

# SOUL DETECTIVE

## 8 CLARENCE NELSON

### part two

...continued from **PART ONE**

I've often said that all of Memphis music appears to be connected in one way or another, and quite a few of those connections seem to lead to **Stan Kesler**.

Kesler was the pedal-steel guitar player in drummer Clyde Leppard's **Sneally Ranch Boys**, and when the band came to Sun Studio to back up Bill Taylor for Sam Phillips' **Flip** subsidiary in early 1955, Stan pitched a song he and Taylor had written to Sam Phillips. Sam had Elvis, Scotty Moore and Bill Black cut **I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone** and released it as the flip of Presley's first chart hit (#5 Country smash 'Baby Let's Play House') in December of 1955. By then Stan had become a regular member



of the 'house-band' at Sun, and made the switch from pedal steel to bass. **I Forgot to Remember to Forget**, a song Stan wrote with Sun Rockabilly legend **Charlie Feathers**, would become Elvis' first number one record in early 1956.



Flush with that success, Kesler started up his own Crystal label with Bluff City businessmen Eugene Lucchesi and Drew Canale in 1957. They made some local noise with Jimmy Pritchett's **That's The Way I Feel** but, according to the Rob Bowman & Ross Johnson **interview** of Stan for **The Journal of Country Music**, the label folded after a few more releases. *"Canale put in a thousand dollars and expected back 10,000 next week,"* Stan told them, *"...me and Drew wouldn't work."* Kesler went on to say that *"In 1959, Clyde and I put in our own studio. We got some semi-pro equipment... we were up on Main Street."*

Main Street? Hmmm...



Meanwhile, in 1956, **Ronald 'Slim' Wallace** had started up the F **'Cowboy' Jack Clement**. Within a few months, Clement went to work for Sam Phillips at Sun, and **Scotty Moore**, who had returned to Memphis after leaving Elvis behind in Hollywood, became Fernwood's vice-president. In 1958, Moore took Thomas Wayne Perkins (the brother of Tennessee Two guitarist **Luther Perkins**) to Hi Records' Royal Studio to record with his erstwhile partner **Bill Black**. When the intended B Side of Fernwood 109, **Tragedy**, rose to #5 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the Spring of 1959, the label was suddenly rolling in dough and, according to Scotty, they

*"built a fully equipped studio in a rented building at 297 N. Main Street."* Was this the studio initially opened by Stan Kesler and Clyde Leppard?

It may well have been as, by early 1960, Kesler said they *"moved to Echo, down on Manassas... and went in with Jack Clement. Jack was partners with us for a while."* Which would imply, I suppose, that Clement had stopped working at Sun. I'm not sure what happened with Scotty and Fernwood but, according to Kesler, when Sam Phillips opened his new studio on Madison that Summer, Moore was already on board. Be that as it may, within a couple of years both Scotty Moore and Jack Clement had taken off for Nashville, and the Echo property was taken by eminent domain for 'urban renewal'. Stan Kesler would then become the full-time engineer at Sam Phillips.



*"So what became of the 'fully equipped' studio at 297 North Main?"* you might ask, *"and what on earth does all of this have to do with Clarence Nelson?"*



Well, if you recall, back in **Part One**, **Darryl Carter** told us *"When I first got to town I went to this other studio on N. Main Street, I can't remember the name of it, and Earl Forest was in there and so was Clarence Nelson..."* Once John Broven read that, he gave me a copy of **Juke Blues No.56** (Summer 2004), in which there was a great article on Earl written by Brian Baumgartner. Please let me take a moment here to say how much I continue to appreciate **Juke Blues**. Started thirty years ago as a labor of love by editor Cilla Huggins and her like-minded associates, the sheer amount of well-researched and documented material (not to mention top-notch graphics and photography) contained within it's 79 issues is fairly incredible. Hailing from an era that preceded the internet and the ability to 'Google' just about anything on earth, this hard-won and

priceless wealth of information (in many cases drawn from interviews with those since deceased) deserves to be preserved for future generations. I sincerely hope that it will be.

