

WattStax (1973)

By Al Bell

It was almost 50 years ago that Larry Shaw (producer and co-director), Forrest Hamilton (associate producer), and I had the vision of taking the roster of Stax Records' recording artists to Los Angeles, California to put on a concert at the Los Angeles Coliseum, record it, film it, and produce a documentary titled *WATTSTAX: The Living Word*. In addition, and as part of our plan, we contributed a substantial portion of the net proceeds to an annual Los Angeles African American cultural event, the Watts Summer Festival, and to various other African American social, humanitarian, and Civil Rights organizations.

We believed that *WATTSTAX* would demonstrate the positive attributes of Black pride and the unique substance found in the lives, living, and lifestyle of the African American working class and middle class while revealing some insight into their internal thoughts during a time when we were still struggling to be recognized, respected, accepted as human beings, and to be granted "equal rights" as enjoyed by every other ethnic group in the larger segment of American society.

Second only to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington, the *WATTSTAX* concert, with a turnstile count of more than 112,000 people, was the largest gathering of African Americans at that time. The seven-hour show in the Los Angeles Coliseum featured the Stax Records roster



Original WattStax Poster (1973) - Courtesy of Stax Museum/ Saul Zaentz Film Center

of celebrated artists such as Isaac Hayes, the Staple Singers, Rufus Thomas, Carla Thomas, Albert King, The Bar-Kays, The Soul Children, Rance Allen Group, Luther Ingram, Little Milton, and Kim Weston and we captured it for prosperity in the Cannes-celebrated, Golden Globe-nominated, Sundance-honored film, *WATTSTAX: The Living Word*. The movie also featured witty social commentary from Stax artist Richard Pryor. From the nightclub performance by Johnnie Taylor to the church pulpit performance by The Emotions, the *WATTSTAX* movie told the human experience of being black in America through their music and insightful on-the-street interviews with everyday Watts

residents, seven years after the 1965 social rebellion in Watts.

We believed that *WATTSTAX* would provide somewhat of a "mirror" for us to see ourselves, and an opportunity for other Americans to peer through a small "window of our existence" and gain a better insight into the kind of caring and sensitive family-oriented people that we really are!!! This was a time when African Americans dreamed of, and desired, to merely be granted, "equal rights" thereby becoming "equal partners and equal participants" in the American Dream. *WATTSTAX* graphically demonstrates how a people, living in the land of plenty, possessing so little, found refuge in the "spirit of celebration."

It is very important to realize and note that *WATTSTAX: The Living Word* was financed by white and black money, for at that time STAX Records and STAX Films were owned fifty percent by Jim Stewart (white) and fifty percent by Al Bell (black). The film's executive producers were Al Bell (black) and David Wolper (white). The producers were Larry Shaw (black) and Mel Stuart (white). The director was Mel Stuart, a white man, whose directing, editing, and finished product was guided and co-directed by a black man, Larry Shaw.

As a result of the heavy black participation, the perspective of this movie was one of

"truth!" It was bold, sincere, and undiluted!!! It also allowed for the 75-percent black film crew to gain entry into the closed Hollywood unions at the time and allowed co-producer David Wolper to gain valuable insight that inspired him later to produce Alex Haley's *Roots*.

Stax Records and the film *WATTSTAX: The Living Word* personified how white and black people working side by side could make music for people, and a documentary about how the music reflected what was going on in black lives, living, and lifestyles, without compromising in any manner the authenticity of the presentation. Is this a miracle, or is this merely an example of what we whites and blacks can achieve in America by working together, respecting each other, and accepting each other as we really are?

Al Bell (born Alvertis Isbell in Brinkley, Arkansas) is the former Chairman and Owner of Stax Records, and served as Executive Producer on the film WATTSTAX. He subsequently served as President of Motown Records Group, and is the writer and producer of the hit song "I'll Take You There" performed by the Staple Singers Today, Mr. Bell is the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Al Bell Presents, LLC.

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