

Steve 'The Colonel' Cropper returns with a new star-packed studio album, *Friendlytown*



Steve Cropper was one of Stax Records' most valued songwriters, producers and guitarists, playing with everyone from Otis Redding to Sam & Dave and Wilson Pickett. Now, 63 years after his first hit, he's about to release a new album, with a little help from some famous friends...

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

Play it, Steve!



Steve Cropper co-produced his latest album with longtime friend Jon Tiven (Wilson Pickett, Don Covay, Frank Black)

If being an octogenarian is now a roadblock for the most important job in world politics, it's heartening to know that it's no such impediment in the less cutthroat world of rock'n'roll. Steve 'The Colonel' Cropper was born 13 months before Joe Biden, but unlike America's 46th President, this Stax giant's talents are, it seems, undimmed by age.

In his bloom, Cropper's guitar playing graced some of the greatest records ever made, many of which he had a hand in writing, too – *Green Onions*, *Knock On Wood*, *Time Is Tight*, *In The Midnight Hour*, *(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay*... the list goes on. He's worked with everyone from Otis Redding, Carla Thomas and John Lennon to Jeff Beck, BB King, Etta James and Roy Orbison.

He's been nominated for eight Grammys, with two wins, and has been, and continues to be, a bona fide Blues Brother. This is a man who, with his band The Mar-Keys, put out his first single in 1961, and 63 years on, is releasing a brand new album. Retirement, it appears,

is just not in the vocabulary of this twinkly-eyed 82-year-old guitar whizz.

"If your booty is not shaking in the first two bars of this album, you're already dead in a chair," the guitarist says about *Friendlytown*, the new release from the cannily-named Steve Cropper And The Midnight Hour, a band that includes country-rock singer Tim Montana, plus Queen axe hero Brian May and ZZ Top guitarist Billy Gibbons.

A-LIST ASSISTANCE

That his latest album can be so star-packed is testament to Cropper's not inconsiderable clout. Listen to any of *Friendlytown*'s 13 guitar-powered tracks, and there's more spirit and va-va-voom than on records by artists half Steve's age. To *Vintage Rock*'s ears at least, there's more than a little Stax magic on the album, with the record's feelgood vibe recalling the finger-snappin' ethos of Jim Stewart's famed Southern soul label, though the similarity is not something the guitarist can necessarily hear himself. ➔

Steve (second from left) with Stax house band Booker T. & The M.G.'s



In the 1970s, Cropper became a much sought-after session guitarist



➤ “I don’t think that I play the same as I did 50 years ago,” Steve tells us from his home in Nashville, his Memphis twang still strong after all these years. “I played totally different then, so I can’t play like I did when I was a teenager – I’m not trying to, I’m just being me now. So I don’t see the connection to Stax, unless the connection is me.”

Cropper is hoping that *Friendlytown*, and his vast back catalogue, can ride the wave of a resurgence of interest in Stax. Earlier this year, HBO screened *Soulsville U.S.A.*, a four-hour documentary on the label that introduced the world to Otis Redding, Eddie Floyd and Wilson Pickett.

It’s a fascinating, unvarnished look back at one of the most maverick labels of the 60s, but what’s particularly illuminating in the documentary is how slow America was to turn on to the sounds of Southern soul, with one of the most epochal moments in the company’s life when Atlantic (who owned Stax) decided to book Otis Redding to play at the predominantly rock-oriented Monterey International Pop Festival in June 1967.

“We played on the Sunday,” recalls Cropper, who performed at the festival as part of Booker T. & The M.G.’s, backing Redding. “I remember the crowd sitting there with their umbrellas up. Then they said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Otis Redding, Steve Cropper and Booker T. & The M.G.’s,’ and it stopped raining.



All the umbrellas came down and they watched the show – pretty cool!”

Otis Redding remains Stax’s most famous and enduring artist

Monterey was the event that introduced Redding to a mass American audience, yet just six months after that seismic performance, he was dead, killed in a plane crash that also claimed the lives of four members of

“Every time I talk about Otis Redding it’s painful. If I think too much about it, then I get real emotional.”

STEVE CROPPER

The Bar-Kays, the group that had taken over from The M.G.’s as the singer’s backing band. Otis died just three days after recording what would become his defining song, and the first ever posthumous No.1 single in the US, the Steve Cropper co-write (*Sittin’ On*) *The Dock Of The Bay*.

“The last time I saw Otis,” Cropper remembers, “he said, ‘I’ll see you Monday,’ but he didn’t – his plane went down on the Sunday.”

BITTERSWEET SYMPHONY

Before his death, Redding had recorded his vocals, but his co-scribe hadn’t yet laid down his guitar. “He never did hear that, or the seagulls or the waves,” Cropper says, referring to the sound effects added to the final mix. The guitarist was tasked with mixing the song just two days after Redding’s plane went down, a job that he admits, with understatement, was “hard to do”.

The success, then, of (*Sittin’ On*) *The Dock Of The Bay* was bittersweet for Cropper and Stax. Steve was incredibly close to Redding,



co-writing such numbers as *Mr. Pitiful*, *Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song)* and *Direct Me* with the singer.

