



By Chris Neal

"I'm not a poet," declares Steve Cropper. "I wouldn't call myself a tunesmith. I'm a groovesmith."

While it's hard to imagine that the Songwriters Hall of Fame member who co-authored monumental classics like "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay," "Knock on Wood" and "In the Midnight Hour" couldn't be fairly termed a "tunesmith," there is no argument that Cropper is a groovesmith extraordinaire—and if the sound of sweet soul music is poetry to your ears, then he's certainly a poet.

As the guitarist for Stax Records house band Booker T. & the M.G.'s, Cropper helped define soul music in general and the funky "Memphis sound" in particular. He cut a groove a mile wide with his clean, crisp riffs and licks on hits by Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Wilson Pickett, Albert King and many others—including Booker T. & the M.G.'s itself, which enjoyed chart success as a standalone instrumental unit. He also became an influential producer at Stax before leaving the company in 1970.

During the following decade he manned the boards for albums by Jeff Beck, José Feliciano, John Prine and others while continuing work as a session guitarist for everyone from John Lennon to Wayne Newton. In 1978 he and M.G.'s bass player Donald "Duck" Dunn began backing *Saturday Night Live* stars Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi as members of the Blues Brothers Band, spawning the first revival of the Stax sound they had helped build.

The last two decades have seen that legacy loom ever larger. In 1988 Cropper rejoined the revived Blues Brothers Band (which had split following Belushi's death six years earlier), and in 1994 Booker T. & the M.G.'s began working together regularly, as well.

To those working acts he added the Northwest All-Stars, in which he plays classic rock hits alongside fellow rock legends.

Cropper struck up a songwriting collaboration two years ago with Rascals singer and keyboardist Felix Cavaliere—himself a fellow All-Star, Rock and Roll Hall of Famer and Nashville resident. "We were stockpiling quite a few songs," Cropper recalls. "We realized that this is some pretty serious stuff." The result is the duo's spirited new album, *Nudge It Up a Notch*—released, fittingly, on the rejuvenated Stax imprint.

In the coming months Cropper plans to play shows with all of his various outfits, as well as a few as a solo artist. We caught up with him at home in Nashville to discuss his evolution as a guitarist and groovesmith.

How did the writing process work with Felix?

Sometimes we'd start with a beat from a drum machine and I'd go, "All right,

here's a nice set of changes," and it would be up to Felix to follow on from that and put a nice melody to it. The ideas came either from Felix or from [producer and songwriter] Jon Tiven or myself, as far as the subject we were singing about. We reached out to some people [Henry Gross and Tom Hambridge] and got help with lyrics. It's simple in its form, but there's some interesting stuff on there.

Do you write on electric?

I do. Usually unplugged, if no one else is playing. If I'm competing with a guy with an acoustic guitar, I might as well put it down or get an amp. I don't play or write with acoustic that much. Through the years I've used it some, but I'm just not an acoustic guy. Now, a lot of the older stuff was written on acoustic guitar. Otis carried an acoustic everywhere he went, and he tuned to a chord so it was open-E tuning most of the time. I adapted the electric on a lot of Otis' songs. I tuned to a chord, what the old guys used to call "vastapol." It was basically open tuning. On songs like [Redding's 1965 hit] "I've Been Loving You Too Long," I tuned to a chord so I could get a similar voicing to what we had when we wrote the song.

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