

2011 LIVING BLUES AWARDS WINNERS INSIDE!

Living Blues

Issue #214 • Vol. 42. #4 • ©



GRIT & GUMPTION

Chicago's Maxwell Street

THE BO-KEYS

NAT REESE

HOMEMADE JAMZ

\$5.95 US \$5.95 CAN
www.livingblues.com





Archie "Hubie" Jenkins



Howard Grimes

In the last decade vintage soul has reached new audiences via the career revivals of artists including Bettye LaVette and Solomon Burke, while groups including New York City's Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings have spearheaded a retro-soul movement. Sitting somewhere between these trends is Memphis' Bo-Keys, including both younger fans of vintage music and veterans who cut their teeth at Stax and Hi.

Founded in 1998, the Bo-Keys are led by 37-year-old bassist, producer, and engineer Scott Bomar and currently include veterans Howard "Bulldog" Grimes, the drummer with the Hi Rhythm Section and the band's most recent member, Charles "Skip" Pitts, best known for his wah-wah guitar riffs on Isaac Hayes' *Shaft*, Archie "Hubie" Turner, keyboardist with the Hi Rhythm section, and Ben Cauley, trumpeter for the Bar-Kays and lone survivor of the 1967 plane crash that killed four of his band mates and vocalist Otis Redding.

JACOB BUCKENSTINE X 7



Marc Franklin

THE Bo-Keys



Charles "Skip" Pitts

Floyd Newman



GOIN'
BACK TO
MEMPHIS

Ben Cauley

Scott Bomar



by
Scott
Barretta



The Bo-Keys play Minglewood Hall, Memphis, 2011.



WHISKEY SNAPS PHOTO

Filling out the current lineup are founding member Marc Franklin, a trumpeter and the Bo-Keys arranger who works regularly with Bobby "Blue" Bland, saxophonist Kirk Smothers, who was often used by Willie Mitchell, and, on occasion, first-call sax player Jim Spake, an original member of the group.

Although the group doesn't have a regular lead vocalist, they often feature Percy Wiggins, who recorded dynamic soul sides for labels including Atco, RCA, and Abet and worked for many years as the vocalist with the Hi Rhythm Section; his brother is soul recording artist Spencer Wiggins. On the Bo-Keys' recent, sophomore release **Got to Get Back!** (Electraphonic) Percy is featured—along with Spencer and John Gary Williams of the Mad Lads—on one of only two covers, *Catch a Teardrop*, originally recorded by the Five Royales for Memphis' Home of the Blues label.

Guest artists on the CD include Charlie Musselwhite, who grew up in Memphis and both sings and plays harp, saxophonist Floyd Newman, who played baritone saxophone in B.B. King's band in the mid-'50s and later the Mar-Keys, vocalist William Bell of Stax fame, and Hi Records stars Ann Peebles and Otis Clay. The latter, who sings on the title track, particularly enjoyed reuniting with old friends at the sessions.

"Ben Cauley, he was with the Bar-Keys when I first played Memphis in 1967—I came in as a headliner at the Ellis Auditorium," says Clay. "I met Skip with Gene Chandler [in the mid-'60s], just to show how far back that

goes. Howard, with the Hi Rhythm section, we started doing that stuff in '70, I was still with Atlantic. We worked together over the years, like when we went to Japan in '83 for the **Soul Man: Live in Japan** album.

"[The Bo-Keys] have done exactly what they set out to do, when you talk about that Memphis sound. It was something we did back then, but here it is in the 21st century and it still sounds fresh."

The publicity for the independently released CD has so far been impressive, with coverage in NPR's Weekend Edition, the *Wall Street Journal*, and Tavis Smiley's radio show. The group also received acclaim for their work behind Cyndi Lauper on the Bomar-produced **Memphis Blues**, which was nominated for a Grammy® in the traditional blues category last year.

The story of the Bo-Keys to a large degree mirrors the renaissance of Memphis soul in the last decade, manifested most clearly in the establishment in 2003 of the Stax Museum of American Soul and the associated Stax Music Academy. Memphis native Bomar, who discovered the riches of Memphis music via his mother's 45 r.p.m. collection, points to a late '90s event at B.B. King's on Beale Street as the catalyst for the revival. There, former Stax publicity rep Deanie Parker—later the CEO of Soulsville USA, which oversees the Museum and Academy—handed out unclaimed RIAA Gold Records to a long list of Stax veterans, all of whom performed a song.

