

The Memphis Music Legacy -- Burden or Blessing?

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Under the leadership of former president Jerry Schilling, the Memphis & Shelby County Music Commission, an organization at least theoretically responsible for guiding the local music industry, once issued a mission statement dedicated to promoting a music industry that "builds on Memphis' rich cultural heritage and puts its mark on the 21st century just as surely as it has defined the 20th."

Is this even possible? Is it a worthy goal or a setup for disappointment? The compatibility of exploiting the past and building the future is an ongoing issue in Memphis music and one that gains new prominence this month as the music commission rebuilds after Schilling's tumultuous reign. By replacing Schilling, a "Memphis Mafia" alumnus and personification of "the heritage," with Rey Flemings, a young businessman with no connection to the city's musical legacy, the commission is sending a message, intentional or not, that their focus is moving from the past to the future.

But what role will and should the city's musical legacy play in managing and shaping the present and future? What impact does the legacy have on Memphis' current music scene? Is it a blessing, something that gives the contemporary scene vitality? Is it a burden, a distraction that takes attention away from what's happening today? Likely, it's a little of both. The following debate between *Flyer* music editor Chris Herrington and Local Beat columnist Andria Lisle may not provide all the answers, but hopefully it'll push the discussion along.

Burden

The legacy's great, but Memphis music can't go home again.

The Peabody hotel's most famous regular patron, William Faulkner, once wrote, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." He may have been contemplating the mind of the South when he wrote those words, but they could just as easily apply to the way people talk about music in Memphis.

Over the past couple of years, the city's towering music legacy has cast a broad shadow: the 50th anniversary of Sun Records, the 25th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, the Premier Player Awards' salute to Hi Records, the opening of the Stax Museum of American Soul Music and its attendant celebrations. All of these events are certainly worthy of the attention they've received, but taken together they present a community obsessed with past accomplishments.

The Memphis music legacy is clearly a blessing in a multitude of ways, which I'll leave to my colleague Andria Lisle to describe, but there's little doubt that this relentless focus on the past is a burden in at least one major way: It sets up entirely unrealistic expectations for the present and future. Over the past few years, I've heard countless rally-the-troops speeches at musical events in which those who have been to the mountaintop assure the faithful that the good times will come back around again. But while the allure of such conjecture is understandable, it seems unreasonable if you take an objective look at the way popular music has evolved.

To understand why the glory days are likely gone for good you have to understand why they happened in the first place, and, more importantly, understand why they went away.

Memphis' mid-century run as a pop-music mecca was a product of great historical forces, not just

individual genius or any kind of mystical myth of Memphis exceptionalism. It was born out of a post-WWII cultural paradigm shift that dramatically shaped the course of pop history. To put it in radically simplified terms, this shift was a product of two musical mutations. One was Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and others of their generation combining blues and country to create rock-and-roll. The other was Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and others of their generation combining blues and gospel to create soul music. It's no exaggeration to say that most of the significant Western pop music of the next quarter-century was born directly from these two Eisenhower-era developments. As a consequence, the most prominent American popular music from the '50s through the mid-/late '70s was directly blues-based. And Memphis, the "Home of the Blues," was a natural source of energy.

Socially and politically, the civil rights movement was the engine that drove pop music during this era. Blues-based rock and soul, as Jim Dickinson commented at the local Premier Player Awards a couple of years ago, was the product of a racial collision writ in black and white. The awkward combination of racial segregation and racial proximity and familiarity fueled creative juices across the South, particularly in Memphis, an urban center amid a vast expanse of rural land. Memphis was a meeting place, a gathering place, a place where, as local writer Robert Gordon attested in his celebrated scene history *It Came from Memphis*, all the vectors pointed. Thus, the two most vital music-makers of Memphis' glory years -- Sam Phillips' Sun Records and Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton's Stax -- were driven by the combustible and fruitful mix of black and white culture.

