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String musicians in the recording studios of Memphis, Tennessee

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Introduction

From the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, Memphis, Tennessee was home of one of the most successful recording industries in the USA and its popular recorded releases began to rival those of Nashville, Los Angeles, New York and Detroit. Solo artists, song writers, session musicians and arrangers became overnight successes and a rebellious and influential upstart recording industry emerged. But the growth was too fast and, fuelled by zealous egos and competition, an infrastructure was never formed resulting in a musical and financial cataclysm from which the Memphis music community has yet to recover. This article is about those classically trained string musicians who were hired to play in the studios of Memphis during that era.

My initial search for documentation of string musicians' involvement in the history of recorded popular music in America quickly proved that such individuals have not only been overlooked by researchers of popular music, but in some cases even mocked or subtly demeaned to the point of censure (Gillett 1970, pp. 193–5; Middleton 1972, pp. 212–14; Logan and Woffinden 1977, p. 43; Palmer 1980, pp. 214–18; Guralnick 1983, pp. 106, 304–7; Charlton 1994, pp. 100–1; Bowman 1995, p. 286).[1] Most of those investigating rockabilly, rock 'n' roll, R & B and soul – often specifically recorded in Memphis – have tended to focus their attention on the producers, star performers and rhythm musicians who were involved in its creation. The latest product of Rob Bowman's research, *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, for example, only mentions the use of strings at Stax twice (Bowman 1997). Others operating from a socio-historical viewpoint stress the significance of social aspects and ramifications from the 'pluralistic synthesis' of African-American and European-American musical styles (Middleton 1972, p. 212). It is reasonable to state that, in most cases, the use of strings in African-American soul music is misinterpreted and portrayed as a point of delusion rather than a new level of synthesis (Keil 1966; Gillett 1970, p. 240; Guralnick 1983).[2]

The unbalanced discussion is not limited to African-American music, for rock releases using classical instrumentations have also been described as an indication of artistic low points. Such is the case with the music of the teen idols whose sound is described as having 'string-laden blandness' performed by 'bored middle-aged musicians' (Shaw 1992, p. 108). Similarly, the use of brass and strings on *The Soft Parade* by The Doors marks an all-time low in their 'artistic stock' which 'turned what the group had come to represent into a joke' (Bangs 1992, p. 389).

All this judgemental censorship seems unwarranted considering string

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musicians were consistently used in some of the most successful pop hits ever to have been recorded in the United States. Memphis string musicians, for example, can be found on 'The Letter', 'Hooked on a Feeling', 'Angel of the Morning', 'Suspicious Minds', 'In the Ghetto', 'Theme From Shaft', 'Let's Stay Together' and 'Disco Duck'. Memphis strings were not only an integral part of the local recording industry but also a major component of the overall sound of an era. It is ironic that during that time of human rights protests, rebellion against social norms and governmental policies, and the height of racial tensions, African-American musicians and audiences were unwittingly vindicating the validity of traditional 'high' culture. Regardless of how they have been stereotyped in both academic and popular writings, the insiders of vernacular culture saw the value of strings in their recordings. It is equally ironic that classically trained European-American musicians played such a large part in the recording of music and other styles associated with the youthful rebellion in the 1960s during the Vietnam War era.

I have conducted personal interviews with many musicians and arrangers employed by Memphis studios, as well as with other professionals who were observing the local music industry during that time (1960–85).[3] Their recollections provide a new point of view of American popular music and contribute a fresh contrast to the existing body of research.

Early string sessions in Memphis

After the excitement caused by Elvis Presley and other Sun recording artists in the mid to late 1950s had died down, producer Sam Phillips began to follow the national trend of using choruses and string sections in his recordings (Escott and Hawkins 1991, p. 225). From February through October of 1960, local violinists were hired for songs by Barbara Pittman, Bobbie-Jean Barton, Ernie Barton, Brad Suggs and Carl Mann (Escott and Hawkins 1987, pp. 16, 17, 117, 119, 200). But the first successful recording nationally in which local violins were used was 'Mountain of Love' (Rita 1003), sung by Harold Dorman and produced by Roland Janes for his short-lived Rita label. With strings overdubbed onto previously recorded tracks, the song sold a million copies upon its release in 1960, peaking at number 21 on the *Billboard* pop chart by April (Whitburn 1989A, p. 134). The violinists were Noel Gilbert, his daughter Joan Gilbert, Nino Ravarino and Anne Oldham (Escott and Hawkins 1987, p. 21). Roland Janes credits the overdubbed strings as the selling point of the song stating 'during that era people were string happy. I guess strings helped us to get [radio] play in areas where we might not have sold records [otherwise].' (Marsh 1989, pp. 326–8)

Another early string session was held at the fledgeling Satellite label (which became Stax) in December 1960. On that occasion, Carla Thomas, daughter of disc jockey and entertainer Rufus Thomas, recorded 'Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)' with the production help of Chips Moman. After Bob Tally, the contracted arranger, failed to show up for the session, violinist Noel Gilbert obligingly helped Satellite's owner Jim Stewart, an amateur violinist himself, arrange string parts for the string ensemble (Bowman 1997, pp. 16–18). This, Memphis's second string session paying union scale, went overtime, and was perhaps an omen for future sessions at Stax. Not only was there no string arrangement, the studio did not have music stands or chairs, nor was appropriate lighting provided in order to read the music.[4]

