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Out of Exile, Back in Soulsville



Josh Anderson for The New York Times

Al Bell, who led Stax Records in Memphis during the label's 1960s and '70s heyday, has returned to the city as chairman of the Memphis Music Foundation to resuscitate its entertainment stature.

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The Staple Singers, an act Mr. Bell signed to Stax.



Fantasy/Concord Music Group/Stax Museum of American Soul Music

Al Bell, right, with the Rev. Jesse Jackson at “Wattstax,” the 1972 soul concert in Los Angeles.



Stax Museum of American Soul Music

Jim Stewart, one of the founders of Stax Records, with Mr. Bell during the label’s peak period.

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Reed Bunzel

Al Bell at the Stax Museum of American Soul Music in Memphis. Mr. Bell was a major player in the city's music scene in the '60s and '70s.

AS the peacock-blue Cadillac with the gold trim and fur lining spun on a giant turntable in the Stax Museum of American Soul Music here, Al Bell, the final owner of the late, great record label, chuckled. Decades before [50 Cent](#) with his customized Rolls-Royce and [Akon](#) with his tricked-out Lamborghini, there was [Isaac Hayes](#) with this pimped-out ride, an over-the-top gift from Stax to its over-the-top star, who wore slave chains like emancipatory bling across his bare, buff chest.

“The reason I chuckle is because I think of what has been born out of the rap and the hip-hop world, and then I look at what we were doing back then, and, you know, we were really ahead of our time,” Mr. Bell said.

His chuckle is rueful, though. When Mr. Bell, 69, stands by that revolving Cadillac, he sees the arc of his life come full circle, unexpectedly. The original Stax Records is long gone, Mr. Hayes and many other Stax artists, from [Otis Redding](#) to Rufus Thomas, have died, and, until recently, Memphis showed little interest in reclaiming or building on its soul-music heritage. Six years ago, though, the Stax Museum opened. And earlier this summer Mr. Bell was invited back to Memphis with a bittersweet mandate: to resuscitate the city's once great music industry as chairman of the Memphis Music Foundation.

As a result, after years of exile, Mr. Bell now has the opportunity both to promote a more enlightened Memphis and to redeem his own legacy, which was tarnished when Stax was forced into involuntary bankruptcy in 1975 and when he himself was tried for — and acquitted of — bank fraud.

What happened at Stax in the turbulent years after the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)'s assassination in Memphis was complicated, as was Mr. Bell's role in it. But in retrospect Deanie Parker, interim chief executive of the Soulsville Foundation, which runs the museum, boils it down pungently to this: “In its own way, Stax Records was fighting the same fight as Dr. King, and Stax Records was assassinated too.”

In its heyday Stax, a rhythm and blues label founded by a white brother and sister, Jim Stewart and Estelle Stewart Axton, represented the model of an integrated workplace in a deeply segregated city. Under Mr. Bell it became one of the nation's largest black-owned companies. Its failure devastated not only those whom it sustained financially and artistically but also those who saw it as an inspiration. Many African-American leaders, including the Rev. [Jesse Jackson](#) and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, viewed Mr. Bell's prosecution as persecution; his trial included testimony that a local banking official had bragged, using a racial slur, about “running those” blacks “and especially the chief” black “out of town,” Mr. Bell's defense lawyer, James F. Neal, a former Watergate prosecutor, recollected recently.

Despite his acquittal Mr. Bell left Memphis with his career in tatters.

“I didn't feel broken — I'm a fighter — but I did experience the low lows,” said Mr. Bell, who is imposingly tall (6 foot 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ in his precise accounting) and dapper, with pinstripe suits, monogrammed

cuffs and silk pocket squares that match his ties.

To many, then, it seems a fitting, if not poignant, postscript that Memphis is welcoming Mr. Bell back with outstretched arms. “The way that Al Bell was treated in that city at the end of the history of Stax Records was despicable,” said [Rob Bowman](#), the author of “Soulsville U.S.A.,” the definitive history of the record label. “I think it’s wonderful that he has been chosen for this position. Al did so much for Memphis. In taking Stax from a mom-and-pop operation to an R&B powerhouse, he really put Memphis on the map.”

Born Alvertis Isbell in Brinkley, Ark., Mr. Bell is a mix of velvety charm and prickly pride, with the rhetorical cadences of a preacher and the unwavering self-confidence of a politician. His bumpy career path intersected with crucial figures and moments in 20th-century African-American — and entertainment — history.

The product of a black high school and college in Little Rock, Mr. Bell marched with Dr. King, worked as a black-radio D.J. in Washington at the peak of the civil rights movement, ran the two major black record companies — he served briefly as president of Motown Records too — and eventually started his own independent label, Bellmark, with hit songs as varied as “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World” (Prince) and “Whoomp! (There It Is)” (Tag Team).

Now, at an age when others choose to retire, Mr. Bell is trying to reinvent himself. In Memphis his mission at the private, nonprofit foundation is nothing less than to help make Memphis the independent-music capital of the country, first by nurturing local artists and music businesses. In a personal venture, he recently started an Internet radio network, [albellpresents.com](#), with an e-commerce link, and its first station features soul music with Mr. Bell hosting in his suave baritone.

