

Unsung: Chips Moman is one of the key figures in the history of Memphis music. So why hasn't he been given his due?

By Bob Mehr

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This is not a sob story or a tale of woe, or a plea for pity or praise. But for Lincoln "Chips" Moman it's about respect -- respect earned, but not given.

In music, few men could claim more or finer achievements. A gifted rockabilly guitarist and band leader in the 1950s, Moman went on to become one of the architects of Stax Records and author of some of the most enduring songs in the history of rhythm-and-blues and country music -- from "Dark End of the Street" to "Luckenbach Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)." Besides Sam Phillips, he was the only man to effectively produce Elvis Presley -- helping midwife The King's creative rebirth in 1969. And it was Moman who helped build and shape American Sound Studios and its house band -- generating the most prolific run of chart hits ever.

Yet, for the last two decades, Chips Moman has been a cipher, a ghost, the missing man of Memphis music. Much of that is his own doing, of course. Sensitive and highly strung, Moman left Memphis twice -- once in the '70s and again in the '80s -- under acrimonious circumstances.

Still, for a town that values its musical history, Moman has been curiously consigned to footnote status. You'll find little mention of him or the American Studios band in the Rock 'N' Soul Museum or the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, and their names were all but absent from the city-sponsored year-long musical celebrations of 2004 and 2007.

The 71-year-old Moman has been back living in LaGrange, Ga., where he was born, for the past decade. Though semi-retired, he still makes his way to Nashville for the odd session or to get together with friends. But one place he doesn't visit is Memphis. "I've stayed away," says Moman, in an easy drawl. "I have no desire to ever be back there. I don't know, man. It's really kind of hard to talk about, 'cause a lot of things that went on there hurt me tremendously."

Moman couldn't possibly have anticipated either the triumph or the trials he would face when he first hitchhiked from LaGrange to Memphis as a 14-year-old back in 1951. "I never knew I'd be in the music business," he says. "I never gave it any thought. But I'd been playing guitar since I was a child."

His eventual "discovery" seems like a story lifted from an old Hollywood script. Sitting in a local drugstore, strumming away on a six-string, he was spotted by Sun rockabilly

star

Warren Smith. "He asked me if I wanted a job," says Moman, who played his first gig backing Smith at an Arkansas club on a bill that included Carl Perkins and Roy Orbison. "That's how I went into the business."

Moman quickly became a hotshot local guitarist, and joined up with brothers Johnny and Dorsey Burnette. He traveled with them for sessions in California at the famed Gold Star Recording Studios. Moman watched and studied noted engineer Stan Ross behind the board. "And from what I'd learned in California, I decided to take that experience and put it to work in Memphis," he says.

His chance came when he was called to do a session at a tiny garage studio in Brunswick, Tenn., owned by Jim Stewart. Moman and Stewart hit it off, and decided to join forces to start what would become Satellite, and eventually, Stax Records.

"I found that old theater (on McLemore), and the rent was only \$50 a month. Went back and told Jim Stewart that and we rented it and built it out. That was the start of Stax. The rest is what happened."

What happened has been the subject of some controversy and debate over the years. Certainly, Moman played a pivotal role in Stax's development. He was the one who recorded the label's initial hits by Carla Thomas, Rufus Thomas and William Bell; helped develop "Last Night," the song that would become The Mar-Keys' smash; and was the one who was musically predisposed to turning Stax from a white country music company into a black R&B label in the first place.

But a rancorous split with Stewart and his sister and co-owner, Estelle Axton, in 1962 brought all that to an abrupt end. As music historians Rob Bowman and Peter Guralnick have detailed, recriminations flew: Moman said he'd been cheated out of profits and ownership, while Axton and Stewart suggested Moman was seeking credits and money he didn't deserve.

More than four decades later, anger about his ouster at Stax still lingers in Moman's voice.

"Sometimes you can get hurt bad enough that you don't forget it," he says. "What happened to me at Stax caused me to lose my house. I lost everything that I had. I remember that year ... for Thanksgiving, my wife and child, all we had was a box of corn flakes and some milk. You don't forget those kinds of things."

