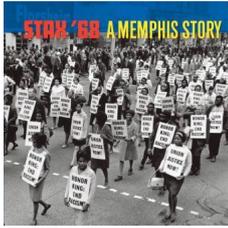


## VARIOUS; Stax '68 A Memphis Story (Craft/Stax/UMC)

Written by Bill Buckley

Tuesday, 13 November 2018 18:45 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 November 2018 19:04

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Memphis' Stax Records holds a very special place in soul history. Motown aside, it's probably the best known and certainly the most influential label of the genre. Founded in 1957 (originally as Satellite) by a part time country fiddler – Jim Stewart and his astute sister Estelle Axton, Stax created a very special sound that defined what has become known as Southern soul. Using one studio and essentially the same musicians behind a cohort of stellar performers, Stax scored hit after hit and grew way beyond the expectations of the original sibling founders.

Stax histories will tell you that 1968 was a pivotal year. The label's biggest star, Otis Redding had perished in a plane crash in '67 and business-wise the label's deal with Atlantic that had helped Stax to flourish was coming to an end and there was certainly an air of uncertainty in and around Soulsville. To add to that uncertainty and doubt, the Southern states were in social ferment and turmoil – heightened by the cruel assassination in '68 of Martin Luther King in a Memphis motel.

Through all this Stax continued to make music in their famed sloping floor studios in the old cinema at 926 East McLemore Ave, Memphis and to allow soul fans and musicologists to focus on this seminal period, Craft Records via UMC have just issued this superb five-disc box set containing all the A- and B-sides of every single released under the Stax banner in 1968. There are a massive 120 tracks here and, of course, they feature all the label's big names -Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, William Bell, The Staple Singers, Sam and Dave et al. Indeed the spirit of Redding hangs over the whole collection. His still magnificent 'Dock Of The Bay' opens proceedings while there are four more Redding cuts alongside the poignant 'Tribute To A King' from William Bell. Anoraks will know too that the collapse of the Atlantic partnership meant that Stax lost Sam and Dave – but not before they cut 'I Thank You' and 'Wrap It Up' – both included.

The collection also offers a plethora of great music from lesser names – people like Linda Lindell, Billy Lee Riley and Shirley Walton and though, maybe second stringers, their contribution to the label's legacy is still important. One of the many unknown gems comes from Philly group The Epsilons. Their 'The Echo' is a thing of harmonic beauty and very different to the classic Stax sound.

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The box also has plenty from the various Stax subsidiary labels. All soul fans know about imprints like Volt... but what about Enterprise, Arch and Hip? Hip was the real oddity – specialising in rock, pop and country. Of interest amidst the Hip output is music from Southwest FOB – a psychedelic rock group from Dallas that included England Dan and John Ford Coley in their number. And if you want a real oddity from Hip, try a country version of 'Who's Making Love' from Daaron Lee ... almost unrecognizable from the Johnnie Taylor original (which is also included).

The album packaging matches the beauty and quality of the music. The 5 CDs come packed in mock-up 7" vinyl picture sleeves while there's also a 56-page book with liner notes by Memphis historian Andria Lisle, Stax Records historian Robert Gordon, and renowned producer Steve Greenberg, plus rare and never-before-seen photographs from the Stax archives. 'Stax '68 A Memphis Story' is pretty much unmissable... essential fare for any and every soul fan. Add it to your Christmas wish list right away.

(BB) 5/5