



The American Way

Everyone has heard of Stax. But another studio in Memphis, almost forgotten today, also cranked out hundreds of hits. **By Eddie Hankins**

Memphis in the 1960s was one of America's music capitals. The names of Memphis performers appeared on the Top 40 charts almost every week sharing what magazines dubbed "The Memphis Sound" with the rest of the world. But in the shadow of Sun and STAX, Hi and Sonic, a small, rat infested converted Easy Way grocery store at the corner of Thomas and Chelsea was preparing to make history.

American Sound Studio and its stellar session men would record more than 100 hit records in a ten year period from 1962 through 1972. And behind all of the hits was a group of largely unknown studio musicians who would come to be known as the Memphis Boys.

This band — called at various times the 827 Thomas Street Band (the studio's address), the American Group, and since their move to Nashville in the 1970s, the Memphis Boys — includes Reggie Young on guitar, Bobby Wood on piano, Bobby Emmons on organ, Mike Leech on bass, and Gene Chrisman on drums. Despite their string of hits, they remain essentially unknown. This is the story of a legendary group of musicians who have, until now, have been largely ignored by music history.

"We all sort of intermingled."

As with just about anything involving music in Memphis in the 1960s, the band traces its roots back to Sam Phillips. Two of the musicians, Bobby Wood and Gene Chrisman, were part of a group called the Starlighters and worked

together at Sam Phillips' Madison Avenue studio, backing such artists as Harold Dorman and Sam the Sham.

Wood, who had begun his performing career with his family's gospel group in New Albany, Mississippi, had fallen under the spell of the Sun sound, particularly that of Jerry Lee Lewis. He moved to Memphis to audition for Sam Phillips. After Phillips advised him to find his own voice, he recorded a couple of sides for Sun, although whether they were ever released or not is unclear.

After leaving Sun and signing with Sun engineer Stan Kessler's Joy Records label, Wood enjoyed a couple of minor hit records in 1964, but while on tour in Ohio in 1965, had a devastating car accident, which left him blind in one eye. After a six month recovery period, he returned to the studio, but the momentum had been lost.

"It was time to make some hard decisions," he says, flatly.

Meanwhile, tired of life on the road while touring with Jerry Lee Lewis, Gene Chrisman had turned to studio work. As he recalled to interviewer Allen Smith, "When I worked with Jerry, it was just three of us: me, Jerry, and his father in law on bass. I started in 1960 and played about a year and a half. I enjoyed it at first because I got to see the country. But after you ride with three people in a car, driving 300 to 500 miles every day, it wears you out."

In addition to being road weary, the gig wasn't as lucrative as it once was. Lewis' career was still smarting following the 1958 revelation that he had married his 13 year old cousin Myra. The trio was barely clearing \$30 a night.

Meanwhile, Hi studio was in the midst of an impressive run of instrumental hits such as "Smokie, Part 2" by the Bill Black Combo, "Tuff" by sax man Ace Cannon, and "20 75" by Willie Mitchell. As Reggie Young remembers, "We all sort of intermingled. It was like one big band making up these three instrumental groups."

In addition to playing guitar and touring with the Bill Black Combo, Young also wrote, re corded, and performed club dates with Willie Mitchell, and recorded and played weekend gigs with Ace Cannon. The pay for being a session musician at Hi, however, left much to be desired.

"We were making \$50 a week, plus \$60 a session when we'd actually record somebody," recalls Young. "A session was supposed to be four songs, at \$15 a song, but if we only cut two, I'd get a \$60 check and have to pay \$30 of it back to [studio owner] Joe Cuoghi." No one was getting rich anytime soon, on the road or in the studio.

Two other Hi session men working under the same conditions were keyboardist Bobby Emmons and bassist Mike Leech. Emmons had been manning the Hammond B 3 organ on the road in the touring version of the Bill Black Combo, until Reggie Young suggested a move to a more stable and lucrative studio gig. Leech was playing jazz and nightclub shows, occasionally sitting in at blues clubs. He was also majoring in music theory at Memphis State University, where he played trumpet in the marching band. Emmons

recommended Leech to the studio, and Leech jumped at the opportunity for studio work, dropping out of school to focus on the music.