Other early string sessions in Memphis were organised for Jerry Lee Lewis's

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final recordings for Sun Records. In early 1963, Vinnie Trauth contracted a string group, led by Noel Gilbert, to overdub onto the Lewis country tracks recorded earlier that year. Though it was temporarily shelved during the commotion caused by Lewis's move to Mercury Records, the track 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginia' (Sun 396) was released two years later with only moderate sales. 'Invitation to Your Party' (Sun 1101), on the other hand, rose to number six on the country chart in August 1969 (Whitburn 1989B, p. 178).[5] Although these two Sun releases were important to the early stages of the recording boom in Memphis, and demonstrate the value and accessibility of local string musicians, Sun was by this time past its prime, never becoming a major supplier of other sessions discussed in this investigation. But because of the success of Sun, other labels and back-room studios quickly appeared in Memphis – all trying to capitalise on the market's doors opened by Sam Phillips.[6]

The first of the four important Memphis studios to employ strings regularly was Chips Moman's American Recording Studio, which had significant success in the pop-rock market. Moman, who played an important role during the early years of Satellite (Stax), opened his own American Recording Studio in 1964. After recruiting a regular rhythm section, his American Recording Group produced charting singles for The Box Tops, Wilson Pickett, B.J. Thomas, Neil Diamond, Dionne Warwick and Elvis Presley. During its heyday (1964–73), 120 charting singles were produced for various labels at the American Recording Studio (Guralnick 1983, p. 299).

With a production taste not unlike the famous 'wall of sound' used by his California contemporary Phil Spector, Moman also used string and brass sections in many of his productions. Because the studio and staff were not yet experienced with such sessions, the physical accommodations were not up to the standards to which the symphony string musicians were accustomed. Much like the first sessions at Satellite and Sun, there were no chairs or music stands in the studio and only a single light bulb hung from a cord above the musicians. The headphones at that time were made of metal, reminiscent of those used in the Air Force, and were heavy and cumbersome for the string musicians.[7] Jamieson Brant, current president of the Memphis Federation of Musicians (American Federation of Musicians, Local 71), maintains Chips Moman held up to a dozen sessions a week and his American Recording Studio was known for hiring the largest sections of twelve violins, six violas and four cellos.[8]

The second prominent studio to regularly hire strings during this early period was founded by WDIA Radio owner John Pepper in 1960. At first, the Pepper label tried to compete in the record market but with little success; Pepper, logically, turned to the production of prerecorded radio advertisements. This rethinking proved profitable; by 1965, the company had grown to become one of the leading employers of instrumentalists and vocalists in Memphis and was supplying jingles and radio identifications nationwide. Although it never produced hit records, the Pepper Advertising Agency remained a reliable employer for string musicians, holding overdub sessions weekly. Although the company was sold to Media General in the early 1980s, many of the radio and television advertisements are currently being used today, both regionally and nationally (*Billboard*, 29 March 1969, p. 10).

Another studio which employed local string musicians was the Royal Recording Studio, home of Hi Records. Begun in 1956 as a competitor to Sun, Hi

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had some success with instrumental releases through the mid-1960s, and by 1968 Willie Mitchell's band had become the leading act of the label with 'Soul Serenade' (Guralnick 1983, p. 303). By 1970, Mitchell became not only the chief operating officer of Hi Records, but also its producer, arranger and recording engineer. Under his supervision, vocalist Al Green recorded twenty-four charting songs from 1970 to 1979. Mitchell's intent, to take soul music in a new, more elegant and refined direction, was partly achieved by the use of strings (Whitburn 1989c, pp. 39, 174). 'Let's Stay Together' (Hi 2202), a number one hit in December 1971, was the first of many for the label using strings as a suave subtlety. Among the producers active during the recording boom in Memphis from 1960 to the mid-1980s, Willie Mitchell stands out among string musicians as having been particularly well organised in his studio. Not coincidentally, Mitchell is the only producer from that period who is still recording in Memphis.

Stax Records, which had developed an identifiable sound during the 1960s by adhering to a 'less is more' policy, was the last to adopt strings into its sound. The use of strings on the 1967 release of Eddie Floyd's 'I Never Found a Girl' marks the dividing line, as drawn by historian Rob Bowman, between two distinctive musical style periods. It is ironic that the musicians at Stax had wanted to add strings, but because of tight budgets and owner Jim Stewart's conviction that Stax should remain 'raw' and 'funky', they were not hired. In this sense, the true desires of the R & B culture, who wanted to 'broaden and diversify' the Stax sound, were predicated and moulded by a cultural and musical outsider (Bowman 1997, pp. 151–2). Whether the addition of strings to the Stax sound is viewed delusionary or simply an attempt to remain in contention for the ever-changing popular R & B market, local strings, nevertheless, became a regular part of all the styles being recorded in Memphis.

