

skip pitts

BY MICHAEL ROSS

DROP THE NAME SKIP PITTS INTO A conversation and you might get blank looks—but mention “Shaft” and the room lights up. Everyone remembers fondly the wacka wacka of the tune’s wah pedal played by—you guessed it—Charles “Skip” Pitts. But even before “Shaft,” Pitts had assured his place in guitar history by creating an unforgettable signature riff for the Isley Brothers’ classic “It’s Your Thing.”

“My group, the Midnight Movers, began backing the Isley Brothers just after they left Motown and started their own label, T-Neck Records,” says Pitts. “Ronnie Isley showed me his piano part and I added a harmony.” Pitts’ C-E \flat -D notes against the bass notes F-A-B \flat tweak the ear, but it is the extra right hand strokes across the deadened strings of his burgundy Gretsch Chet Atkins Tennessee that add the funk. “I have my own style,” he explains. “When I play rhythm I will put a lot of drum beats with it.”

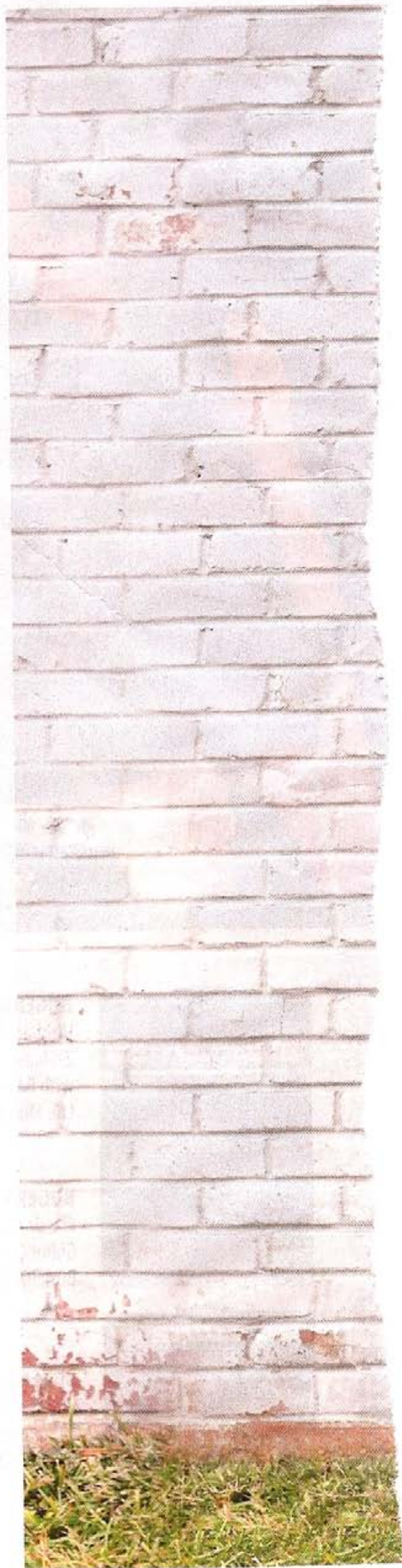
Discussing his years with the Isleys, Pitts takes time to debunk a common guitar legend. “Jimi Hendrix did not teach Ernie Isley to play the guitar,” he maintains. Some sources say Ernie played bass on “It’s Your Thing,” while Pitts remembers him playing second drums. In either case the younger brother apparently didn’t start playing guitar until two years after Hendrix left the Isleys. “If Ernie was a guitar player I didn’t know it,” says Pitts. “He was in school at the time. Those licks on ‘Caravan of Love’ that he did later, with his brother and cousin [in the group Isley Jasper Isley], came from me. He was a very good mimic. If he heard you play something, he would pick it right up.”

It was Pitts’ work with the Isleys that afforded him the opportunity to create his second classic guitar part. “Because of ‘It’s Your Thing,’ Isaac Hayes called me to come to Memphis in 1970,” says Pitts. “Isaac wanted to get his own band. He had been using part of the Bar-Kays, along with musicians belonging to other groups. “When I got there, he took me to the music store to get anything I wanted. I bought a Maestro box with the different dials that made different sounds. [The G-1 Rhythm ‘N Sound, an early filter, fuzz, and drum/bass synthesizer unit with brightly colored rocker knobs]. Later, I got an MXR Phase 90.”

“I started out playing more rhythm with Bobby Emmanuel doing most of the lead stuff. Isaac bought us each a rig of Sunn amps—two heads and two 4x10 cabinets. Anything Isaac did he overdid. We would just use one cabinet and head in the studio, and after a while we would use just one of each on stage, and have it miked. Other than the Sunn, the Fender Twin Reverb was it for me back then.”

