

# SOUL DETECTIVE

## ⑧ CLARENCE NELSON

*The first new Soul Detective Case in almost five years, we'd like to take this opportunity to thank [Dr. David Evans](#) and [Jim Cole](#) of the University of Memphis, and [Eric LeBlanc](#) of the Victoria Conservatory of Music for their expert input and advice.*

Arguably one of the most influential figures in the development of The Sound of Memphis, guitarist Clarence Nelson has remained in the shadows. We hope you will join with us in our quest to change all that.

According to [Eric LeBlanc](#), the [Tennessee Death Index](#) lists Clarence as being born in Galloway, Tennessee in 1934, and passing away in Memphis in March of 1986. Armed with that information, I was able to track down an obituary that appeared in [Living Blues](#) #74, and was written by [David Evans](#):

## Clarence Nelson

Clarence Nelson was born in 1934 in Galloway, Tennessee and died on March 9, 1986. after a long bout with cancer. At the age of eight he began playing a strand of broom wire attached to the side of the house. In 1951 he began playing the guitar, moved to Memphis, and soon became the guitarist with Ben Branch's band at Curry's club, backing the Largos and Vel-tones vocal groups as well as many touring R&B stars. Clarence stayed with Branch's band for about eight years. In 1963 he formed a three-piece band called the Mustangs with Melvin Lee on bass and Elmer Jackson on drums that worked for a number of years with vocalist Spencer Wiggins. Throughout the 1960s, and early 70s, Clarence played on a number of recording sessions for producers Chips Moman, Willie Mitchell, and Isaac Hayes, backing such artists as James Carr, O.V. Wright, Barbara and the Browns, and Sam the Sham. He also recorded singles under his own name for the Pen and MGM labels. In the early 70s, he toured with Stax recording artist William Bell. As the Memphis R&B and commercial music scene dropped off in the mid-1970s, Clarence spent time in New York, New Jersey and Wisconsin, exploring the music scenes there. Around 1977 he returned to Memphis and joined Prince Gabe and the Millionaires, recording with them on their first album (Four Ace TOAD 001). In 1981 he and keyboard player Larry Isbell split off from Gabe and formed a duo playing in a jazz blues style, often borrowing Gilmore Daniel on sax when he wasn't busy with the Hollywood All Stars. In 1982 he began filling in with the Fieldstones and recorded with them behind the Jubirt Sisters and Little Applewhite (High Water 414, 415, and 422). He will also be heard on future Fieldstones releases. In 1983 he filled in as a second guitarist with the Hollywood All Stars and will be heard on one track of their forthcoming album. He traveled to Venezuela with Prince Gabe in 1980 and to Holland with the Fieldstones in 1982. Clarence Nelson was a quiet man and a very versatile musician with a tasteful guitar sound and a mellow tone. Although he could play any style of music, he knew not to add too many fancy turns to the blues and preferred to find the right tone with his fingers rather than with electronic gadgetry. He will be greatly missed in the Memphis music scene.

© 1987 Living Blues

—David Evans

Further research turned up a [page](#) about Clarence on our esteemed colleague Sir Shambling's Deep Soul Heaven:

## Clarence Nelson

Clarence Nelson was a Memphis guitarist who worked in several city bands in the 60s like the house band at Johnnie Currie's Club Tropicana. No doubt he also played on R & B recording sessions as well, and he was a member of the Fieldstones on High Water in the 80s. but he only seems to have made two 45s under his own name.

The famous Memphis engineer Stan Kesler, whose work for Goldwax and other southern soul labels like XL is rightly revered, apparently owned the Pen label (although XL's Gene Lucchesi may also have been involved) but this is the only 45 on it that I could recommend. **I Hurt** is a simple piece of country soul, just a rhythm section, no horns, but Clarence Nelson's vocal turns it into a memorable one. Although his range isn't too great he uses a lovely gritty tone which makes the fine melody work very well.



