

A detailed history of an unsung recording studio and its lasting impact on music



Memphis Boys

The Story of American Studios • Roben Jones

Memphis Boys



"For Your Precious Love" session, 1967. Left to right: Don Crews, Reggie Young, Tommy Cogbill, Gene Chrisman, Oscar Toney Jr., Papa Don Schroeder, Chips Moman, and Bobby Emmons (seated). Photo courtesy Erick Crews, © Papa Don Schroeder.



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American Studios

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University Press of Mississippi Jackson

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Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2010

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jones, Roben.
Memphis Boys : the story of American Studios /
Roben Jones.
p. cm. — (American made music series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-60473-401-0 (cloth : alk. paper) 1.
Memphis Boys (Musical group) 2. American Sound
Studios. 3. Moman, Chips. 4. Musicians—Nashville—
Memphis. 5. Sound engineers—Nashville—Memphis.
6. Sound recording industry—Nashville—Memphis—
History. I. Title.

ML421.M45J65 2010

781.64092'2—dc22

[B]

2009031476

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available

In memory of Tommy Cogbill

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



No one does a book alone, particularly not a first book, and particularly not a comprehensive music history. A music documentarian is by definition enlisting the help of many people and with this one, five years in the writing and two more in the editing, I have had help from the best.

Thanks to Mike Leech, Reggie Young, Bobby Emmons, Bobby Wood, Gene Chrisman, and to later arrivals Glen Spreen, Johnny Christopher, Hayward Bishop, and Shane Keister. Each of them endured many hours of interviews, emails, and questions about what all of it meant with remarkable patience, and each brought his own form of assistance to the table. Mike Leech helped conceive this project, arranged many of the initial interviews, and for much of it worked as de facto editor, all of which made it a better book than it would have been otherwise. He also kept the group informed of new developments in the writing and kept them on board with the project, a task akin to herding cats. Reggie Young and Bobby Emmons shared the session books that each of them faithfully kept, documenting session dates and times and sometimes amounts paid, which was an invaluable help in establishing chronology. Bobby Emmons replaced Mike Leech as de facto editor for the final half of the book, supervising during a critical phase. And Reggie Young arranged the introductions to the musicians from Muscle Shoals, for which I owe him eternal gratitude. Thanks also to Gene Chrisman's stories and fact checking, and the comments, additions, corrections, and suggestions freely supplied by Bobby Wood.

Thanks to Hayward Bishop, Mike Leech, Glen Spreen, Papa Don Schroeder, and Erick Crews (Don's son) for the photos and to Erick an additional thanks for the hand-drawn map of the studio, as well as his enthusiastic cooperativeness in supplying visual material. Thanks also to Hayward Bishop for providing the introduction to John Broven. Spooner Oldham, Glen Spreen, and Hayward Bishop supplied

me with CDs by the American group that I did not already have in my collection, adding to my store of knowledge about the band. Johnny Christopher and Shane Keister are to be thanked for the enthusiasm, brilliance, and complete sincerity which they brought to this project.

Chips Moman was unfailingly courteous and gracious when I spoke with him. For his patience in going over material about which he had probably spoken to journalists a hundred times or more, many, many thanks. If there is any accuracy, craftsmanship, and professionalism at all in my writing it is in many ways due to his dedication and determination that I should keep working on the book until I had it right. I am pleased to have been the recipient of his perfectionism and commitment to excellence.

Another special thanks to Billy Burnette, Red West, Richard Mainegra, and Rick Yancey for their perspectives. Wayne Carson deserves extraordinary commendation for having sat through the many interviews he so graciously granted. And a nod to the American group support system: sound engineers Ed Kollis, Mike Cauley, and Stan Kesler, secretary Ima Roberts Withers, and the original business manager Don Crews. Marty Lacker and Bob Moore are the best fact checkers in the world, and thanks to both of them.

To the musicians in and of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, for their participation in this account. Many thanks to all as they recalled the road trips and their memories of Tommy Cogbill. A warm and appreciative thanks to Jimmy Johnson, who organized some of the initial interviews. Thanks also to David Hood, Roger and Brenda Hawkins, Spooner and Karen Oldham, and Jerry Carrigan. Additional thanks to Norbert Putnam, who supplied the project with invaluable background information and insights, enthusiastic encouragement, and good advice. Dan Penn provided many comments about events never previously discussed by historians, such as his official photographs for the Elvis sessions. Special thanks as well to Donnie Fritts for his insights and encouragement.

Others who contributed to this book and deserve commendation include studio clients Quinton Claunch, Fred Foster, and Papa Don Schroeder, recording artists Brenda Lee, B. J. Thomas, and Sandy Posey, and musicians Larry Butler, J.R. Cobb, Jim Davis, Wayne Jackson, the late John Hughey, Gary Talley, Bobby Dean Stewart, and Ron Oates. Dan Penn's wife Linda and Tommy Cogbill's widow Shirley were inspirations throughout the writing of this book—when I grow up, I want to be like them.

Special thanks as well to Buddy Spicher for his encouragement and understanding. For other assistance and various kindnesses I would like to thank Kittra Moore and the late Bobby Thompson and his widow Judy.

Thanks to Craig Gill and his staff at the University Press of Mississippi for their interest in and commitment to this book, and for their editorial suggestions that made it stronger and better. Thanks also to John Broven, who introduced me to the world of book publishers, to John Ridley for the American Group discography, and to Joe Bageant for literary advice, for understanding exactly what it took to write, and for the invitation to the 2007 Southern Festival of Books in Nashville.

