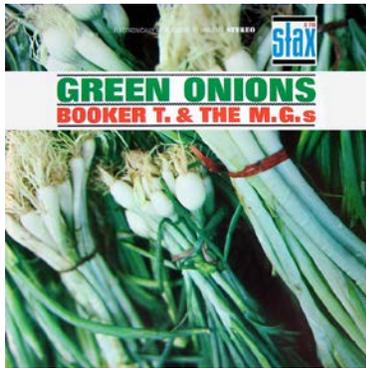


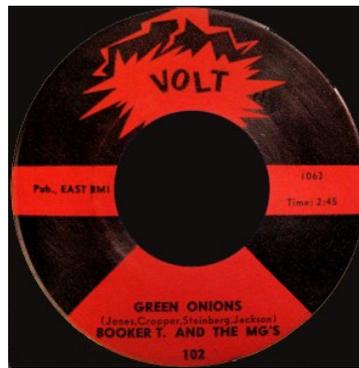
“Green Onions”--Booker T. & the M.G.s (1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Scott B. Bomar (guest post)*



Original LP



Original 45 label



Booker T. and the M.G.s

Booker T. & the M.G.s' "Green Onions" was an unplanned recording by a group of musicians who never intended to form a band. "It was pretty much an accident," guitarist Steve Cropper confirmed in 2014. "It was just one of those things that fell together by chance." Nevertheless, the 1962 single from the album became the first #1 R&B hit for the gritty Southern soul powerhouse known as Stax Records. The subsequent instrumental album was the first LP released on the Stax label proper, and it established the sound that would define the Memphis studio's hit-making recordings with artists such as Sam and Dave, Wilson Pickett, and Otis Redding.

The Stax name was derived from combining the first two letters of the last names of its owners, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. The white siblings grew up in rural Tennessee, where Jim taught himself to play the fiddle by listening to the Grand Ole Opry. By the mid-1950s he was working at Memphis' First National Bank, but longed to make a living in the music business. He launched a publishing company and record label with some fellow country musicians in 1957, using the name Satellite. After a few false starts, he regrouped in 1958 and partnered with Estelle, who mortgaged her house to purchase new recording equipment.

At the outset, Jim relied heavily on Chips Moman--a young guitarist who had worked as a backing musician for Johnny Burnette and Gene Vincent--to assist with production. Chips was the first to turn Jim on to black music when he recorded a local doo-wop quintet called the Veltones. The resulting single made a splash on the local scene in 1959, and Mercury Records picked it up for distribution. It was the first sign of hope for Jim and Estelle's fledgling Satellite label.

Like Chips, Estelle's saxophonist son, Packy, loved R&B music. Packy joined the Royal Spades --a white band that specialized in black music--in 1959. The guitarist and bandleader was Steve Cropper. Packy, Steve and their bandmates eagerly helped with the renovation effort when Satellite relocated to 926 E. McLemore Avenue in 1960. The building was a former movie

theater that Moman had spotted in a rapidly-changing area of Memphis. “The neighborhood was in transition at that time,” Booker T. Jones recalled. “It was still sort of a white neighborhood at first, but it was changing as the white families were moving out.”

Rufus Thomas, a revered black Memphis performer and DJ on WDIA, stopped by to scout out the new studio. Soon after, he and his teenage daughter, Carla, recorded a duet called “Cause I Love You.” The guitar duties were handled by Cropper, while the baritone sax part was played by Booker, who lived in the neighborhood. “That was the first time I got the chance to do something in a recording studio,” Jones recalled. “That was my first session ever.”

“Cause I Love You” sold well enough that Satellite’s local distributor brought it to the attention of Atlantic Records in New York. Atlantic’s Jerry Wexler contacted Jim and the two set up a deal for the larger label to release the song on its Atco imprint, as well as some future recordings. The arrangement quickly paid off when Carla’s “Gee Whiz” became a national rhythm and blues and pop hit early the following year, a crossover success for the label that was a sign of things to come.

In June of 1961, Chips Moman produced an instrumental single called “Last Night” credited to the Mar-Keys. Though only two of its members appeared on the record, the Royal Spades became the Mar-Keys and hit the road to promote the single. “Last Night” became a Top 5 hit on both the R&B and pop charts, which brought Satellite Records to the attention of another company using that name in California. Satellite was quickly redubbed Stax Records.