**Earl Forest** is yet another under-appreciated figure in the development of Memphis music. A regular at Sunbeam's on Beale Street, he would become B.B. King's first drummer, before he became Bobby Bland's. He was on the drum kit for the first records Joe Bihari cut on B.B. at Sam Phillips' Memphis Recording Service shortly after it opened in 1950. *"B.B. and myself, we brought Ike Turner to Memphis,"* he told Baumgartner, *"...he had a bad band! We talked to Phillips, and that's where he cut Rocket 88."* That was the record, of course, that convinced Bihari to leave Union Ave and set up his own portable recording equipment at other locations around town. When **3 O'Clock Blues** (cut by Bihari at the 'colored' YMCA) was released on RPM in early 1952, it shot straight to #1 R&B, and effectively ended Earl's days with B.B., as King was now out touring behind the record with Tiny Bradshaw's band, and would soon join forces with Bill Harvey.





After doing one more session for Modern with his new singer Bobby Bland, Earl brought his band (which now also featured Johnny Alexander on piano and Billy Duncan on sax) to WDIA to record for program director David James Mattis' newly formed record label, **Duke**. It was Mattis who re-christened Alexander 'Johnny Ace', and released **My Song** under his name in August of 1952. This breakthrough recording would spend five months on Billboard's R&B chart, including *nine weeks* at number one. Their second session for Mattis would yield another top ten R&B smash in late 1952, Earl's own **Whoopin' and Hollerin'**. *Great stuff, man!* Unable to keep up with demand, Mattis at this point 'shook hands with the devil' and entered into an ill-fated partnership with Peacock Records owner

Don Robey in Houston, who would wrest control of the label from Mattis (literally at gunpoint) within a year. Although Mattis would try to make a go of it with a new label he called Starmaker, it would fold in late 1953 after only a few releases, including this previously unknown side by Ben Branch (sent in by our newest detective, Frank Bruno of **Memphis Wax**), **The Masher**. *Thanks, Frank!*

Making the best of a bad situation, Earl would soon move to Houston, and become Robey's right hand man. *"I was very close to him,"* he told Juke Blues, *"in fact I was the only one who could get into his office."* In 1954, Robey's Buffalo Booking Agency reunited Earl with B.B. King, and sent him out on an extended nine month coast-to-coast package tour in the fabled **bus**. When the tour got back to Memphis in early 1955, Forest decided to stay home, maintaining his association with Duke as a 'songwriter and talent scout' - an arrangement that would pay off handsomely after he sent Robey a song he had worked up with Bill Harvey at Sunbeam's. A song that Little Junior Parker would take all the way to the R&B top ten in early 1957, **Next Time You See Me**.

All of which brings us back to Fernwood, and the aforementioned studio at 297 N. Main: *"I originally went there to do sessions for Duke and Peacock,"* Earl said, *"they were located at Main & Winchester, and had 3-track recording equipment - the only one in Memphis at the time. Different Rhythm & Blues and Spiritual groups would come in to cut a session, pay for it, and then shop the tapes to different labels. In fact I cut the first thing that the original Mar-Keys did. I also knew Roosevelt Jamison who was doing some songwriting as well, so I recorded both O.V. Wright and James Carr for him..."*



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Which would seem to indicate, boys and girls, that the mythic long-lost 'Blood Bank' tape that Roosevelt Jamison took to Quinton Claunch's house in the middle of the night was cut by Earl at Fernwood! Wow!



DUKE 349

▶ **Beale Street Popeye**

Duke would release this smoking little number in 1962, shooting for their own piece of the Popeye pie while at the same time, no doubt, trying to cash in on the recent success of South Memphis' smash hit 'Last Night'. When Earl mentioned cutting 'the original Mar-Keys', I'm sure he was (at least) referring to Gilbert Caple and Floyd Newman, both of whom appear on this record. Contrary to popular belief, one person who does not appear on this record (or the three other instrumental sides from this period released

by Duke under Forest's name) is **James Booker**. According to Earl, that wild Hammond is being played by Joe Louis Hall, formerly of Bill Black's Combo (!). Released around the same time as The Mar-Keys' own 'Popeye Stroll' on Stax, neither 45 dented the charts.