And then there are the others who gave me so much, and who are indirectly responsible for this book in ways large and small. Many of them are no longer living: grandparents Thomas and Alice Cantley, who provided me a home for many years; mother, Natalie Cantley Jones, whose sacrifices and ambition made me a writer; father, Charles Jones, who put up with me; godmother Clarice J. Lawson, who first sensed that I could become a writer, and godfather, Mannie Klein, who always knew it would happen and said so. My first mentor, Hugh McPherson of West Virginia Public Radio, and his wife Myrtle, would have loved to have seen this book, as would my best friend, the late Spiegel Willcox, and his wife Helen. Dwight Wetherholt's passion for history helped incite within me a similar devotion to facts from the past. Additional family members no longer living to whom I owe much are Sara Cantley Jones; Jack, Johnny, and Terry Jones; Thelma

Cantley Marshall; and Abby Adkins, as well as family friends Bernie Privin and Gladys Fox.

More than anything, I wish Joe Martin had lived to see this book. Joe died in the fall of 2007, as the final drafts were being written. I will miss his encouragement, thoughtfulness, warmth, and gracious spirit each and every day of my life.

To those still living, thanks to Patrick Harold Jones and to family friends Rosalea J. Poland, Mary Helen Cobb, and Victoria Babick. To two of the best "best-friends" a person could have known as a youth, Joseph T. Hardy and Rob Prichard. And thanks to Susan Coleman for standing by me when I needed a friend back there in 1969. Thanks also to Howard Farber, whose used-record business gave me many of my favorite American group recordings over the years. Additional support and encouragement came from Joan McInerny, Evan and Carolyn Roderick, Gladys Lawson Price, Billy Edd Wheeler, Rebecca Williams, Natalie Green, Helen Lanier, Julie Martin Ezell, Madhu Graham, Linda Bowles, Dave and June Conner, my kindred spirit Dottie Dillard, and Tommy Lovelace.

Two others no longer living deserve some of the deepest thanks of all. Thanks to the late Lovell Webb, whose radio show from WKAZ and later WXIT in Charleston, West Virginia, featured the work of the Memphis Boys and instructed the listening audience in who these magnificent musicians were. And especially to Tommy Cogbill, who was the heart and soul of the Memphis Boys. Tommy's productions captivated my heart and my imagination and thus began the long, sometimes arduous, journey that eventually led to this book. So perhaps in a strange way the book is also his creation.

And thanks most of all to James Earl Fetterly, the wind beneath my wings, who knows exactly what I am and endures me anyway, and without whose kindnesses, assistance in ways too numerous to cite, understanding, and almost unconditional love this book would probably not have been written.

INTRODUCTION



They were a band without a name for a long time. In the late sixties, when they began an unprecedented streak of hit records, no one called the band anything at first. In 1968 they released a few instrumental recordings as the American Group. After that they were occasionally billed as the 827 Thomas Street Band, after the address of the Memphis studio where they worked. By 1972 they began the second phase of their careers, as freelance session players in Nashville, and established musicians in town would say of them, “Oh, you know . . . that’s some of those Memphis boys.” With the release of a 1991 album produced by Allen Reynolds, they made that phrase the title, and the Memphis Boys they officially became.

This book is the culmination of a forty-year journey, for them and for me.

In April 1969 I was the typical rebellious fourteen-year-old of the time. I wore wire-rimmed glasses, denounced the Vietnam War at every opportunity, and was in the process of being expelled from my West Virginia junior high school for “insubordination” and “failure to show proper respect to school officials.” At my hearing before the county board of education, I was declared an “unreachable child” and told I could not attend school anywhere in West Virginia. My family would have to move, and at the time, we did not know where. All of us were going to suffer because of the stand I had taken.

I was out of school for most of that year, which allowed me to pursue a better kind of education. The radio was always on and I was developing a passion for all kinds of music. My family was slightly concerned that I spent so much time listening to the radio and seemingly caring about nothing else—in those days such things just were not done—but they sensed I needed it and more or less left me alone. I stayed in my room and did not bother them with my music. And that was how, one Saturday morning, I heard a song that literally changed my life.

Drifting out of my speakers was Alex Chilton, at the time one of the Box Tops but whose recordings were solo performances with session players accompanying him, singing something called “I Shall Be Released.” It was a Dylan tune, but I did not know that then. I could certainly relate to the words, about a man in the lonely crowd who remembered “every face of every man who put me here” and swore that he was not to blame. But even more than the song itself, what got me was the music.

It opened with a resonant grand piano, then continued quietly with the piano and an acoustic guitar underlining the verses. But the anguish implied in the lyrics burst forth in the choruses, with a horn arrangement building and building to screams of bewilderment and pain. Bob Dylan may have been writing about a literal prison, but these musicians, these producers and arrangers—whoever had gotten that sound—had built and woven around Dylan’s words to describe a prison of the spirit. These people knew something about agony and loss and bleak empty roads stretching endlessly before them.

It was the most musically creative thing I had ever heard; the production embellished the song to create a completely personal statement. There was nothing else on the air to compare with it.

My family made our weekly trip that afternoon to Montgomery, the largest town near us, and there in the old wooden record bin at G.C. Murphy I found that single. Along with it I bought an album, Merrilee Rush’s *Angel of the Morning*, because I loved that song and her sweet, hurt-sounding voice. I took the records home and looked at the credits, because I was especially interested in who had gotten that particular sound on the single. The production credit on the single, I discovered to my surprise, was the same as that for the album: Tommy Cogbill and Chips Moman. I had never heard of either of them before, but I knew they were on to something. I absolutely had to hear more. That day I began my life as a record collector.