More serious and responsible than his bandmates in the Mar-Keys, Steve Cropper tired of life on the road and returned to Memphis, where he worked for Estelle in the record shop that she established in the concession area of the movie theater-turned-studio. The shop allowed Estelle to keep her finger on the pulse of what kids were buying and what sounds were connecting with young listeners. It also gave her a forum to gauge local music enthusiasts’ responses to the music that was being made in the adjacent studio. “That’s why we were successful with nearly everything we put out for a few years,” she explained to Robert Gordon. “We tested them at home before we let them go.”

In late 1961, Stax spun off a new label imprint called Volt Records with a song titled “Burnt Biscuits” by the Triumphs. The interracial recording group, which included Chips Moman, Booker T. Jones, and bassist Lewie Steinberg, was named after Moman’s Triumph convertible. Soon after the Triumphs’ record was released, however, Moman and Jim Stewart parted ways following a rancorous dispute over money, and Steve Cropper gradually moved from working in the record shop to filling Moman’s role as A&R manager, producer, and Jim Stewart’s right hand man.

By 1962, Stax could point to a handful of successes, but Stewart was still working at the bank, and relied upon Cropper to keep things running during the day. To help stay afloat, the studio was available for demo recordings, radio spots, and similar work-for-hire situations. In the summer of 1962, Steve Cropper, Booker T. Jones, Lewie Steinberg, and drummer Al Jackson, Jr. were assembled at Stax to record a commercial jingle with rockabilly singer Billy Lee Riley. It was a Sunday, so the bank was closed, and Jim Stewart was working the controls. When the session was aborted, the musicians started jamming on a slow blues progression that Booker had

been playing in the clubs. It was the first time this particular assemblage of musicians had played together in this configuration, but there was immediate chemistry.

Liking what he heard, Jim asked the band to play the song again, and he recorded it without their knowledge. Estelle, who was taking care of bookkeeping in the record shop, came in and heard the playback. It was Axton who suggested they call the instrumental “Behave Yourself.” Jim said he would release it as a single, but they would need a B-side. “I had this little ditty that I’d been playing on piano at my mother’s house,” Booker recalled. Steve had to remind his friend about the partial song. “Even Booker didn’t remember that he had played me that riff a couple of weeks before,” Cropper recalled. “We made the arrangement up in the studio, but he had played me that lick earlier. I said, ‘Oh that’s a good one. Keep that one in mind.’” Booker tried it out on the Hammond M-series organ, rather than the piano, which imbued the song with a vaguely menacing intensity. After taking a few minutes to work out the arrangement, the musicians recorded the final version of the tune that came to be known as “Green Onions” in only two or three takes.

“There was only one change that was made after the first take,” Cropper reflected. “Originally, Booker played the intro and I doubled the bass line with Lewie Steinberg on my guitar. I was originally doing that intro that you hear on the record in the middle instead. Jim said, ‘Hey Steve, why don’t you put that on the front as an intro and then when it comes to the middle 12 bars, which is a third verse, just play a regular solo.’” Cropper’s Fender Esquire guitar comes in too loud in the first couple of notes of the solo, but then drops down very low in the mix. “What happened was I hit it a lot harder when I hit that opening note and it probably scared the crap out of Jim Stewart,” Steve explained. “But it was going so well that rather than stop the session and say, ‘Oh, man, that just saturated the tape,’ I’m sure he grabbed that knob and turned me down a lot lower than he probably needed to. I guess it just shocked him so bad. The final version was the first and only take with a guitar solo in the middle, which is probably why I hit it harder than expected. I was a rhythm guitar player and I was not used to playing solos in the studio.” Though not a technically perfect recording, the immediacy of the record is part of the charm. Jim Stewart and the musicians knew it *felt* good, and opted not to tinker with it.

On Monday, Steve took the master tape of the two songs to Sam Phillips’ recording studio where Scotty Moore, Elvis’ original guitarist, cut two acetates. “He’s the one who really mastered ‘Green Onions,’” Cropper pointed out. That afternoon, Steve became increasingly convinced that the intended B-side, which did not yet have a name, was the more appealing record. On Tuesday morning, he carried one of the acetates to WLOK where DJ Reuben Washington played it back-to-back several times. “Everybody wanted to know who it was and what it was,” Cropper remembered. “They didn’t have an answer for ‘em.” When I got to the record shop at 9 o’clock the phone was ringing off the wall. Estelle said, ‘What have you done?’ She said, ‘We better call Jim and get him over here on his lunch break.’”

