bell was launching where the company would simultaneously release twenty-seven albums in May 1969. This audacious move was orchestrated with the singular purpose of creating an instantaneous catalogue to replace what had been lost when Stax severed their distribution deal with Atlantic Records in May 1968 and, in the process, lost their entire back catalogue. To put the size of this release in perspective, in 1965 the company had issued only two LPs; under Bell’s auspices that number increased to twelve in 1966 and sixteen in 1967. In total the company issued only forty-three albums from its inception in 1960 through the dissolution of the agreement with Atlantic in May 1968. In the company’s second period 205 albums appeared on Stax.

Significantly, *Hot buttered soul* (Enterprise 1969) had nothing whatsoever to do with the “Stax sound” and, equally significantly, no single album had a greater impact on the direction of black music in the first half of the 1970s. Reflects Hayes (Hayes 1986),

> When I did *Hot buttered soul* it was a selfish thing on my part. It was something I wanted to do. Al said, ‘however you want to do it’. I didn’t give a damn if it didn’t sell because I was going for the true artistic side, rather than looking at it for monetary value. I had an opportunity to express myself no holds barred, no restrictions, and that’s why I did it. I took artistic and creative liberties. I felt what I had to say couldn’t be said in two minutes and thirty seconds. So I just stretched [the songs] out and milked them for everything they were worth. I didn’t feel any pressure that it had to sell because there were twenty-six other albums out there.

Only four songs were cut for *Hot buttered soul*; an eighteen-minute version of Glen Campbell’s 1967 hit “By the time I get to Phoenix”, a twelve-minute version of Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s “Walk on by” which had recently been a hit for Dionne Warwick; a nine-minute track Al Bell called “Hyperbolicsyllabicsesquedalymistic”, and a relatively short five-minute take on Memphis songwriters Charlie Chalmers and Sandra Rhodes’ “One woman”.

It surprised many that the man who had co-written such incendiary pieces of gospel-inspired soul as “Soul man” and “Hold on! I’m comin’” would record an
album three-quarters of which he didn’t write, and half of which were white pop tunes. It was quite a radical move.  
“What it was, was the real me”, proclaimed Hayes (1986) when I first met him:

I mean, OK, the real me had written those other songs [‘Soul man,’ ‘Hold on! I’m comin’], etc.] but they were being written for other people. As for me wanting to express myself as an artist, that’s what *Hot buttered soul* was. Although I was a songwriter, there were some songs that [other people wrote that] I loved, that really touched me. Came the opportunity, I wanted to record these tunes. I wanted to do them the way that I wanted to do them. I took them apart, dissected them, and put them back together and made them my personal tunes. I took creative license to do that. By doing them my way, it almost made them like totally different songs all over again. I was targeting the black listening audience. Very few black people knew about ‘By the time I get to Phoenix’. But I broke it down and rearranged it where they could understand it, where they could relate to it. Music is universal [but] sometimes presentation will restrict you or limit your range. Glen Campbell and Jim Webb were targeting the pop audience. But, when I did it, I aimed to the black market, but it was so big, it went all over. It sounds radical because it had gone against everything that Stax had represented up to that point. All before then I would ask Jim Stewart to record me and he would say, ‘Isaac, your voice is too pretty!’ Jim was hard-core Otis Redding, Albert King, that sort of thing”. (ibid.)

The basic rhythm tracks were cut for the album in a mere eight hours. Strings and background vocals were added in Detroit. Al Bell (1993) told me:

I wanted the remainder of it, the horns and the strings, to be a soundtrack to a motion picture and the motion picture was what Isaac was rapping about. I talked to [the arrangers] about adding the European influence. [It was] done in a very creative manner where it all embellished and enhanced the story. The idea was to go and put the package wrapped around him as opposed to taking a package and putting him in the package.

Hayes, in fact, had long felt frustrated by Jim Stewart’s insistence that the company continue to create records that were limited to what had become the stereotypical Stax sound. From Jim Stewart’s perspective, the black consumer was not only not interested in buying LPs, but they would also not be willing to support a black artist singing white pop tunes that lasted many minutes beyond the standard three to three and a half minute single.

It is important to quickly provide context for the attitude of Jim Stewart and other record executives with regard to the black populace’s interest in, and ability to, purchase albums, as opposed to singles, in significant numbers. When the long playing 12” 33 1/3 rpm album was first introduced in 1948 by Columbia Records, it was viewed as an ideal vehicle for genres such as classical music, Broadway sound-
tracks and jazz. Classical and jazz performances were routinely too long to fit onto the older 78 or new 45 rpm mediums that could accommodate approximately three minutes of music per side and soundtracks, by their very nature, were best appreciated in their entirety, rather than as single tracks.

All three genres, by and large, appealed to an adult and, for the most part, middle class demographic with a modicum of disposable income. The industry correctly assumed that this demographic would be interested in spending some of that disposable income on a leisure item that signified modernity as one of the latest products of technological innovation. Such was the more expensive and, certainly for genres such as classical, Broadway and jazz, more satisfying album medium.

Rhythm and blues, country and rock and roll were largely relegated to being sold as cheaper two sided discs, for awhile in both the 78 and 45 rpm mediums before the 45 came to dominate. These musics were generally thought of as ephemeral and disposable cultural products purchased by either adults from the economic underclass or teenagers with limited disposable incomes.