There was a lot of work from the American

Studio group to collect that summer. Dionne Warwick's *Soulful*. Herbie Mann's *Memphis Underground*. Neil Diamond's "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" and, later, "Sweet Caroline." Hearing "Windmills of Your Mind" on the radio sent me to the *Dusty in Memphis* album, and from there on to Aretha's *Lady Soul*. B. J. Thomas's single, "It's Only Love." And finally Elvis Presley's famous comeback sessions. Through it all, I discovered, the producer whose work I had so admired was also an astonishing bass player.

Before CMT, before *Rolling Stone* was widely distributed, before MTV and VH-1, listeners had to puzzle out alone what was happening with their favorite kinds of music. I deduced that the creative leadership of the group was coming from Cogbill and Moman, and that there seemed to be a third voice named Dan Penn who operated slightly independently of the other two. I avidly read the credits on the back of the album jackets—particularly those from Atlantic, a label that was good about assigning proper credit—to learn who the other musicians were and what they did. Musicians: Gene Chrisman. Reggie Young. Bobby Emmons. Bobby Wood. Bobby Womack. Spooner Oldham. String arrangements by Mike Leech or Glen Spreen. And the writers whose work was also making such an impact: Mark James. Wayne Carson. Billy Burnette. Richard Mainegra. Johnny Christopher. Donnie Fritts. All these players and writers, with their country outlook and strong melodic sense, spoke directly to me. Their very Southernness, their sense of themselves, resonated with me.

As I delved into the world according to these session players, writers, and producers, I found a philosophy more coherent and mature than anything most rock bands were serving up. Both lyrically and musically, many of the songs seemed to be about pain, suffering, hard times, and hard choices. The sound was intricate and textured, with a deep, full tone. The basic rhythm was strong and spirited; the keyboard-driven midrange gave the records complexity; the string lines ranged from somberly contemplative to anguished or despairing.

I did not know it, but I had been captivated

by a way of making music that was different from anything a casual listener could have imagined. What I was hearing was an interpretive art that had nothing to do with formal training, composed notation, planned preproduction, or note-reading musicians. It had everything to do with the soul and skills of the producers and players. "I've always found that studios need musicians and vice versa, and producers need musicians and vice versa," said the legendary songwriter and keyboard player Spooner Oldham, who wrote many of the Box Tops hits and who occasionally did some producing.

"The outside has no real clue about the recording process," said Glen Spreen, one of the two arrangers for the Box Tops record. "In ninety-nine percent of the recordings the producers, arrangers, and musicians were the decision makers and in control. . . . The producer and musicians were the center of the sessions. The singer, for the most part, had little participation in the process of which songs were recorded and how those songs were interpreted. The producer and the musicians (mostly the musicians) decided on the interpretation, the arranger worked alone and no one heard his interpretation until the day it [the string and horn overdubs] was recorded."

Bobby Wood, who played the resonant piano introduction to "I Shall Be Released," explained that freeform recording method simply. "We were basically artists," he said. "We were all producers."

Had I been right in my assumption that these record producers and session musicians drew on their own experiences as they embellished existing tunes to describe the dark night of the soul? Were they making statements about what their own lives had been? For Bobby Wood, the question was so obvious it did not even need to be asked. "Oh yeah, everybody does that," he said matter-of-factly.

It was equally obvious to Shane Keister, the keyboard player who replaced Bobby Wood in 1972, knew Tommy Cogbill well, and who himself became a producer. "We all do that," he said, echoing Bobby. "I guarantee you, there's not a musician alive, whether they are playing

in a studio or onstage, who doesn't draw on his own experiences." As he outlined the process, it sounded close to the way an actor uses sense memory to interpret a scene. "I don't know how it is with other people, but I have always been conscious of the lyric," he said, noting that this was one of the skills he learned from this group of musicians. "Sometimes, while I am in the studio and running down my chart, key words or phrases will leap out at me. I don't consciously do this, but I draw from my own experiences. If the lyric is about an unhappy love affair, I place myself in the memory of someone I loved I broke up with. Even if there's an up-tempo funky groove, I tap into the excitement it creates. I'll think about things as far back as my childhood, my children, my grandchildren, my parents, my cousins, my friends. I don't consciously do this, but the reason I know is that when it is over, I remember not only the lyric, but the scenes, the pictures it suggested. And we all remember pictures more easily than we do words." He recalled Chips Moman suggesting ideas to the band in the form of pictures the music should paint. When Shane began producing during the late seventies and early eighties, he often asked Tommy Cogbill about sounds or key effects; the advice he got was to notice the song's meaning. "He listened to the lyrics. . . . He really, really dug into what a song was all about," said Shane.

"All of the people are emotionally interpretive people," said Hayward Bishop, who became the studio percussionist a year after the Dylan song was recorded and who also spent much time with Tommy. "It's the emotion that connects with the people who are buying the record. The producer himself is an artist, the musicians are artists. It's artistic people creating a commercial structure.

"[Chips and Tommy] chose that song because they could relate to it. Why would somebody pick a song they don't relate to? . . . What most people don't realize about record producers like Tommy Cogbill, for instance, is that they involved their own emotions from the time they would choose which songs would make the cut. Good producers like Tommy knew the emotional value of the songs they

were choosing as well as the emotional interpretive and enhancement skills of our band. Their job and purpose was to look for that combination of emotional and commercial-sounding performance in the song-choosing stages and then be able to mechanically break it down while producing it with the musicians and put it all back together again as a polished, finished work that sounds like the vocalist was thinking out loud! . . . It's the producer's emotions that would steer and temper the musicians' emotions so that the final product would stir the emotions of the listener."

Reggie Young, who played lead guitar on the Alex Chilton (Box Tops) session as well as on everything else coming out of the studio, said that he had given the matter a lot of thought over the years and that geography may have been one influence on the highly personal way the songs were interpreted and played. "For all of us, it was the area of the country we lived in," he reflected. "It's the dead center between Delta blues and Nashville country. Some of the things we cut could have been country. All the club bands played that way. If you blindfolded me and took me into a club and I heard somebody play that way, I'd know I was in Memphis."

The musicians, writers, and arrangers at this studio were a literal cross-section of the American South: several from Alabama and Tennessee, two Georgians, an Arkansan, two from Mississippi, two Texans, one each from Louisiana, Missouri, Virginia, and my own home state of West Virginia. Since the players, writers, and producers all had the same regional and musical background, establishing a sound from that common pool of sense memories was easy. To Chips Moman, the co-producer of the Box Tops song, it was essential to distill those experiences and see that they reached the largest possible audience—but first came the record's acceptance by the studio band. "I want everybody to like it. I think that's important," he said.

Marty Lacker, the former Elvis associate who became office manager for the studio at roughly the same time the Box Tops session was done, offered a perspective that in many ways was the mirror opposite of mine. He had

grown up in the North and his family had come south when he was fourteen. He knew from observing at close range what I had sensed from listening. “Chips is the one that put these musicians together one by one as a band, so he must have recognized that southern breeding that gave each one of the guys their life experiences that translated into their style of playing and the feel they each brought to a song. That might be because he shared that same kind of upbringing and the South’s lifestyle of hills and valleys.”

“People in the South have a way of living true to life,” observed Johnny Christopher, the acoustic guitarist and songwriter who was the newest musician on staff at the studio when the Box Tops session was done. “Whenever a society or a civilization perishes . . . do you know what the preconditions are? People forget where they come from.” The recordings of the American Group are a stunning reminder of roots—that the South was originally a land of impoverished, neglected people who, in the case of sharecroppers, textile workers, and coal miners, at times were little better than serfs.

Spooner Oldham described the process of creating music from this pool of memories as so intuitive that “little instruction needed to be given” from the producers. “You rarely have to verbalize the feeling or the mood. They’re just such learned musicians, they pick up on the mood and go with it.” “We analyzed music by playing it together,” added Hayward Bishop. “It’s a thing jazz musicians do when they get together and jam. We don’t read music, so how else are we going to do it?” “We weren’t like five egomaniacs, you know,” Reggie Young continued. “Instead of five players, we were like one band.”

“I heard theories somewhere that people think from different quadrants of the brain and that affects your decision-making,” said Bobby Emmons, the studio organist who played on the Box Tops session. “It was rumored that corporations gave psychiatric tests on job applications for executives to determine what quadrant they were thinking from and then make an effort to evenly distribute the type thinkers they had in production groups and so forth. I

often wondered if we lucked into such a combination with our band.

“You’re a product of all the music that you’ve ever tentatively listened to and you’re programmed subconsciously to a certain extent by everything that’s playing, whether you’re listening attentively or not,” Emmons added. “To go on, everything you’ve ever really liked or really disliked makes a lasting impression that you carry with you. When you need to make a decision musically with something you’ve been working on, those things become guidelines. They program you in the direction you’re wanting to go. They push your mind away from the bad and toward the good.”

“It really boils down to who you are,” Glen Spreen elaborated. “If you have had a lot of sadness in your life, it never leaves you and you will respond to that. We were all products of our environments. Our music worlds were all influenced by our personal histories. Our opinions and styles were a product of the lives to which we were subjected. Our personal experiences were the major and central driving factors in the music we liked and played. I think that was referred to as ‘soul.’ It was our way of communicating and talking with the listeners,” he continued. “We had no choice. It let us survive with our sanity intact. This brought us together and gave us a common bond and meaning.”

Their main message seemed to be about stoicism, about triumphing through simple endurance. It was a message that resonated to a young girl coming from an Appalachian family plagued with both bad luck and bad judgment, a girl who never fit into her own household because she did not seem to her elders to be reserved and stoic enough. Years later, it was suggested to me that perhaps that was the secret of the music’s appeal: I turned to the American Group for guidance on how to fit into my family, and for lessons on how to be strong. If so, I was not disappointed. The group, and especially Tommy Cogbill, never failed me in that regard.

My records accompanied me to my family’s new house in Ohio, and as a Southerner in exile, a wallflower at school, and increasingly

isolated from my family, the recordings of the American Group became more important to me than ever. They were letters from home, telling me what was happening in the South and how that region was changing. Before there was southern rock, there was the American Group, writing and commenting like a living newspaper on everything that was happening back there, and keeping me connected to my roots. I wandered away for awhile; there was a period of extensive jazz listening, discovering the big bands and small groups of the Roaring Twenties. But that music was too frivolous to help me face the challenges of a family life that careened from one misfortune to another, one tragedy to another. And so I returned to the American Group.

Night after night, for more years than can be counted, I sat in my room and listened till long into the morning, playing the records of the American Group over and over, searching for nuggets of meaning like a prospector panning for gold. What other people my age seemed to get from rock, I got from these musicians—a context. I got a sense that the lives and experiences of people like me and my entire embattled, luckless family had some significance, and that truth could be learned even from meaningless suffering. In good times and some absolutely horrific ones, the music made by these people gave me hours of inspiration, thought, and sheer pleasure. It was the most real thing in my life.

And through it all I kept coming back to where it began for me. Tommy Cogbill, especially as a producer, was a beacon in the dark. I felt as if I was not listening so much as I was conducting a dialogue with him through music; I came to Tommy bearing a young girl's questions, and he answered them. His productions taught me how to see and interpret; he showed me the importance of structure and form, whether in a song or a paragraph. After his photo appeared on the back cover of *Aretha's Gold* in late 1969, I would go down to the local five-and-ten and pull the album out of the bin and stare at it for hours, trying to see into the soul of the man who made that beautiful music I loved. And, two years after the fact,

when I read that he had died the words rushed up at me like a freight train. I think I cried . . . but I don't remember.

Fast forward to the new century and the Internet. A chance online encounter with the then-extant website of Mike Leech led me to do further research on the careers of these musicians. I began corresponding online with Mike, and asked him so many questions about the group and about working with Tommy that eventually we began talking about my doing a book—the story of American Studios. Immediately I knew that telling their story would be my thank-you letter to all of the people whose work I so deeply respected.

Gradually, by email and then phone, I began contacting present and former members of the group, asking them questions about specific songs and sessions. One question or story led to another, and another, and another; one person referred me to another who might have something to contribute. It was a big wheel that never stopped rolling. People who had fallen out of touch with colleagues from long ago wanted to know how old friends were doing; people who were still working together gained insights about one another they had never had before. It was a learning experience for everyone involved, most of all for me.

What emerged from these talks and emails was a collective memoir, a sort of group biography that took shape as the writing progressed. Gradually it became apparent that their story could be told almost exclusively from the viewpoint of these studio musicians who brought the songs to life, rather than from the more commonly sought perspective of the stars. The American players never felt they had gotten proper credit for their work anyway; it had always been a sore point with them that other Memphis studios like Sun and Stax had gotten the press. In fact, one of the most remarkable things about the American Group was its sense that they were a band of renegades battling the entire music business because of their differences in recording methods as well as content (it is no accident that later, when the group resettled in Nashville, they became the prominent backing band for the Outlaw movement). That

clannishness was extended even to the way they treated one another; musicians who came into the group later on were only half tolerated. The fact that one and all spoke as freely as they did for this book is astonishing in itself.

Not every interview I sought came off, but I was able to speak with all of the American group save three. Mark James, one of the studio's most important songwriters, said he would think about speaking, but never got back to me. Every effort to locate Darryl Carter, one of the studio's longest-lasting sound engineers and Bobby Womack's frequent songwriting partner, was fruitless. Bobby Womack, who occupied a unique position as both studio musician and one of the best-known artists who recorded at American, was writing his autobiography at the time and could not be reached. I am sorry that I never had the pleasure of talking with them. Apologies as well to Albert "Junior" Lowe, whom I was unable to locate in time to get his recollections. It is to be hoped that his memories of the Wilson Pickett and Aretha Franklin sessions in Muscle Shoals can appear in another book I hope to write.

I am also sorry I did not get to speak with the staff from Atlantic, the record label most closely associated with the Memphis Boys during the years of this study. The gifted producer and engineer Tom Dowd died in October 2002, as the book was getting under way; Arif Mardin and Ahmet Ertegun died within five months of one another, midway through its writing. It is the deepest regret of all my experiences with this book that I was unable to talk to these extraordinary gentlemen; from what the American musicians and others told me of them I know I missed something. The last member of the Atlantic crew, Jerry Wexler, told his story often and through many forums, cited in the bibliography; his version of events seemed to be already well documented. He died in August 2008, as the book was in its final stages of editing; he had been ill for some time, although he kept in touch by phone with several of the people cited here (Chips Moman, Bobby Wood, and the Muscle Shoals songwriter Donnie Fritts all spoke to him regularly).

The Box Tops' lead guitarist, Gary Talley,

attempted to put me in touch with Alex Chilton; given Chilton's reportedly prickly personality, it is not surprising that he did not respond to a request to rehash his early recordings one more time. I also never spoke to Toni Wine, the New York songwriter who came to American in its waning days and who eventually married Chips Moman; her career as Brill Building writer, singer, and musician during the 1960s is worthy of a biography in itself. So I decided to tell the story almost exclusively through the eyes of the players, writers, and engineers who made the music at American Studios so special, with an occasional comment from a friend or colleague who witnessed the magic.

As I talked to these musicians and to many of their friends, it occurred to me that the great story I was hearing was even greater because so much of it has never been talked about in most music books referring to the time (therefore causing me to rely on sources never cited before: the participants themselves). It is the story of a group of studio players who remained colleagues and lifelong friends. It is the story of how working together created such a profound brotherhood that even former members remain affected by and identified with those recordings of so long ago. It is the story of some of the most creative decades ever in pop and country music. Above all, it is the story of some fascinating human beings; their old patron Papa Don Schroeder was right when he described them as "men of character." Dan Penn was right, too, when he said of the group's journey: "It really is the Untold Story."

This is their history. This is their music.

PROFILES



(along with ages in 1970)

The Leader

LINCOLN WAYNE "CHIPS" MOMAN
(33)

Farm boy from LaGrange, Georgia. Came to Memphis at fourteen and played guitar for Dorsey and Johnny Burnette. Owner of American Studios, which he established with Seymour Rosenberg as his first partner in 1962; producer, arranger, songwriter, guitarist, occasional background singer. Played lead guitar on the first Aretha Franklin session for Atlantic Records. With Dan Penn, wrote "Dark End of the Street" and "Do Right Woman." Produced the Gentrys' "Keep On Dancin'," Sandy Posey's "Born a Woman" and "Single Girl," B.J. Thomas's "Hooked on a Feeling," and the Elvis comeback sessions of 1969. His vision and view of the world strongly influenced the group and the kind of recordings they made.

The Partner

DON CREWS (40)

Farmer from Lepanto, Arkansas. Partner in American Studios with Chips Moman beginning in 1964. Served as original business administrator and office manager for the studio. Left in 1970 following a lawsuit by Chips Moman; acquired Onyx Studios, where he later produced some of T.G. Sheppard's early hits.

The Core Group

TOMMY COGBILL (38)

From Brownsville, Tennessee; family moved to Memphis when he was a child. Bass player, guitarist, producer, occasional percussionist. Soul of the band in the same way Keith Richards exemplified the Rolling Stones. Originally a steel guitar player, then played jazz in small clubs before going into studio work. Best known for having played bass on Aretha Franklin's recordings and on Dusty Springfield's "Son of a

Preacher Man." Produced Merrilee Rush's "Angel of the Morning" and Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" and "Holly Holy." Co-produced King Curtis's "Memphis Soul Stew" with Tom Dowd and the Box Tops' "Soul Deep" with Chips Moman. Left the group in early 1972 and resettled in Nashville; there he produced Carl Carlton's "Everlasting Love" with Papa Don Schroeder in 1974. Died of a stroke in December 1982 at the age of fifty.

REGGIE YOUNG (31)

From Osceola, Arkansas; family came to Memphis when he was thirteen. Lead guitarist, sitar player, occasional songwriter. First came to national prominence with the Bill Black Combo in 1959. Played electric sitar on the Box Tops' "Cry Like A Baby" and B.J. Thomas's "Hooked On A Feeling." Also known for the lead guitar line on "Son of a Preacher Man."

BOBBY EMMONS (28)

A farm boy from near Corinth, Mississippi. Organist, piano player, songwriter, occasional backing vocalist. A charter member of the Bill Black Combo along with Reggie Young, and later worked extensively on freelance sessions at Hi Records. Probably the member of the group closest to Chips Moman, with whom he later wrote "Luckenbach, Texas."

GENE CHRISMAN (27)

Memphis native. Drummer, percussionist. Also filled out the official forms documenting the sessions for the Musicians' Union. Worked for awhile as drummer for Jerry Lee Lewis, then joined Bobby Wood's band the Starlighters, playing in a local club. Recommended for the group by Tommy Cogbill.

MIKE LEECH (27)

Another Memphian. Bassist, string arranger, occasional producer, occasional percussionist. Joined the group in 1967, shortly after its original formation. Studied for a time at Memphis State University. First string arrangement appeared on the Box Tops' "The Letter." Played bass on Elvis's "Suspicious Minds" and on Bobby Womack's "Woman's Gotta Have It."

BOBBY WOOD (28)

A farm boy from New Albany, Mississippi. Pianist, background vocalist, occasional songwriter. Worked as a part-time group member practically from the band's inception; became a full-time member in late 1968. Had some success as a solo singer, placing one hit ("If I'm a Fool") on the pop charts in 1964. Later collaborated on songs with Johnny Christopher.

Additions

DAN PENN (29)

Originally from Vernon, Alabama. Songwriter, singer, producer. Worked in bands from his mid-teens, came to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, in 1960 and became part of the scene coalescing around the studio and central figure of Rick Hall. Introduced to Chips Moman by MGM label head Jim Vienneau in 1966; left Muscle Shoals later that year to work at American Studios. Produced the Box Tops hits "The Letter," "Cry Like a Baby," "Choo Choo Train," and "I Met Her in Church." With Chips Moman wrote "Do Right Woman" and "Dark End of the Street." With Spooner Oldham wrote "Cry Like A Baby," "Sweet Inspiration," "I Met Her In Church," and "A Woman Left Lonely." Left American in late 1968 to open his own studio. Produced Ronnie Milsap's first album and served as official photographer for the Elvis sessions in early 1969.

LINDON DEWEY "SPOONER"

OLDHAM (27)

Pianist, organist, songwriter, occasional producer. Originally from Center Star, Alabama, near the Shoals. Attended Florence State College in Florence, Alabama; was on hand at the beginning of the Muscle Shoals scene. Replaced David Briggs as studio keyboardist when Briggs left for Nashville in 1964; played organ on Percy Sledge's "When A Man Loves A Woman" and on Aretha Franklin's first hit "I Never Loved A Man." Came to Memphis in early 1967; while there, wrote "Cry Like A Baby," "Sweet Inspiration," and "I Met Her in Church" with Dan Penn. Left in late 1968 and resettled in Los Angeles as freelance studio

keyboardist; wrote "A Woman Left Lonely" with Dan Penn after that. Also wrote "Roadmaster" and "Lonely Women Make Good Lovers" with Freddy Weller.

BOBBY WOMACK (27)

Singer, songwriter, guitarist. Came to Memphis in 1967 following time in California working with his brothers in a group called the Valentinos, mentored by Sam Cooke. Also played on sessions in Muscle Shoals for Wilson Pickett and in New York for Aretha Franklin. Wrote "I'm in Love," "Midnight Mover," and "Woman's Gotta Have It" with soundman Darryl Carter. Left Memphis and returned to California in mid-1968, but recorded his first two albums at American Studios; returned again in 1972 for the recording of "Woman's Gotta Have It."

Late Arrivals

GLEN SPREEN (29)

Native of Houston, Texas. String arranger, pianist, saxophonist, woodwind instruments, occasional songwriter and producer. Worked with B.J. Thomas in Houston. Introduced to the group by his and B.J.'s songwriter friend Mark James. Began working with the group full-time in late 1968 following his discharge from the army. Produced B.J. Thomas's "Most of All" and "No Love at All." Left in late 1970 and relocated to Nashville; during his tenure there, wrote string arrangements for Dan Fogelberg and produced Dave Loggins's "Please Come to Boston."

JOHNNY CHRISTOPHER (27)

From Atlanta, Georgia. Songwriter, acoustic guitarist, background vocalist. Came to Memphis in late 1968 as bass player for Ronnie Milsap's band, backing the singer when Chips Moman found for him a residency at a club called T.J.'s. Placed "Mama Liked the Roses" with Elvis and, on the strength of this demo, was hired as acoustic guitarist on sessions. One of three credited with writing "You Were Always on My Mind"; later wrote successfully with Bobby Wood. Left in early 1972 and resettled in Nashville.

HAYWARD BISHOP (25)

Native of Norfolk, Virginia, and veteran of the beach-music scene. Drummer, percussionist, occasional background vocalist, producer. Came to Memphis in early 1969 following time in the air force. Hired at American Studios as assistant engineer; first contributed occasional percussion to records, then replaced Gene Chrisman on drums in early 1972. Discovered the three-man singing/writer's group Cymarron and produced their early demos. Played drums on "Woman's Gotta Have It" and "Good Time Charlie's Got the Blues." In Nashville, played drums on recordings by the pathbreaking country group Alabama.

SHANE KEISTER (19)

Synthesizer player, pianist, songwriter, producer, arranger. A native West Virginian whose family moved to Portsmouth, Ohio, when he was seven. Attended Marshall University and North Texas State University; while at North Texas State joined a band called Southwest FOB with Dan Seals and John Ford Coley that recorded for Stax. Came to Memphis in 1970; replaced Bobby Wood in 1972 following several years of session work and club appearances. Later became the most prominent synthesizer player in Nashville.

Writers

WAYNE CARSON (THOMPSON) (28)

Songwriter, singer, occasional background vocalist and guitarist. From Springfield, Missouri; protégé of Springfield music impresario Si Siman. Wrote Box Tops hits "The Letter," "Soul Deep," and "Neon Rainbow," and B.J. Thomas's "No Love at All." Main composer of "You Were Always on My Mind." Successfully operated his own studio in Springfield for several years.

MARK JAMES (27)

Songwriter, singer, occasional producer. Native of Houston, Texas. Vietnam veteran who came to Memphis in 1967 through the auspices of a friend from Houston, Scepter Records promotion man Steve Tyrell. In turn, brought B.J.

Thomas and Glen Spreen to Memphis in 1968. Wrote "Eyes of a New York Woman," "Hooked on a Feeling," and "Suspicious Minds": one of three who wrote "You Were Always on My Mind."

RICHARD MAINEGRA (27)

From Slidell, Louisiana. Singer, acoustic guitarist, and aspiring writer who came to American in 1969. Wrote "Let's Give Adam and Eve Another Chance" and "Separate Ways" with Red West. With friends Rick Yancey (Memphis native who also came to American in 1969 following staff writing for Hi Records) and Sherrill Parks (a farm boy from near Jackson, Tennessee), was a member of Cymarron, a vocal trio who had a hit with "Rings" in 1971.

BOBBY "RED" WEST (35)

Memphis native. Songwriter, producer. Brief tenure at American Studios from 1969 through 1970; discovered Richard Mainegra and Rick Yancey. Best known for his work as bodyguard for and close friend of Elvis Presley and his work as actor and stuntman on Robert Conrad's TV shows *Wild Wild West* and *Black Sheep Squadron*. Wrote "Let's Give Adam and Eve Another Chance" and "Separate Ways" with Richard Mainegra; made sure that Elvis got a copy of "You Were Always on My Mind." Later co-author (with Dave Hebler and cousin Sonny West) of *Elvis: What Happened?*

DONNIE FRITTS (27)

Singer, songwriter, organist from Florence, Alabama. Along with Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham, a key contributor in the early days of Muscle Shoals. Wrote "Choo Choo Train" and Dusty Springfield's classic "Breakfast in Bed" with Muscle Shoals guitarist Eddie Hinton and "Rainbow Road" with Dan Penn. Later played in Kris Kristofferson's backup band for many years and wrote "We Had It All" with Troy Seals.

BILLY BURNETTE (18)

Songwriter, singer, guitarist. Son of legendary Memphis songwriter Dorsey Burnette; nephew of Johnny Burnette and cousin of

Rocky Burnette. Signed as a writer by Chips Moman when Billy was just out of high school in 1971. Later worked as guitarist with Fleetwood Mac, replacing Lindsey Buckingham.

