



## The Bo-Keys keep Memphis R&B alive

If Steve Cropper was the chief architect of the Stax sound, then Scott Bomar is its primary and tireless renovator who, with his instrumental group the Bo-Keys, enhances the original structure with improvements and upgrades while skillfully maintaining every ounce of historic integrity.

*Got to Get Back!*, the Bo-Keys' sophomore album, fluently glides between Memphis's golden soul era of the 1960s and the twenty-first century. The players here are the real deal. Guitarist Skip Pitts was performing at Harlem's Apollo Theater at fifteen, then graduated to Washington D.C.'s go-go scene before solidifying his reputation as Isaac Hayes's wah-wah man. Trumpeter Ben Cauley was aboard the plane that took Otis Redding's life four decades ago, and has survived that crash and a debilitating stroke. Saxophonist Floyd Newman's recording legacy is well documented, while drummers Willie Hall and Howard Grimes have cut a wide swath in Southern soul. Rounding out the group are the next generation of Memphis musicians: Keyboardists Al Gamble and Hubbie Turner, a crackerjack horn section that includes session men Jim Spake and Kirk Smothers, Bobby "Blue" Bland trumpeter Marc Franklin, and Bomar himself, a bass-playing producer who scored *Hustle & Flow* and *Black Snake Moan* and produced Cyndi Lauper's last album, *Memphis Blues*.

Recorded via analog tape at Bomar's Electraphonic studio, nestled on the south end of downtown between fabled Highway 61 and Central Station, which Amtrak's City of New

Orleans rolls through twice a day, *Got to Get Back!* unwinds like an aural road map of modern Memphis. "90 Days Same As Cash" shimmers and percolates with all the promise of the garishly painted car-title loan shops on Park Avenue, while the lean, moody lines on "Jack and Ginger" evoke the flashy liquor store neon that lights up Crump Boulevard. "Cauley Flower" blooms like the proverbial weeds that grow through the cracks in the Orange Mound sidewalks, seeking sunlight. "Sundown on Beale," meanwhile, sprawls into the no-man's-land between Saturday night and Sunday morning, bridging a slow dance-floor grind and a meditative gospel number.

Not even a series of spectacular guest vocalists—William Bell, Percy Wiggins, Charlie Musselwhite, and Otis Clay—can steal the spotlight from these instrumentals. Wiggins delivers a jazzy take on the "5" Royales' "Catch This Teardrop," and Musselwhite sings a long-forgotten Prince Conley song, "I'm Going Home." You can trace the musical signposts between the Bo-Keys, the Mar-Keys—Stax's first instrumental hitmakers—and "5" Royales guitarist Lowman Pauling. "Catch This Teardrop" was originally recorded by Memphis tastemaker "Poppa" Willie Mitchell for the now obscure Home of the Blues label. Even more interesting, "I'm Going Home" was released on Stax forerunner Satellite Records in 1961, and, not so coincidentally, a twelve-year-old Grimes played drums on the session.

Call it serendipity, but for the Bo-Keys there are no happy accidents. These are simply Memphis musicians doing what they do best. Not for posterity, nor for tourist bucks. They're executing serious work and flourishing at their craft, sounding effortlessly relevant in this chaotic, contemporary city.

● Andria Lisle