When Jim got off work at the bank that afternoon he assembled the musicians to figure out the details. “I remember when we were trying to come up with a title for the song,” Steve explained. “Lewie Steinberg said, ‘Let’s name it onions.’ We said, ‘Onions? Why?’ And he said, ‘Cause that’s the stankiest music I ever heard!’ I jumped in there and I said, ‘Well, that’s a little negative. Onions make people cry and not everybody likes onions, but what about *green*

onions?”

“When the time came to come up with a name I think Al Jackson wanted to name it Booker T and something,” Jones recalled. “Booker T is just a great name,” Cropper added. “We thought, ‘Booker T and *what?*’” There was a long pause as the musicians tried to think of a name with the right ring to it. “Chips Moman had a Triumph that he was driving, Jones continued. “He used to do wheelies in the snow out there with it. So somebody said, ‘M.G.s’” When the British automotive company indicated they didn’t wish to be associated with a musical act, the band adjusted the explanation to say it stood for “Memphis Group.”

“Green Onions” was initially released as Volt #102, and its popularity spread quickly throughout the region. “I went down and picked up a box of 25 records from the plant,” Cropper remembered, “and took off with a buddy of mine on a Friday morning who went out and serviced the jukebox operators in Arkansas and a little bit in Mississippi and some in Tennessee. I would have him drop me off at the local radio station while he went and called on his clients. They were glad to see anybody. Nobody came to visit those guys too often. That’s how we broke it so soon.”

Atlantic’s Jerry Wexler suggested they reissue the single on the Stax label, since the original imprint had already had some success. “We called the pressing plant,” Steve explained, “and said, ‘You’ve got to change the stampers. It’s the same information, but just put it on the Stax label instead of Volt.’” The single was a huge crossover hit for Stax, and the tune quickly became a staple song for young bands to learn and established artists as varied as Henry Mancini, Count Basie and the Ventures to cover.

“I was in twelfth grade in June of 1962,” Booker explained, “and was just about to graduate. I was heading to Indiana University to get my degree in education. Stax was a convenience for me because I was making good money as a session player, but I had no intention of making my career there or staying there at all. I was gonna get educated and become a music teacher. Right away there was a conflict because I’d already enrolled at Indiana and I had paid nine hundred bucks at that point for two semesters of tuition.”

Thanks to the success of the single, the Atlantic brass encouraged Jim Stewart to record an LP. The process began in the summer, but continued into the fall. Jones pursued his studies, but regularly returned to the Stax studio and the M.G.s. “I would drive four hundred miles every week from Bloomington to Memphis,” he recounted. “I knew every inch of that road.”

Considering that the session that spawned their hit single was a spontaneous effort, the unplanned band had to figure out what to record for their debut album. “We just put our heads together in the studio,” Steve remembered, “and said, ‘OK, we’ve got to do this, guys. What are we gonna do?’” They turned to the woman with her finger on the pulse. “My recollection is that these songs were ones that we were introduced to at the Satellite record shop by Mrs. Axton,” Booker explained. “They were records we were fans of and that we maybe tried to play in clubs. She made the majority of these suggestions, especially the Atlantic stuff. She knew what records were selling at the time and she wanted to help a brother out by having us record songs that were popular.”

Apart from the title track and a couple of additional original compositions, the album was filled with covers.

The lead-off track was “Green Onions,” credited to all four band members. It was followed by Rinky-Dink, which was a Top 10 hit in 1962 for Dave “Baby” Cortez on Chess Records. Next, they covered Ray Charles’s “I Got a Woman,” which had particular significance for Jones. “The reason I even was interested in playing a Hammond organ,” Booker explained, “was because I heard Ray Charles play it on his Atlantic Records that he recorded with Quincy Jones as the arranger--specifically, ‘One Mint Julep.’ That same sound is on ‘I Got a Woman’ and ‘Lonely Avenue.’ That was something I was trying to imitate at the time.”

“Mo’ Onions” was another original credited to all four band members that played off the progression of “Green Onions.” “I think ‘Mo’ Onions’ was actually something that Lewie came up with,” Cropper recalled. They recorded a rhythmically tight rendition of the frat house favorite “Twist and Shout,” which had originally been recorded by the Top Notes as “Shake It Up Baby” in 1961 before the Isley Brothers recorded their hit version in 1962. The first side of the LP ended with “Behave Yourself,” the song that Jim Stewart initially recorded at the spontaneous session that spawned “Green Onions.”