"It's still very painful," Cropper says about his friend, 57 years after his death. "Every time I talk about Otis it's painful. If I think too much about it, then I get real emotional."

In the 60s, Cropper worked full-time at Stax, initially as the company's A&R man and later as one of their house producers. He co-wrote such jukebox faves as *Knock On Wood* and *634-5789 (Soulsville, U.S.A.)*



After starting as Stax's A&R man, Cropper soon became one of the label's most prized producers

with Eddie Floyd, *In The Midnight Hour* with Wilson Pickett and *Green Onions*, as part of Booker T. & The M.G.'s.

SOUL REVOLUTION

Cropper was there at Stax from the very beginning. With his family, he'd moved to Memphis when he was nine and joined the newly christened Stax (they were originally named Satellite Records) in 1961, aged just 20, replacing Chips Moman as Jim Stewart's assistant and A&R man. Stax was a revolutionary label, a truly multicultural operation, employing Blacks and whites at a time when the South was viciously segregated. And as part of the mixed-race Booker T. & The M.G.'s, who not only released their own music but backed many of the label's solo artists, Cropper was right at the centre of the company's high-octane, blues-powered sound.

"History says Memphis was the most segregated place in the South," he says, remembering Tennessee's second-most populous city in the 1950s and 60s, "but I don't think so. ➔

The Booker prize

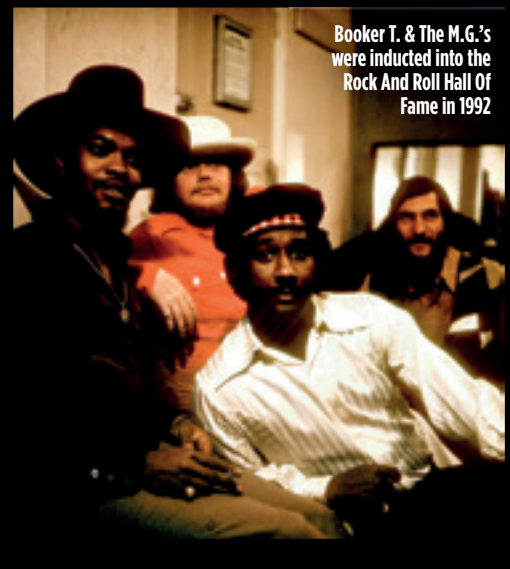
After The Mar-Keys, Cropper joined Booker T. & The M.G.'s, formed in 1962 alongside 17-year-old keyboardist Booker T. Jones. The outfit would become not only Stax's in-house band, backing such singers as Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Bill Withers, Sam & Dave, Carla Thomas and Albert King, but also become recording artists in their own right.

The group was emblematic of Stax's multiracial ethos, featuring both Black (Booker T. Jones, Al Jackson Jr) and white (Cropper, Donald 'Duck' Dunn) members. The band broke through with the instrumental *Green Onions*, a No.3 smash hit in the US. The accompanying

long-player, also titled *Green Onions*, peaked at No.33 on the Billboard chart.

The M.G.'s would release many LPs throughout the 60s, including *Soul Dressing* (1965), *Hip Hug-Her* (1967) and *The Booker T. Set* (1969). *Green Onions* would remain their biggest-selling 45, though they'd enjoy Top 10 hits with *Hang 'Em High* (1968) and *Time Is Tight* (1969).

Cropper would leave the band after 1971's *Melting Pot*, returning for 1977's *Universal Language*. Since then, they've only released one album, 1994's *That's The Way It Should Be*, and Booker T. Jones now tours as a solo artist, putting out his most recent LP, *Note By Note*, in 2019.



Booker T. & The M.G.'s were inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 1992



The Stax Records label epitomised Southern soul in the 1960s

Stax appeal

Stax is as synonymous with Steve Cropper's name as much as Cropper's name is tied to Stax's. The label, based in Memphis, was formed out of the ashes of Satellite Records, which Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton had started in 1957, initially selling country and western LPs. But as their output slowly evolved to soul, their name changed to Stax (a conflation of the surnames of its sibling owners).

Cropper joined Stax when he was just 20, acting as Stewart's assistant. He would soon rise up the ranks, becoming one of the label's most valued writers, producers and session guitarists.

Under the direction of Stax executive and later president Al Bell, the label would come to define Southern soul in the 1960s, making stars of such artists as Otis Redding and Rufus and Carla Thomas.

Often characterised as the grittier alternative to the honeyed, more commercial sounds of Motown, the truth is that they were very different operations. Motown boss Berry Gordy kept a tight rein on his label's output, overseeing every aspect of the company's recordings. Jim Stewart and Al Bell, on the other hand, gave their artists complete freedom in the studio. Its sound was organic and raw, compared to the smooth, candied soul emanating from Motor City.

Though Cropper left Stax in 1970, the label continued to enjoy success in the first half of the new decade, with newer stars including Isaac Hayes. Sadly, due to a number of factors, the label went bankrupt in December 1975.

► "We all just got along together, and that happened at Stax, too. We were just musicians playing with each other. I didn't look at Booker T or Al [Bell, co-owner] as having any colour."