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### MEMPHIS

Eugene Lucchesi and Paul Bomarito, Pen Records, are promoting Clarence Nelson, guitarist and singer they recently signed. His first single is "You Make Me Feel So Good" and "I Hurt." ... © billboard 9/12/64

**I Hurt** gets a mention in Billboard in September of 1964, which also confirms Sir Shambling's suspicions that Eugene Lucchesi had a hand in the Pen imprint, as did someone named Paul Bomarito. That name ring any bells with anyone? It seems a shame that Nelson's 'lovely gritty tone' didn't earn him a follow-up release on the label. What a great record.

"Well, Red," you might say, *"that just about covers it, doesn't it? Why start up this whole case on him?"* Because I believe there is more work to be done. *"No doubt he also played on R&B recording sessions..."* sayeth Ridley and, according to David Evans, *"Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, Clarence played on a number of recording sessions for producers Chips Moman, Willie Mitchell, and Isaac Hayes..."* Our mission here will be to identify as many of those recordings as we can, as that is where Nelson's true legacy, and rightful place in Memphis music history, has been waiting all these years to be discovered. The earliest mention of him that we can find comes courtesy of Jim Cole, who supplied us with this great ad for a Little Richard concert in July of 1956. It's interesting that Clarence already had name recognition as a solo artist a full eight years before his first single... With Jim Crow still in full swing, note that there is a 'section reserved for colored' at this show in which all the performers were black. Although we're not sure who Booker James was (a dyslexic reference to a certain New Orleans legend, perhaps?), We know that The Vel-Tones were Memphis' premier vocal group at the time.

**Terrific Rock 'N Roll Show**  
**LITTLE RICHARD**  
 (In Person)  
 Featuring Memphis No. 1 Hit Tunes  
 "Rip It Up" . . . "Ready Teddy"  
 Added Attractions—Vel-Tones  
**Booker James—Clarence Nelson**  
 Adm. \$1.50 Advance—Door \$2.00  
 Goldsmith's Ticket Office—Poplar Tunes  
 Walgreen's (Main & Union)—Lansky Bros.  
 Modern Music—Olswanger on Union  
 SOUTH HALL  
**Auditorium, Tuesday, July 24, 8 P.M.**  
 One Performance for White—Section Reserved for Colored

© Commercial Appeal 7/22/56



According to the Evans obituary, Clarence had backed up The Vel-Tones as a member of Ben Branch's house band at Currie's Club Tropicana in North Memphis. As The Veltones, they would have the first R&B release on Sattelite Records in 1959, with a song written by Chips Moman and Jerry 'Satch' Arnold, **Fool In Love**, which would end up being leased to Mercury for national distribution. I'm not sure if that's Clarence or Chips playing that wild guitar on there, but suffice it to say that this is one historic 45, foreshadowing so much of what was to follow.

The first record that we know for sure features Clarence Nelson on guitar (thanks to Rob Bowman's exhaustive Liner Notes for **The Complete Stax/Volt Singles**), would be released by Stax five years later:

STAX 150





Another great unsung singer from this period was Barbara Brown. With her sisters, she fronted a group called Barbara and the Browns. The Brown family was a large one consisting of ten girls and two boys; four of the girls, Barbara, Roberta, Betty and Maurice, ended up in the group. They had originally sung gospel as the Brown Sisters. Then one of their brothers had gone down to Chips Moman's American Recording Studio to discuss the possibility of making a gospel recording. Chips listened to the group sing two spirituals. He then played them "Big Party" and they recorded it that night.

Maurice recalls, "We didn't want to sing rhythm and blues but that's what he put on us." No one quite remembers how the record ended up coming out on Stax but some sort of deal was made with Chips, and the record briefly reached the Hot 100, climbing to #97. The great guitar line is played by the late Clarence Nelson (who recorded solo singles for MGM and Penn and was a member of the Fieldstones), while Bobby Woods is heard on piano.

© 1991 Atlantic Recording Corporation

▶ **Big Party**

One of the greatest Stax 45s to be released in 1964, it seems scarcely credible that it could have been cut by *Chips Moman!* Moman, of course, had been on the outs with Jim Stewart ever since Green Onions hit in 1962, and had just recently settled his lawsuit with Stax. He had used that money to open his own rival studio across town with the lawyer who had negotiated that settlement, one *Seymour Rosenberg*. Maybe releasing this single was part of the deal? As one of the first records to be cut at American, it demonstrates that Chips was still a force to be reckoned with.