In the 1950s, only a handful of the most commercially successful R&B or rock artists had their recordings released on albums. In the case of those that did, the albums were usually hastily packaged after three or more hit singles and consisted of their earlier hits, B-sides and another five or six quickly recorded tracks, most often as not consisting of cover songs. Packaging was cheaply done, showing little thought or care, and sales, with the exception of Elvis Presley, were expected to be minimal.

In a story that will be familiar to most, this was to change with the explosion of the Beatles in 1964, their successors such as the Kinks, the Rolling Stones and the Who and the movement of folk artists such as Bob Dylan into the world of teenage pop and rock beginning in 1965. All of these artists, with the exception of Dylan, achieved their initial success via 45s but quite quickly achieved substantial, in the case of the Beatles massive, album sales.

Recognizing this shift in the market place and the economic power of teenage baby boomers, by the mid-1960s white rock and pop artists routinely released albums as well as singles. Reflecting the increase in capital involved in the consumption of albums, rock artists spent more and more time on the recording of albums creating ever longer and more complex tracks, the accompanying art work and promotion.

By 1966, the first rock magazine, *Crawdaddy*, was discussing these albums in detail and that same year, KPFA in San Francisco, became the first FM station to program a steady diet of rock and album tracks. While some of the early free-form rock-oriented FM stations played a handful of blues and soul recordings by black artists, for the most part the rise of the LP, a dedicated music press and FM radio impacted the political economy and creative possibilities of white artists only. In the world of soul music, it was business as usual: the 45 rpm single was the dominant medium of commerce, there were no specialist magazines devoted to the music and no FM radio stations broadcasting soul album tracks. In the second half of the
1960s black FM stations were a relatively new phenomenon and the handful that existed were nearly exclusively devoted to jazz programming.

With Al Bell giving Isaac Hayes total freedom in the studio, the resulting album *Hot buttered soul* was a drastic departure from the norm including only four songs, two of which were twelve and eighteen minutes long. The length of the songs, the arrangements that equally fused rock, soul, pop, jazz and classical, the massive and majestic orchestrations, the long spoken rap that preceded Hayes’ cover of “By the time I get to Phoenix”, and Hayes’s crooning baritone vocal style were all radically different from what was going on in mainstream R&B at the time.

No 45s were originally envisioned for *Hot buttered soul*, and none were scheduled amongst the thirty singles that were released alongside the twenty-seven albums at the Stax sales meetings in May 1969. Al Bell had planned to try and break the record as an album in Los Angeles on a jazz station, but to his surprise it was broken in Detroit by Sonny Carter on station WGPR-FM. Carter was general manager of the station and hosted his own jazz-based show. He tells an interesting story. Pat Lewis had arranged the innovative background vocals on “Walk on by”. Lewis had a tape of the album before it was released to the public and, for one reason or another, she needed to copy it. She took it to Carter and asked if he would copy it at the station, making him promise not to play it on the air. Carter loved the eighteen-minute version of “By the time I get to Phoenix” and broke his promise. “Overnight, it was like a sensation”, laughs Carter. “That was possibly on Friday. We got so many requests for it, by Monday it was just ridiculous” (Carter 1993).

The reaction to *Hot buttered soul* in Detroit was so strong that Bell realized instantly that the record was potentially a gold mine. Within four weeks of its release, Stax took out a full-page ad in *Billboard* citing the record’s sales in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Isaac (Hayes 1986) claims: “We were getting reports about people in Detroit burglarizing record shops and the only thing they’d take out was *Hot buttered soul*. That’s making a statement”.

*Hot buttered soul* went on to sell over one million copies, an unprecedented showing for what was nominally an R&B album. Equally unprecedented was the fact that the album charted in the upper reaches of four different charts – jazz, pop, R&B, and easy listening – simultaneously, a feat few – if any – artists have ever achieved! This was the kind of across-the-board success that Al Bell had envisioned for Stax.

Up to this point, as I mentioned at the start of this paper, virtually everyone in the record industry simply assumed that the black audience was neither economically equipped nor aesthetically interested in purchasing LPs in large numbers². Consequently black artists had not been afforded the luxuries enjoyed by their white counterparts in crafting extended songs or album concepts. Instead, most black LPs were hurriedly and cheaply recorded to capitalize on a string of hit singles. Little thought, effort, or expense was put into cover art design or marketing. According to Atlantic Records owner Jerry Wexler, if a black album sold 30,000 copies the market had been saturated. Super stars such as James Brown and Otis Redding were the exception in that they might over several years sell 200,000 plus copies
of a given album. *Hot buttered soul* unquestionably proved that black artists could sell LPs in massive numbers, and consequently single-handedly revolutionized the notion of the length and musical palette appropriate for black recordings. Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and Funkadelic would all follow Hayes’s lead and, over the next few years, all four would record a series of utterly brilliant albums breaking for all time the myth that black consumers were not interested or financially able to support album-length R&B masterpieces.

**Endnotes**

1. The term “Bama” music is a contraction of the name of the state of Alabama. It is meant pejoratively to suggest that the music is somehow backwoods and rough-around-the-edges, thereby implying that more Northern and urban listeners would not be interested in it.
2. In various interviews Al Bell, Jim Stewart and Jerry Wexler have all told me that the primary consumers of Stax Recordings were black. This is supported when one looks at the relative success of Stax recordings on the R&B and pop charts.

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