Stax is now considered one of the defining labels of the 60s and many of its songs, from Sam & Dave's *Soul Man* (which includes the line "Play it, Steve!"), and yes, that is directed at Steve Cropper), Johnnie Taylor's *Who's Making Love* and Albert King's *Born Under A Bad Sign* are classics of the Southern soul genre, yet in the 1970s that sound was out of favour, confined only to soul-focused record stations and still-loyal devotees. What helped revive it commercially had a lot to do with two white comedians who'd grown up on the blues and soul-fuelled 45s coming out of Memphis in the 60s.

BROTHERLY LOVE

The Blues Brothers were formed in 1978 by Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi – and Steve Cropper was at the heart of the band from the start, alongside his old M.G.'s mucker Donald 'Duck' Dunn,



1980's *Blues Brothers* film, directed by John Landis, is one of the great cult movies

The Blues Brothers' *Briefcase Full Of Blues* album has sold over two million copies in the US, going double platinum

plus Matt Murphy, Lou Marini, Tom Malone and Alan Rubin. As the story goes, Belushi was hanging out with Otis Redding's former manager Phil Walden and told him about his and Aykroyd's plans to form a band. "You need to get Steve Cropper to play guitar," replied Walden.

Cropper would perform on The Blues Brothers' cover-laden debut album *Briefcase Full Of Blues*. The success of that LP (it hit No.1 on the Billboard album chart) led to a movie, also guesting Steve, in 1980.

"John was a great guy," Cropper says of Belushi, whose reputation as a hellraiser is legendary. Cropper has spoken before

about his friendship with the late comedian, who died from a drug overdose in 1982, and it's hard to think of a more jarring pairing, the almost supernaturally laid-back Cropper with this one-man hurricane. But Cropper's experience of Belushi goes beyond the lurid tabloid headlines.

"What I remember him most for is that he never let a fan go without an autograph," he says. "If they wanted an autograph, they got one. If there was one person or 25 people, he'd stay there and sign 25 autographs. He had a giving heart."

The Blues Brothers movie was written by Dan Aykroyd and directed by John Landis and ended up grossing over \$115 million, propelling its Cropper-featuring soundtrack to No.13 on the US chart.

"Some people, some friends of mine had never seen a film –

they didn't go to the theatre, but when it came on TV they saw it. They said every time they watched it, they saw something different. I said you know why? It's your focus which is different. It was shot with six cameras. People don't know that. Most movies are shot





Above: Steve Cropper with *Friendlytown* collaborators Jon Tiven (back) and ZZ Top guitarist Billy Gibbons

make you or break you.’ And the next take is always great! Some artists like to clown around.”

Age may not have withered Cropper’s love of the graft, but it seems as if guitar playing has now taken more of a backseat to producing and writing.

“I could have made a living just playing guitar but not anymore,” he says, with a sigh. “I only use it as a tool, not as a musical instrument. As I’ve gotten older I’ve fallen a couple of times, I can’t play it as well.”

But still, for all those hungry for some Steve Cropper guitar wizardry, there is plenty to savour on *Friendlytown*, even if he’s now sharing the spotlight with two other legends of the axe (“it’s guitar heaven,” he says of the new record). But if Cropper believes his playing isn’t what it was, the same can’t be said for his ear for a melody, and *Friendlytown* is full of what he calls “radio hooks”.

This latest album may be more straight-ahead blues rock, as opposed to the bristly soul on which he made his name, but there’s a clear throughline from Stax to this record. Sixty-three years on from his first hit, Steve Cropper’s still here and still making great music. As Sam & Dave sang back in 1967, “Play it, Steve!”... *

• *Friendlytown* is out now via the Mascot Label Group and reviewed on page 84

with one camera. God knows what that might have cost. And it did over 600 miles of film. Think about that – 600 miles, that’s halfway to L.A. from Nashville. That’s crazy!”

The Blues Brothers film was 44 years ago now, yet Cropper still performs with the band, alongside Lou Marini, as the only original members. John Belushi is sadly long gone, as are many of Cropper’s most illustrious collaborators. After Stax, Steve clocked up an impressive array of songwriting and producing credits, working alongside artists as diverse as Eric Clapton, Billy Burnette, Art Garfunkel, John Lennon (on his *Rock’n’Roll* album), Dolly Parton and Rod Stewart. “But not Tina Turner,” he says ruefully. “I would have loved to have worked with her.”

KEEP ON RUNNIN’

At aged 82, Steve could easily put his feet up, but retirement, or even semi-retirement, doesn’t appear to appeal.

“I love being in the studio,” Cropper smiles. “Just anything to do with the studio – I love mixing, I love producing, I love being behind the glass, looking at the artists.”



When once asked what he thought of Steve Cropper’s guitar playing, Keith Richards responded, “Perfect, man.”

And what’s the secret to getting a great performance from someone that you’re working with?

“Sometimes I walk out and I say one thing,” he reveals. “I say, ‘Just remember this, there are a million ears out there listening to every word you sing. It can either

“I love being in the studio. Just anything to do with it, the mixing and producing. I love being behind the glass, looking at the artists.”

STEVE CROPPER