"It was like every living member of the Stax family was there that night—it kind of

changed my life," says Bomar. "The seed for the Stax Museum was planted that night."

Shortly thereafter Bomar put together a band to back Stax songwriter Sir Mack Rice that included Franklin and Spake. On another early show the group—adding keyboardist Ronnie Williams, a longtime collaborator with David Porter—comped Rice, Rufus and Carla Thomas, and Eddie Floyd. In 2003 Bomar began teaching bass at the Stax Academy, where he met and recruited fellow teachers Pitts and drummer Willie Hall, a stalwart at Stax who later anchored the Blues Brothers.

In 2004 the group cut their first CD, **The Royal Sessions**, an allusion to Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios, where Bomar worked under Mitchell for about five years; his projects there included engineering Al Green's **I Can't Stop** [2003] and **Everything's OK** [2005]. **The Royal Sessions** featured mostly instrumentals and had an early '70s feel, and the critical and fan responses were positive.

Bomar's ability to promote and go out on the road with the band were limited, though, as he became tied up with film work. He composed the scores for two films by Memphisian Craig Brewer, the hip-hop themed *Hustle and Flow*, which featured music recorded by the Bo-Keys, and *Black Snake Moan*, which drew upon the sounds of north Mississippi hill country blues. Bomar also produced three songs for the film *Soul Men*, in which the Bo-Keys appear on stage backing Samuel L. Jackson and Bernie Mac.

The Bo-Keys did, however, continue to

perform semi-regularly, backing veterans including William Bell at the Stax Museum, appearing behind Mable John at a Memphis revue at London's Barbican, and supporting a wide array of artists—Roy Head, Harvey Scales, Lil' Greenwood, Dennis Coffey, Tami Lynn, Willie Tee, Bobby Patterson, the Bobettes, and Texas Johnny Brown—at Ponderosa Stomp associated events in New Orleans, New York, and Austin.

"They've been one of my go-to bands at the Stomp," says founder and organizer Ira "Dr. Ike" Padnos. "They learn the parts, come ready to play, and they're a stop-on-a-dime band behind whoever they back. Where else can you get the guys that actually played on the records and know how to do it right? And as a band with their own material, no one captures the classic Memphis sound better."

"Right now we're probably more active than ever," says Bomar, "and the lineup is the best it's ever been—we're all on the same page. The drummer has to have to the right feel for us to do this music, and having Howard Grimes in the band, it's like a night and day difference."

Howard Grimes

"It started with my mother putting that beat in my head"

Howard Grimes arguably embodies the Memphis soul tradition more than anyone else alive. As a teenager in the 1950s he played drums with leading R&B and jazz bands around town, and he anchored some of the first singles on the upstart Satellite label, which soon became Stax. By the mid-'60s Grimes was working on the road with the band of Willie Mitchell, which included brothers Charles, Mabon ("Teenie"), and Leroy Hodges. As the Hi Rhythm section the group played on Mitchell's productions of artists including O.V. Wright, Otis Clay, Ann Peebles, Syl Johnson, and, most notably, Al Green.

Since the sale of Hi in the mid-'70s Grimes has been woefully underutilized, although he did reunite with the Hi Rhythm section in the '80s and '90s on albums by Clay and Peebles. He's the most recent addition to the Bo-Keys, having replaced longtime drummer Willie Hall in 2010 and is grateful for the opportunity to be active on the scene once again.

Grimes was born Memphis in 1941, and his most vibrant early musical memories are of the joy his mother experienced while listening to records. "I was about six years old and my mother was playing all KINDS of music—Jimmy Dorsey, Count Basie, and Glenn Miller. I'd seen how happy she was around the house doing chores and things, and I heard her popping her fingers to this music. And I had no idea she was putting it down in my ear."

Grimes has strong memories of listening to the Grand Ole Opry while sitting on his grandfather's lap, though as he grew older he would surreptitiously switch the radio over to WDIA when his grandfather went to Masonic lodge meetings.

