

## Stax Museum of Memphis: Home of American Soul

Amid the racial and economic tensions of 1957, a humble recording studio was launched in a garage in South Memphis. The music made there soon outgrew its small home and was relocated to the neighborhood's 1930s Capitol Theater. This was the birthplace of Stax Records, an energetic center for a musical fusion of blues, country, rock and gospel. The Stax splendor lasted until 1975 when the business went bankrupt, but the spirit of the music never died. Leveled in 1989 for an unrealized project, the historic building was reborn in 2003 when a 17,000-square-foot brick reconstruction of the Capitol Theater was dedicated by a diverse group of civic leaders. Twenty-eight years after its disappearance, Stax was back.

The new building, anchoring a neighborhood redevelopment area known as Soulsville, USA, is situated on the original site facing McLemore Avenue at the corner of College Street and features the classic neon theater marquee, a tribute to an era of music symbolized by spinning 45s. In the parking lot, the music beckons visitors to participate in soul music's vibrant culture through strategic placement of speakers installed on the building's exterior. Instead of being treated to visual stimuli before reaching the entrance, Stax guests are invited inside by the rich sounds of soul. Although the structure is unassuming from the outside, its double doors open onto a musical phenomenon that continues to inspire American music and culture despite its short peak in the 60s and 70s.

The interior, with its exposed infrastructure of light tracks and ductwork and detailed tilework in black, red and white, takes the visitor on a winding, narrow path into an experience of soul. This journey begins with an electrifying 10-minute film that recounts the facts of Stax and the social context of 1950s, 60s and 70s America. The small theater is illuminated with vertical, multi-colored, fluorescent tube lighting and

seats about 50 people. The straightforward visual elements of the room and the final image from the film establish a mood appropriate for the story and encourage the audience to move further along the path and deeper into the history of soul.

The next segment of the journey presents the gospel roots of soul music. Near the entrance to this section, a didactic panel proclaims that "soul music was born in the church and in the cotton fields;" the exhibit emphasizes this fact by leading the visitor into the reconstructed Hoopers Chapel AME, originally built in Duncan, Mississippi, in 1906. The one-room church building is a weathered, clapboard structure with original rough-hewn furnishings, including faded church pews, a baptismal bowl, a full-color, hand-held fan printed with the likeness of Mahalia Jackson and a framed print of Leonardo DaVinci's "The Last Supper." Inside the church, recordings of gospel music create a feast for the ears.

Additionally, six informational kiosks sit in a narrow corridor outside the small building, facing the church like congregation members telling visitors about the role of spirituals in soul music. Hoopers Chapel offers a glimpse into the background of soul and also presents an intriguing example of imbedded architecture. The experience of standing in that church within the larger Stax Museum reminds the visitor that gospel, like blues, rock and country music, is a tributary of the river of soul.

As Ray Charles declares about the musical tributaries to the soul river, "it's all intertwined some kinda way," and the next segments of the display focus upon this weave of musical genres. In a small rotunda of recessed glass cases featuring shiny 45s and singers' sparkling costumes, there is no hierarchy, only a recognition of the many artists who were part of the Stax family. The rotunda's wood flooring is composed of alternating triangles and varying bands of color

in browns and tans, which radiate from the walls into the center where they all join. Although visually spare, this floor and the rotunda itself are powerful symbols of the contributions the black vocal group tradition, country, white pop, jazz, and Memphis music clubs made to soul.

Just past the rotunda lie simple enclosed cases featuring Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, the founders of the business side of Stax Records. Unlike some other museums of its kind, the Stax does not hesitate to display the particulars of the financial and legal proceedings that established the recording studio, so visitors can read Axton's second home mortgage of \$4,000 to fund the move into the Capitol Theater as well as other founding documents. Although Stewart and Axton, whose last names form the name of the music business they started, were important figures in Stax, the collection of artifacts related to their roles is modest and continually points to their place in the larger Stax community. This equality is featured later in a large wall panel listing the names of Stax artists in alphabetical order. The museum repeatedly and implicitly states that music is best when it is born in a community of people, black and white, working together.

As suggested by the rotunda and the rounded display cases, the circle is an apt shape to symbolize the work and the presence of Stax. This basic shape is featured prominently on several occasions in the museum. One of the most notable occurs when the path through the Stax opens onto a pulsing wooden dance floor. The floor, lit with blinking, multi-colored circular lights, entices the visitor to dance along with the projected recording of "Soul Train," with its hip young dancers swaying to soul. A second prominent exhibit, which features Isaac Hayes' 1972 peacock blue Cadillac Eldorado, sets the circle in motion. These two exhibits appear in unexpected

places, making the Stax experience one for the body as well as for the mind.

Throughout the museum, the visitor is inundated with sounds emanating from all sides. In one particular corridor of plain, glass cases filled with electric guitars, saxophones, and keyboards and other artifacts from studio recordings and live performances, what is most apparent is the cacophony. Although there is a purpose to these layers of sound, they overwhelm the ears at various times and require some effort to sort and understand. At first, this music sounds like aural confusion over the relatively simple and straightforward visual presentations, but after visitors become accustomed to it, the sense of the complex weavings of musical influences in soul music and culture become more apparent.

Emerging from this profusion, the visitor arrives at the studio's tape library, dubbed the brain stem of Stax. Along the same passageway is a display of Studio A's control room, said to be Stax's heart, and a collection of master tapes, the lifeblood of the company. Finally, the visitor arrives in the

expansive interior of the Stax recording studio. If there is a true sanctuary in the Stax Museum, this room is it. With its padded walls, carpeted floor, and moveable cases of instruments, the studio provides a quiet space for reflection after the strains of the rich sounds fade away. The architects' and designers' turbulent river of soul now carries the visitor into the calm of Studio A; they have funneled all of these sounds and sights into one focal point: the making of music. This smooth melody is the reason Stax was created in the first place, and this is the reason Stax will continue. In this space, quiet though it is, Stax seems most alive because the room is a tribute to the music that was made when Stax was at its peak, and it hints at the potential for Stax to re-emerge.

Designed by a team of architects from the firms Looney Ricks Kiss Architects and Self, Tucker Architects, the Stax provides an intimate experience of soul by guiding the visitor's journey along a winding path that refuses pretense. The overall feeling of the architecture is both disappointing and enlightening. Where it fails, it does so because the choice to

restore the Capitol Theater building to its exact dimensions creates limitations upon what the Stax can do with its space for museum purposes. However, the Stax succeeds because it preserves not only the relics and recordings but also the feeling of soul. Through a strong focus on a relatively short-lived cultural phenomenon, the Stax reminds visitors of the deep roots in and long-lasting impact of soul on American culture.

Most importantly, and perhaps ironically, the structure's sloping floors and angled walls, retained from the design of the original building, enable the Stax to teach us about the role of architecture in the music. That Memphis Sound, which reverberated off the slanted surfaces of the building, was unlike any other precisely because the music was recorded in the most unlikely of places under unlikely circumstances, proving that music can be made from simple bricks and mortar.

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Photo by Paul Reck. Courtesy Stax Museum of American Soul Music.



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