



WATTSTAX: “BLACK WOODSTOCK” AND THE LEGENDARY FILM IT INSPIRED

by Rob Bowman

The story of Stax Records is chock-full of glorious moments, but perhaps none was as grand or ambitious as the Wattstax concert. It was the crowning moment in the label's post-Atlantic period when, under the leadership of co-owner Al Bell, the company was growing in a number of new directions. Bell had established a West Coast office in Los

Angeles headed by Forest Hamilton, the son of jazz drummer Chico Hamilton. Stax West was conceived with a mandate that included the promotion and marketing of existing Stax products, the ferreting out of untapped regional talent, and the establishment of Stax within Hollywood's motion picture and television industries.

According to John KaSandra, one of Stax's West Coast-based artists, Wattstax began in March of 1972 when "I came down [to the L.A. office] with an idea that we'd have a black Woodstock." Seven years earlier, to the chanting of "burn, baby, burn," a sizable section of the predominantly black Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles had been destroyed by fire during the first of the 1960s race riots (referred to as "rebellions" within the community). The Watts Summer Festival had been established to commemorate the rebellions and raise money for the ailing community. It was Hamilton's idea that Stax should be involved in the 1972 festival for promotional purposes, and he had not forgotten KaSandra's "black Woodstock" idea.

On August 20, 1972, that notion blossomed into an epic one-day festival at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The day opened with Reverend Jesse Jackson leading the audience in a proclamation of the black litany, "I Am Somebody," followed by Kim Weston singing the black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." It closed with Isaac Hayes as Black Moses embodying the strength, beauty, and spirituality of contemporary black culture. In between, virtually every major artist signed to Stax performed, including the Staple Singers, Rufus and Carla Thomas, Albert King, and the Bar-Kays. All the artists played for free, and the Schlitz Beer Company helped underwrite production expenses. The event drew more than 100,000 people, making it one of the largest gatherings of African Americans at the

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time, and undoubtedly one of the pinnacle events in black culture of the early 1970s.

The day itself proved to be unremittingly glorious. The capacity audience paid a dollar apiece (all proceeds went to charities in Watts) to spend seven hours in the warm California sun listening to a stunning array of gospel, blues, jazz, and funk. Stax artists Melvin Van Peebles, KaSandra, Rev. Jackson, Billy Eckstine, and William Bell handled the MC chores alongside movie stars Fred Williamson and Richard Roundtree.

While Wattstax was clearly an event with large-scale political and sociological overtones, it was also a marketing coup. More than six months after the actual concert, the Stax organization was still producing and promoting a variety of Wattstax-related products. A double album featuring most of the live performances shipped in early 1973. Several months later, a second double album of Wattstax performances was issued. But by far the most important product to come in the wake of the concert was the documentary film *Wattstax: The Living Word*, which premiered in Los Angeles in February 1973.

Wattstax became much more than a string of great concert performances. Under the guidance of award-winning director Mel Stuart, the film remains one of the finest examples of the use of music—and its visual aspect—as a form

of profound social commentary. In addition to the concert material, Stuart, with the aid of assistant director and Stax marketing executive Larry Shaw, shot substantial footage within the Watts community. This material was deftly intercut with a biting monologue by comedian Richard Pryor. The combination helped dramatize certain realities of contemporary African American life and the crucial role that music played within it.

The film unfolds in a series of brilliantly edited chapters, with songs such as Little Milton's "Walking the Back Streets and Crying," Luther Ingram's "(If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don't Want to Be Right," and Albert King's "I'll Play the Blues for You" setting the stage for impromptu meditations on themes such as religion, the blues, black pride, love, and race relations. Reinforced visually and verbally by the community footage and various "man-on-the-street" interviews, each song seems to capture a different aspect of the Watts neighborhood and, more generally, of the African American experience. Pryor's hilarious Greek chorus-like monologues further cement these connections, creating a tapestry that is—like the festival that inspired it—both multilayered and incredibly rich.

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