"As I got up a little in age in elementary school I heard [Bill Doggett's] *Honky Tonk*," says Grimes. "And that music energized me. I was hearing a new beat, I was hearing a new thing. And my mother was popping her fingers so loud it sounded like the drummer. And later on Ray Charles came in the picture, so that kind of caught my ears."

Grimes says that drums first really entered his consciousness when he heard the band practicing at nearby Manassas High School, and he became further entranced by the band's fancy uniforms. He built his first drum set out of ice cream boxes, using as a cymbal the metal cover of his grandfather's fan.

"It all came to me from God, I was self-taught," says Grimes. "I didn't know what I was doing, but I could hear all these different



JACOB BUCKENSTAFF

rhythms on records. It started with my mother putting that beat in my head."

In the ninth grade Grimes began playing in the band at Manassas under Emerson Able, who had been a student at Manassas under jazz bandleader Jimmie Lunceford. Grimes was recruited by Able to play in the big band of Onzie Horne, an alumnus of the Ellington orchestra who arranged for and recorded with B.B. King and Bobby "Blue" Bland in the '50s. Horne also taught scoring and arranging to Willie Mitchell and in the '70s wrote orchestrations for Isaac Hayes.

Able—who Grimes says "was the cause of my career"—gave Grimes work backing well-known R&B artists at charitable events sponsored by radio station WDIA at the Ellis Auditorium. Grimes also began playing out at nightclubs.

"I had my first gig from a schoolteacher at Booker T. Washington at the Rivermont Club for a dollar and a half," recalls Grimes. "[Then] I started working with the [pianist] Bob Talley quintet five or six nights a week at the Hi-Hat Club. I got with Floyd Newman's band and I worked over [in West Memphis] at a club called the Plantation Inn—Isaac Hayes was in the band."

Grimes first went out on the road in 1958 with bands organized

by booker/club owner Sunbeam Mitchell, and colorful stories about these early experiences are featured in Preston Lauterbach's new book *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock'n'Roll*.

In 1960 Grimes was called down to Satellite Records by producer Chips Moman for a session with Rufus and Carla Thomas. According to Grimes, the initial drummer couldn't sustain a solid beat on the duet 'Cause I Love You.

"Chips pulled me in, and he built this band around half of the Mar-Keys [including guitarist Steve Cropper and bassist Duck Dunn], and with Floyd Newman, [tenor saxophonist] Gilbert Caple, and myself. The beats that I was playing [initially] wasn't working, but I remember [bassist] Wilbert Steinberg said, 'Tell Howard to play the beat he plays at the club, *Ooh Poo Pah Doo* [a 1960 hit single by Jessie Hill]. So I played the beat on it, and that's what Chips and them was looking for. That was a joyful day for me.

"Chips and them called me back for William Bell, that's when I recorded *You Don't Miss Your Water* till the well run dry. Mr. [Jim] Stewart [Satellite/Stax co-owner], he kind of liked Carla, so they called me back for *Gee Whiz*. So those were my first major records, that's what started everything."

Grimes' career at the Satellite/Stax concern, though, was short-lived. According to Grimes, when he couldn't be contacted to come in for a session with organist Booker T. Jones, Moman called up drummer Al Jackson Jr., who was working at the time with Willie Mitchell's current group, Don Bryant and the Four Kings, at the Club Manhattan.

"I found out a little later on that Steve Cropper had recommended Al Jackson, and he came up and recorded *Green Onions*," says Grimes. "When the record took off he was still with Willie, and Booker T had to go to Detroit, so I had to play in Al's place [with the road band]."

Grimes continued to work actively in town with bandleader Gene "Bowlegs" Miller and Ben Branch and the Largos. As the house band at Currie's Tropicana club on North Thomas Street, the Largos played behind artists including the Five Royales and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, and Grimes appeared on the Dot LP *Beale Street Today* by Lorece Thompson and Largos.

In the mid-'60s Grimes began working with local blue-eyed-soul group Flash and the Board of Directors, who were hired by Dick Clark to go on a national tour with Paul Revere and the Raiders.

COURTESY HOWARD GRIMES



Howard Grimes, holding drumsticks and squatting next to vocalist/pianist Isaac Hayes, with Floyd Newman's band at the Planatic Inn, West Memphis Arkansas, late 1950s.