When Hi engineer Ray Harris informed the musicians that their pay was being cut from \$15 to \$10 a song, Young quit. Joe Cuoghi intervened, restoring the \$15 rate and Young returned, but his frustration was mounting. He began looking elsewhere.

Around this time Chips Moman, former STAX engineer, came to Hi with the Gentrys, a rock and roll combo he was producing. He had opened a new studio across town called American Sound Studio but continued to use Hi occasionally to record because, as American co owner Don Crews recalls, "American only had a two track recorder [but] Hi had a three track." Besides, American didn't even have its own rhythm section. As Bobby Wood explains, "In those days at the studios in Memphis, everybody had [to have] their own band."

In late 1965, the Gentrys had made it to number 4 on the Billboard charts with "Keep On Dancin,'" originally a minor local hit by a rhythm and blues trio called the Avantis. The Gentrys had gone into American and, under Moman's guidance, cut a rock and roll version. Now the group needed an album. Young saw his opening. He stayed at Hi long enough to finish recording the Gentrys' album, Keep on Dancin', then left for good to join the American studio house band.

At the time, the late bassist Tommy Cogbill was the only other member. Work at American was somewhat sporadic so Cogbill, Young, and Moman began traveling to New York, Nashville, and Muscle Shoals for sessions. Some of these sessions included Aretha Franklin's landmark '60s recordings for Atlantic Records. They soon decided that instead of traveling they would be based in Memphis and as Young says, "Anybody that wanted to use [us] would have to come to American."

It wasn't long before Bobby Emmons followed his Hi studio mate to American. Next, Tommy Cogbill recruited Gene Chrisman. The following year, Bobby Wood joined the group, and when bassist Cogbill decided to concentrate on producing, Mike Leech came on board. The 827 Thomas Street Band was complete, and ready to make history.

"That was a great environment."

Whereas STAX, Hi, and Sun focused on their namesake record labels and subsidiaries, American was mainly a rental studio. The local Goldwax label was among the first to regularly bring artists to American, scoring R&B chart hits with James Carr and the Ovations. Other Memphis based labels soon followed, as Pepper Records brought in the Short Kuts and a then unknown female singer named Rita Coolidge. STAX even used American in 1964 for one release, "Big Party" by Barbara and the Browns, a minor chart hit featuring Bobby Wood on piano, his first session at the studio he would soon

call home. Other artists who did some of their first recording at American include Isaac Hayes, who recorded one single for Moman's Youngstown Records; future STAX songwriting great Homer Banks, perhaps best known as the co writer of Johnnie Taylor's number one hit "Who's Making Love," who recorded a handful of singles for the Genie and Minit labels; football star Roosevelt Grier, who had been attempting a music career for several years; and Alex Chilton in his role as lead singer of the Box Tops.

The Box Tops were one of American studio's most unexpected success stories. A trio of R&B loving Memphis teenagers, the group was essentially the remnants of a group called the Devilles with 16 year old Alex Chilton added as vocalist. According to writer Ron Hall in *A History of Garage and Frat Bands in Memphis: 1960 1975*, the band had been searching for a singer who could sound black when they found Chilton. Staff songwriter and producer Dan Penn was put in charge of the group. His general instructions to Chilton were to "sing harder" and, on their first record, to pronounce "airplane" as "aero plane." That record, "The Letter," went to number one on the Billboard charts. Ironically, even though the Box Tops had played their own instruments on "The Letter," on all subsequent recordings — including the top 20 hits "Cry Like a Baby" and "Soul Deep"— the bulk of the playing was done by the 827 Thomas Street Band. As Alex Chilton recalled to Jud Cost, "That was a great environment for me to grow up in, hanging around all those great musicians in that studio. It was such a creative scene."

Beyond the local scene, American held accounts with big name record companies such as Atlantic, Bell, Scepter, MGM, and Capitol. When these labels thought an artist could benefit from a little Memphis soul, they sent them to the studio at Thomas and Chelsea to record.