Pop music of this era was fueled by blues roots and the turmoil of racial integration, as was Memphis itself, and thus Memphis became a pop-music center. Everyone in Memphis who cares about music understands all of this whether they would put it in those terms or not. We all know why Memphis became a holy city of American music (and understand how the blues connection and cultural mix made Memphis a musical capital even before the post-war shift).

But less understood and chronicled is why the run ended -- why everything changed in the '70s and why the successes of the past are unlikely to be repeated. Understanding this is crucial to reasonably integrating past accomplishments and future goals.

There are a lot of convenient reasons one could hold up as the source of Memphis' musical demise, explanations rooted in individual decisions and problems, explanations that don't detract too much from the notion that It Could All Happen Again. You can point out Elvis Presley's death, Al Green's religious conversion and farewell to secular music, or Stax's bankruptcy and disintegration. But these are all red herrings. In truth, while the rise of Memphis music was the result of a larger pop-music shift, so was its fall.

This next shift is still not quite as universally recognized as the emergence of rock and soul a generation earlier, but its impact on the pop landscape has been every bit as sweeping. The shift was manifested in three new musical mutations that all occurred in the mid-/late '70s, all born in major urban centers. First was disco (and subsequent DJ-driven dance musics that we'll call "techno"), which moved the energy in R&B-based dance music away from the rural and organic to the urban and synthetic. Then there was punk, which buried the blues roots of guitar-based rock-and-roll under a noise aesthetic that critic Robert Christgau mused at the time was something akin to a white equivalent of be-bop. And then there was hip-hop, the most postmodern of all, a distinctly urban and, until relatively recently, Northern form that downplayed the importance of live performance, turning one person with two turntables into a whole band.

Just as the rock and soul mutations of the '50s informed most of the important pop music of the next 25 years, the punk, disco/techno, and hip-hop mutations of the '70s have spurred most of the significant new pop of the past quarter-century, these forms and their various permutations, along with the increasing influence of international music on American pop, still creating the sparks that ignite musical culture. This has resulted in an entire generation of pop music that is urban and global rather than rural and regional, indirectly blues-based rather than directly blues-based. That Memphis ceased being a musical center

exactly as this shift was taking root is far from a coincidence.

In that aforementioned Premier Player speech, Dickinson surmised that since racial collision formed the basis for pop music, Memphis' peculiar cultural energy would lead to a new rebirth along the old lines. But he may have been only half-right: Pop music's race/culture collision has moved beyond Memphis' black-and-white focus. The story now isn't bicultural but multicultural, a musical mosaic with DJs across the globe mixing everything together in one big dance party. Are blues and Southern soul still in the mix? Of course. But that music is just a part of a huge and ever-expanding pop palette now. It's not the center anymore, and it never will be again.

As these changes have created new sounds that mesh with the enduring leftovers of what's come before and as business and technological upheavals have made music more abundant and more available than ever before, the very notion of a musical center has completely broken down, which may be disconcerting to diehard Beatles and Motown fans. But it is a beautiful chaos to those willing to accept it. As the British critic Tom Ewing put it recently, "We are all dilettantes now."

The obvious moral here is that the past can't be repeated, that it's misguided to expect anything on par with Sun and Stax and Hi to ever happen again. That boom was a reflection of an indigenous culture in full flowering, a regional explosion that became a global phenomenon. It was a magical thing, and it is over. The historical forces that created Memphis' musical moment have vanished. It's a whole new world now. Not only can Memphis not be what it once was -- *no place can be what Memphis once was*.

But there's another moral here and one that shouldn't be missed, and that moral is this: It's okay.

I come not to bury Memphis music but to praise it. Don't get me wrong. I love the legacy, and you should too. Celebrate it. Memorialize it. Make money off of it. Use it as a foundation. Use it to bring attention to the city. Most of all, *listen* to it. Just don't wait around for it to happen again, and don't for a second feel bad about that. Contemporary Memphis music only looks bad if you judge it against the unreasonably high standards of the past. Judged on its own terms, which are the only terms that make any sense, the current Memphis music scene is doing just fine. And you should listen to that too.

Blessing

Memphis' musical past provides inspiration and exposure.

By ANDRIA LISLE

Without question, the Memphis music legacy is a blessing to all musicians in the area. Whether you're a rockabilly drummer, a retro-soul singer, an aspiring blues guitarist directly drawing on local history, or creating your own scene entirely, be it rock, rap, metal, or punk, the privileges offered to Memphis musicians -- opportunities, not obligations or responsibilities -- are manifold. Even players unschooled in local history can benefit from the exposure offered by musicians past -- and harness that energy for their own careers.

Sure, the concept of the Memphis sound is legendary, and it can lead to a lot of expectations that most local musicians cannot (or will not) live up to. But Memphis' music legacy provides a history that can inspire and educate up-and-coming musicians. And, as many area musicians will attest, it's a birthright you can ultimately profit from. Navigate the streams of the music world as a Memphis musician, and, I assure you, you will go far.

Our local heritage provides an identity that's impossible to deny and easy to capitalize on. Looking for national publicity? Tie your group's style into the sounds of Sun or Stax, and you're sure to get attention from outside sources. Your claim can be as tenuous -- or as compelling -- as you want it to be, and

journalists like Chris Morris will guarantee a compulsory listen.

"I have a very active interest in what goes on in Memphis," says Morris, who has penned *Billboard's* "Declaration of Independents" column for the past decade. "There's so much indigenous talent there. It's still one of the great music cities in America."

Thanks to its musical legacy, Memphis is also a must-visit destination for many celebrities. Stake out Beale Street or Graceland and hand off your band's CD to the superstar of your choice. From Michael Jackson to Marky Ramone, they've all visited the Bluff City over the last decade.

Unsure about this tactic? Check in with Porch Ghouls frontman Eldorado Del Ray, who gave Aerosmith guitarist Joe Perry a copy of his band's demo at Sun Studio one day. Perry liked what he heard, and within a year, the Porch Ghouls were signed to Perry's Sony imprint, Roman Records.

With major-label funding behind them, these local ruckus-raisers bypassed some steps on the blues-rock road to fame, traveling up and down the East Coast on press junkets and promotional tours and racking up frequent-flyer miles while rubbing shoulders with the rock-and-roll cognoscenti. Sure, it's a one-in-a-million chance, but it's yet another blessing we can attribute to our Memphis music legacy.

Not sure you have what it takes to make it? Drive by 185 Winchester Street, the site of the Lauderdale Courts apartment that was Elvis Presley's first home in Memphis. When the Presleys moved here from Tupelo in 1948, they were poor folk: Everything the family owned -- including the guitar Elvis received for his 11th birthday -- fit in the trunk of their '37 Plymouth.

"We were broke, man, broke," Elvis remembered. At times they had nothing to eat but cornbread and water. Yet, in less than a decade, the Presleys moved from public housing to the Graceland mansion.

If that's not enough inspiration for you, head over to the Stax Museum of American Soul Music on East McLemore Avenue. Pay the \$9 for the tour, then check out the photographs of a gawky, teenaged Isaac Hayes, standing in the back row of the WDIA Teen Town Singers.

A native of nearby Covington, Tennessee, Hayes hung around Stax in the '60s with David Porter, a young Memphian who sacked groceries across the street from the studio. The two wanted to be songwriters -- and just a few years later, they were making big bucks penning hits for Sam & Dave ("Soul Man," "Hold On, I'm Comin'"), Carla Thomas, and other Southern soul stars.

Don't believe me? Check out Hayes' gold Cadillac, on permanent display at the museum. Sure, Hayes went bankrupt in the mid-'70s, but today, as a deejay, recording star, cartoon personality, and entrepreneur, he's doing better than ever.

Women in search of a role model need look no further than rockin' granny Cordell Jackson, who, in her own words, "aimed for the sun but landed on the moon." Turned down by Sun Records founder Sam Phillips back in the '50s, Jackson refused to take no for an answer. Instead, she started her own label -- the appropriately named Moon Records -- and launched a career that's survived five decades.

If Jackson's not your speed, look up Bettye Berger, who started as a deejay on Memphis' all-female AM radio station WHER in 1955. When she wasn't on the air, Berger was booking acts like Ivory Joe Hunter and Al Green on the road, eking out an existence in the Memphis music biz any -- and every -- way she could.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are as many inspirational stories as there are musicians in this town. If you keep both ears open, you're sure to hear some encouraging words and get an energetic push from a Memphis music veteran.

Meanwhile, school-age musicians can find incredible support within the greater Memphis community. With

a tradition that harkens back to the days of Professor W.T. McDaniels' reign at Manassas High School (when horn players like Hank Crawford, Evelyn Young, Frank Strozier, and George Coleman toiled in the senior band), our city schools place an importance on musicianship that far exceeds the national norm.

After their regular classes, many budding talents head over to the Stax Music Academy, a multimillion-dollar complex designed to teach at-risk youth the disciplines of music. Stax session man Nokie Taylor, an instructor at the academy, expresses the importance of Memphis' musical legacy more succinctly than I ever could: "Seeing these kids learn is incredible. I'm able to share things that I've learned from all the professional musicians I've worked with -- music lessons *and* life lessons," Taylor says. "It's interesting to see them go back into the community and teach what they've learned from me." Those are precious words, folks, and no other city in the world can claim 'em.

Too old to benefit from the Stax Music Academy or a program in the Memphis city schools? Take a lesson from the musicians who've come before you, and strike out on your own. Are you a hopeful metal guitarist who rolls your eyes at mentions of Memphis rockabilly and blues, or a wannabe dirty South rapper who's sick of all the Southern soul? You can benefit from your elders' examples, whether you approve of their style of music or not. Think about it: What made those musicians so interesting in the first place? I'll clue you in -- it was their originality.

Memphians are known worldwide as the originators of not one sound but four: blues, rockabilly, rock-and-roll, and Southern soul. Mastering any of these genres is a worthy endeavor, but there's no reason why you should adhere to their rules. Find your own sound. Howlin' Wolf, Charlie Feathers, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Otis Redding certainly did.

No one stopped to pound on the door at Sun on that summer night nearly 50 years ago when Elvis, Scotty Moore, and Bill Black were goofing off in the studio. Producer Sam Phillips simply stuck his head around the corner and asked the boys to "back up." "Try to find a place to start," he said, "and do it again."

"Try to find a place to start" -- those words are magic. Memphis musicians couldn't ask for a better mantra. Think about the music you love, the sounds you want to emanate from your instrument. Wrap your brain around a musical concept, then loosen up and let yourself go. Try to find a place to start, and before you know it, you'll be on your way.

Meet the New Boss

The Memphis & Shelby County Music Commission hits "reset" with a surprising hire.

After a tumultuous three-and-a-half-year run with former Elvis crony and music-industry veteran Jerry Schilling as president, and after several months without a president following Schilling's resignation last fall, the Memphis & Shelby County Music Commission essentially hit the reset button last week with the hiring of a new president, relative music-scene unknown Reynaldo (Rey) Flemings, 29.

On the surface, Flemings might be seen as the anti-Schilling -- he's a generation younger, he's African-American, his background is heavy on business and light on music, and, most intriguingly, he has no tangible connection to the city's sizable music legacy, where Schilling was in many ways an embodiment of that heritage. The symbolism of the hire is unmistakable --that of an organization making a transition from a focus on the past to a focus on the future. And even if the transition is not quite as cut-and-dried as that, commission chairperson Phil Trenary accepts the symbolism.

"It was not intentional," Trenary says, "but I think that's accurate. We have so many people doing such good work on the legacy end, but we've underperformed dramatically in terms of the contemporary music."

Flemings' lack of name recognition in the music industry, especially among those engrossed in the local

music scene, could be a hurdle.

"It's an obvious issue, but not a concern," Trenary insists. "If you look at what [Flemings has] accomplished and the businesses he's gone into, he had zero experience in each one of those fields yet was able to make a huge contribution and achieve very quick success. The guy's learning curve is unlike anything I've ever seen."