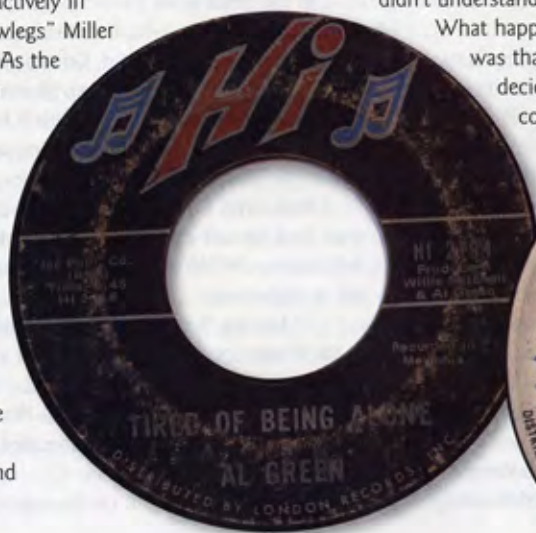
"I went out with these guys and it was the wrong time," says Grimes. "Things were going pretty smooth till I got to Montgomery, Alabama, and that's where the trouble started with me being a black drummer. I didn't realize that Dr. Martin Luther King was in Selma on his way to Montgomery.

"I had been playing there [in Memphis] with Chips for years and we were all together white and black, there were no problems. But the outside world wasn't ready for it, and I didn't understand it.

What happened was that I decided to come off

the road because a cat called me the n-word, created a little problem, but I thank God for Paul of the Raiders, he raised a lot of sand, he got angry.

"When I come home I called Teenie [Hodges] and I tried Willie Mitchell's band," says Grimes. "I had been a hyper musician, because the bandleaders had me playing like that. The day that Willie tried me out Willie stopped the band and said, 'Hold it, hold it. What the hell is you doing? Look, slow the goddamn tempo down.' He said, 'We're all going to get there at the same time.' And when he set the time I felt so relaxed and comfortable that I picked right up



the structure of him. He hired me and I cut five instrumental albums with him before he took us off the road.

"When I cut *Soul Serenade*, that was 1968, that was the record that took him all the way, he had instrumental of the year [Cashbox' Instrumental Group of the Year]. We did *American Bandstand*, I met Wolfman Jack on the *Midnight Special*, Disneyland, Joey Bishop's show, we played with Ike and Tina Turner, I worked. 'Cause Willie Mitchell was hot, that record was hot."

According to Grimes, Mitchell decided to concentrate on producing after an auto accident in Texas resulted in injuries to many band members. The first major production was of vocalist O.V. Wright, who was brought to Mitchell by Don Robey of Duke/Peacock.

"We cut *Eight Men and Four Women*, and O.V. Wright took off," says Grimes. "And behind O.V. Wright came Ann Peebles, Gene 'Bowlegs' Miller brought her from St. Louis. Then behind her came Syl Johnson. Then behind him came Otis Clay. We cut Denise LaSalle's first hit, *Trapped by a Thing Called Love*, and then she had another vocalist, which was Bill Coday, we cut *Get Your Life Straight*, which was a hit. So, man, we were hot. We was puttin' everybody in the charts. Stax was cuttin', but hey weren't doin' what we were doin'."

Grimes' most notable achievements with Mitchell, at least in terms of sales, were the recordings he cut for Hi with vocalist Al Green.

"During the time Willie was out there with *Soul Serenade* we was playing up in Waco, Texas," says Grimes. "Al Green come up to the stage that night and asked Willie to let him sing. And Willie didn't let people sing on his shows. We took a break and Willie asked the club owner, 'That man that came up to the stage, is that Al Green?' The man said, 'Yeah, that's him.' He said, 'Man, you jokin'.' Al Green, man, looked like he was homeless. He had on an old coat, we

couldn't believe that was him. We knew Al Green, but nobody had heard of him since *Back Up the Train* [the single *Back Up Train* and a similarly titled album by 'Al Greene' were released by Hot Line Records in 1967].

