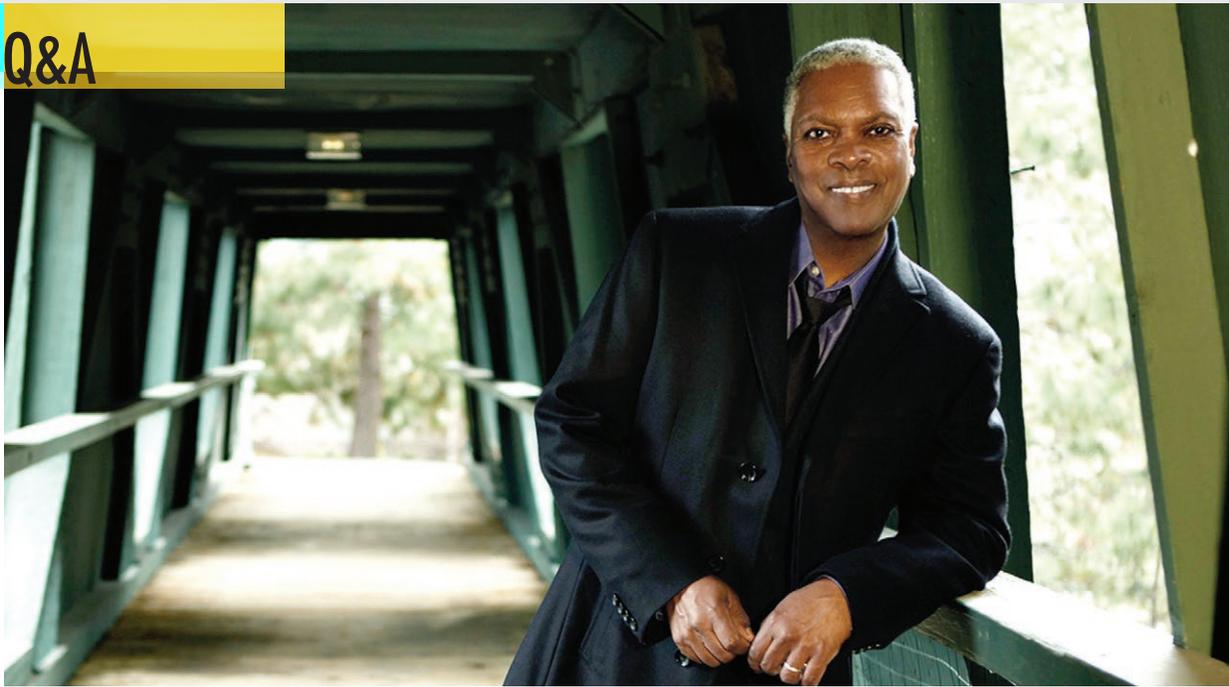


## Q&amp;A



Piper Ferguson

## BOOKER T. JONES

**An architect of the Memphis sound takes his B3 on a new adventure**

IN THE '60S, STAX RECORDS HOUSE band Booker T. & the MG's backed a host of Memphis soul stars, including Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, and Albert King. But beginning with 1962's classic "Green Onions," the quartet scored several chart-topping instrumental hits of their own. Since the group disbanded, frontman Booker T. Jones, 68, has lent his signature Hammond B3 organ sound to countless sessions and has produced albums by Willie Nelson, Bill Withers and others. He recently re-signed with the reactivated Stax and is releasing a star-studded new album, *Sound the Alarm*, that fuses classic '60s soul with modern R&B and hip-hop touches.

### What was your goal with the record?

I'm paying tribute to my roots musically. I was able to do some music the way I learned it when I was in the clubs in Memphis, but I'm playing it now with musicians I've been working with recently, like Gary Clark Jr. and my son Ted, who plays guitar. We'd go in a room together and write a song like we did in the '60s, and record it in the same room right after we wrote it. That's the Stax feeling, and it's still alive in me. I was also able to get

the more modern sounds that I like—hip-hop sounds—on some of the songs. Stax has been very close to me. It defined my life, and I had some of my best music-making times there. This return to the label means a lot to me spiritually. We used completely new technology on a lot, but the Hammond organ is the same as it was in 1960, so that's 50 years of no change—though I do try to make the instrument sound different on every song.

### Which players influenced you?

The first was Ray Charles, an alto sax player in Quincy Jones' band. He moonlighted on the Hammond M3 on a song called "One Mint Julep." I heard that and instantly knew I wanted to create that sound. Then I heard Bill Doggett and Jimmy Smith and Brother Jack McDuff.

### The MG's had a signature clean sound.

That was a conscious effort. We all had an understanding that we would keep it simple and funky. We would monitor each other to not get too outrageous. We wanted to keep it accessible. [Drummer] Al Jackson Jr. was the guardian of that more than anybody else, and [bassist] Duck Dunn was his partner in

rhythm. I would try to lead them in different directions, and they would reel me in. It was friendly push and pull—but the tension worked.

### Recall a favorite session.

"(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" with Otis, which I played piano on, was pretty special. We never did all-nighters, but this time he insisted that we not go home. Maybe he had some kind of premonition—we recorded that song during that time. I never knew it would be a hit, but we loved the song.

### Did you think "Green Onions" was a hit?

Absolutely not! It was just a little ditty that I'd done in the clubs. I was supposed to play it on the piano but I happened to play it on Hammond organ. I was so surprised to hear it on the radio.

### How'd it feel to play at the White House?

We also played there last year with Buddy Guy and had a blues night. They made us very comfortable. The president explained that he doesn't get out to do this kind of thing, so this was a real opportunity for him to jam in his own house.

—Jeff Tamarkin

**'The MG's had an understanding that we would keep it simple and funky.'**