Returning to the role of disc jockey, like returning to Memphis, is “precious,” he said. His “jock” career began in high school, when he was president of the audio-visual club. This put him at the helm of the sock hops, for which he borrowed records from girls, whom he quizzed thoroughly about their interest in, say, the Coasters or Nat King Cole. “This gave me so much insight until finally I got me a microphone,” he said. Soon he was a gospel music D.J. on a Little Rock station.

After high school, in 1959, Mr. Bell went to work under Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He spent a year in Georgia until “breaking rank” with the nonviolent-resistance ethos at a march in Savannah, Ga. When a hostile bystander spit on him, Mr. Bell pulled a switchblade from his pocket and plunged into the crowd. Fellow marchers restrained him, “fortunately,” Mr. Bell said, but Dr. King was not pleased.

Earlier, Mr. Bell said, he had brushed aside Dr. King’s concern about his switchblade by joking to him, “Well, Doc, Jesus had Peter with him, and Peter carried a sword.” But Mr. Bell said that after the march Dr. King, calling him Alvertis, rebuked him for his increasing advocacy of self-defense against the police and their dogs. “So I said, ‘O.K., Doc.’ And I left the next day, with love.”

Back in Little Rock, Mr. Bell, while attending college, resumed his radio career, eventually graduating in 1961 to WLOK in Memphis, where he used this sign-on: “This is your 6 feet 4 bundle of joy, 212 pounds of Mrs. Bell’s baby boy, soft as medicated cotton, rich as double-X cream, the women’s pet, the men’s threat, the baby boy Al” — and then he rang a bell — “Bell.”

At the time, in a converted movie theater in a black neighborhood, Mr. Stewart and Ms. Axton, who died in 2004, were getting Stax off the ground. Mr. Bell promoted their artists, not only in Memphis but also, more significantly, in Washington, when he moved to WUST in 1963. Two years later it seemed a natural fit for Stax to hire Mr. Bell as its first in-house promotions man.

A 25-year-old workaholic who posted a giant thermometer in the lobby to track sales, Mr. Bell injected

considerable energy into the small company. “You could say that Stax didn’t really begin until he got there,” said William Bell, 70, whose “You Don’t Miss Your Water” was an early Stax release. “Jim Stewart was a behind-the-scenes guy. Al Bell was a wheeler-dealer.”

In Mr. Bowman’s book, *Booker T. Jones of Booker T. and the MGs*, the house band that shaped the Stax sound, calls Mr. Bell “our Otis for promotion.” Otis Redding, a year younger than Mr. Bell, was the life force of the studio. “Everybody looked up to him,” Mr. Bell said. Asked if he too looked up to him, Mr. Bell said, “I looked at him.”

In his drive to promote the gritty Memphis sound outside the South Mr. Bell took a Who’s Who of Stax talent to the [Apollo Theater](#) in Harlem for 10 days in 1967. It was during those shows that Redding became a kinetic performer instead of a stationary crooner, according to Mr. Bell. As Redding, the headliner, watched from the wings, Johnnie Taylor would energize the crowd by shouting, “I want everybody here to give me the clap,” and Sam and Dave would “set the stage on fire.”

“Finally,” Mr. Bell said, laughing, “Otis came out, grabbed the microphone and went hustling from one end of the stage to the other.”

On Dec. 10, 1967, when Mr. Bell was attending a radio industry convention in Las Vegas, a loudspeaker announced that Redding, 26, had died in a small plane crash near Madison, Wis. “I lost it,” Mr. Bell said. That night he drank himself into a stupor while playing craps. He learned the next morning that he had made \$85,000. “But Otis was still gone,” he said.

Four months later, on April 4, 1968, Mr. Bell was presiding over, in retrospect, a bizarrely timed recording session of “Send Peace and Harmony Home,” a song that he, with others, had written for Dr. King. He was staying nearby at the black-owned Lorraine Motel, the only place in town where Stax’s racially mixed artists were free to socialize and where classics like “In the Midnight Hour” were written.

According to Mr. Bell, Homer Banks, a singer and songwriter, burst into the studio, calling out, “They just shot Dr. King, and he’s dead.” The tape was rolling, and the vocalist, Shirley Walton, started singing wrenchingly and crying. “My God,” Mr. Bell said, shuddering.

Racial tensions escalated in Memphis. Stax remained safe while other white-owned businesses were burned. But inside the company, Mr. Bell said, there developed “a new color consciousness.” Around that time Mr. Bell was given a stake in Stax, and he soon signed his favorite group, the Staple Singers. But there were business problems. After [Warner Brothers](#) bought Atlantic Records, which had been Stax’s distributor, Stax learned that it no longer owned its chief asset, its back catalog.

In an effort to create a new catalog from scratch, Mr. Bell called on Stax’s entire roster to produce. “He was our ‘Yes, we can’ man,” said Ms. Parker, who was director of publicity. In May 1969 alone Stax released 27 albums and 30 singles. “Craziness!” Mr. Bell said.