PURE GOLD 316



▶ **A Whole Lot Of Tears**

Even though he had a brand new studio on his hands, Slim Wallace seemed unable to come up with another hit on Fernwood. With the R&B and Soul explosion in Memphis in full swing all around him, he created subsidiary labels **Pure Gold** and **Whirl-A-Way** in order to release some of the material that Earl was producing at the studio on folks like Willie Cobbs and **Jeb Stuart**. This greasy slab of deep 'Soal' we have here was cut around the same time that Darryl Carter showed up on North Main, and very prominently features

our man Clarence Nelson (*remember him?*) on the guitar. *Very cool!*

TUFF-STUFF 105



▶ **Now It's Alright**


Tuff-Stuff was apparently Earl Forest's own label, and this great 45 represents its solitary release. Ultra-rare, there were only a few hundred copies pressed at the time. It was discovered among the Fernwood master tapes after they were acquired by **Stomper Time**, and released on the great **Fernwood Rhythm 'N' Blues from Memphis** CD in 2003. Just fantastic stuff, they date it as being cut in 1965. *Earl still had it goin' on!* Although it doesn't sound like Clarence on the lead guitar, it just might be him on that awesome

driving reverbed rhythm... *What do you think?*

So, whatever became of the Fernwood studio? **Well, according to the Rockabilly Hall of Fame, "Fernwood Records operated on and off until 1968, when a flood destroyed tapes and stock at their headquarters on North Main Street."** Bummer... if you punch in the address on Google Maps, you will find that 297 N. Main Street is now located directly under the approach to the Hernando DeSoto Bridge! Yet another piece of Memphis music history gone forever... a piece I never even knew existed, until now.



Now - let's get back to Stan Kesler, who told Rob Bowman that, while he was still at Echo, *"Gene [Lucchesi] came to me and he asked me would I be interested to go back in the record business. I said 'I tell you, I'd be interested but not like we did before' and he said, 'Well, I got a friend, Paul Bomarito. Me and Paul want to put some money in it' ...at the beginning it worried me."* The first **Pen Records** release was on Bobby Wood's band, **The Skylighters**, and they would have their first chart action (#74 on the Hot 100) after the move to Sam Phillips when they leased Wood's version of Kesler

composition  **If I'm A Fool For Loving You** (later, of course, famously covered by Elvis at American Sound) to **Joy Records** in the Summer of 1964.  
PEN 352A

 **You Make Me Feel So Good**

Here's the exuberant A Side of Nelson's Pen 45, issued (as we determined back in **Part One**) in September of 1964, while the Bobby Wood release was still riding the charts. *"They're dancin' all around, hands in the air - they're doin'the twist, just like this..."* Just a fun record, I love Clarence's down and dirty, slightly off-kilter guitar solo. As the label's new signing, Nelson would most likely have become Kesler's 'go to' guitarist for his other productions at Sam Phillips during this period. *Hmmm...*  
XL 105

 **Wooly Bully**

For one reason or another, Lucchesi and Kesler would start up another label named **XL** around this time. According to Stan, they cut this monster of a record in *"late '64, we cut it and we released it in early '65... it was out a long time before anybody would touch it."* When MGM finally did pick it up that April it went positively viral, on its way to becoming Billboard's Number One Record of 1965. Cut in the same studio, by the same producer, just a couple of months after Nelson's Pen single... *I'm definitely thinking that could be our man Clarence playing that infectious 'jerk' rhythm guitar! Yeah, baby!!* Judging from what we've heard so far, I'd say he definitely had it in him! I haven't been able to find anything that confirms my theory, but I haven't found anything that disproves it, either. Allow me to present one more bit of evidence in support of this hypothesis:

MGM 13725

 **Good Times**



The only other single released under Clarence's name appeared on *MGM* in 1967... *a payback for helping them sell all those Sam the Sham 45s? Hey, could be!* Larry Grogan posted the flip of this one over on **Funky 16 Corners** way back in 2009. Both sides were produced by the 'flamboyant but beloved' Memphis figure **Edwin Hubbard**, another first-call studio musician who went on to create a niche for himself as a new age 'flute-picker' and all-around character. I'm not sure who's rocking that Hammond organ on here, but they sure are cookin' it along! I'm loving Nelson's typical fractured 'vise-grip' approach to the Telecaster as well... *"A Good Time was had by all!"*

Now let's take a look at a couple of things that have come to light since last time:

Preston Lauterbach posited that the 'Williams' listed as the composer of 'Big Party' (in lieu of the actual songwriter, **Chips Moman**) may have been *WDIA* dee-jay **A.C. 'Moohah' Williams**, which certainly seemed like a good possibility... but, looking at an alternate pressing of *STAX 150* that I found on YouTube, I noticed that this one had the full name of the songwriter credited as one 'Jerry L. Williams' - not Moohah after all. I also noticed that the publishing is listed as 'Beckie' - which was owned by Eugene Lucchesi. *Hmmm...*