New York's Bell record company had begun sending many of the soul artists on their roster to American. Hits from James and Bobby Purify, Oscar Toney Jr., the Masqueraders, and Merilee Rush soon began climbing the charts. Papa Don Schroeder, who produced the Toney and Purify discs, enthused to Bill Dahl of Sundazed.com: "The combination of American Studio with Chips Moman and [the musicians] was simply magic. What a band!" Hit records backed his opinion. Rush's "Angel of the Morning" garnered a Grammy nomination, further cementing the studio's reputation as one of America's hit factories. The versatility of the musicians, plus Moman's growing reputation as an ace producer, was beginning to pay off.

No label came to Memphis to "get the band" as often as the legendary Atlantic Records label. Atlantic producers Jerry Wexler, Arif Mardin, and Tom Dowd brought hardcore R&B acts such as Wilson Pickett, Joe Tex, King Curtis, Don Covay, Arthur Conley, the Sweet Inspirations, Solomon Burke, and countless others to the studio.

The first artist Atlantic brought in was the volatile Wilson Pickett. Moman and Cogbill had previously recorded with Pickett in Muscle Shoals, producing Pickett's hit versions of "Land of 1,000 Dances," "Funky Broadway," and "Mustang Sally," so there was some degree of familiarity. Pickett, upon surveying the band members for the first time in the studio, asked dubiously,

"Who are all these farmers?" Despite his initial misgivings and occasional tantrums in the studio, the sessions yielded a bumper crop of hits, with three of them, such as "She's Looking Good," going on to the Top 40.

Next came Joe Tex, known as "The Preacher" for his secularized sermons in song such as "Hold What You Got." The former gospel singer's country soul style meshed perfectly with the Memphis sound.

"I really liked Joe," chuckles Gene Chrisman. "Every time he'd come in with his house shoes, holding a bucket of Colonel Sanders chicken and a quart of orange juice."

Tex recorded numerous hits at American, the biggest being the Top 10, Grammy nominated "Skinny Legs and All" in 1967. "Joe was a lot of fun to record," recalls Leech. "He had ideas pouring out of his head."

As Atlantic started to see how smoothly the band adapted to each artist's individual style, it began to dispatch pop and jazz artists as well. Perhaps the most notable was songstress Dusty Springfield.

The British vocalist — a huge soul music fan — was deeply excited to record in Memphis. Upon arriving at the studio in September 1968, however, she became so intimidated at singing into the same microphone as the famous Wilson Pickett that she froze in the vocal booth. As Jerry Wexler, who co-produced the sessions, recalled in his autobiography *Rhythm and the Blues*: "Dusty was all raw nerve ends and neuroses. She wouldn't put her voice on a practice track, making it tough for us to work up the arrangements. She wouldn't sing at all."

The band plowed gamely ahead and turned the finished backing tracks over to Wexler, who finally persuaded Springfield to lay down vocals, albeit in New York. These tracks made up the somewhat inaccurately titled LP *Dusty in Memphis*, which featured the Top 40 hits "Son of A Preacher Man" (a Grammy nominee) and "The Windmills of Your Mind." Despite these difficulties and overlooking the fact that the album flopped when it was initially released, band members cite the Springfield sessions as a high point of their recording careers.

"That album still sounds great," insists Reggie Young. Critics agree. *Dusty in Memphis* placed at number 89 in the 2003 Rolling Stone "500 Greatest Albums of All Time" issue.

Another surprising Atlantic records artist sent to Memphis was jazz flautist Herbie Mann. Best known for his numerous recordings in the Brazilian bossa nova style, Mann seemed an unlikely candidate for either the down home funk or pop perfection in which the American boys specialized. He brought guitarists Sonny Sharrock and Larry Coryell along with vibes man Roy Ayers and proceeded to cut the heavily R&B influenced, Grammy nominated jazz album *Memphis Underground*.

