

From Memphis, With Groove...

STAX
SOULSVILLE
USA

THE TOP-25 STAX DRUM TRACKS

by Patrick Berkery

Arguing about the superiority of the two definitive American R&B labels—Stax and Motown—makes for one of the all-time great musical debates. You can defend the sweetness of Motown's arrangements in contrast to the raw, southern soul of the Stax recordings. Or what about comparing Motown staff composers like Holland-Dozier-Holland to the Stax in-house songwriters Isaac Hayes and David Porter? And if you *really* want to start some static, pit Motown house band The Funk Brothers against Stax's Memphis-bred wrecking crew, Booker T. & The MG's.

Man, the latter argument has ruined friendships and torn families apart. It's a tough one, as both units made some of the most important American music ever crafted. Just as important, both were racially mixed bands of musical brothers plying their trade at volatile times, in volatile regions.

Let's call it a draw for now and focus on Stax, for this year is the storied Memphis label's fiftieth anniversary. They're commemorating this occasion with a slate of reissues (like the new two-CD *Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration*) and a full-scale revival of the label.

Specifically, let's focus on the drummers of Stax. Headed by the legendary Al Jackson Jr., with solid, tasteful players like Willie Hall and Carl Cunningham answering the bell when called upon for a session or live date, they gave the label's recordings an often-imitated, impossible-to-replicate sense of groove and grit. They laid down beats that fit snugly in the pocket of a Duck Dunn bass line, and delivered smart fills that punctuated classic hooks in songs by Sam & Dave, Otis Redding, and The Bar-Kays.

The sound was lean, live, and fevered, the byproduct of a few mics, little separation, and another session usually just around the bend. The Stax drummers provided the heartbeat for "Soulsville, U.S.A.," with classic performances like the Top 25 examined here.

The great Al Jackson Jr.

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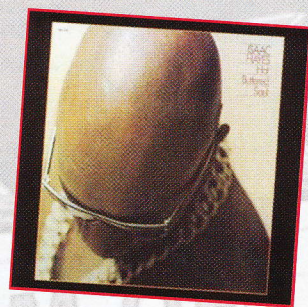
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**25) "Burnt Biscuits" (1961), Howard Grimes
The Triumphs (The Complete Stax Singles
1959-1968 box set)**

Of all the one-and-done artists throughout Stax's history, The Triumphs stand out for this snappy instrumental that's more Chicago blues than southern soul. Howard Grimes uses the rim and muted snare taps in true Chess Records style, creating a chugging rhythm that keeps perfect time under wailing harmonica and fleet-fingered organ solos.

**24) "When You Move You Lose" (1965) Al Jackson Jr.
Rufus & Carla (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

Few could make a martial snare figure sound funky like Al Jackson Jr. Stax's go-to timekeeper drags across the snare like he's in no particular hurry on this steamy call-and-response track from Rufus and Carla Thomas. Listen for the sharp accents Jackson throws in toward the climax, implying a build-up just as the song is fading.

**23) "You Don't Miss Your Water" (1961), Howard Grimes
William Bell (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)**

Many R&B junkies consider this 12/8 ballad to be the first great country-soul hybrid. Grimes' sizzle ride floats in the air like juke joint cigarette smoke, as he plays with a slow and easy touch. That hypnotic sizzle of the cymbal doesn't just glue this gorgeous, understated love song together. It also underscores the narrative.

**22) "Young Man" (1964), Al Jackson Jr.
The Drapels (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

It's what Al Jackson *doesn't* play on this sassy song that makes it swing. With the drums hot in the mix, Jackson smacks out a strutting groove in the opening chorus, before breaking it down to quarter notes on the hi-hat and kick for the verses. He weaves from chorus-to-verse with a series of syncopated accents, snare rolls, and stuttering kick figures. It's a hidden Al Jackson gem.

**21) "Soul Finger" (1967), Carl Cunningham
The Bar-Kays (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)**

Before a plane crash claimed the lives of Otis Redding and all but two of the original Bar-Kays (Redding's backing band at the time), the act groomed to play understudy to Booker T. & The MG's made a handful of instrumental soul classics. The stomping "Soul Finger" is their most recognizable, punctuated by blaring horns and the late Carl Cunningham's measure-long snare rolls. At some points it feels like he just won't stop rolling. That four-on-the-floor groove he laid down could only come from someone who possessed soul fingers.

