

Legendary Stax Records guitarist Steve Cropper (1941-2025)

James Brewer
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The widely influential guitarist Steve Cropper self-effacingly and all too modestly told *Guitar Player Magazine* in 2024, “My playing has always sucked, but it sells ... I keep it simple, I guess. I’m not a guitar player. I never took the time.” By that time, he was early into his ninth decade and had been in the forefront of the Memphis soul-rock scene for a full six of them.

Cropper died in a rehabilitation facility on December 3 at 84. He was well-renowned as a soul rock music icon among millions of fans. It can be safely assumed that many who love his music may not even know him by name. As Booker T. & the MGs’ guitarist, he contributed to an informal jam session which was recorded and became a top hit nationally in 1962. “Green Onions” has since become an early soul rock classic.

Eschewing flashy guitar solos and pretentious showmanship, Cropper was known for “playing for the song.” In a 2021 interview on guitar.com, he said “I’ve always thought of myself as a rhythm player ... I get off on the fact that I can play something over and over and over, while other guitar players don’t want to even know about that. They won’t even play the same riff or the same lick twice.”

He told *Total Guitar Magazine* in October 2024, “In the early days when I was playing guitar, I knew the world didn’t need another B.B. King, Chet Atkins or Les Paul. So, what are you gonna do now? I thought, ‘Just be yourself and do your thing. Don’t go changing.’”

The members of Booker T. & the MGs became the house musicians for Stax Records. The Memphis label started as Satellite Records in 1957 and was renamed Stax in 1960. This was around the same time as Detroit produced the black-owned Motown label featuring black artists such as the Supremes, the Four Tops, the Miracles, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and the Jackson 5.

While Motown’s music was noted for being more polished, Stax artists produced a gritty, soul-inspired sound. Cropper collaborated with numerous acts that recorded under the label, including Albert King, Otis Redding, Sam

and Dave, Wilson Pickett and Eddie Floyd. He cowrote and played on many of the most imperishable tunes for those artists: In 1966 Sam and Dave’s “Soul Man;” Wilson Pickett’s “Midnight Hour;” Eddie Floyd’s “Knock on Wood.”

In a 1984 interview, Cropper was asked whether he considered himself primarily a guitar player or a writer. His response: “I think the songwriting came first, and I think the guitar came second, and being in Memphis in an environment around such a marriage of black ethnic music, blues, and country farm kind of music, and church music, gospel, and all that. Being influenced by all that kind of music, I just, I either evolved out of or lucked up on a certain style that, that seemed to be popular among people who were making records.”

Special note must be taken of his work with Otis Redding. He described working with him (also in 1984) at Stax: “Otis was one of those type of people that really walked around with a guitar full, or a handful, or a suitcase full of songs. He always had 10, 12, whatever, how many ideas, running around of unfinished things. And usually when he came to town, it was a very short stay. I mean, it was never longer than, like, a couple weeks.

So we really had to burn the midnight oil, so to speak, in the first two, three days he was here. And I just sort of, he’d throw this at me, and I’d throw something at him that I’d been doing. And we just sort of, together, collaborated on certain ideas, and I just sort of picked the best of it.

And I think, of course, I was very fortunate to be working with somebody like Otis Redding, who was so talented, but he really influenced me, and the funny thing that I, every time I look back on it, I used to write, if anybody ever listens to the songs themselves, a lot of the songs that we wrote together.

“Sittin’ on the Dock of the Bay” was cowritten and produced by Cropper. It was released in 1968 after Redding’s untimely death at the age of 26 in an airplane crash.

Ozark County in Missouri was Cropper’s home from his birth in 1941 until he was nine, when his family moved to Memphis. At the age of 14 he became interested in playing guitar and ordered one from a mail order house. Also in *Total Guitar Magazine*, Cropper said of that first guitar: “It was a Country Western, a big round-hole, flat-top guitar. I’d sit on the porch waiting for that guitar to be delivered every weekend, waiting for the truck to turn the corner. And then it finally arrived.

The strings were loose and the bridge needed fixing, and they wanted a 25 cent delivery fee – 25 cents. My mom said, “I’ll lend you that quarter if you become a guitar player”. She’s not around to defend herself anymore, but I think I did!

Cropper came under the spell of the emerging soul and rock’n’roll sound that Memphis nurtured, especially emanating from Sun Records, the studio founded in 1952 by Sam Phillips that spawned the careers of Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley and others. His first band was called the Royal Spades, formed in 1958 while he was in high school. One of the members of the band was Charles “Packy” Axton. He played saxophone and had very little experience. He became a part of the band because his mother was Estelle Axton, and his uncle was Jim Stewart, the two principals of Satellite Records. When Satellite Records released their recording of “Last Night” as a single in 1961, they were convinced to rename themselves the Mar-Keys and the tune became a number-three hit nationally.

This was the first major hit for Satellite and catalyzed the transformation of the label into Stax Records. The Mar-Keys became the first house band for the new label and, barely 20 years old, Cropper was recruited as Stax’s A&R man, scouting and nurturing new talent, as the label’s president recognized in him a maturity and ability beyond his years.

Money was tight at Stax in those early days. “I get asked sometimes, ‘How come there was only one guitar player on those records?’ I tell them, ‘Because they couldn’t afford a second guitar player!’” And that’s why. Stax couldn’t even afford me! In fact, I think I did a lot of those sessions for nothing.”

From starting out producing country music tunes in a garage in North Memphis, the label transitioned to recording black artists. It’s first hit on the Satellite label #101

was “Fool In Love” by the Veltones in 1959.

What was striking about collaboration at Stax Records is that it was interracial. Memphis was completely segregated at the time Cropper and Stax started out, but inside the studio, “there was no color.” Cropper described it as “family.” When doing tours, there were issues “which we had no control over.”

Cropper’s high school friend Donald “Duck” Dunn replaced the M.G.s’ original bassist Lewie Steinberg in 1965, so, “there were times when, on the road with Booker T & the MGs, because we were, two white guys, and two black guys ... a lot of people that had booked us, listened to our records, whatever, didn’t know that it was a mixed group. And so, a few things, you know, went down, we just sort of walked around, you know?

“We would stay in hotels on the outskirts of town, rather than plowing through and saying, Hey, we’re gonna just brave this. We didn’t look for trouble, so we weren’t bothered by it.”

Cropper’s last days at Stax coincided with the financial insolvency of the label. He went on to form his own label and moved on to other ventures. In 1978, he and Duck Dunn appeared in the cast of the film starring two *Saturday Night Live* veterans, John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, called *Blues Brothers*. Not a great film, but it was successful at the box office due to featuring popular music stars Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Chaka Khan, Cab Calloway and others. A 1998 sequel, *Blues Brothers 2000* also featured Cropper and Dunn with many of the same artists in addition to B.B. King, harmonicist John Popper and many others.

Cropper was known widely as humble and unassuming. Later in his career, he played with many of the most renowned popular music artists in the world. He performed, recorded and gave interviews until recently. His last album was released in 2024 called *Friendlytown*.



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