"Willie decided to let him come up and sing. When he walked out there and opened his mouth, the whole damn house come to life. That's when Willie seen it. He knew that's who he was looking for, that was the boy. So he set up a deal for him to come in a couple weeks later. We couldn't get nothing going at first, and one day he come in the studio with a little acoustic studio and told Willie he had a hit. He sat down and played *Tired of Being Alone*. We heard the way he was playing those changes and Teenie picked that stuff up. Man, we had that song in one take and the rest is history. Everything else was gold."

The golden period at Hi came to an end abruptly, though, when the label was sold in 1977 to Al Bennett of Cream Records. Grimes and the other band members were told about the deal while working at a session, which was canceled. The band members were promised profit shares, but according to Grimes it was a relatively insignificant sum, particularly given what they had created over the years.

"That's when my life took a turn, and I was homeless for quite a while," says Grimes. "I was living with my mother till I met a lady that came in my life, she took me in, named Juanita. She got me back on the road, she bought my clothes, took care of me."

For over three decades Grimes played relatively little and developed a reputation of being reclusive. Scott Bomar was well aware of Grimes' work, but only came in active contact with him following a show Grimes performed at the Stax Academy in 2007 in which HE reunited with the Hi Rhythm Section and Syl Johnson.

Grimes, though, only got into contact with Bomar after being inspired by an odd source—his postman had looked him up on the Internet, discovered his achievements, and told him he needed to get back out and play.

Grimes says he talked to God

about what he should do, and then showed up at Bomar's studio offering his services.

"I said, I'm available, man, I need a job, I need to work, man," says Grimes. "I was letting him know it wasn't about money. I knew that all I had was my talent to play drums. I knew my name stood for something, that people hadn't heard from me in years."

Grimes was impressed by Bomar's knowledge of Memphis music history and says that they soon developed a musical connection akin to the one he had with bassist Leroy Hodges. Bomar initially hired Grimes to work on a blues album he was producing with Cyndi Lauper, *Memphis Blues*. His pleasure with that project, which was nominated for a Grammy and featured guests including Allen Toussaint, led to his working with the Bo-Keys and the recording of *Got to Get Back*.

Grimes is currently looking forward to more work with the Bo-Keys and hopes that, like Willie Mitchell's Royal Studio, Bomar's Electraphonic Sound will continue to draw in more outside artists. Remarkably humble for a man of his achievements, Grimes ended our interview with some reflections on the lessons he's learned as a Memphis musician.

"The masters I came under, they didn't ever tell me anything about money, they taught me to tell the truth, and they taught me that when I play gigs to be on time," says Grimes. "They taught me to not to overplay myself, they told me to never thought I was better than anybody else, and always be willing to help. These was the blessings they gave me, and I'll be seventy years old next month. I'm still who I was, I'm the kid the first day that they picked me up. That's what's instilled in me, and that's what I'll be until the day that God calls me home."

Skip Pitts

"I always play with beats in mind"

If the Bo-Keys don't quite have a front man, Skip Pitts, with his perpetual smile, mesmerizing guitar antics, and a speaking and singing voice that evokes Howlin' Wolf, is certainly the focal point on stage. Like his early hero Bo Diddley, Pitts emphasizes rhythm over melody, notably on those songs where he features the wah-wah technique that he most famously employed on *Shaft*.

Although Pitts became a Memphis institution via his long association with Isaac Hayes, he grew up in the nation's capital,





Skip Pitts performing with
The Bo-Keys, New York, 2010

where he was born in 1947. Pitts first began playing guitar at age 11, spurred, like many young males, by the attention young ladies paid to musicians.

"My girlfriend Tina was having a birthday, and when I got there I brought her a little cash register, this was one of my toys," says Pitts. "And there were two guys there, Gregory and Haywood. They were standing there with their foot on the kitchen chair and playing hollow body guitars, they were doing like *Honky Tonk*. And all the girls came to them, man, my girlfriend and them were surrounding them, just blushing, and I got so jealous that she didn't pay me any mind.

"I got home, my father came home from work, and I came runnin' to him cryin', 'Daddy, Daddy, I want a guitar.' We took a cab down to 7th and T to Waxie Maxie's. I picked out one guitar, and to get that I would have to get it on layaway. And the man said, 'I can give you that one for 35 dollars.' It was a big Stella guitar, I'll never forget it, it was blond, it had F-holes. It was a regular converted to electric, one clip-on pickup.