Eventually, Moman threatened to sue Stax and negotiated a few thousand dollars in settlement. It was enough -- along with the help of a couple of partners -- to start up a new place at 827 Thomas called American Sound Studios.

For a couple of years, Moman struggled, producing the odd track, but mostly made his living playing guitar on sessions down in Muscle Shoals (for the likes of Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett, among others) and co-writing songs -- often with Dan Penn -- like the immortal "Dark End of the Street" and "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man."

In 1965, things got rolling at American, with the arrival of local teen garage band The

Gentrys, who cut a million-selling smash called "Keep on Dancing."

"They were just kids, and I wasn't much more" says Moman. "But that got me started to the point where I could afford to hire a secretary."

The secretary Moman hired, Sandy Posey, would be his next protégé, and she would go on to record the Top 20 Grammy-nominated hit "Born A Woman." "After that, people started calling me to produce records," says Moman.

The studio hit its stride when Moman wooed members of the staff bands at Hi Records and Phillips to form the American Studios group: guitarist Reggie Young, drummer Gene Chrisman, pianist Bobby Wood, organist Bobby Emmons and bassists Mike Leech and Tommy Cogbill. That unit, mostly with Moman at the helm, would help sire a succession of hits for artists like the Box Tops ("The Letter"), Dusty Springfield ("Son of a Preacher Man"), Neil Diamond ("Sweet Caroline), B.J. Thomas ("Hooked on a Feeling"), Bobby Womack ("Fly Me To The Moon") and, most famously, Elvis Presley ("Suspicious Minds").

"We were working night and day," Bobby Wood recalls of the period. "Sometimes we'd be doing Elvis at night and somebody like Neil Diamond during the day. I remember B.J. Thomas was in for his second album after 'Hooked on a Feeling,' and I didn't know he'd already had a No. 1 record. That's how hard we were working -- we didn't even listen to the radio."

Between 1967 and 1972, American would cut 122 chart records -- a still unmatched achievement. And yet, despite those gaudy numbers, few people seemed to give Moman or the band its due. He was particularly irked after the band was completely passed over for some local music awards in the early-'70s.

"The thing is, Chips wasn't one to come out and say, 'Well I need my recognition.' He wouldn't do that," says his friend and longtime Memphis music industry vet Herb O'Mell. "Those guys were not self promoters in any way and never tried to be. Whereas -- and I'm not saying anything bad -- the Stax people, they promoted themselves. The American people wrote their songs, made their records and went on to the next thing."

But Moman was particularly sensitive to slights, both real and perceived, after his experience with Stax. A lack of recognition within Memphis -- from the press, from fellow musicians, from the city fathers -- for what he and American had contributed musically and economically almost overshadowed his success.

"I've heard him say that many times," says Reggie Young. "And really, if you looked at it, here we were, and we've cut a hundred-something chart records, but yet there would be a mediocre Hi record or a Stax record that would get the press. In our little circle we'd come up with all kind of scenarios as to why we're not in the paper on Sunday or whatever. I guess they had better PR than we did."

The lack of attention -- and a gradual downturn in session work -- was enough of an issue that Moman was thinking of leaving town. "I figured if Memphis don't think no more of us than that, we can do what we do anywhere," says Moman.

Although Moman says City Council members pleaded with him to stay -- he was putting

money into the city coffers, after all -- in 1972 he closed up shop in Memphis and headed to Atlanta to start a new studio, taking most of the American band with him.

His tenure in Atlanta was short-lived, however. After encountering problems with the new record label he'd set up, Moman decided to get out of the music business entirely.

"I was planning to go to Australia and become a bush pilot. But I decided to visit some friends in Nashville before I left," says Moman. "While I was there, I wrote a hit song for B.J. Thomas ("[Hey Won't You Play] Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song") that became record of the year. So I stayed."