**20) "Blue Groove" (1965), Edward Skinner
Sir Isaac & The Doo-Dads (The Complete Stax
Singles 1959-1968)**

This is a lazy, jazzy instrumental with co-writer/trumpeter George Hudson blowing some serious raunchiness into the tune. The other co-writer was drummer Edward Skinner, who lays back deep in the pocket, delivering a slow groove that sits perfectly behind the beat. This Stax obscurity is a great example of less-is-more playing.

**19) "Copy Cat" (1972), Willie Hall
The Bar-Kays (The Best Of The Bar-Kays)**

There's nothing fancy about this party jam, just lots of hootin' and hollerin' and measure-long rolls from Willie Hall that sound like an homage to original Bar-Kays drummer Carl Cunningham. The horns and the female chanting might provide the hooks, but Hall's simple kick-snare-ride groove is what makes you want to shake a tail feather.

**18) "Cold Feet" (1967), Al Jackson Jr.
Albert King (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

Laying it down with a heavy hand and a spring in his step, Al Jackson takes this throwaway Albert King blues back and forth from a mid-tempo grind to a swinging shuffle. These sorts of jarring tempo shifts weren't heard much on Stax recordings, but Jackson and The MG's handle the changes with ease and typical great feel.

**17) "Down Ta My House" (1967), Al Jackson Jr.
Rufus Thomas (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

This punchy dose of R&B has a very poppy hook. And Al Jackson feeds off that undeniable sense of melody, laying down a beat that's snappy but economical. Throughout, he drops in kicks and fills in all the right spots like a great pop drummer should. A track like this shows Jackson could handle any genre.

**16) "Knucklehead" (1967), Carl Cunningham
The Bar-Kays (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

This sweaty workout is a great showcase for all of The Bar-Kays—dig the wheezing harmonica and gritty guitar—but drummer Cunningham *owns* it. He uses a four-bar solo to turn the groove around, accenting it with hits and kicks in choice spots. It's a mighty funky reminder that Al Jackson had some serious competition in the Stax camp.

**15) "Walk On By" (1969), Willie Hall
Isaac Hayes (Hot Buttered Soul; Stax 50th
Anniversary Celebration)**

Isaac Hayes might've poured the heat and the butter into his classic



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Hot Buttered Soul LP, but Willie Hall's bedrock grooves most certainly provided the soul. Hall gave this steamy re-working of the Burt Bacharach-penned classic a sexy thump that lives on through multiple hip-hop samples. His off-the-cuff solo at the end is a bit of spontaneous brilliance.

14) "Hold On I'm Comin'" (1966), Al Jackson Jr. Sam & Dave (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

As evergreen a Stax classic as there is, "Hold On I'm Comin'" is pulsed by one of Al Jackson's great in-the-pocket grooves—right hand dancing on the hi-hats, left slamming the snare with authority, right foot mimicking the cymbal pattern to give the song its funky heartbeat. The slightest drag in tempo after the lead vocal enters gives the take even more character.

13) "Crosscut Saw" (1966), Al Jackson Jr. Albert King (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

"Crosscut Saw" is the sound of Stax getting dirtier, funkier, and edgier. Al Jackson taps out a jittery pattern on the snare and rack tom that falls somewhere between a Chicago blues groove and a samba. Today Jackson's part *still* sounds tricky, but it's the perfect foil for blues legend Albert King's slow-talking guitar and sweet vocals.

12) "Booker Loo" (1966), Al Jackson Jr. Booker T. & The MG's (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

Lots of moving parts at work in what seems like a pretty simple beat. In this mellow instrumental, Al Jackson accents the 1 and 2 with the rim, then the "&" of 3 and the 4 on the tom-tom. He fills in the blanks with kick beats on the "&s" of 4, 1, and 2. It takes a few seconds to find the 1 at the top. By the time you feel it, you're hooked by Jackson's oddly solid pattern.

11) "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody" (1966), Al Jackson Jr. Sam & Dave (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

Everyone on this 1966 Sam & Dave chestnut seems under the sway of the burgeoning British blues movement—perhaps none more than Al Jackson, who sweats out a heavy-handed backbeat and lays into the hi-hats with something extra in the chorus. The slightly detuned snare sound hints at the signature deep tone Jackson favored during his Hi Records years.