Speaking in 1971 with interviewer Les Tompkins, Mann addressed the question of race and R&B: "The only black musicians on the album were Roy Ayers and Sonny Sharrock. The whole rhythm section's white. There's a

feeling that goes beyond black and white color: It's black/white Southern rhythmic feeling. Color isn't involved."

In 1968 American was, in Reggie Young's words, "hotter than a pistol." Scepter Records, also based in New York, sent B.J. Thomas and Dionne Warwick into the studio. Thomas' hits "The Eyes of a New York Woman," "Hooked On a Feeling," and "I Just Can't Help Believing," and Warwick's "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" were the result. Other Scepter artists of note who came through American included Ronnie Milsap, and staff songwriter Mark James, who recorded a song he'd written and was sure would be a hit — "Suspicious Minds."

"When he walked in, I kind of choked."

While James' version of that song went nowhere, it was a different story in 1969, when RCA records sent hometown hero Elvis Presley to American for a crack at "Suspicious Minds," among others. These were the King's first Memphis sessions since his days at Sun Records nearly 15 years before. The musicians initially felt somewhat blasé about the prospect of backing Presley.

"His record sales were way down at that time, so I said, 'You know, at this point, we're hotter than he is,'" recalls Bobby Wood. That cockiness changed the minute Presley stepped into the studio. "When he walked in, I kind of choked," grins Wood. "You definitely knew when he was in the building. It was like a deity had arrived."

The sessions were successful, to say the least, resulting in four classic singles: "Suspicious Minds," "In the Ghetto," "Kentucky Rain," and "Don't Cry Daddy," and two hit albums From Elvis in Memphis and From Vegas to Memphis. Impressed by their talents, Presley later put feelers out to see if the band would join him on tour. It was an offer most musicians would give their eyeteeth for, but the American response was a simple "no."

"No one in the band wanted to do it," explains Young. "Session work was popping and we felt the road gig would stifle our studio careers," echoes Mike Leech.

Indeed, American was hot, often operating around the clock to meet the demand. As Leech recalls, "We'd get a call to come in., with no idea when we would knock off. Many times we would work all day [and] half the night."

Just prior to Elvis' comeback sessions, another singer who had gone a while without a big hit decided to see if any of the Memphis magic could rub off on him. Neil Diamond entered the studio in late September 1968. He emerged with his first Top 30 hit in over two years, "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show." Realizing that something special was happening in Memphis, Diamond returned to American a few months later to record what would be

the biggest hits of his career, the Top 10 smashes "Sweet Caroline" and "Holly Holy."

It was around this same time that a struggling musician who had been living in L.A. decided to move to Memphis.

"I stayed at a place called the Trumpet Motel," Bobby Womack recalled in an interview with Goldmine magazine. "I went down there to American and asked if I could play with the studio band. I just loved playing with these different guys. Every time it was someone new. Tomorrow it's gonna be Aretha Franklin [Womack had accompanied Cogbill to one of Franklin's New York sessions], the next night it's gonna be Ronnie Milsap. Next time, Elvis Presley. I said, 'Man, this just blows me out! How you guys can turn and transcend somebody else's sound and sound just like their records.' It was phenomenal."

Nearly as phenomenal was Womack's own success at American. In addition to playing guitar on sessions ranging from Joe Tex to the Box Tops, he also provided a number of songs for Wilson Pickett's American recorded album I'm in Love and finally resuscitated his own languishing singing career. The three albums he recorded at American — My Prescription, Fly Me to the Moon, and Understanding — produced seven pop and ten R&B chart hits including the number one soul hit "Woman's Gotta Have It."

By this time the band and Chips Moman had formed a partnership called American Group Productions. Thanks to shared production fees and higher pay offered by the national record companies, nobody seemed to mind working crazy hours.

It was during this time Emmons coined a phrase that could serve as a motto for working musicians everywhere: "I guess we'll just have to call home sick."

"We pretty much crashed and burned."

Following Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968, the city was inflamed with racial tension and unrest. Things slowed down at American, but they never stopped.

Gene Chrisman admits, "It was a little scary down there for a while, but we went ahead and cut. Everybody had a gun." The studio closed for a week, waiting for the turmoil and riots to subside. "We had curfews there for a while but no racial problems in the studio," says Bobby Wood. "It was like a brotherhood in there."