Moman would spend the next dozen years in Nashville, where he would dominate the country field -- writing hits and producing albums by Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Tammy Wynette and Ronnie Millsap.

Despite his success in Music City, in 1985, Moman was lured back to Memphis. Then-Mayor Dick Hackett and First Tennessee bank chairman Ron Terry, eager to re-energize a Memphis music industry that had been stagnant since the demise of Stax in 1975, offered Moman a studio site and financial incentives to return to town.

"I had a lot of people telling me not to do it," Moman says. "But it was kind of an honor to have them ask me to come back. And so I did. But things didn't go well."

At first, Moman was hailed as a potential savior of the city's music. He quickly recorded the high-profile *Class of '55* album featuring Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Roy Orbison.

But then an album with Ringo Starr, in particular, was plagued by problems. After The Commercial Appeal ran a column mildly disparaging Starr (saying the "aging Beatle is yesterday's news"), Moman staged a bizarre protest in front of the newspaper's offices. Despite doing some recording, Starr eventually abandoned the project and sued Moman to stop the album's release.

In the end, Moman decided, "Fixing the music business in town wasn't going to happen overnight, like everyone wanted it to," and he returned to Nashville, where he resumed his success for another decade before heading off to semi-retirement in Georgia.

Moman's reclusive nature and lingering bitterness about Memphis have come with a price: His achievements, and those of the American band, have been marginalized in the city's musical history.

In the last two decades, Moman and the American band have repeatedly been passed over for industry awards and honors -- in fact, their only institutional recognition came last year in Nashville, where the band was among the inaugural inductees to the Musicians Hall of Fame and Museum.

Like the original Stax studio, the building housing American was demolished in 1990; today, in its place is a parking lot. There's no plaque or marker to note what was once there.

Herb O'Mell says part of the problem is that no one has served as custodian of

American's legacy. "The people from Stax and Sun, they remained here, and they became the officers and took over the (Grammys) and all the award things, and they just kinda left Chips and American out," says O'Mell. "There's nobody here saying '*American, American, American*,' the way Deanie Parker has done for Stax or Knox Phillips has done for Sun. That is, unless you talk to someone like Marty Lacker."

Lacker, a longtime music industry veteran, Elvis confidante -- he helped bring Presley to American in 1969 -- and friend of Moman's, has, for the past year, been campaigning privately with both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and The Recording Academy, the group that governs the Grammys, to get Moman and the American band some long-overdue recognition.

It's a task made more difficult by the fact that Moman and American weren't identified with a single label or style, as were other house bands that have been honored, such as Stax's Booker T. & the MGs or Motown's Funk Brothers.

"Chips says he doesn't give a damn now if they do anything. But I know deep down inside he does," Lacker says. "Especially, with the local Grammy chapter -- it's nothing but politics there. Most of the (American band) guys are from here. They don't have anything against Memphis. It's just that nobody has said, 'Y'all did good.'"

Memphis Grammy chapter executive director Jon Hornyak says Moman and the American band have been on the list for the chapter's bi-annual Recording Academy Honors the past two times. Other sources confirm that their names have previously been submitted to the national Grammy body for consideration for Trustee's and Lifetime Achievement awards -- but, so far, nothing has happened.

"There are a lot of great people out there, and some get more attention than others, and it's not always clear why," says Hornyak. "I don't think a lot of people are aware of the things Chips had accomplished and all the things that he had his fingers in."

Whether anyone ever recognizes it, Moman says his greatest joy comes from what he and the American band achieved. "We still get together and play once a year. And every once in a while we'll book a session and everyone comes, and we're like we always were," says Moman. "They're like my family. We've stayed together 40 years. That's my proudest accomplishment."

As for the fate of his and the American band's legacy, Moman says he doesn't really expect anything to change.

"And I got no hard feelings about it. ... Well, I can't say that," he admits. "Obviously, I do. I don't know what it is with us and Memphis, or why it's turned out this way. But if you happen to find the answer, I'd appreciate you letting me know."

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