10) "Knock On Wood" (1966), Al Jackson Jr. Eddie Floyd (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)

One of the biggest hits of the Stax era features a simple, behind-the-beat groove from Jackson. It feels like he's waiting until the last possible millisecond to hit the downbeat. And that bap-bap-bap-bap snare break that answers Floyd's "I better knock" lyric was Jackson's suggestion, of course. Hooky as the part is, Al got no songwriting credit.

9) "Boot-Leg" (1965), Al Jackson Jr. Booker T. & The MG's (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

"Boot-Leg" is a southern-fried, funky strut that probably got many a dance party swingin' during the mid-'60s. And all these years later, this little rave-up could still get a party started, with its sharp horn stabs and Al Jackson's backbone-slipping backbeat. It's one of those classic grooves from Jackson and The MG's where they hit it and quit it in just over two minutes.

8) "A Hard Days Night" (1968), Carl Cunningham The Bar-Kays (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)

Plenty of R&B artists in the '60s and '70s covered The Beatles. Few spun a Fabs song into something as wigged-out as The Bar-Kays version of "A Hard Days Night." Carl Cunningham registers an amazing drum track. From his slamming groove in the verses, his laid-back feel



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in the bridges, and his tasty fills throughout, it's still more proof that Cunningham wasn't second fiddle to Al Jackson.

**7) "Wrap It Up" (1968), Al Jackson Jr.
Sam & Dave (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

It's all about the right hand and right foot of Al Jackson on this one. He hits the hi-hats hard, making for a sloshy sound that's a nice contrast to the tightness of the rhythm section's groove. And you can't help but think that Jackson's spastic kick pedal work—during the intro, and where he breaks down with Duck Dunn's bass—inspired John Bonham's stuttering kick exploits.

**6) "I Thank You" (1968), Al Jackson Jr.
Sam & Dave (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

Jackson governs the dynamic of this hip-shaking classic with parts that aren't as straightforward as they appear. He pulses the tightly coiled verses with an 8th-note pattern on the snare, twisting the straight feel by accenting every third note. A rumbling roll introduces Jackson's funky chorus groove, which he halts with a crash on the 4 of the last measure. Al doesn't bring the snare back in until the 2 of the verse, giving Sam Moore's vocal room to breathe.

**5) "Soul Man" (1967), Al Jackson Jr.
Sam & Dave (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)**

"Soul Man" finds The MG's at the top of their powers as an ensemble. Notice how Al Jackson locks right into Duck Dunn's busy bass part in the verse. Then he pushes the groove while leaving room for the vocal hook and Steve Cropper's stinging guitar lead. Jackson delivers tasty parts throughout, especially that fill into the bridge.

**4) "Theme From Shaft" (1971), Willie Hall
Isaac Hayes (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)**

Hall's chicka-chicka-chicka-chicka might be the most famous 16th-note hi-hat part of all time. Not only does it give Hayes' blaxploitation anthem its signature pulse, the part is pretty much ground zero for

disco. (And that's not faint praise.) There's a lot more to "Shaft" than the hi-hats too. From the odd accents, to the snare fill after the "Can you dig it?" line, this drum track is one bad mutha.

**3) "Son Of Shaft" (1972), Willie Hall
The Bar-Kays (Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration)**

Here's that hi-hat part again. The difference is that this time Hall throws in some extra kick drum accents, and he locks in with an even nastier wah-wah than before. The copycat intro gives way to an all-out hard funk assault in the verse, which segues into some rat-a-tat syncopation from the entire band.

**2) "Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymistic"
(1969), Willie Hall Isaac Hayes (Hot Buttered Soul)**

The title? It's a mouthful and a little nonsensical. The groove? That's a whole different story, as The Bar-Kays kick out the jams and lay down some dirty funk during the song's extended vamp. In a brief flash before the chorus, Hall turns the groove around with his offbeat kick pattern, before falling right back into the tight pocket that defines this bit of psychedelic soul.

**1) "Try A Little Tenderness" (1966), Al Jackson Jr.
Otis Redding (The Complete Stax Singles 1959-1968)**

The arc of this Otis Redding classic hinges upon Al Jackson's performance, which, for all its relative simplicity, is a prime example of time-keeping as an art form. At the top he plays in a waltz-like time; then out of nowhere the drummer establishes the 4/4 feel with a simple click of the rim. Jackson then taps softly behind Redding's impassioned vocal before driving the song home with a full-on groove. Today they'd piece something like this together with Pro Tools. Back then? Live to tape, baby.



To hear some of these Stax tracks, go to MD Radio at www.modrdrummer.com.