The creation of the “Shaft” part was part logical lead-up and part happy accident. “Isaac had already done ‘Walk On By’ with the wah-wah before I got there,” recalls Pitts. “It was played by Michael Toles. They would need someone to get down on their hands and knees to move the wah while Michael was playing, because he was just a young boy and couldn’t get it going.”

Pitts had no such problems. “I had a Maestro Boomerang wah that I was using on the road,” he relates. “The ‘Shaft’ part was created because Isaac needed something driving





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for the beginning of the movie, when Richard Roundtree is coming out of the subway and walking through Times Square. Isaac had drummer Willie Hall lay the sixteenth notes down on the hi-hat. While Willie was doing that, Isaac was searching on the piano for something to put with it.

"I was checking my pedals. I tested my overdrive, my reverb, the Maestro box, and then I started in with the wah. Isaac stopped everything and said, 'Skip, what is that you are playing?' I said, 'I am just tuning up.' He said, 'Keep playing that G octave.'

Pitts was playing a part that alternated between the G on the D string and G on the low E string. "I did it in the key that the tune was in," he explains. "When he went from the F to the E, I switched to E. He said, 'No, go back to your G.'

"It was getting repetitious to me. So when he went to the next part I tried to do the rhythm with him. He says, 'No. Stay

with what you are playing. I don't give a damn what I play.' He told me how to play it and put it in perspective, but it was my creation."

Pitts recorded a tune for another Hayes soundtrack that became part of a more recent hit: "Hung Up on My Baby," from the movie *Tough Guys*, was sampled by the Geto Boys for "My Mind's Playing Tricks On Me." Pitts' rhythm licks can be heard in the sample, but you need to listen to the original to hear his fuzz solo freak-out courtesy of the G-1.

The success of "Shaft" made Pitts a popular player in the Memphis studios. Soon Pitts received a call from another Stax artist, Rufus Thomas, and a third classic lick was born. When Orleans ("Dance With Me") covered Thomas' hit, "The Breakdown," they also copped Pitts' trick of running his left hand up and down the strings along the neck—a technique that creates a whip-lash/ricochet effect.

"I created that to make up for missing a note," Pitts admits. "If I am playing a song, and I don't have the lick yet, I will put something in like that. I didn't get it from anybody else. I started doing that when I was 12 years old. Later I started incorporating it with the drums on purpose, but in the beginning I used it to make up for the quarter-note I missed on a particular song. Nobody knows that, but you can go on and tell now that I told you."

More recently, Pitts has been keeping the Stax guitar sound alive in his work with the Bo-Keys, a largely instrumental group from Memphis. On their record, *Got to Get Back!* [Electroponic], his wah work is heard to full effect on tunes like "90 Days Same as Cash," and the "Shaft"-inspired "Work That Thing."

He puts his own twist on the Steve Cropper rhythm/lead style on tunes such as "Just Chillin'," and "I'm Going Home." The latter, a blues featuring Charlie Musselwhite,

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recalls Cropper's work with Albert King. "I was into Steve Cropper because I was into Otis Redding," says Pitts. "I liked the two-string things he did, like on 'Soul Man.' I told Steve one day, 'You took a country lick and made it funky.'"

For his early Stax work, including "Shaft," Pitts favored black and sunburst Les Paul Customs. Today he prefers a recent Fender Stratocaster, especially for live performance. "A Stratocaster is so durable, man. I could bust you in the head with it and it would still stay in tune," he laughs. "I've got locking tuners on it. Once I tune it, I might not

have to touch it again that night. When I use the Les Paul, I have to tune all through the set. When recording, I also use a Les Paul and a Telecaster. These days, I use a Super Reverb in the studio and on stage."

Scott Bomar, bassist and producer with the Bo-Keys, helps Pitts achieve the classic Memphis guitar sound in the studio. "I have two amps that Skip played through: a silverface Super Reverb on about 85 percent of the tracks, and a silverface Deluxe Reverb on the rest."

"Most of the guitars were recorded blending a Shure SM7B with a Royer R-121. The

SM7B is like a beefier SM57, and is used for a lot of voice-over work. On a few of the songs we used an Electro-Voice 664 instead of the Shure. The EV has a unique midrange bump. I set the mics pretty close on the speakers, off axis, and then I ran them through a Vintech X73i preamp.

"I also tracked Skip through one of my favorite pieces of gear for guitars: a JFL Audio CLF5 compressor made by Frank Lacy down in Oxford, Mississippi. For mixing I used a Tubetech LCA 2B compressor."

The Washington, DC-raised Pitts began his career working with more urban acts such as the Coasters, Gene Chandler, and the Isleys, and has played the blues with Cyndi Lauper—but his heart in is the Southern-fried sound of Stax. "It's close to church soul, like when people get the Holy Ghost," he says. "Memphis soul guitar? On a scale of one-to-ten, I give it a ten and a half." ■

MORE ONLINE



- See Pitts perform his signature "Shaft" lick with Isaac Hayes.
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