The string musician's perspective

Isaac Hayes is quoted in Rob Bowman's *Soulsville, U.S.A.* as saying the string musicians used for his sessions '. . .had their noses in the air. They were snobbish and they looked down on the music' (Bowman 1997, pp. 205, 206). This single and rather misleading statement concerning the string players' attitudes (in the 400-page document) would surely come as a surprise to most of the string players I interviewed. To the contrary, a majority of those interviewed during this study have fond memories of the Stax sessions with Isaac Hayes. It is to the string musicians' credit that, although they were probably driven primarily by economic reasons, those who enjoyed the recording boom of that period were also ultimately motivated by genuine artistic principles and a sense of professionalism. As the many quotations following will demonstrate, most seemed, at least in hindsight, to take pride in their musical input. Violinist Dr Robert Snyder explains the duel orientation as follows: 'It was the most fun work I ever did in Memphis. . . We knew it was a different job [stylistically], and we did it. We were always concerned about the sound of the final product.'[9] Other string musicians whom I interviewed generally agree in their recollections of the character and atmosphere of the recording sessions they participated in. Violinist Joan Gilbert remembers: 'It was always fun, really fun, creative. We had input. . . We had a sense of togetherness. Our results came from our friendships, discussion, . . . socialising with friends.' Violinist Jim Edmonds likewise agrees: 'The nice thing about playing sessions was there was no

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competition, or you didn't feel competition. Everybody knew everybody else back then. We all got paid the same money.'[10]

Financial benefits aside, cellist Barbara Thompson enjoyed playing sessions because they helped to provide a variety to her musical life:

> It was a learning experience, . . . fun. That's the one thing I used to argue about with my brother who plays oboe in the Pittsburgh Symphony. [Mockingly] Of course he went to Juilliard! It [recording] was a challenge of a sort, but it was something fun, different. My real love is symphony playing.[11]

The differences in musical training and cultures was obvious to most. Robert Snyder explains: 'They [arrangers] were amazed by the sound [of strings]. They were very complimentary, and it gave us a good feeling . . . But as time went on, they got used to it.'

Part of what made recording sessions in Memphis different from those in New York City or Los Angeles was the relaxed mood of the participants. This was a trait of the producers and rhythm sections already, but also a quality which the string players assumed as well. The main facilitator in this respect was Memphis's veteran violinist Noel Gilbert. Much of the coordination and communication between the producers or arrangers and the string section was carried out by him. As the contractor and leader of most of the string sessions from 1960 through 1976, Gilbert was the unofficial but undisputed master, the godfather, of string performance styles in the studios of Memphis. His role as contractor, coordinator and stylistic interpreter was all-important in the string sessions held in the city.[12] Violinist Bill Thurman further describes how Gilbert acted as an intermediary for the string section:

> Well, there could only be one boss. Ol' Noel would figure out what they wanted by demonstrating different ways to do it to them, and then he would show us how to do it. Some of the more strict classical guys looked down their noses at the styles called for. To do it like they [the producers] wanted was sort of against their religion. . . To Noel's credit, he knew what it was to 'get funky' and all. He could feel things.[13]

Violinist Jim Edmonds also comments on this feature of the sessions:

> The producers always had the final say so. They just sang it for you, and you had to figure out how to get that sound. Noel would demonstrate two or three ways for them [on his violin]. They would decide which one they liked. Then we'd all do it that way. Most of the arrangers weren't knowledgeable string players. They came from R & B. When they came in with something and indicated that it wouldn't work, we'd help them fix it so it would. I understand they don't do that in L.A. or New York. [We would] lean over backwards. If there was a wrong note on the page, we'd ask them to check and see.

Edmonds' statement 'we help them fix it' should be emphasised. Probably unknown to the arrangers, adjustments in subtle nuances (bowing, articulation, timbre) appropriate for string writing were made by the veteran string musicians.

Such leadership and minor adjustments to string arrangements were appreciated by Mike Leech, one-time arranger for Chips Moman's American Recording Studio who now enjoys a successful recording career in Nashville, Tennessee. He voluntarily gives credit to the Memphis string musicians and their generous patience while he was learning much of his arranging skills on the job. Leech explains how ideas were transferred through Gilbert and how this method made his job easier and that he essentially had an in-house laboratory orchestra to experiment with: 'When changes had to be made, he would assist me. I'd just hum to him what I wanted, and he'd play it. They would all change their parts.' Leech immediately

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noticed the differences in string players' attitudes when he began session work in Nashville, Tennessee. He stresses that there is still a great deal of difference between the two cities and the overall ambience in the studio: 'In Nashville, if you have to make a change, they [string musicians] just sit there and stare at you like you're crazy!'[14]

As the following scenario related by Barbara Thompson points out, Gilbert's ideas were not merely directed to the violinists:

> Noel was very prominent. See, they [arrangers] didn't know the instruments or how to ask for what they wanted. They'd say ''No man, that's not what I want''. Noel would say ''Well, that's what you've got written''. Then he'd [the arranger] say, ''No man, I want a ripple effect, a waterfall. . .'' Noel would play different things for him, sliding down the fingerboard, chromatic things, trills. Then he'd say [the arranger], ''Yeah man, yeah man! Now you've got it!''

Violinist Robert Snyder had similar remarks about the arrangers' apparent lack of knowledge and experience: 'Everybody arranged back then, whether they knew how or not. Some of them were completely unprepared. They didn't realize the concept of the string section, that we all had to be playing the same thing.'

As one of the youngest members of the professional string society at that time and perhaps most familiar with popular music, Bill Thurman was in a position to witness the meeting of the two cultures. Here he sums up the role of his elder Noel Gilbert as he perceived it and the difference in the two disciplines:

> It was like a clash of cultures. That was the funny thing about it. It was a culture crunch! A lot of the producers would be mumbling amongst themselves, trying to find a solution to a problem. One time ol' Dan Penn had a session over at Lynn Lou [a small recording studio on Chelsea Ave]. Dan showed up thirty minutes late! Ol' Noel and them were getting really worked up about it . . . watching the clock. The whole thing was loose. Dan Penn didn't have charts written for us. He said, ''Why don't you just make up some stuff''? The string players couldn't play anything unless they had the notes. Noel composed half of it for them. He said, ''This is what we're going to do''! Noel knew enough about people that he could smell where they were coming from. He was just cool enough so that he could take somebody else's cue as to what style they wanted.[15]

String musicians and the 'Memphis sound'

Not all sessions were fun, creative, and communal efforts, however. String musicians faced several problems when asked to record in local studios, especially for soul and R & B sessions. Most of the producers and arrangers were African-American, and the string sections were entirely European-American and, typically, the producers and arrangers had limited schooling in music notation and nearly all were unfamiliar with the idiosyncracies of stringed instruments. Thus, a potential for interpretive confusion existed both socially and musically, especially during the tense years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Moreover, the string musicians who were hired for these sessions had no prior interest or exposure to pop music in general. For the most part, they simply were not accustomed to playing 'head arrangements' and they required written music for the sessions. Such innate problems were further exacerbated by the style of playing the R & B arrangers demanded. Again, Isaac Hayes is quoted as saying 'It was a challenge for them because they had to stay within rhythm. They couldn't play like they played classical music. You've got to get the feel, you've got to go with the flow, you've got to go with the groove.' (Bowman 1997, p. 206). His unfamiliarity with the pur-

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pose and appropriate application of strings is clear – Hayes evidently did not want the string players for their symphony persona but for a different purpose. Instead of writing traditional chordal passages and diatonic accompaniment lines, the R & B arrangers at Stax and Hi gradually began to transplant guitar and trumpet styled 'riffs' to the string section.[16] These arrangements involved much more syncopations, anticipations, blue notes and chromatic runs than previous string accompaniments used in releases from Memphis and, typically, the written music did not reflect them accurately. This new approach to arranging, at least in Memphis, forced the classically trained musicians to adapt their rhythm and intonation to the R & B idiom and interpret jazz shorthand musical notations. On the subject of imitating the styles performed on previous rhythm tracks, Barbara Thompson reminisced: 'Well, they weren't bashful about telling you what they wanted . . . If they weren't happy with what we played, they'd tell us, and we'd do it until they were happy with it. They liked what they heard when they found what they wanted.' Her elusive answer about who influenced whom is perhaps reflective of the fact that both musical cultures were unconsciously adapting to each other in the forging of a new sound. Jim Edmonds strongly feels the string players supplied an important element which helped define a 'Memphis sound'. He declares: 'We mastered the style, there's a lot of people playing the same notes [but] they don't sound the same!'

Memphis's string players may have simply and unknowingly imitated nuances of the vocals or horn lines that were in the headphone mix. While it is difficult to pinpoint just how regional styles developed in R & B and soul styles, in Memphis at least, the imitation of pre-existing rhythm tracks, plus the humming and singing by amateur pop arrangers to Gilbert and his section, became the most efficient means of conveying specific musical ideas. The mannerisms called for by R & B arrangers were often the very things classical violin technique had taught them to avoid (e.g. playing without vibrato, portamento devices, lethargic shifts between fingering positions, deviations from printed rhythmic notations, and 'swinging' dotted eighth notes connected to sixteenth note figures). While these are standard practices in jazz and R & B, they are not standard performance practices in classical art music. Example 1 shows the strings rendering lines derived from R & B in 'A Man Will Be a Man' on the Isaac Hayes' album entitled *Joy*. Although the upper strings begin by playing a rhythmically strict melody line (presumably as notated), as the repetitions continue, the string section gradually emulates the vocal syncopated anticipations.[17]

The new application of strings is evident in the solo section of 'Ghetto Child' found on the album *Memphis Unlimited* by singer O.V. Wright. The album, produced and engineered by Willie Mitchell, integrates the string section into the band's sound by allowing them to play the parts customarily performed by the rhythm section. Unlike the orchestrations at American Recording or Pepper–Tanner, where the schooled arrangers were perhaps acquainted with typical writing styles, the strings on much of Mitchell's Hi label are written somewhat primitively in parallel octaves. Example 2 shows how Hi's arrangers often used string sections for solos rather than the more traditional organ, piano, saxophone or guitar.

The situation at Hi studio was described to me by Viola player Bill Thurman, who is himself a schooled arranger and composer: 'Aaron Nesbit worked for Willie [Mitchell] some as an arranger. He tried to translate quite a bit of R & B guitar licks to the entire string section. . . Many of those guys [string players] couldn't do that with ease.'[18] An example of this 'translation' can be found in 'Pity Yourself' (Stax

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Example 1. Transcription of an excerpt of the string arrangement for 'A Man Will be a Man' from the album *Joy* (Stax 5MP S8530) by Isaac Hayes.



Example 2. Transcription of the string arrangement for the song 'Ghetto Child' from the album *Memphis Unlimited* (Backbeat BB1X72) by O. V. Wright.

3017) recorded by the Sweet Inspirations (Example 3) where the violins and violas are used in a pentatonic solo passage more typical of an electric guitar riff. This style of writing would become a major component of the national disco fad of the 1970s, which invariably used orchestral string sections. We can only speculate the degree to which the Memphis recording industry would have grown if it had survived until the disco era.

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Example 3. Transcription of an excerpt of the string arrangement for the song 'Pity Yourself' from the album *Sweet Inspiration* (Stax STS 3017) by The Sweet Inspirations.

The Memphis habits of recording did not always suit the more practical techniques of outsiders not accustomed to Southern studio manners. The lack of rapport sometimes made sessions quite tedious. Violinist Joan Gilbert explains the difference in regional attitudes as witnessed during a soundtrack session for the movie *Every Which Way But Loose*, starring Clint Eastwood: 'This guy from California, Dee Barton, made it difficult. He was hard to work with. He just snapped at people, uptight. He just wanted it fast! He had a California attitude. Here we were much more laid back, like chamber music, and it showed in the music, more relaxed. He [Isaac Hayes], for example, was very social.' Violinist Robert Snyder recalls Dee Barton in much the same way as Joan Gilbert: 'Well, he just wrote impossible things and didn't want to pay over-time [to finish them].' These parts were often so technically difficult that some members of the string section would refuse to attempt them.

It is clear from these excerpts from the string musicians I interviewed that there was a situation of compromise, on the part of both the vernacular and cultured musicians, to maintain a balance of professional atmosphere and creativity. It is also interesting to note that all of this interracial communication took place during the height of racial turmoil in the South. Much has been made of the racial mix of the rhythm sections of the period (Stax, for example, had an interracial rhythm section), but those musicians had similar interests in popular music and popular performance styles. The productivity of the entirely European-American string players in conjunction with the (largely) African-American R & B musicians, arrangers and producers is equally impressive and valiant, for although most Memphis string players enjoyed their session experiences, it certainly was not their main musical outlet for self expression.

Conspicuous consumption

The late 1960s to early 1970s still remain the financial high water mark for the recording industry in Memphis, and especially for the use of strings on recordings. There were now nine recording studios regularly holding string sessions in Memphis. But. . .

The details of the unravelling of the Memphis recording industry have been documented by popular music scholars such as Peter Guralnick and Rob Bowman.[19] I will expand on that discussion here by offering, through my informants, a unique

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perspective of that era. Excesses and abuse of budgets within the local record industry were becoming obvious even to the peripheral string musicians who were hired for Stax sessions, as the following story recounted by Jim Edmonds reveals:

> It was a 12:00 session at Stax for Isaac Hayes. When we were already being paid time-and-a-half for the late night session, we started several hours late while they figured out how to get a celesta to the studio. They called a taxi to come pick up a guy to go get the thing from somewhere across town. Then the thing wouldn't fit into the trunk, so they put it on the roof of the car and held it through the window!

The anecdote demonstrates that there was little regard for the cost of employing a string section to wait in an empty studio while on the clock, and further suggests that the arrogance and extreme lack of preparation was becoming blatant and even deliberate.

Gloria Hendricks describes a typical scene at the Stax Studio during the early to mid-1970s:

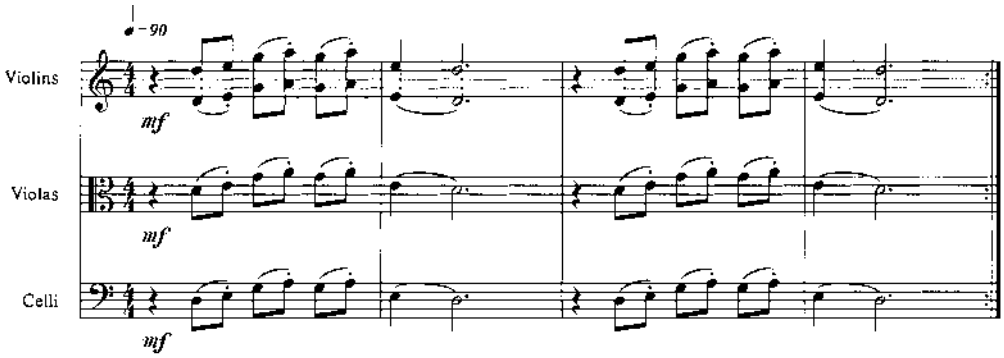
> Stax would let people get by with murder. . . It was filthy when you walked in, . . . the dirty old red carpet. . . Yes, it was filthy even in its heyday. I don't care what room you looked in. It was just filled with couples . . . smooching around, laying on the desk, hollering. . . You know!

One of the obvious reasons for Isaac Hayes's bankruptcy in 1976 is evident in the large orchestrations on his solo records. The album *Joy*, for example, besides employing a standard rhythm section, also includes a nearly orchestra-sized string section, a jazz brass section, plus a French horn, flute, harp and oboe. The local AFM contracts show that on April 22 1976, fifteen strings, one harp and an oboe were employed to record seven songs in addition to twelve brass players. The 'double session' (six hours) of string and brass overdubs added a total of $12,160 beyond the rhythm tracks with $6,022 spent on string tracks alone (these songs became the album entitled *Juicy Fruit*).[20] An orchestration of this size is not unusual in popular music, but if studio time is not used efficiently, it becomes financially overwhelming. Even though the local musicians' union was more relaxed about its procedures and policies than in other regions, these string musicians were nevertheless being paid union scale for the time they spent waiting for the session to even begin. When I asked Snyder how they passed the time, he replied: 'Sit around, play cards or read . . . or find a corner somewhere and sleep!'

The level to which some orchestrations had grown in Memphis soul music is evident on the albums *Hot Buttered Soul, Groove-athon, The Isaac Hayes Experience* and *Joy*. These were more expensive than any other production Stax had ever released. These albums became so costly because, in part, they were often recorded in Memphis studios other than Stax (Guralnick 1983, p. 369). Gloria Hendricks, who was also a guidance counsellor in the Memphis City School System, was shocked by the lack of discipline she encountered: 'There was just nothing structured. We'd get there for a seven o'clock session, and there'd be no chairs or stands. . . He [Isaac Hayes] didn't care. . . 'Loose, man, . . . just hanging loose'. [mimicking Hayes' manner]. . . It was terrible!' In this case, both the cultivated and vernacular musicians agree as to the degree of laxity during 1971 (Bowman 1997, pp. 229–30, 245).

Memphis Federation of Musicians President Jamieson Brant alleges that strings were often used in Memphis studios as a matter of conspicuous consumption. They were used, as Brant stated it: 'in excess during fades and introductions to songs to show off that they could hire strings and put them to work'. This, I

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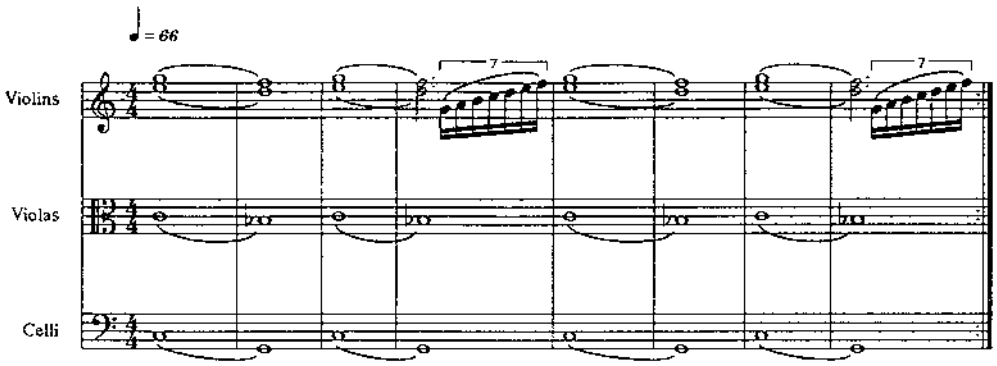


Example 4. Transcription of an excerpt of the string arrangement for the song 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix' from the album *Hot Buttered Soul* (Stax 5STX-4114) by Isaac Hayes.

would suggest, might well be the case with 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix' (Enterprise 9003) from Isaac Hayes' album *Hot Buttered Soul*, where the string section dominates the four-minute introduction of the 18:40 minute song as well as its eighty-eight measure fade-out. The strings are very prominent in the overall sound as they repeat the monotonous pattern shown in Example 4. 'Walk On By' (Enterprise 9003), also on the *Hot Buttered Soul* album, is another example of how the strings were used to flamboyant excess. Over half of the twelve-minute song is a vamping fade-out on which the string section is quite dominant (Example 5).

For all these and perhaps other reasons, by the end of 1976, the massive quantity of records recorded in Memphis had reduced to a trickle. Stax had filed for bankruptcy in 1975, Al Green refused to record secular music after his 1976 split with Mitchell and Hi, and throughout the 1970s Chips Moman's American Recording Group was splintering into various independent factions (Guralnick 1983, pp. 306, 374, 375). Except for the Pepper–Tanner jingle sessions, the string players watched the recording business end just as suddenly as it began. Recording had become a beneficial addition to a select group of string performers and the collapse of the local industry left a serious vacancy in their careers.

Although not a complete collection, the remaining recording session contracts from the late 1960s through mid-1970s on file at the Memphis Federation of



Example 5. Transcription of an excerpt of the string arrangement for the song 'Walk on By' from the album *Hot Buttered Soul* (Stax 5STX-4114) by Isaac Hayes.

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Musicians reflect the deterioration of the industry as a whole. The response to thesection pertaining to 'to be paid' begins to shift from a typed 'within fourteen days' (which was union standard) to handwritten 'upon completion' of the session. Also, many later contracts filed by the R & B arrangers are not as neatly organised as those of earlier years. The spaces for 'artist', 'record label' and 'songs recorded' are often left blank or are sloppily handwritten instead of typed, and in general, the contracts begin to slip in their formality, becoming increasingly disorderly in appearance as the 1970s progress.

In the early to mid-1970s, the most chaotic years of recording in Memphis, the productions at Pepper–Tanner remained the most reliable and efficient session work in town. The Memphis Symphony Orchestra conveniently eliminated Wednesday nights from its rehearsal schedule to facilitate the weekly sessions at Tanner's Studio V.[21] Jingles produced by the Pepper–Tanner staff were regularly heard all over the United States and Canada, representing major corporations such as Toyota and Sears and supplying an untold number of radio station identifications. But in 1982, faced with charges of tax fraud and other questionable financial dealings, even the jingle sessions came to an end. The Pepper–Tanner company was sold to the Texas-based Media General, who immediately began scaling down the size of the staff and instrumentalists and subsequently moved its operation from Memphis in 1985 (Ross 1982, pp. 80–4).

Memphis in the aftermath

In 1987 the unwanted contents of the former Tanner studios were emptied onto the Diana Street curb to be hauled away by the Memphis Sanitation Department. I recovered heaps of files listing sessions and past clients, reams of score paper, audio tapes, photographs and assorted pieces of broken musical instruments. A box of colour slides were also uncovered of violinists Noel Gilbert, Robert Snyder, Jim Edmonds and Laura Manthey playing at Pepper–Tanner Studio.

Isaac Hayes' Hot Buttered Soul Recording Studio, abandoned, was still standing in 1992 with its doors wide open and windows broken out. Inside there were still faint reminders that the lavish studio was once something more than a sanctuary for the homeless, but they were difficult to find amongst the broken gin and whiskey bottles. The modern-styled, swank structure stands as a ghostly reminder of Memphis's recording industry and musical past. The entire city block that was once the home of Stax Studio and Satellite Record Store was demolished in 1988 and Chips Moman's abandoned American Recording Studio was bulldozed in 1989 to make way for an auto parts franchise. There are now few union-sanctioned string sessions in Memphis.

Endnotes

1. Peter Guralnick refers to augmentation by 'candy-cane strings' and fails to mention their prominent usage on Al Green's recordings. *The Illustrated History of Rock* condescendingly states about the James Brown hit, 'It's a Man's World', that 'Although the song employs strings, it was nevertheless delivered in Brown's frenzied and distinctive gospel-styled singing. . .', and in his description of Ben E. King's 'Save the Last Dance for Me', Charlie Gillett remarks, '. . . although King was not helped by the Spanish guitars and lush strings that prevented any kind of improvisation by the rest of the Drifters'. He also states about

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their song 'On Broadway', 'In amongst the swirling strings was a simple but effective blues guitar solo. . .'. In *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll,* there is only a single statement concerning strings and the Memphis sound, and it is negative. Palmer states, 'The younger Stax producers favoured orchestral sweetening and more up-to-date band tracks. They diluted the integrity of the original Memphis sound.' Similarly, the introduction of strings on Stax recordings was a cut-off point for the end of the first period sound. Richard Middleton's ranking of soul music into 'heavy', 'light' and 'sophisticated' obviously views the use of strings as a gimmicky frill. In her analysis of the instrumentation on 'My Girl' by the Motown group the Temptations, Katherine Charlton fails to mention that the string section is featured during the entire solo section.