The second side of the album opened with “Stranger On the Shore,” which had been a hit for clarinetist Acker Bilk in late 1961. “That was just a favorite of mine personally,” Booker explained. “My first instrument was clarinet, which I started in 4th grade, and played all through junior high school. It led to me playing saxophone, which is how I got into Stax in the first place. I was a reed guy, and that was one of my favorite songs.”

One of the only cover songs on the album that was not a recent release was the Doc Pomus-penned “Lonely Avenue,” which was a hit for Ray Charles in 1956. The next track, Smokey Robinson’s “One Who Really Loves You” was a current Top 10 for Mary Wells. “I’m gonna guess Mrs. Axton suggested that song,” Jones reflected. “She was a big Motown fan.” Similarly, “You Can’t Sit Down” had been released the previous year by the Philip Upchurch Combo, and “A Woman, A Lover, A Friend” had been a #1 R&B single for Jackie Wilson less than two years prior.

The album closed with “Comin’ Home Baby,” which was first recorded as an instrumental by the Dave Bailey Quintet in 1961, followed by Herbie Mann’s cover that same year. It became a hit when Mel Torme released a vocal version in 1962. “We all loved Herbie Mann,” Steve recounted, “but for the most part, Booker T. & the M.Gs covered familiar songs that people knew the melody to without actually having to hear the lyrics.”

Though both the Mar-Keys and Carla Thomas had released full albums prior to Booker T. & the M.G.s, those efforts appeared on the Atlantic label. The “Green Onions” LP was the first to appear on the Stax label, and the first album to emerge from the Memphis studio to appear on the Billboard album chart. The look of the album was somewhat of an accident in its own right. “The way that album cover came about is kind of a funny story,” Steve remembered. “Atlantic’s art department didn’t have a picture of green onions, so they sent a photographer [Irving Schild] down to the sidewalks of New York to one of those outdoor grocery stores. He saw a bin of green onions and shot it. And that’s the album cover.”

The album art, however, is more notable for what the record company chose not to picture. “The reason there’s not a photo of the band,” Cropper explained, “is that they didn’t want people to know it was a mixed race group.” The South of 1962 was still largely segregated, and interracial groups were not common. Despite fears about what the public might think, the interracial collaboration represented by the band was a key factor in the dynamic of the Memphis studio. “That’s what made Stax,” Steinberg told Robert Gordon. “We integrated Stax and didn’t think no more about it than the man on the moon.”

Despite the racially diverse group, they didn’t face harassment or open hostility. “I don’t remember ever having any kind of confrontation or anybody saying anything,” Steve recalled. “The only time that it might have mattered is if we stopped at a road stop to get something to eat, like at a burger joint or something, they might have separate counters for black people and white people, or separate water fountains for white people and black people. It was stupid, but that’s the way it was.”

“The races, basically, didn’t mix in most social situations,” Jones confirmed. “It was an anomaly to have four mixed race people in a car going to a restaurant for food or going to a hotel. It was just a matter of getting around tradition. Whites going in and getting the rooms, and blacks sneaking in the back door, or vice versa. But we didn’t go on the road for very long. They were short driving trips. We only played a few jobs, and they were mostly at clubs in Memphis where people knew what to expect.”

With the success of the “Green Onions” single and album, Jim Stewart knew what sound he wanted for Stax. Though they continued to release material as a band, the M.G.s became the de facto house band at Stax and were largely responsible for the sound that came to define the label’s artists, such as Otis Redding, Eddie Floyd, and Albert King, as well as the Atlantic artists who recorded at Stax, including Sam & Dave and Wilson Pickett. “Nineteen sixty-two was the year that first started the Stax sound,” Jim Stewart told author Peter Guralnick. Booker T. Jones agreed. “Green Onions was really the beginning of that Memphis funk sound,” he reflected.

When Booker was away at college Isaac Hayes often substituted for him in the studio (even playing organ on several tracks that were released under the Booker T. & the M.G.s name). In some cases, both men appeared on Stax recordings. In late 1964, Donald “Duck” Dunn replaced Lewie Steinberg as the official M.G.s bassist. With Dunn onboard, Booker T. & the M.G.s released eleven more albums for Stax and scored hits with the singles “Boot-Leg,” “Hip Hug-Her,” “Groovin’,” “Time is Tight,” and “Soul Limbo.” The band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992.

But it was the serendipitous “Green Onions” session that first launched Booker T. & the M.G.s and solidified the Stax sound. The song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1999, and named by “Rolling Stone” magazine as one of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time” in 2004. The “Green Onions” album was added to the National Recording Registry in 2011.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress