

# R.I.P. Jim Stewart



Jim Stewart, co-founder of Stax Records died on December 5th at age 92. In 1957 Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton started Satellite Records with releases of country, pop and rockabilly music recordings. But once Stewart heard Ray Charles's "What I'd Say" he changed his path. Their first R&B release was "Fool In Love" by The Velvtones on the Satellite label but by 1961 they changed the name to Stax because Satellite was already owned by someone else. Stewart met Rufus Thomas who was working as a DJ at the time while he was promoting "Fool In Love." Thomas was also an artist and he and his daughter Carla recorded "Cause I Love You" which was a regional hit for the Memphis-based label. Stax began to assert itself on a national level in 1962 with the success of Booker T. & the M.G.'s instrumental hit "Green Onions." The company

would pioneer southern soul music and Otis Redding was its biggest star when he signed to the Volt subsidiary in 1962 recording for them until his death in 1967. Legends like Wilson Pickett and Sam & Dave recorded at Stax and had their records distributed by Atlantic. Stax's impact hit its highest point by the mid to late '60s with music from The Bar-Kays, Eddie Floyd, William Bell, Albert King and The Mad Lads.

Johnnie Taylor was the artist to usher in the label's independent era after their distribution deal with Atlantic ended in 1968. His "Who's Making Love" was their best-selling single at that point. They also added gospel group The Staple Singers to their roster. Isaac Hayes, who had been a writer and producer for Stax, became a funk pioneer with the release of the *Shaft* soundtrack in 1971. The next year Stax presented the Wattstax concert in California which was hosted by the Reverend Jesse Jackson. The gathering was dubbed "The Black Woodstock" and a concert film of the event made it into theaters in 1973. Stax went into bankruptcy in 1975 but was relaunched in 1978. New artists Rick Dees and Fat Larry's Band were signed but the label never reached similar heights of the past. They became a reissue label in the '80s and soon after Jim Stewart retired. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2002. In 2018, he made a rare appearance and donated his fiddle to the Stax Museum which is currently celebrating its 20th anniversary.

Stax went through another revival in 2007 with the release of a 50th-anniversary compilation. Ben Harper, Angie Stone, Lalah Hathaway and the late Teena Marie all released music on the relaunched Stax.