2. Charles Keil's *Urban Blues is* essentially a sociological study of Afro-American musical culture and *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll,* repeatedly overlooks the obvious existence of strings in famous pop recordings. For example, in his description of Isaac Hayes' 'Shaft', Gillett credits the 'wah-wah guitar' as a 'clever effect' but fails to mention the overwhelming use of Beethovenesque strings which dominate the recording, and the omission of commentary about the importance of strings in *Sweet Soul Music* demonstrates the narrow focus common among most research.
3. I have chosen 1985, when Media General pulled out of Memphis, as a cut-off point for this study.
4. Joan Gilbert interviewed by telephone, 2 February 1991.
5. The Sun release was not spelled the same as the older song 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginny' by James Bland.
6. Smaller record companies included Golden Eagle, Penthouse, Ardent, Pepper, X-L, Genie, Holiday Inn Label, Goldwax, Zone, Stomper Time, Erwin, Camaro, Wooten, Fernwood and a host of other independent studios.
7. Gloria Hendricks interviews, 30 September 1990 and 3 April 1992.
8. Interview with Jamieson Brant, 15 April 1991.
9. Robert Snyder interview, 4 February 1992.
10. Jim Edmonds interview, 20 February 1991. It is perhaps due to the recording boom that Memphis was so late in developing a full-time symphony orchestra. The Memphis Symphony Orchestra did not instate a full-time core group until 1984.
11. Barbara Thompson interview by telephone, 8 March 1992.
12. Noel Alexander Gilbert was born in Scott's Hill, Tennessee, in 1909. His exposure to music began with his father's involvement in country bands in and around Henderson County, Tennessee. In 1925, at the age of 16, he moved to Memphis to take advantage of opportunities to work in the pit orchestras and study in the music schools in the city. Gilbert worked his way into the Orpheum Theater pit orchestra and other pick-up groups. He was also a violinist for WREC-Radio and later director of the WMC studio orchestra. Gilbert began teaching at Memphis State College (University of Memphis) in 1948, where he remained employed until his retirement in 1974. There are no interviews of Noel Gilbert in this work because he maintained such a forward-looking approach to life and music that he basically refused to talk about his past. Once, he responded to my questioning with a simple: 'What do you want to know about that stuff for?'
13. Bill Thurman interview, 29 March 1992.
14. Mike Leech interview by telephone, 8 March 1992.
15. A 'culture crunch' was also a factor in the string quartet overdubs for the Beatles' 'Yesterday' (Capitol 5498) and 'Eleanor Rigby' (Capitol 5715). Paul McCartney and producer George Martin recall similar communication problems in Mark Lewisohn's *The Beatles Recording Sessions: The Official Abbey Road Studio Session Notes* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), pp. 59, 77.
16. Strings had been used in similar fashion in other regions. The Temptations' 'My Girl' (Gordy 7038), recorded in 1965, uses Detroit strings in an innovative way which must have influenced arrangers in Memphis to carry the style a step further.
17. These examples are my transcriptions from the recordings themselves; the actual scores were not available during my research. Rob Bowman, however, has seen some of the arrangements which are in the possession of their composer, Johnny Allen.
18. Bill Thurman interview, 27 April 1991.
19. Peter Guralnick documents the demise of Stax in his chapter 'Death of a dream' in *Sweet Soul Music,* as does Rob Bowman in the latter half of *Soulsville, U.S.A.*
20. Rob Bowman asserts that these string sessions were overdubbed in Detroit. Perhaps the Memphis tracks were erased in favour of Detroit performances. The contracts I read at the Memphis Federation of Musicians prove some kind of string sessions were completed in Memphis for these Isaac Hayes projects (Bowman, 1997, pp. 182–4).

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21. The string players during that period used at Tanner were, violins: Noel and Joan Gilbert, Robert Snyder, John Whelan, Jim and Jan Edmonds; violas: Marianne Snyder and Ann Taylor; Cellos: Peter Spurbeck and Vincent DeFrank.

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1989B. *Top Country Singles: 1944–1988* (Menomonee Falls, WI)
1989c. *Top R & B Singles: 1942–1988* (Menomonee Falls, WI)
'The Memphis sound', *Billboard,* 29 March 1969

Discography

The following is a partial listing of compact discs, albums and 45 rpm singles on which Memphis string musicians can be heard.
The Box Tops, *The Ultimate Box Tops.* Warner Bros. CD9-27611-2.
Compilation, *The Complete Stax/Volt Singles 1959–1968.* Atlantic 7-8221-2.
Rick Dees and His Cast of Idiots, *The Original Disco Duck.* RSO RS-1-3017.
Harold Dorman, 'Mountain of Love'. Rita 1003.
Eddie Floyd, *Baby Lay Your Head Down (Gently on My Pillow).* Stax STS 3016.
Inez Foxx, *Inez Foxx in Memphis.* Volt V05-6022.
Al Green, *Al Green's Greatest Hits.* Motown MOTC-5283.
Isaac Hayes, *The Isaac Hayes Movement.* 5STX-4129.
Isaac Hayes, *Black Moses.* 5MP S8509.
Isaac Hayes, *Hot Buttered Soul.* 5STX-4114.
Isaac Hayes, *Joy.* 5MP S8530.
Isaac Hayes, *Greatest Hit Singles.* 5MP S8515.
Jerry Lee Lewis, 'Invitation to Your Party'. Sun 1101.
Elvis Presley, *From Elvis in Memphis.* RCA PK-1456.
Paul Revere and the Raiders, *Going to Memphis.* Columbia CS 9605.
Merrilee Rush and the Turnabouts, *Angel of the Morning.* Bell 6020 LP.
The Staple Singers, *Chronicle/Their Greatest Stax Hits.* Stax STX 4119.
Rod Stewart, *Downtown Train: Selected Hits from the Story Teller Anthology.* Warner Bros. 26158-2.
B.J. Thomas, *B.J. Thomas's Greatest Hits,* Rhino R 270752.
Carla Thomas, *Memphis Queen,* Stax SMPS 8539.

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Rufus Thomas, *Rufus Thomas's Greatest Hits*. Hollywood HT-179.
O.V. Wright, *The Bottom Line*. Hi 6008.
O.V. Wright, *Memphis Unlimited*. BackBeat BBLX72.

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