The most successful album was “Hot Buttered Soul,” which Hayes, who was primarily a songwriter, had to be coaxed into recording. He had been lured into the studio to make his first album, which was not very successful, after Mr. Bell loosened him up with Asti Spumante at a party one night. This time Mr. Bell urged him to do whatever he wanted, which resulted in unconventionally long songs like an 18-minute 42-second version of “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” and a 9-minute Bell-Hayes collaboration called “Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymistic” (a word that Mr. Bell said he coined to describe those who abuse big words).

To the surprise of many “Hot Buttered Soul” was a hit. It was followed by the soundtrack for the movie “Shaft” and ever-increasing success for Mr. Hayes and for Stax. The company was continually expanding yet also losing its original intimacy, and some of its original musicians, as new personnel

and heightened security ruffled feathers.

In the summer of 1971 Mr. Bell's younger brother Louis was murdered in Arkansas. Right before the funeral, Mr. Bell said, he sat on the hood of a junked school bus in his father's yard and a song came to him:

I know a place
Ain't nobody crying
Ain't nobody worried
Ain't no smilin' faces
Lynin' to the races.

Afterward Mr. Bell brought the song to a recording session with the Staple Singers, who "took it to the next level," he said, and "I'll Take You There," with its island groove, became one of their biggest hits. Mr. Bell likes to say that he did not write the song but that it was "written through me." Still, he claimed sole songwriting credit, irking Mavis Staples, who believed the song to be collaborative, according to Mr. Bowman.

Mr. Bell increasingly saw Stax, which branched into spoken-word albums with Mr. Jackson, [Richard Pryor](#) and [Bill Cosby](#), as a platform for black advancement. Looking back at "Wattstax," the 1972 concert — later a film — at the Los Angeles Coliseum that was referred to as the black Woodstock, Mr. Bell still takes pride: "Here's this black guy from Memphis, Tenn., pulling together 112,000 black people in Hollywood."

But the unraveling of Stax began not long afterward. Mr. Stewart wanted to leave, with cash for his half of the company. Mr. Bell made a distribution deal with [Clive Davis](#), who ran CBS Records, which allowed him to buy out Mr. Stewart. But CBS soon dismissed Mr. Davis and relations between the two companies disintegrated, ultimately causing severe cash flow problems for Stax.

"The time came for the big fish to eat the little fish," Mr. Bell said.

Stax filed an antitrust suit against CBS, and its bank, Union Planters, also accused CBS of economically strangling Stax. But Union Planters, which was facing its own financial troubles, was squeezing Stax too, and it brought pressure to bear with racist rhetoric, as came out at Mr. Bell's trial.

At the same time Stax found itself under investigation by the [Internal Revenue Service](#). Employees started going without paychecks, and artists were jumping ship. Mr. Bell came under attack in the Stax family, although Ms. Parker said that many later regretted that they had not been "the wind at Al's back instead of the wind in his face."

Mr. Stewart, the company founder, who tried to salvage Stax with his own money, never held Mr. Bell responsible for Stax's downfall, Mr. Bowman said. "Al Bell went to Herculean efforts to try to save Stax," he said. "Jim Stewart found the racism involved in the end to be despicable."

On Dec. 19, 1975, after three small creditors, prompted by Union Planters, brought an involuntary bankruptcy petition against Stax, the company's receiver, accompanied by armed guards, arrived at Stax. Mr. Bell said the receiver addressed him with a slur, saying, "You got 15 minutes to get out of the building." He got out.

Not long afterward Mr. Bell was indicted for conspiring with a former Union Planters official to defraud the bank. The banker had confessed to making fictitious loans and to forging Mr. Bell's signature as a guarantor on those loans.

"It was a bitter story," Mr. Bell's lawyer, Mr. Neal, said. "The bank engineered the government into

charging him criminally. I never thought he was guilty, and neither did the jury.”

Mr. Bell moved his family into the unfinished basement of his father’s house in Little Rock. “I went from a man that owned a company whose masters were valued by Price Waterhouse at \$67 million to a man that could scrape together 15 cents from time to time,” he said.

After the bankruptcy Union Planters deeded the studio to the Southside Church of God in Christ for \$10, and the church eventually tore it down. Occasionally, Mr. Bell said, he visited the vacant lot. “I’d see beer bottles and paper bags and all that,” Mr. Bell said. “It was a like a dumping ground, yet all this creativity was still vested in that soil. I would cry.”

But Mr. Bell, and Stax’s music, with its singles rereleased in very successful box sets in the ’90s, both outlasted Union Planters. Mr. Bell gradually made his way back into the entertainment business, greatly assisted by Berry Gordy Jr., the founder of Motown. “He mainstreamed me back into the industry,” Mr. Bell said.

And the Stax Museum’s opening kick-started the process of bringing Mr. Bell back to Memphis and Memphis back to him. “He has a reputation, he is a brand name, and we need him,” said Dean Deyo, president of the Memphis Music Foundation. Sometimes, Mr. Bell said, he has to pinch himself.