

Booker T empties the 'Potato Hole' in his head

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NEW YORK - He led one of the greatest record-label house bands of all time, wrote a rock classic, is enshrined in the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame and received a lifetime Grammy award.

Now Booker T. Jones has recorded his first solo album in 20 years -- not the funky soul that Stax Records fans would expect from the organist whose band backed Otis Redding, Sam & Dave and Carla Thomas, but funky rock with some help on guitars from Neil Young and the southern rock band Drive-By Truckers.

The disc, which will be released on Tuesday, April 21, is called "Potato Hole" after the hiding place under the floorboards of plantation shacks where slaves used to keep a little extra food.

"This potato hole is my potato hole, the place where I have deposited my ideas. All my stuff," Jones told Reuters.

That "stuff," is the music he has been storing up since leaving the legendary Stax studios in Memphis 40 years ago, where he headed up Booker T and the MG's. The group had a string of instrumental hits starting in 1962 with "Green Onions," a classic 12-bar blues tune that has become a staple for every aspiring rocker.

Booker T & The MG's (for "Memphis Group") played on just about every record Stax put out in the 60's when soul music was as big as rock 'n roll.

"(But) I always loved rock 'n roll," said Jones, 64. "Otis heard the (Rolling) Stones and I heard the Beatles in '65, so I was influenced by what was happening with the guitars.

"I played guitar, but it was a softer, R&B, soulful guitar. Except when I was on my own at home and we did a couple of songs with Eddie Floyd and Otis, when the things was turned up to 10 and I was strumming the thing," he recalled.

"But it (rock) was out of place in Memphis and out of place at Stax. Then once I actually heard (Jimi) Hendrix, who did this stuff without any reservations, it was just another reason to leave Memphis."

Stax, rooted in the city on the Mississippi -- where blues met country and morphed into rock, soul and R&B -- was nearing the end of a golden era, and Jones wanted to expand musically.

It was wrenching to leave the studio where he first played baritone saxophone on Carla and Rufus Thomas' "Cause I Love You," when he was 16.

An after-school job

"I told them I also played piano and they called me back," he said about the Thomas' record. "I ended up playing organ on William Bell's 'You Don't Miss Your Water,' and I ended up with a job, after school."

After he left Stax, Jones, who studied music at Indiana University, moved to California and joined A&M Records as a staff producer. There he supervised recording sessions for Rita Coolidge, his wife Priscilla

(Rita's sister) and Bill Withers.

He produced Willie Nelson's 1978 album "Stardust" and in 1988, Booker T. and the MGs reunited with Jones, guitarist Steve Cropper, bassist Donald "Duck" Dunn and various drummers replacing Al Jackson Jr, who was shot to death in Memphis.

Asked if he felt musically constrained at Stax, where records had to be a certain length and conform to the house style, Jones replied that leaving was "liberating."

"You don't have to say it needs this kind of a groove or whatever. Guidance can be restricting, however well-meaning. I was basically let go to do what I wanted" after nine years at the label, he said.

But like the fans who will always remember Stax's "Memphis Sound," Jones cannot completely distance himself from his hometown -- the one where he swears he saw a young Elvis Presley riding around on a motorcycle and sneaking into black churches to listen to gospel.

He recalled how his band, along with songwriters Isaac Hayes and Daid Porter, would adjourn to a motel to discuss projects when they worked at Stax.

"The Lorraine Motel was the location for all the Stax meetings and where we went for our lunch. Steve Cropper and Eddie (Floyd) must have written most of the songs they wrote at the Lorraine Motel.

"It was our social spot. We didn't have that at 926 East McLemore Avenue (where Stax was based). We didn't have a boardroom or anything.

"That's what the Lorraine Motel was to us...until that day," Jones said.

"That day" was when civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in the racially segregated city in April 1968 -- at the very same Lorraine Motel.

"I was in Memphis that day, but I wasn't there. I know the room though."

It was the room where King's own dream died, and the same room where Booker T and the MG's -- two black guys and two white guys -- wrote what was a sort of soundtrack to the turbulent civil rights era in America's history.

Source: [ABS-CBN News](#)