"First thing I did, I went to Gregory's house, and believe it or not he tuned it to the open string E [a tuning Pitts used for about two years]. And I banged and banged and taught myself, and a few months later I was playing and all the girls came to me including Tina. She said, 'I'll be your girlfriend again,' and I said, 'No, that's all right.'

Pitts learned to play guitar largely by listening to the radio, and eventually formed a group, the Enjoyables. "It was me on guitar and

three other singers. I started [plays funky guitar rhythms] to make up for rhythms that we didn't have. See, I like drums and polyrhythms, too—I always play with beats in mind on guitar."

An early influence was Bo Diddley, who lived in D.C. during the '50s and '60s. "I was listening to his records—*Bo Diddley is a Gunslinger*, *Hey Bo Diddley*, *Bo Diddley*—all that stuff with maracas. It used to drive me wild because it had that *beat*. He played some cold-blooded rhythms. Bo Diddley was my boy."

Although Pitts was too young to see Diddley play at clubs, he and the Enjoyables got to know him on a professional level. "He was rehearsing us to record us down in his basement on New Jersey Avenue," says Pitts. "He never got to record us because the deal never came through."

The Enjoyables did record for Capitol and the D.C. label Shrine, which also released a single by member Sidney Hall, currently with the Flamingos. Other members included Keni St. Lewis, still active in L.A. today, and Carl "Maxx" Kidd, a pioneer in D.C.'s distinctive go-go style. Immediately prior to our interview, Pitts was enjoying a phone call with old friend Chuck Brown, whom he knew long before Brown became recognized as the "godfather of go-go."

Pitts met many of his musical heroes at his uncle's Pitts Motel, where James Brown's band stayed while in town. He also encountered R&B royalty at D.C.'s premier African American venue, the Howard Theatre. One notable was Billy Guy, the lead singer of the Coasters, who began managing the Enjoyables and arranged an audition for the group with Atlantic's Ahmet Ertegun. The group was rejected, but Ertegun offered to sign Pitts.

"He wanted me by myself, and I never did do it because at the time I was so into that group," says Pitts. "We had a lot of nice original material."

Pitts gained his first glimpses of fame when the Coasters hired him to play bass for a week at the Howard and another week at Baltimore's Royal Theatre. Around this time vocalist Gene Chandler asked Pitts if he knew of a guitarist; Pitts subsequently played the guitar parts from Chandler's singles that were supplied by another major Chicago artist.

"I was into Curtis Mayfield and I knew those songs," says Pitts. "And [Chandler] got me to go on the road with him with my mother and father's blessing. We were on the road all the time from '64 to '68. I was his bandleader and everything—that's how I got my band. Five pieces, two horns, bass, guitar, and drums. I brought Ernest Xavier Smith [second guitarist in the Enjoyables] with me on bass.

Although Curtis Mayfield played on many of Chandler's recordings, Pitts did contribute to others, including his *Live at the Regal* LP.

A day after leaving Chandler, Pitts and his group were hired by Wilson Pickett; the resultant ten-piece band was later dubbed the Midnight Movers in honor of Pickett's similarly titled hit. "Every time I left an artist, the next day I was with hanging out with another artist," says Pitts. "I didn't have a rest period—we were hot!

"That week we did the first gig with Pickett and it was fantastic—I had never seen a crowd like that. Gene did 98 percent black; with Pickett it was like 50/50 black and white. I'd never been bashful about playing, so to me it was just a boost to know that I'm playing with this big crowd. And I was directing the band."

In 1968 the group toured Europe—Pitts can be seen in multiple videos of the tour, which all reveal the power and incredible stage presence of the band. Upon returning to the U.S., though, the Midnight Movers left Pickett over a pay dispute.

"The next day the whole group got with the Isley Brothers. [Producer] Herb Rooney was tight with the Isley Brothers and they were leaving Motown, so he got us to come to New York, and we started jamming with them, and the next day we started recording with them.

