

R.I.P. Thom Bell



Thom Bell, one of the creators of the Philadelphia soul sound, died last Thursday at age 79. Bell's earliest successes as an arranger go back to his days of working with the local group The Delfonics and producing their hits "La-La (Means I Love You)" and "Didn't I (Blow Your Mind This Time)?" He later joined Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's record company and arranged music for The O'Jays, Archie Bell & The Drells, Dusty Springfield, Jerry Butler and Jerry Bell. The three of them also formed the Mighty Three Music publishing company. Bell's production genius went on to produce The Stylistics, The Spinners, James Ingram, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Dionne Warwick, Deneice Williams and The Temptations. Bell had formed a songwriting partnership with Linda Creed that was responsible for the hits with The Spinners and The Stylistics.

The sound Bell developed with Gamble and Huff had joyful orchestration, rumbling bass lines and what Fred Wesley described as "putting the bow tie on funk." Bell's training as a classical pianist gave him the vision to add violin and the oboe to his arrangements which was unheard of in R&B. His admitted influence from Burt Bacharach was so strong that he was called the Black Burt Bacharach. The songs he produced were the backbone of '70s soul and his work with Williams in the '80s was on two of her biggest songs; "Silly" and "It's

Gonna Take A Miracle.” Bell retired from music in the ’90s around the same time Mighty Three Music was sold to Warner Chappell Music. He was inducted into the Songwriters Hall Of Fame in 2006, the Musicians Hall Of Fame and Museum in 2016 and in 2017 received a Grammy Trustees Award.

Watch: Donny Hathaway & Lalah Hathaway- This Christmas

Watch Dr. Lalah Hathaway reinvigorate her father’s “This Christmas” as a duet. Donny Hathaway’s iconic holiday song had an unreleased recording and Lalah’s voice blends with it as if they were together in real time. Her smoky resonance is a welcomed harmonious layer to Donny Hathaway’s upbeat soul celebration. Hathaway co-directed the video with Phil Beaudreau which is similar to Natalie Cole’s “Unforgettable” duet with her late father Nat King Cole which was done years before she passed in 2015.

She spoke to *Vibe* this year about doing an entire album of posthumous duets with her father and she said that it was something she was working on for a future release. “This Christmas” is the first song to give an example of what father and daughter sound like together. She previously recorded “This Christmas” in 2017 as a Spotify exclusive and that was also the year of her last solo album *Honestly*. The singer went to Twitter to let everyone know that she, her sister Kenya, her sister’s two daughters and their mother are all on the duet recording of “This Christmas.”

Hil St. Soul Wants Christmas With You



Hil St. Soul imagines a romantic connection during the holiday season on “Christmas With You.” The U.K.-based chanteuse has released her first-ever Christmas song. She shared the story about her debut holiday tribute in a statement,

“After completing my current album ‘Back In Love,’ myself and my producer Lorenzo Johnson started a conversation about

doing a Christmas song. It's my first time ever recording a Christmas song, so I was up for it! Essentially this song is about a long-distance relationship and the longing to spend Christmas with that special person or people in your life. Christmas for me is a time of celebration, a time where family members get a chance to get together. It's a time for gathering and spending quality time with loved ones, and in some cases a time for breaking bread. A lot of couples are away for work prior to the holidays but come back home for Christmas and it's time for them to reunite."

The sultry plea for togetherness is a nod to couples but at Christmas, it becomes a universal theme for anyone feeling alone. "Christmas With You" is more new music from the singer who just released her critically acclaimed *Back In Love* album. Hil St. Soul just entered the pantheon of singers with original Xmas music and it is a song that will be heard year-round.

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.