<b>BIG PARTY (Legal Title)</b>		
BMI Work #114589		
<b>Songwriter/Composer</b>	<b>Current Affiliation</b>	<b>CAE/IPI #</b>
MOMAN LINCOLN WAYNE	BMI	21174330
<b>Publishers</b>		
BECKIE PUBLISHING CO INC	BMI	2477510

I'm not sure who the 'Williams' listed as the composer on the label might have been but, according to the BMI database, the song was written by Chips himself. I guess that was where Jim Stewart drew the line - there was

no way the name 'Moman' was appearing on a Stax label at that point! In any event, *check out Clarence Nelson on the guitar!* Just elemental Memphis, man. It is interesting to note that Bobby Wood was already in the house...

The next iconic 1964 single that we know Clarence Nelson appears on is this classic inaugural Goldwax release by O.V. Wright. We know this through various conversations we've had over the years with Chips Moman, Quinton Claunch and Roosevelt Jamison, all of whom were there at 827 Thomas Street the night it was recorded.

GOLDWAX 106



▶ **That's How Strong My Love Is**

They just don't come much deeper than this, boys and girls. One of those records that still gives me a chill every time I hear it, Nelson's guitar work on here lies at the very foundation of Memphis Soul. Released during the era when Billboard didn't compile an R&B chart, and overshadowed by Otis Redding's Volt version in early 1965, this 45 remains a hidden gem that once again illustrates the importance of Moman's early days at American Sound. Claunch knew a good thing when he heard it and, even though he would



lose O.V. to Don Robey shortly after this was recorded, he would continue to cut at American with Clarence, according to Roben Jones in **The Memphis Boys:**

**GOLDWAX 113**



### ▶ **It's Wonderful To Be In Love**

They cut the Ovations singing "It's Wonderful to Be in Love" at American, with Chips engineering, and several of his future group (Gene Chrisman on drums, Bobby Wood on organ, Tommy Cogbill on bass). "They wanted me to engineer and then do whatever else," Chips said of his role. Reggie Young was not there. "There was an old black guy on some of the early records, Clarence Nelson," remembered Wood. "They wanted Reggie to play that Nelson style." The piano player recalled that Clarence's bluesy playing had been a considerable influence on Chips's guitar sound. Claunch also recalled Nelson's presence there.

© 2010 University Press of Mississippi

Another great record, Sam Cooke impersonator Louis Williams led the Ovations all the way to #22 R&B with this one in early 1965 in the wake of Cooke's untimely demise. It's interesting that Bobby Wood recalls Nelson as 'an old black guy' even though he would have only been 30 years old at the time. Wood goes on to say that Clarence had been 'a considerable influence' on Chips' own guitar sound, and that he wanted Reggie Young to play 'that Nelson Style'. Hmm... let's see. An influence on both Chips Moman and Reggie Young, I wonder if Clarence could possibly have been more of a pivotal figure in the development of that stinging Memphis guitar sound...

"Another influential figure for me was a guy named Clarence Nelson," Cropper adds. "I think he played in [saxophonist] Ben Branch's band. Duck had played in that band too. And Clarence Nelson was a phenomenal Telecaster player. I picked up on him, and so did Reggie Young, who became the guitar player over at American Recording where Chips had gone."

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Well, in an interview with Alan DiPerna for **Guitar Masters: Intimate Portraits**, Stax stalwart Steve Cropper acknowledges his debt to Nelson as well, calling him "*a phenomenal Telecaster player...*"

There you have it. As I said earlier, you'd be hard pressed to find a more fundamentally influential personage in Memphis music history, yet few people even know his name. There is no note on Beale Street, no 'Mike' from the Memphis Music Hall of Fame...

This case had been kind of simmering on a 'back burner' for a while, but something happened on the last **road trip** that finally convinced me to get off my ass and get things started... John Broven and I were in our little rental car with Howard Grimes and Darryl Carter when this song came up on the car radio:


M.O.C. 664

### ▶ **Hey Little Girl**

As soon as they heard it, both of them chimed in at the same time, "*That's Clarence!! That's Clarence Nelson!*" We had spoken with them about him before, and they knew we were on the lookout for material. Just a great song, it was written by Don Bryant and produced at Royal Studio by Willie Mitchell. I knew the song well from the great **Forgive This Foolish Man** compilation, but I always thought that was Reggie Young on the guitar. I figured Hi Records, pre Hi Rhythm, meant Bill Black's Combo, or what was left of it, right?



[ed.note: as I write this, I just got the sad news that **Bobby Emmons** has passed away. Just a giant of a figure in Memphis (and Nashville) music history... we will miss him, his music, and his genuine smile. May He Rest In Peace.]

Well, the tune gets a mention in Billboard in May of 1967, which would place it as being cut *after* Reggie Young and Bobby Emmons had finally decided to make the move and leave Hi to work with Moman at American. This is further evidenced by the fact that Sound Stage 7 2585 also shares the R&B Spotlight that week, Sam Baker's great  **That's All I Want From You**, cut at American with the newly formed 827 Thomas Street Band and arranged for John R by another recent arrival, Dan Penn, whom Chips had just succeeded in luring away from Rick Hall at Fame. I'm not sure of the circumstances in which Clarence left American, but I get the feeling that Chips had his eye on Bill Black's

boys all along. He was, after all, a member of the Combo himself while Reggie was in the service, and when he left Stax he opened American Sound literally across the street from the original location of Black's Lyn-Lou Studio.

What all of this indicates, or seems to anyway, is that Clarence became the Royal Studio guitarist after Reggie left, and before Teenie got there... hmmm.



Let's rewind things a minute, first... a few years ago, when we were working on **Looking Straight Ahead**, Darryl Carter told us the story of how he first came to American in 1965: *"Asking around, he heard about a funky little studio that some guy had just opened up in North Memphis, and got up the courage to go knock on the door..."*

As it turns out, there's a little more to the story. When I told him recently that I had finally started writing up our case here on Clarence, he told me: *"Well, Chips' wasn't the first door I knocked on. 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. Clarence took me aside and told me, 'Man you don't want to work here, Earl don't pay shit!' and he was the one who took me over to American to meet Chips. As I told you before, after he heard me sing, Chips told me maybe I should think about becoming a songwriter. I had never written anything in my life, but I got together with Clarence and we came up with a couple of things. The first one we cut was on this girl, Fran somebody, I don't remember..."*


## R&B SPOTLIGHTS

### CHART Spotlights—Predicted to reach the R&B SINGLES Chart

JAMES CARR—Let It Happen (Press, BMI). GOLDWAX 323  
 LARRY WILLIAMS & JOHNNY WATSON—Two for the Price of One (Nelchell, BMI). OKEH 7281  
 JOE HINTON—You've Been Good to Me (Don, BMI). BACKBEAT 581  
 JONATHAN CARTWRIGHT—I'm Walking Behind You (MCA, ASCAP). VEEP 1260  
 BILLY T. SOUL—Call on Billy (Vakin, BMI). MUSICOR 1248  
 SOUL BROTHERS—Some Kind of Wonderful (Anteresgeo, BMI). ATLANTIC 2406  
 JOHNNY ADAMS—Don't Wait Too Long (Cash Songs, BMI). MODERN 1036  
 NORM WEST—Hey Little Girl (Jac, BMI). M.O.C. 664  
 PAUL KELLY—Sweet Sweet Lovin' (Tree, BMI). PHILIPS 40457  
 THE EXOTICS—Boogaloo Investigator (Excellorec/Chatlee, BMI). EXCELLO 2284  
 SAM BAKER—That's All I Want From You (Weiss & Barry, BMI). SOUND STAGE 7 2585  
 BENNY LATIMORE—Girl I Got News for You (Sherlyn, BMI). DADE 2012