"Our band was with the orchestra that recorded *It's Your Thing*—they had some problems with Motown and *It's Your Thing*, but they



COURTESY SKIP PITTS

Isaac Hayes' group, early '70s. Skip Pitts is to the right, wearing a broad-rimmed hat. Trumpeter Ben Cauley is second to the left of Isaac Hayes.

couldn't have had a problem with the rhythm because we created that in the studio [sings his instantly recognizable rhythm, bass, and lead guitar parts].

"Most of the things we did with them were in the studio. We did *Live at Yankee Stadium*; they had an album out on it and they made a movie out of it. I remember going to see it at the movies. I had my back turned, and my Afro was just starting to grow.

"When I was with the Isley Brothers, Sam and Dave was staying in New York. The Midnight Movers produced them through Atlantic—it didn't do nothing, but we got some money. They had the Charmels, a singing group that used to tour with them [the group recorded four singles for Stax subsidiary Volt], and I started going out with the singer [Eula] Jean Rivers. And lo and behold, Jean Rivers used to go out with Isaac Hayes before he was the Isaac Hayes."

When Hayes played the Apollo Rivers went to the show and told him about her boyfriend who had played on *It's Your Thing*. Hayes, it turned out, was looking for a new guitarist.

"In November of 1970 he sent us round-trip tickets to Memphis, and when I met him he was on the pay phone with this big old maxi mink coat and big old mink hat. I said, 'Whoa, I gotta have me one of those coats.' He said, 'You get with me you'll get one.' And it came to pass.

Pitts' "audition" for Hayes took the form of a friendly jam session, and Hayes hired him to play in both his studio and road bands. "I came out on *Black Moses*, the first song I did was his version of *Never Can Say Good-bye*," says Pitts. "Then everything else that he did I was on. Everything."

It wasn't long before Pitts recorded his signature lick. "We had a deal to do the movie score for *Shaft*, and we were up in Studio City outside of Los Angeles at MGM on the lot," says Pitts. "We had a place where he could roll the movie and work on music for the scenes, source music is what they call it. We got to the beginning when Richard Roundtree is coming up out of the subway and going through the streets, and there was a rhythm to his walk.

"Isaac was just hitting stuff on the piano and I had a maestro box and a boomerang wah-wah. When I plugged in I hit my sources on the maestro box and got my settings, and then I went to the wah-wah and said [sings the rhythm guitar riff from *Shaft*].

He said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm just checking everything down here.' He



said, 'Have you ever played that on a record? Have you ever heard that on a record before?' I said, 'No, man, I'm just tuning.' He said, 'Keep doing it. Do it in G.' Don't forget, I was into Bo Diddley a lot, so that rhythm was easy for me to feel. Then he went to F, and I did the same thing, but he said, 'No, go back to your G.' I went back, but I didn't like it because I wanted to play along with what he was doing. I just didn't feel what it was, not then."

"So that was the song, and the guy came in, [director] Gordon Parks, and we played it for him and he said, 'It's a hit, it's a hit.'"

In addition to recording with Hayes, Pitts played on records by Stax artists including Albert King, Soul Children, Inez Foxx, and Rufus Thomas. In 1981 left Hayes and Memphis "when Isaac had some trouble with the IRS," and returned to the band of Wilson Pickett. Hayes called him back to Memphis in 1994, and Pitts remained with him until Hayes' death in 2008.

In recent years Pitts played on the soundtrack to *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, which featured his longtime boss as "Chef," and rerecorded *Shaft* for John Singleton's 2000 remake. Pitts, who first acted in the 1974 blaxploitation film *Truck Turner* starring Isaac Hayes, has appeared in more recent films including *Black Snake Moan*, and he lends his unique voice to commercials.

In his adopted hometown Pitts' career accomplishments were acknowledged via a W.C. Handy Heritage Award in 2008, and in 2010 a star was placed in his honor on the Beale Street Walk of Fame. It's unlikely that the ebullient guitarist was ever quite in the shadow of his more famous bosses, but he clearly relishes the opportunity the Bo-Keys present to showcase his increasingly recognized talents.

"The Bo-Keys is something that I've been looking forward to doing for a long period of life," says Pitts. "This is something for me this time. I hope and I pray that *Got to Get Back* takes off. I've been doing things for everybody else, and now it's time to do something for me."

LB

