

“Let’s Stay Together”--Al Green (1971)

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Essay by David A. Less (guest post)*



Al Green

The phrase “Memphis Sound” is a great marketing tool but a terrible musical descriptor. Memphis music has been recorded for over one hundred years in various genres; each could correctly be called the “Memphis Sound.” Many locally-produced blues, jazz, rockabilly, rock and roll, soul, gospel and rap records are uniquely Memphis.

One of the most instantly identifiable “Memphis Sounds” is the Hi Records soul sound Willie Mitchell perfected at Royal Recording Studio. It reached its apex on “Let’s Stay Together” by Al Green, setting the template for all of his hits that followed.

Mitchell had worked live and in the studio with many remarkable vocalists. But the sound that he was hearing in his head was incomplete. Something was missing. With Al Green he found his missing piece.

Royal Studio was one arrow in Willie Mitchell’s quiver of sonic weapons. Mitchell had played in bands for decades and had a clear notion of how recorded music should sound. He heard it in his head and was determined to capture it on tape.

Mitchell told me in 1979, “[Hi Records owner] Joe Coughi said, ‘You don’t know anything about engineering records so you go in there and you produce the records.’ After a whole lot of conversation with him I said, ‘I can’t get the sound I want to get. I’m going down there and I’m going to engineer myself.’

“I came down to mike the drums and the first thing I called [drummer] Al Jackson. I said, ‘Al, look man, the drums sound funny. Every time you play it sounds like a Bill Black or an Ace Cannon record. I think I’ll go out and buy some new drums.

“I went out and I bought new drums and I put the mike on it and it sounded the same way. And we had all the mikes, and I took all the mikes and I found me a mike that made the bass drum

sound like I wanted. Then I put another mike up over the whole kit. And it sounded just like I wanted it to sound.”

Mitchell continued to fine tune the studio’s acoustics with carpets, drapes and the placement of instruments until he was satisfied with the sound of the room.

He had essentially raised many members of his band, teaching them to play from their teenage years. Along with his keyboardist stepson Archie Turner, the three Hodges brothers (Leroy, Charles, Mabon) formed the nucleus of his band. Alternating drummers Howard Grimes and Al Jackson, Jr. completed the rhythm section.

Mitchell now had the studio sound he wanted and his musicians performing as he taught them. He produced superbly talented vocalists prior to Al Green including O.V. Wright, Ann Peebles, Tina Turner and Don Bryant. It could be argued that Green was not even the most soulful singer Mitchell produced to that point; O.V. Wright may hold that distinction. But there was something special about Al Green.

Mitchell had already produced two Al Green albums for Hi Records. On those records Green’s vocals were more urgent, less relaxed. The horns were more pronounced in the mix, arranged more like sessions they might have played at Stax studio. Those albums included several cover versions of popular songs with a few compositions by Al Green and Mabon “Teenie” Hodges.

Neither Al Jackson nor Willie Mitchell contributed any of the songs on those records. Jackson, Mitchell and Green wrote “Let’s Stay Together,” starting a collaboration that would yield a series of classic songs. Green described the synergy between the three in our interview in 1978:

“Al Jackson did the rhythm like, ‘Let’s Stay Together’: [*sings*] ‘*Let’s, let’s stay together, loving whether times are good.*’ I mean he would like do the creative rhythms in the songs. Willie Mitchell would create the music. And Al Green would come up with the [*sings*] ‘*Let’s, let’s stay together*’ to go with it. [*sings*] ‘*Loving you whether.*’ I mean I would have to do that see?”

“Now, Al Jackson’s sitting there beating on tables all day long but he had no words. Willie Mitchell was playing on a piano but he had no words. Al Green came along with the words, and so, boom!”

Willie Mitchell was a jazz musician who led bands from the 1950s until the 1970s. He trained his young musicians to play jazz and pop standards through performances on the road, in clubs and in the studio. He taught them to understand music as a dialog, a language spoken between the players.

In an unpublished interview with writer Robert Palmer in 1973, Willie Mitchell described his approach to producing a record.

“If you notice I don’t use horns, they’re just in and out all the time. It’ll never be horns, horns, horns, or organ, organ, organ. I think the horns, when they say something they, like people are talking, you see, that’s the way I think of horns. Matter of fact, that’s the way I think of a record.

The horns talking to the bass and the bass talking to the drums and the singer talking to everybody and everybody talking to the singer. That's the way I think of a record.

“But now anything I hear I can put on tape. I cut records at home. I don't cut records at the studio. Cause I go to the studio to put down what I heard.”

The classic Hi Records soul sound was finally realized with “Let's Stay Together.” After the short horn bursts call everyone together, a dialog begins among the instruments before Green enters. Al Jackson's drums drive the beat pushed by Howard Grimes's congas.

Horns and strings exchange musical pleasantries throughout the song. Leroy Hodges's bass rides the drums. Hodges's brothers, Charles on B3 organ and Teenie on guitar chatter like kids at home in their room, weaving in and out of the melody: an organ stab here, Teenie's guitar line in just the right in place. Jackson turns the beat around by accenting his tom or with a hi-hat splash.

The two female background singers, sisters Sandra and Donna Rhodes, had been on many other records, but Mitchell didn't feel they had what he wanted. He turned to tenor saxophonist Charlie Chalmers and made a request.

Chalmers remembered, “I was in the control room and after they sang a little bit, Willie looked over at me and he said, ‘Charlie,’ he said, ‘it ain't got no meat. Get out there and sing with them, see if it will fatten it up.’ It was instant magic.”

But all that magic would not work unless Green's performance was as superb as the rest. Mitchell wanted him to sing softer because he knew Green could have more control and better range on his vocals.

In the same interview with Robert Palmer, Mitchell recalled, “[Green] called me three or four times and said, ‘But the voice is too little.’ I said that it's like singing yourself into someone's heart; don't scream. I said, ‘Just how soft can you say it and do it in tune?’”

“Let's Stay Together” began a run of indelibly crafted hits for Al Green in the 1970s. This is where all the elements of production and art came together to create a masterpiece. Once those elements had coalesced, Al Green and Willie Mitchell were fully prepared to write a whole new chapter in the book of Memphis Soul.

David A. Less, the author of “Memphis Mayhem: A Story of the Music That Shook Up the World,” has studied Memphis music for over 45 years including work done for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Gibson Guitar Foundation. He has published in “Rolling Stone,” “DownBeat,” and “Blues Revue” magazines and the Society for American Music Bulletin.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