Jim Cole sent in an interesting article from *The Memphis Press-Scimitar* of October 26, 1964 about a performance by *The Mar-Keys* 'on the same platform' as then President Lyndon Baines Johnson, with some information about Jerry L. Williams:

The *Donnie Nix Wilrod 45* actually was released and, lo and behold - *the publishing company?* Beckie, of course! I think this whole set-up gives an idea of how business was conducted in Memphis back then, with outside concerns like Construction and Wholesale Liquor Distributors bankrolling sessions in return for certain concessions, like the songwriting and publishing credits. *Not that there's anything wrong with that...* Jerry would go on to be the road manager for Paul Revere & The Raiders for around six years before opening the *Trans-Maximus* studio with Steve Cropper in 1970. He is now, according to Jim Cole, *"famous around here as the garage impresario of Memphis"* There ya go.

The *Press Scimitar* article goes on to say:

*Which puts Clarence Nelson on the same stage with LBJ just a month after his Pen single was released!* So far, I've been unable to find any other references to the 'Royal Arms Band', or to Margaret White and Clifford Jackson for that matter. Wilbur Steinberg (who apparently shared the band's management with Jerry Williams), is another story:

HUT 4401

### **Ramblin' Blues**

Earl Forest makes a reference to 'the Steinberg brothers' in the *Juke Blues* article, and we know, of course, that *Lewis Steinberg* was the original bass player for *The M.G.'s*. According to **Howard Grimes**, his brother Wilbur was a member of *Bob Talley's* band in 1960, although I'm not sure what instrument he played. This rockin' little number we have here was cut in 1958, and *Talley* is listed as the songwriter. If we figure Wilbur as the sax player, that could be a young Clarence on the guitar... I think it has the elements of his developing style, anyway.

There's a *lot* more to talk about, here, but at some point I just have to stop... this ought to keep us busy for a while!

*Please join us in the discussion...*

*As always, please feel free to email us any scans, photos or mp3s you might have that pertain to the case. You are now a Soul Detective... Welcome Aboard!*

Special thanks to *Juke Blues*, Brian Baumgartner, Jim Cole, Stan Kesler, Rob Bowman, Ross Johnson, Howard Grimes, Darryl Carter, Scotty Moore, Frank Bruno, John Ridley and John Broven.

*(...continued in Part Three)*



**SOUL DETECTIVE**



## SOUL SAUCE

By **red kelly**

Hello there... as you may recall (maybe not), I got this idea a while back for a sort of news column, based loosely on the one that ran every week in Billboard during the 'Soul Era'. The concept was to create a place where we could talk about things that are happening now, without as much focus on the past.

I did put a few of these columns together, and the plan was to place them in the **Soul Sauce Archives** after they'd had their day in the sun. One thing led to another and, after a while, the posts were going straight to The Archives, and promptly disappearing forever. Although the long-awaited **Red Kelly Index** has rescued a good many articles from the swamp of time, it's 45 only format has left some of these more current topics out in the cold.

With this new imagining of the Soul Detective experience, I've provided a permanent place for Soul Sauce here on the front page where it belongs. Although our ongoing investigations will still run on the good ol' **soul detective blog**, all new cases and updates will appear here first

as well. Links for all open inquiries are also available on our expanded **Case Files** page, as well. *In Vinyl Veritas!*

- red kelly, March 2015

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SIR LATTIMORE BROWN .....





Never Alone - The Gospel ...



COSIMO CODE TRAILER



**RECENT ADDITIONS:**

*133-2231 - SUMIT 3401 - 1967*

*1-161 - TULANE 103 - 1961*

Raymond Washington - Sh...



*153-510 - GOLDBAND 1124 - 1962*

**AUDIO FINDS:**

*53-1613 - SHO-BIZ 400 - 1966*

The Soul Brothers - Later F...



*251-2578 - Soulin' 148 - 1968*



Tony Owens - I Know You ...



*85-2610 - Alon 9037 - 1968*

Clemon Smith - The Sweet...



o v wright



# NATHAN & THE ZYDECO C...

