

# Donald “Duck” Dunn, legendary bass player, dead at 70

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26 May 2012

Donald “Duck” Dunn, legendary Stax Record studio musician who toured with the Stax Revue, backing the likes of Sam and Dave, Otis Redding, Eddie Floyd, Arthur Conley and most notably Booker T. and the M.G.’s, died in his sleep early on May 13 after finishing his fifth double-show at a Tokyo night club. He was 70 years old.

Dunn became widely known, along with his lifelong musical colleague, Steve Cropper, when they were cast by actor/comedian John Belushi in the 1980 film *The Blues Brothers* to play themselves in the on-screen band behind Jake and Elwood Blues, played by Belushi and Dan Aykroyd.

Cropper accompanied Dunn for much of his life and was performing in Tokyo with him the day of his untimely death. He wrote on his Facebook page, “Today I lost my best friend, the world has lost the best guy and bass player to ever live.”

Dunn was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1941, where he was influenced by the music of B.B. King and Ray Charles, among others. Dunn grew up during the musical ferment in Memphis that produced artists such as King, “Little Walter” Horton, Ike Turner and many others.

Disc jockey Alan Freed began playing what was then known as R&B (for rhythm and blues), music stereotypically considered black music, on the radio in Cleveland close to the time of Dunn’s tenth birthday. Recording artists such as Johnny Otis and Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton were touring with their R&B revues and the music’s popularity exploded across previously fixed racial boundaries. Songwriters like Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, both Jewish and originally from New York, wrote music for R&B

artists, most notably “Hound Dog” in 1952 for Big Mama Thornton. They later wrote for The Drifters and The Coasters.

While the musical form that became known as “rock-and-roll” was being born, with artists such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry spreading their influence around the country, the music scene in Memphis was boiling over with the new sounds.

During Dunn’s early childhood, the Chess brothers’ recording company in Chicago became an attractive force for many blues artists from Memphis, creating something of a pipeline between the two cities.

Sam Phillips, a former disc jockey for Memphis radio station WREC, founded Sun Records in 1952, which handled both black and white artists and produced country as well as R&B. Sun became known for its 1954 discovery of Elvis Presley, a white musician who, according to many, sounded black and made his first hit recording with “That’s All Right Mama.” Country guitarist Carl Perkins was another Sun artist, considered “rockabilly,” whose song “Blue Suede Shoes” was made a hit by Presley.

Though Dunn had no musicians in his immediate family—his father ran a candy-making business—he took up the ukulele when he was ten years old and progressed to the bass at 16 after trying the guitar and discovering, in his words, that “it had two strings too many.”

He was known as “Duck” since childhood by friends and even some of his teachers. Dunn’s closest friend was Steve Cropper, and the pair formed their first band while high school classmates, with Cropper playing guitar. The band took on new members and evolved into The Mar-Keys, who joined Stax Records, founded by Memphites Jim Stewart and Estele Axton in 1961. Their first hit as The Mar-Keys was a catchy tune

called “Last Night” in 1961. The band became studio musicians for the label, backing artists including those mentioned above, Sam and Dave and Otis Redding.

Booker T. and the M.G.’s was a Stax band that had a big hit with “Green Onions” in 1962. In 1965 Dunn replaced the original bassist, Lewie Steinberg, beginning a lifelong association with the group. The M.G.’s became a key component of the Stax Records sound, serving as rhythm section for singers such as Redding, Floyd, Wilson Pickett, Albert King and The Staples Singers.

According to Dunn’s website, the Stax sound “evolved by happy accident from a blend of musicians who worked well together. ‘Everyone contributed,’ remembers Duck. ‘Sometimes, if I couldn’t find something to play maybe Booker found the bass line. Or maybe Steve Cropper. It was a real family-orientated company. No one had any particular ego. We were a real team.’”

The remarkable sound that became known as “Memphis Soul” had something to do with Stax, but was more generally a result of the times and the unique geography of the city. Located in the southwestern corner of Tennessee on the Mississippi River, Memphis was at the confluence of musical traditions that drew and acted upon each other, from the blues of the Mississippi Delta, to the country music traditions of Arkansas, Missouri and Tennessee.

The four members of Booker T. and the M.G.’s were Booker T. Jones, organ, Al Jackson Jr., drums, Steve Cropper, guitar and Duck Dunn, bass. Jones and Jackson were black and Cropper and Dunn white. The band was one of the first, if not *the* first integrated musical groups in the South, but to the musicians, it didn’t matter.

In a 2005 interview, Dunn spoke about some of the racial issues that emerged with audiences, “A lot of people thought I was a pick-up bass player—they thought Duck Dunn was a black guy who couldn’t make the tour for some reason.

“In Europe they’d ask me, ‘What’s it like to play with a black man?’ I never knew what to say; we didn’t think that way—we just played. We got the soul sound by blending our country and blues influences. I grew up with the Grand Ole Opry. When we mixed that feel

with the blues, we got something new.”

The group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992.

In the 1970s Dunn was called upon by many musicians to provide backup, including Jerry Lee Lewis, Freddie King, Rod Stewart, Leon Russell, Richie Havens and Tom Petty. In 1977, after The Band officially broke up, Levon Helm produced an album with Henry Glover called “Levon Helm and the RCO All Stars” recorded in Woodstock, New York, which included Dunn and Cropper as well as Booker T. Jones, Dr. John, Paul Butterfield and other members of The Band.

As mentioned above, when John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd decided to expand on their Saturday Night Live skit, inspired by Sam and Dave’s “Soul Man,” they created *The Blues Brothers* and cast not only Dunn and Cropper, but Cab Calloway, James Brown, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and others. Many of Dunn’s fans were introduced to him through this film.

Of the film, Dunn told *Bass Player* magazine in 2005, “That may have started as a joke, but we got a really good band together, and we got a lot of people going back to the old records.”



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