In an interview with the *Flyer* two days after his hire, Flemings admitted that, on the surface, he might not seem like an obvious choice to helm the organization.

"If you wanted me to open a concert with a song, I wouldn't be the right person," he says. "But the music commission is largely in its infancy. Even though it's an established organization, it's been ineffectual at most of the things that it's done. And the hallmark of my career has been to work with people, to develop an understanding of an industry, to develop a coherent strategy, and to execute these strategies."

Flemings is a native Memphian and graduate of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where he studied economics. He comes to the commission with a varied and successful business background, most recently serving as vice president of sales and business development for WeTrak, a St. Louis-based firm that worked to authenticate sports memorabilia. He has also worked as a consultant and business strategist with music organizations, most notably the King Biscuit Blues Festival.

But, despite relatively limited experience in the music business, Flemings has made the field a constant avocation, setting up a small home studio where he produces tracks. Flemings is clearly a knowledgeable music fan, conversant in everything from Memphis rap and blues guitar to Icelandic alt-rock and British hip-hop.

It may not add up to a résumé onlookers would expect for the somewhat high-profile position, which will pay \$88,000 (considerably less than Schilling was making), but Trenary makes clear that, after the commission's struggles, "leadership" and business-related organization skills were made more of a priority in the hiring process than music-biz name recognition.

Flemings' hire coincides with an economic-impact study the commission is co-sponsoring with Memphis Tomorrow, an organization of local CEOs, and the University of Memphis. This study and the strategic planning that arises from it will set Flemings' and the commission's agenda for the foreseeable future.

"One of the things that the music commission has been lacking is structure and a clear vision of where we're going," Trenary says. "[The economic-impact study] is going to be a very valuable tool and, more importantly, it's going to be a baseline, so that we can go back in three or four years and measure the difference we've been able to make." Trenary expects the final report to be issued in July.

Even though the long-term direction of the commission will be dictated by the findings of the study, Flemings acknowledges that early results will be the key to his success.

"One thing that the commission hasn't done is build a set of value-added services," Flemings says. "You go into the community and say, 'What is the music commission?' and people don't know, and that's because it hasn't defined a set of services it provides. The first value-added service we can add is getting the technology right, starting with a comprehensive MemphisMusic.org site. My tenure is going to be results-based; that's why I'm here. If there aren't results, then there needs to be a leadership change. I don't view this as an entitlement."

One of Flemings' first challenges may well be financing. The commission's financing from the city was put in a precarious situation due to budget blundering late in Schilling's tenure, and the county government has announced a planned phase-out of music commission funding, making the raising of private funds a new issue for the commission. But Flemings is optimistic about the status of both public and private

funding.

"I appreciate and value the support of city and county government, but there is budget-tightening throughout municipalities around the country," Flemings acknowledges, "and if, at some point, the local governments aren't able to provide funding, we'll need to make up for that shortfall. We're going to continue doing what we're doing. We're enjoying the support of Memphis Tomorrow, and they aren't going to be the only private source. Once we build a value-added set of services and have a message, I think we're going to find partners and revenue-generating opportunities much easier to find. We can't expect funding just because of [who we are]. We have to have a business model. We have to do things for this community that people can see the value of. Now, I can't speak for the mayors or city council or county commission, but I would venture that, if they see significant improvements in the work of the commission and we demonstrate the economic impact of the music industry, it would be hard for them to deny that support."

As for the ultimate goals of the commission, Flemings doesn't shy away from using the city's past as a model, pointing to 1973, when the recording industry was the third largest in the city and Memphis was the fourth largest recording center in the world.

"I don't believe that the two are mutually exclusive," Fleming insists when asked about balancing past and future. "You don't either promote the past or promote the future; the two are bound together. The past is our calling card. We can't underutilize our assets, and the legacy is clearly an asset, but it's not the only one. You can't buy the respect that Memphis has in the international community for its contribution to global culture. We're going to focus on practical goals early on, but our ultimate goal is to return Memphis to its former preeminence or to even exceed that." --**CH**

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