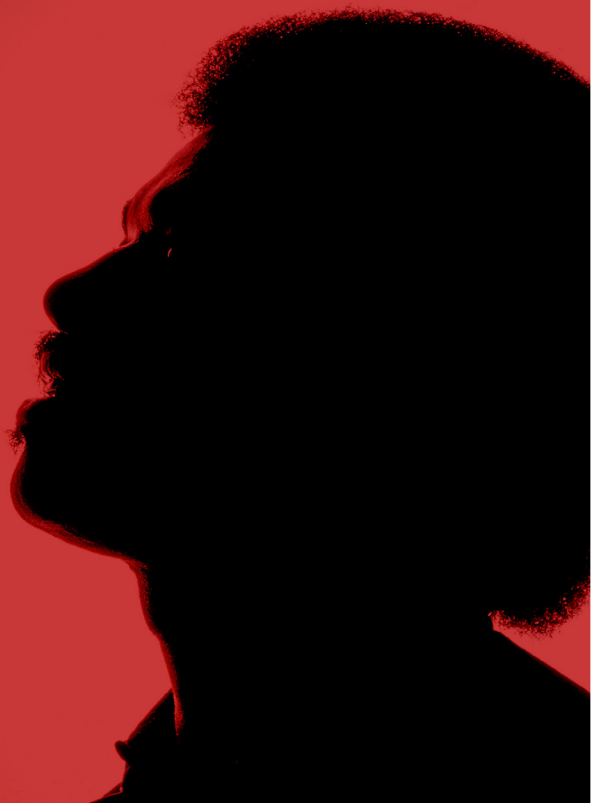




The Soul Years





It's a hot summer afternoon in 1969 and Willie Mitchell is itching all over. He and his engineer Bill Cantrell have spent the day suspended high above the floor at Memphis' Royal Studio packing the building's vaulted ceiling with rolls of yellow fiberglass insulation, its remnants getting into their lungs and irritating their skin.

Perched precariously in the rafters, Mitchell wipes his brow and looks down over his new domain, a studio and record label that have effectively fallen into his lap. Over the next few years, he will seize the opportunity to transform Hi Records into an R&B juggernaut, and alter the sound of soul in the process.

Born in Ashland, Mississippi, in 1928, Mitchell began his career as a trumpeter, leading a touring band while he was still in his teens. After serving a hitch in the Army, Mitchell became one of the Bluff City's hottest acts in the mid-1950s, electrifying audiences – which often included one of his biggest fans, Elvis Presley – at nightspots like Danny's and the Manhattan Club. After a period recording and producing for Memphis' Home of the Blues label, Mitchell hooked up with Hi Records.

The label had been founded in 1957 by a group of partners that included former Sun rockabilly artist, Ray Harris, and two other Sun alumni, Bill Cantrell and Quinton Claunch. Local record store-owner and jukebox merchant Joe Cuoghi provided further financial backing. Hi was headquartered out of an old movie theater on South Lauderdale, built in 1915, that had been turned into a recording studio.

The company would become identified with hit instrumental records from the likes of Elvis' former bassist Bill Black's Combo and saxophonist Ace Cannon. Mitchell's band would back Black and Cannon, and he began turning out a series of soulful singles and LPs of his own, starting with 1962's "The Crawl."

But Mitchell hated the dry, flat sound of Hi's records. He wanted to make changes to the studio and run the board himself. With Hi co-owner Joe Cuoghi's backing, Mitchell eventually bought out the other partners and began producing and engineering.

After Hi guitarist Reggie Young and pianist Bobby Emmons left to launch American Sound Studio with producer Chips Moman, Mitchell would begin to form a new house band, featuring the three Hodges Brothers (guitarist Mabon "Teenie" Hodges, bassist Leroy "Flick" Hodges and organist Charles Hodges). On albums like 1965's *It's Dance Time with Willie Mitchell* and *Ooh Baby, You Turn Me On*, Mitchell would foreshadow the tight grooving sound that would become his group's hallmark.

Despite the odd vocal hit – by the likes of Jumpin' Gene Simmons or Tommy Tucker – Hi's bread and butter remained instrumentals. Though Cuoghi was hesitant to abandon the formula, Mitchell convinced him that the future lay in finding and recording singers. He began cutting sides with a series of fledgling artists, including his longtime road band vocalist Don Bryant, whose early efforts like "She's Looking Good," remain overlooked classics.

But none of Mitchell's early protégés caught on quite like singer Ann Peebles. It was his fellow Memphis band-leader Gene "Bowlegs" Miller who tipped him to Peebles, a gospel ingénue from St.



Louis. "I was singing religious music with my father and his brothers. I had never done secular music before really," recalls Peebles, a slinky figure with a powerhouse voice who earned the nickname "99 Lbs of Soul."

Peebles was paired with fellow singer Bryant (the couple would begin dating and eventually marry) and they began writing songs together. Mitchell would produce a couple of small hits for Peebles, "Walk Away" and "Give Me Some Credit," in 1969, while coaching her performances in the studio over the next few years as she built towards stardom.

It took a couple of bad car accidents while on tour to convince Mitchell, but eventually he decided to retire from the road and focus on making records. A few months later Joe Cuoghi died suddenly from a heart attack. In his will,

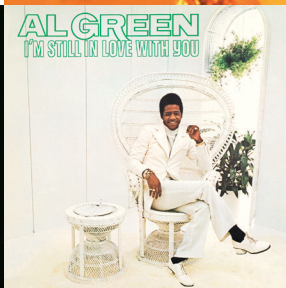
Cuoghi left Mitchell his shares in Hi Records, and instructions that he be made the company vice-president, producer and creative head. (Cuoghi's attorney John Novarece and several others retained shares in the label).

Finally and fully in control, Mitchell began making the last critical adjustments to the studio. He had a custom eight track Ampex tape machine – actually a pair of four-tracks – built in order to capture a specific kind of warmth and low end. Mitchell wanted his records to be more intimate, yet still funky. He described the sound he was searching for as having "sunshine on the top and thunder on the bottom."

Much of the magic of Mitchell's recordings came from the room at Royal. He noted that the studio – the weird slope of its floor, the way the ceiling opened up – gave its sound a mystical quality. He would say the room was shaped like a horn, with the notes rolling out exquisitely into the air.

As the 1970s dawned, Mitchell was on the precipice of something extraordinary. The set up at Royal had been perfected sonically; the band was slowly being nurtured into the ideal instrument of his expression. All that was missing was a transcendent artist to complete his vision.

For years, Willie Mitchell told anyone who would listen that the one thing Hi Records needed was a young, charismatic male singer with the potential for stardom. If he could just find this kind of raw talent, he'd do the rest. In 1969, fate would intervene in the form of a destitute 22-year-old named Albert Greene, who Mitchell chanced upon while performing in Midland, Texas.



Green – as he would later change the spelling – was born in Arkansas in 1946, the sixth of 10 children, raised in a devoutly religious family. He relocated to Michigan as a child and began singing gospel with his brothers. After his strict Baptist father kicked him out of the house for listening to Jackie Wilson records, he launched his career with an album for the tiny Hot Line Label in 1967, called *Back Up Train*. His first single had been a small breakout, making it to the lower rungs of the Top 40, but Green had fallen on hard times since then. Stranded in Texas, he asked if he could sit in and earn a few dollars performing with Mitchell that night. “He started singing and I heard that voice and I said, “Ah-ha! Look what I found here,” remembered Mitchell.

Mitchell told Green he should come with him, that if he gave him 18 months he could make him a star. Green demurred. Then, as Mitchell’s bus was pulling off, Green came chasing after it and hopped on board. He spent the whole ride from Midland to Memphis sitting in silence staring out the window. When they finally arrived in Memphis, Green told Mitchell he needed need \$1500, that he had to go back to Michigan and pay some bills, but that he’d come back soon.

Mitchell gave him the money but didn’t hear a word from Green for months, and figured he’d been conned. He’d all but forgotten about the singer when Green showed up early one morning at Mitchell’s East Memphis home. Mitchell was in the process of renovating his house and didn’t recognize him at first; he thought Green was one of the members of the

construction crew and told him to go out back with the others. “But Willie,” he pleaded, “It’s me. . . .I’m Al Green.”

It would take a little more than the 18 months Mitchell had promised for Green to evolve into stardom. The first two albums they recorded, the covers-heavy efforts *Al Green is Blues* and *Al Green Gets Next to You*, were minor masterpieces in their own way, offering inventive R&B interpretations of songs by the Beatles and Doors, among others. The latter LP produced a top 10 hit in the Green-penned “Tired of Being Alone” and gritty reworking of the Temptations’ “Can’t Get Next To You.” But the whole time Mitchell was pushing Green to soften his singing and find his natural falsetto.

“He’d take instruction, but he was singing too hard at that stage,” noted the producer. “He was still singin’ hard on ‘Can’t Get Next To You’ and ‘Tired Of Being Alone,’ but with ‘Let’s Stay Together’ we went into another bag.”

Improbably, Mitchell had drawn musical inspiration for the jazzy “Let’s Stay Together” while watching the compone country music TV show *Hee-Haw*. There was something in the passing notes that banjo picker Roy Clark was playing that clicked in Mitchell’s mind, and he quickly ran to a piano to work out the song’s brilliant anticipatory intro.

When they cut the track at Royal, Mitchell brought in a group of neighborhood winos who used to linger outside the studio to serve as Green’s audience. So it was that Al Green sang “Let’s Stay Together,” one of the great love songs of all time, to a group of sots; if you listen closely

to the track you can hear the clink of bottles and the rustling of bodies in the background.

Released at the end of 1971, "Let's Stay Together" soon shot up the charts, becoming a No. 1 hit and the biggest pop song of the following year. The accompanying album would also land atop the R&B charts. "Once Al Green got on a hook it was hard to beat him. We had six years of nothing but gold and platinum records together after that," said Mitchell.

The next five years would yield arguably the greatest run in the annals of R&B. With Mitchell producing and helping co-write many of Green's hits ("Call Me [Come Back Home]", and "I'm Still In Love With You"), and guitarist Teenie Hodges collaborating on several others ("Love and Happiness," "Here I Am (Come and Take Me)"), Hi would not only come to dominate, but also redefine, soul music in the early '70s.

In an era and a region that produced some of the hottest house bands of all time – the American Boys, the Muscle Shoals Swampers, the Dixie Flyers – the Hi Rhythm Section stood out as a singular-sounding unit.

The core members of the group, the Hodges Brothers, were country kids, raised in rural Germantown, just outside Memphis. They'd all come up apprenticing in their piano-playing father's blues band as kids. Charles Hodges struck out professionally with soul singer O.V. Wright's outfit, while guitarist Mabon "Teenie" Hodges and bassist Leroy "Flick" Hodges formed the R&B band The Impalas, with Willie Mitchell's



AL GREEN

stepson Archie “Hubby” Turner.

One by one the Hodges Brothers would join Mitchell’s traveling group, and become part of his extended family, living with him and soaking up his wisdom and musical technique. “We learned to play with Willie and with each other, so we got real tight...and kept getting tighter and tighter,” said Teenie.

After they committed to the studio fulltime in 1970, the group was bolstered by the return of pianist Archie Turner – back from a stint serving in the military – and two powerhouse drummers in Booker T. & the MGs trapsman Al Jackson Jr., and former Stax session hand Howard Grimes. Depending on the artist and the song, Mitchell might tap one or the other, or both, to play – with Grimes providing a funkier feel (as well the congas and other percussion touches) on the tracks.

With Mitchell’s brother James arranging strings and brass – using potent five-horn package that included himself Ed Logan and Andrew Love on sax, Wayne Jackson on trumpet, and Jack Hale on trombone – the musical blueprint was complete.

Mitchell’s final touch was putting together a troupe of backing vocalists known as Rhodes Chalmers & Rhodes. Charlie Chalmers was a rock ‘n’ roll sax man and arranger, part of Hi from its early days. Meanwhile, the soulful female voices that graced Hi’s R&B hits were, somewhat improbably, provided by a pair of country singers, the Rhodes Sisters. Sandra and Donna Rhodes had come up in a family band – their parents Dusty & Dot had been signed to Sun Records in the ‘50s – singing close, genetic harmonies. “Most people don’t know they were white, and wouldn’t believe you if you told them that,” chuckled Flick Hodges.

In their melding of jazz chords and R&B beats,



C.V. WRIGHT



OTIS CLAY



sophisticated strings and melodic brass arrangements, Mitchell and his crew of players changed the sound and feel of the music in the Me Decade, moving it from the dance floor to the bedroom. They would, as author Peter Guralnick noted, "take soul music...to quiet, luxuriantly appointed places it had never been before."

Flush with success by 1972, Hi became a hive of activity. The erstwhile instrumental rock label had been transformed into a fully fledged soul music hit factory, as artists from the north – including Chicagoans Syl Johnson and Otis Clay – decamped to Memphis to record at Royal. Staff songwriters like Don Bryant and Earl Randle ("I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down") would spend their days working up material for the company's various charges.

It was this hothouse atmosphere that produced Ann Peebles signature track and biggest hit "I Can't Stand the Rain." "It started out, not as a joke, but just as an offhand comment," recalled Peebles. She, Bryant and DJ/songwriter pal Bernard "Mr. B" Miller were preparing head out to a blues show one evening when it began storming. "It was pouring outside and I just said 'I can't stand this rain,' said Peebles. "And I think it was Don who perked up: 'That's a good title.' We sat down and began to write. We started writing and forgot all about the rain."

Released in the fall of 1973, the steamy number – with its dramatic raindrop intro, provided by an electronic timbale – would provide the title track and foundation for Peebles' breakthrough LP. Aided by Mitchell's most sinuous, seductive sonic touches and some of Hi Rhythm's most evocative performances, the record would mark the apotheosis of the label's sound.



"During that period, Hi was like a big family. Everybody was putting in their ingredients, and things began to really happen," said Peebles. "Rain" would become a top ten R&B hit, a Top 40 pop song, earn her a Grammy nomination, the admiration of fellow artists like John Lennon and David Bowie, and send her touring across the world.

The next few years would be triumphant ones for the label: Peebles had gone gold, Syl Johnson ("We Did It"; "Back for a Taste of Your Love"; "Take Me to the River") and Otis Clay ("Trying To Live My Life Without You"; "If I Could Reach Out") would find the charts consistently.

The era also yielded some of the label's deepest soul sides, courtesy of O.V. Wright. Born in rural Lenox, Tenn., just outside Memphis, Overton Vertis Wright was a gospel singing prodigy. Wowing church audiences at the age of 6 and appearing on WDIA as a teen, he went onto national success with groups like the Sunset Travelers. In 1964, with the help of local songwriter and manager Roosevelt Jamison, Wright entered the R&B field in spectacular fashion. The Jamison-penned, Wright-sung classic "That's How Strong My Love Is" (later covered by Redding and many others) marked the first hit for Quinton Claunch's local Goldwax label and launched Wright's secular career.

But Wright would have his greatest success for the Backbeat label in the late-'60s, after starting an association with Mitchell and Hi Rhythm.



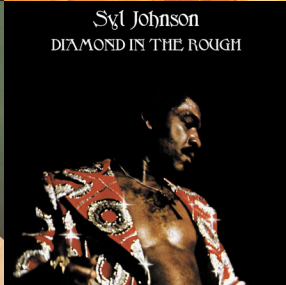
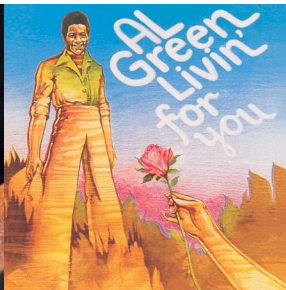
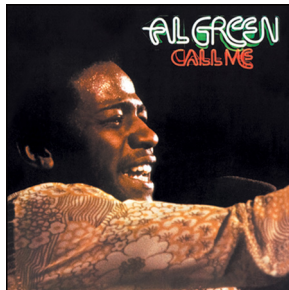
Beginning with "Eight Men, Four Women" and continuing with classics like "A Nickel and a Nail," "Ace of Spades" and "I'd Rather Be Blind, Crippled and Crazy." Despite continuing to turn out one remarkable single after another crossover success eluded Wright.

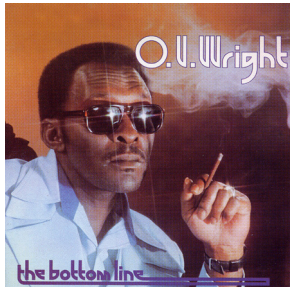
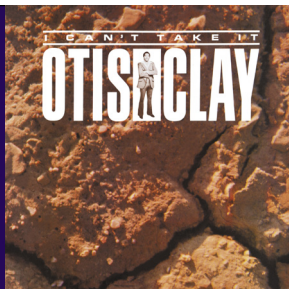
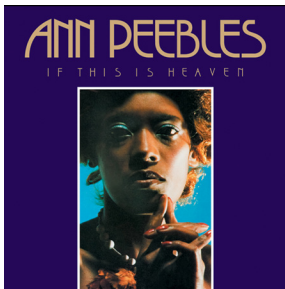
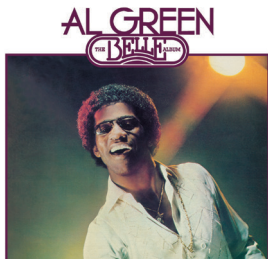
By the mid-'70s, personal and substance abuse issues began to cause Wright serious problems. He was eventually sent to federal prison in Atlanta on drug charges. Upon his release, he returned to music and signed formally with Mitchell's Hi label, and recorded arguably his greatest works with *The Bottom Line* and *We're Still Together* LPs.

And yet, as good as Hi's overall roster was during this period, Al Green surpassed them all, reaching a creative and commercial peak with 1974's Grammy-nominated *Call Me* – his

ANN PEEBLES







massive musical stardom and status as a R&B sex symbol fully realized. Such success, however, would not last forever.

While Mitchell and the musicians at Hi continued to cut a wealth of hit-worthy material on various acts into the mid-'70s, disco was gaining a foothold in the popular consciousness, reshaping the public acceptance of R&B. This would affect Al Green profoundly, as his post-*Call*

Me releases failed to reach similar chart heights.

On a personal level, despite his fame and fortune, Green was deeply unhappy. He began drifting away from music and towards religion. In 1976, Green bought his own church, becoming pastor of the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Memphis. The newly ordained reverend would record a final LP, *Have a Good Time*, with Mitchell and Hi Rhythm that year.

Green would depart Royal for his own newly built American Music studio, where he would self-

produce the spiritually resonant masterpiece *The Belle Album* and his Hi label swansong *Truth N' Time*, before abandoning secular music entirely for a decade.

In 1977, Hi was sold to Cream, a company owned by Arkansas-bred, Los Angeles-based music mogul Alvin Bennett. Mitchell stayed on as house producer for the Cream-controlled Hi and tried to make it work for several years.

With Green having surrendered his career to the Lord, Ann Peebles soon followed into a period of retirement in 1979, and the label's attempts to re-launch with a slate of releases from new artists and old veterans – including Jean Plum and Rufus Thomas – failed to click with the public.

While the golden era of Hi had come to an end by the early '80s, the sense of family, community and creativity that Willie Mitchell imbued into the label would remain a powerful force.

Four decades later, the mystical music made on the sloping studio floor of Royal remains as resonant as ever.

"You know, the thing was that we fed off of each other's minds and spirits," said Charles Hodges. "We lived and breathed each other and tried to play that way, sharing the pain, the sorrow, the joy, and all those emotions, in the music. When you listen to a Hi record, that's what you're hearing."

– *Bob Mebr* MEMPHIS 2014



ALL SONGS PRODUCED BY WILLIE MITCHELL
AT ROYAL STUDIOS, 1320 S. LAUDERDALE, MEMPHIS, TN
ART DIRECTION + DESIGN: KERRI MAHONEY
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Hi

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The Soul Years

Hi: The Soul Years
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DISC 1 1965-1974

- | | | | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Introduction | Willie Mitchell | 14. Precious Precious | Otis Clay |
| 2. Buster Brown | Willie Mitchell | 15. Love And Happiness | Al Green |
| 3. Ooh Baby, You Turn Me On | Willie Mitchell | 16. I'm Glad You're Mine | Al Green |
| 4. Soul Finger | Willie Mitchell | 17. Back for a Taste of Your Love | Syl Johnson |
| 5. She's Looking Good | Don Bryant | 18. Anyway The Wind Blows | Syl Johnson |
| 6. Funky Broadway | Don Bryant | 19. Call Me (Come Back Home) | Al Green |
| 7. I Can't Get Next To You | Al Green | 20. Stand Up | Al Green |
| 8. Right Now, Right Now | Al Green | 21. Let's Get Married | Al Green |
| 9. Part Time Love | Ann Peebles | 22. Livin' For You | Al Green |
| 10. I Still Love You | Ann Peebles | 23. I Can't Stand The Rain | Ann Peebles |
| 11. Let's Stay Together | Al Green | 24. Run Run Run | Ann Peebles |
| 12. So You're Leaving | Al Green | 25. Take Me To The River | Al Green |
| 13. Trying To Live My Life Without You | Otis Clay | 26. Sha-La-La (Make Me Happy) | |

DISC 2 1974-1979

- | | | | |
|--|-------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. Could I Be Falling In Love | Syl Johnson | 12. All N All | Al Green |
| 2. I Want to take You Home (To See Mama) | Syl Johnson | 13. A Good Day For Lovin' | Ann Peebles |
| 3. Love Ritual (Bwana Mix) | Al Green | 14. You Gonna Make Me Cry | Ann Peebles |
| 4. So Good To Be Here | Al Green | 15. Pussy Footing Around | Otis Clay |
| 5. Superstar | Hi Rhythm | 16. Home Is Where The Heart Is | Otis Clay |
| 6. Since You've Been Gone | Hi Rhythm | 17. The Bottom Line | O.V. Wright |
| 7. I Tried To Tell Myself | Al Green | 18. A Long Road | O.V. Wright |
| 8. Have A Good Time | Al Green | 19. Old Man With Young Ideas | Ann Peebles |
| 9. Into Something (Can't Shake Loose) | O.V. Wright | 20. The Handwriting Is On The Wall | Ann Peebles |
| 10. Precious Precious | O.V. Wright | 21. We're Still Together | O.V. Wright |
| 11. Belle | Al Green | 22. It's Cold Without Your Love | O.V. Wright |

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The Soul Years

Disc 1

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Disc 2

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