Despite Wood's assertions, several artists canceled sessions in the wake of King's assassination. Nevertheless, the studio persevered, and the year that followed would see the studio's biggest hits yet.

As the '60s came to a close, the Memphis music industry was riding high. The city had become the fourth largest recording center in the country behind

New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville. Then the bottom fell out, as musical tastes changed. Though each of the musicians has a slightly different take on what happened, all acknowledge that after working what often amounted to 24 hour shifts during the latter part of the 1960s, the early '70s often found them sitting around the studio with nothing to do. "We had closed down most of the recording accounts to try to do our own production thing," remembers Gene Chrisman.

In early 1972, American Sound Studio closed. Moman and the band (with the exceptions of Bobby Wood and Gene Chrisman) moved to Atlanta. "We wanted to do more on our own label and felt like a new local talent pool was in order," explains Emmons.

"We built a studio in an industrial park," remembers Reggie Young, "but there was nothing going on in Atlanta. We just sat around looking at each other."

"We pretty much crashed and burned," echoes Mike Leech. After six months, the Atlanta studio closed, and the group hit the road again. "Reggie and I were driving through Nashville on our way back to Memphis," remembers Leech, "and we stopped in to make a couple of phone calls, and got booked on 20 sessions." Their reputation as hit makers had preceded them.

"A little magic thing over in Memphis."

In 1979, years after Emmons, Young, Wood, and Leech had established themselves in Nashville, Chrisman finally got the music bug again and headed to Nashville. The move proved successful for all of the members of the American group. They readily found work, as various producers in need of a little soul, would say, "Why don't we get one of them Memphis boys?" The name stuck, and though the group rarely recorded as a unit in Nashville, it's the name they go by today.

Over the years, various members of the group have been responsible for numerous country hits, including Waylon Jennings' "Luckenbach, Texas" and "The Wurlitzer Prize" both co written by Bobby Emmons and Chips Moman. Emmons has also played organ on recordings by Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, and many others.

Bobby Wood co wrote several top country hits including Billy "Crash" Craddock's "Still Thinkin' About You" and Crystal Gayle's "Talk ing In Your Sleep," as well as the international disco hit "What's Your Name, What's Your Number" by the Andrea True Connection. He's also recorded with artists ranging from Bob Seger to Garth Brooks.

Mike Leech made a name for himself with both his bass and arranging skills, both of which have graced records by artists such as Willie Nelson, Dobie Gray, Henry Mancini, and Joan Baez.

Gene Chrisman went on to back artists such the Statler Brothers, Jerry Reed, Julie Andrews, and Loretta Lynn, with an occasional stint at the Grand Ole Opry.

Reggie Young's demand in Nashville was so great that in 1979 he doubled his scale. "I figured that if even half the people that were hiring me stopped, I'd still make the same salary," he laughs. "But most of them continued to hire me." He's featured on hits such as "Drift Away" by Dobie Gray, "Always On My Mind" by Willie Nelson, "I Can Help" by Billy Swan, "Everlasting Love" by Carl Carl ton, plus records by Charlie Rich, Jimmy Buffett, and hundreds more.

Memphis' A list players had become — and remain — some of Nashville's first call music men. Today, the Memphis Boys have become a touring group, performing everywhere from B.B. King's on Beale Street to sold out shows in Europe.

Currently, a project reuniting the Memphis Boys and Chips Moman is under way in Nashville. In addition to giving the musicians a rare opportunity to record together, the all star album is bringing together music legends Willie Nelson, George Jones, and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Looking back on the Memphis days, Reggie Young says, "I can't really say how I got where I got. I just put one foot in front of the other. I guess it took me getting away [because] it wasn't till I moved to Nashville and people would introduce me as 'This is the guy who played on this or that record.' Because, you know, we would have four, five, six, eight songs in the charts. Every week. I just thought that's how it was. I didn't realize how hard that was to come by. That's when I began to think there was a little magic thing over there in Memphis."