TONI WINE (23)

Songwriter, piano player, backing vocalist. A native New Yorker and child prodigy who was classically trained and gave her first recital when she was ten. At sixteen she was a successful songwriter working out of the Brill Building; wrote "Groovy Kind of Love" with Carole Bayer Sager and "Candida" with Irwin Levine; sang backup on Tony Orlando's recording of the latter tune. Also wrote "Black Pearl" for Sonny Charles and the Checkmates; that same year she sang on the Archies novelty hit "Sugar, Sugar." Began working in Memphis at the beginning of 1970; embarked on a complicated affair with, and later marriage to, Chips Moman.

Sound Crew

ED KOLLIS (27)

Engineer, harmonica player. Native of Madison, Wisconsin, and graduate of the university there. Came to Memphis in 1967 and played harmonica on Joe Tex's "Skinny Legs and All"; also contributed harmonica to "Stranger in My Own Home Town" from the Elvis sessions. Left American Studios in early 1970 to become staff engineer at Columbia Studios in Nashville.

MIKE CAULEY (22)

Arkansas native. Engineer, aspiring producer and songwriter. Replaced Ed Kollis in early 1970; left American for good in 1971. Worked subsequently at Onyx Studios with Don Crews, then for many years as a professional gambler.

STAN KESLER (42)

Engineer, songwriter, producer, steel guitarist. From a farm near Abbeville, Mississippi; came to Memphis after World War II. Knew Tommy Cogbill in the late forties; worked as songwriter and steel player at Sun Records in the fifties; while there, wrote both "I Forgot to Remember" and "I'm Left, You're Right, She's

Gone" for Elvis. Wrote "If I'm a Fool" for Bobby Wood in 1964. Produced Sam the Sham's novelty hits "Wooly Bully" and "Little Red Riding Hood." Developed the band the Dixie Flyers and the Sounds of Memphis studio. Came to American in 1971. Later engineered at Pete Drake's studio in Nashville.

Office Staff

MARTY LACKER (35)

From what is now the South Bronx in New York, his family moved to Memphis when Marty was fourteen. Worked as a radio announcer and then foreman of Elvis Presley's Memphis Mafia from 1961 until 1967; from there worked at the jingle company Pepper-Tanner. Joined American Studios as promotion man in late 1968; became studio manager, replacing Don Crews, in 1970. Left in 1971 to operate his own promotion firm and to work on the Memphis Music Awards. Later did two books about his experiences with Elvis.

IMA ROBERTS (LATER WITHERS)

(21)

Secretary hired by Don Crews to help handle the workload in late 1967. Left the studio in late 1970; eventually became a key executive at BMI in Nashville.

Memphis Boys

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Sun Days and Hi Times

In 1960 the Memphis music scene, for all intents and purposes, looked dead. By decade's end, with the Stax and Hi record labels, independent studios including Ardent, the Pepper-Tanner jingle company, and the remarkable comeback of Elvis Presley, the recording scene had come roaring back—only to finally and spectacularly fall in the middle seventies.

“Memphis was primarily a pop market,” observed Bobby Wood, one of the young musicians playing clubs in town. Many of the artists who had made Memphis that way in the first place—Elvis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, and even lesser-known Sun discoveries like Conway Twitty and Ed Bruce—were no longer recording in town by 1960. Charlie Rich had just broken through, and he would be the last great Sun discovery. Elvis, of course, maintained his mansion, Graceland, in the Whitehaven suburb outside Memphis, but many of the others had moved to Nashville, near where they were recording. Even the great blues players like Ike Turner and Howlin' Wolf weren't Memphis-based anymore. B. B. King was still around, and that was about it (and he spent much of his time touring). Small wonder it looked as if Memphis had had its time in the national spotlight.

There were still some optimists around who seemed to think Memphis had a future. Sam Phillips had just completed a new recording studio complex, named for himself. His old associates and former Elvis accompanists, Scotty Moore and Bill Black, each had set up studios and record labels of their own (Fernwood and Lyn-Lou, respectively) which gave them incomes now that Elvis was in the army. Another

former Sun musician, the steel guitarist Stan Kesler, was doing small-scale recording at his Echo Studio. Jerry Lee Lewis was blacklisted by radio, but his concerts were still packing them in. And Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, with help from a young Georgia guitarist, Chips Moman, were just beginning Stax Records.

There were others out there too, younger players whom nobody had bothered to inform that Memphis music was officially dead. Some of them were already there—native Memphians like Gene Chrisman and Mike Leech.

“Gene is a brilliant drummer,” said Monument Records president Fred Foster, who would hire Chrisman many times over the years for sessions. “He plays just behind the beat enough to make it soulful.” Gene was more modest. “I was just self-taught. Never took any lessons, just tried my best to do what I could, and went from there. I first liked music when I was in the ninth grade and going to sock hops and so forth at Whitehaven School in Memphis. I enjoyed Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry. I would listen to their records and play along with them on cardboard boxes and pots and pans. My mother later got me a set of old used drums at a pawn shop. I began to play along with the records on the drums, and later found a few guys that did about the same thing I did.” He formed a band in high school that featured another future Memphis music legend, the Johnny Cash soundalike Tommy Tucker, on vocals; Tucker later recorded a few singles for Hi.

Mike Leech had a similar story to tell. He grew up in the same neighborhood as Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn (both of whom became members of the racially integrated Stax house band Booker T. and the MG's), and first picked up a guitar in their presence when he was fourteen. Shortly thereafter he joined a high school rock and roll band, switching from guitar to bass. The highlight of his career at that point, he recalled, was his group's audition for Sam Phillips's right-hand man, Jack Clement. “He was dating someone who lived a block or two from where I grew up. Anyhow, the audition was a total disaster. We could never get in tune. Not just ‘out of tuneness,’ I mean we

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