© MAY 20, 1967, BILLBOARD



A search of Darryl's Songwriter pages on the **BMI Repertoire** turned up three songs he had written with 'Nelson Clarence'. Some creative googling of a combination of those titles with the name 'Fran' confirmed that Work #1149956 was the song he was talking about, which took me right back to **Deep Soul Heaven**, where Sir Shambling maintains a page on a young lady named **Francine Carr**. He (of course) favors the flip,  **I'll Always Be In Love With You**. Written by **Memphian** Archie Bradley, in Ridley's words, the song is "...a strong ballad complete with pumping piano, well arranged horns and some nice guitar fills." Fills which have been very obviously (in hindsight) provided by our man Clarence! John was kind enough to send us the other side:

PAPA S NEW BAG AIN T NOTHING B (Legal Title)		
BMI Work #1149956		
Songwriter/Composer	Current Affiliation	CAE/IPI #
CARTER DARRYL	BMI	5371025
NELSON CLARENCE	NA	65551082



YOUNGSTOWN 604A

 **Papa's New Bag Ain't Nothin' But A Hag**

As Sir S says, "*The funky flip is a very fine answer to Brother James' huge hit,*" and that it is... Way funky, with an almost Eddie Bo-ish New Orleans feel to it, driven by a greasy bass line (that I imagine is being played by Tommy Cogbill), and punctuated by Nelson's 'chank' guitar and some punchy horn lines that just won't quit. Very cool that it was Darryl's very first songwriting collaboration! You may notice that, on the label anyway, Carter and Nelson share the composer's

credit with 'Crews' - which, I'm sure, refers to *Don Crews\**, who would have been newly arrived on the scene at American at that point as well. Try as I may, I can't seem to locate any further information on Francine... think she was related to James?

There's a lot more to tell, more 45s we need to check out, and some obvious questions that still need answers, but I think we'll leave that for our next installment...

-Detectives?

*\*Don Crews son Erick has been in touch recently with a further clarification:* "The inclusion of my Dad's name on the Francine Carr 45 is not my Dad trying to steal royalties from the writer (as was often the case in the music business), but most likely an agreement between the writer & Dad so that some 'front' money could be given, and in return a slice of the pie and a credit. No-one had any money at that time except Dad who was venturing into that dangerous world called 'The Music Business'. His farm interests are what kept the lights on and the machines running for a substantial time. I have seen his name on 2-3 singles. When I asked Dad, he replied in his usual less than forthcoming 'Well, I was just tryin' to help a fella out who was having a tough time.' My Dad was too kind to not eventually get devoured by a cutthroat business.

*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!*

*...continued in PART TWO*





# 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

### RED KELLY INDEX

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SIR LATTIMORE BROWN .....



Never Alone - The Gospel ...





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RECENT ADDITIONS:

**133-2550 - MODE 501 - 1968**



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The Soul Brothers - Later F...



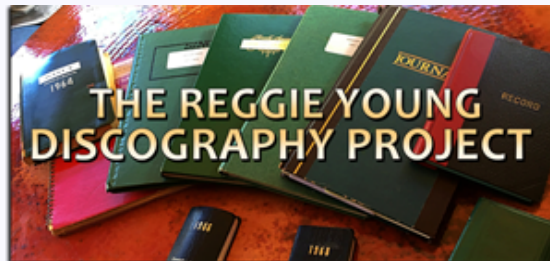
*251-2578 - Soulin' 148 - 1968*

Tony Owens - I Know You ...



*85-2610 - Alon 9037 - 1968*

Clemon Smith - The Sweet...



BILL BLACK'S COMBO - ...



DON BRYANT - I'll Do Th...







Darryl Carter - Looking ...

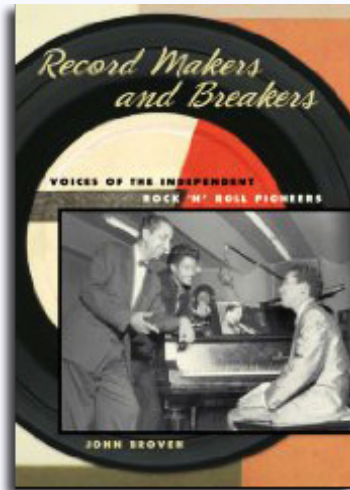


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NATHAN &THE ZYDECO C...





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