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# Isaac Hayes's Soul Concept: Reexamining Hot Buttered Soul as a Pioneering Concept Album

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Isaac Hayes's Soul Concept:  
Reexamining *Hot Buttered Soul* as a Pioneering Concept Album

by

Bryan Terry

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Introduction

In 2018, a shockwave reverberated through the American music industry when the coveted Pulitzer Prize for Music was awarded to hip hop artist Kendrick Lamar for his album *DAMN*. The board of judges described the work as “a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African American life.”<sup>1</sup> This marked the first time a work outside the classical and jazz music genres earned the award and was just the fifth time an African American artist won the prize throughout its 75-year history. On its website, the Pulitzer Prize for Music is described as being awarded for “distinguished musical composition by an American that has had its first performance or recording in the United States.” The honoring of a popular rap album was a lightning rod that ignited debate throughout the music and artistic worlds.

But an aspect of this cultural moment taken for granted—assumed, even—is that Lamar’s album was considered to be one “musical composition.” In other words, *DAMN*. was not merely a collection of individual songs, but a singular work in which each of the tracks contained therein are weaved together in a purposeful manner to convey the artistic message. As shown in the quote above, the Pulitzer’s board specifically used the term “unified” as a central concept for explaining the work’s merit.

To zero in on this idea of a unified album might seem superfluous in light of contemporary customs of musical production and distribution. New musical releases are often constructed in this way. But Lamar, in creating this conceptual work as an African American artist speaking directly to the contemporary African American experience, is picking up a thread

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Coscarelli, “Kendrick Lamar Wins Pulitzer in ‘Big Moment for Hip-Hop,’” *New York Times*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-pulitzer-prize-damn.html>.

that dates back to black artists in the 1960s, for whom these musical avenues were not always open.

During this time, the development of the long-playing record (“LP”) gave rise to larger-scale musical ideas and production—what has been termed the “concept album.” As is the case with many instances of artistic, technological, and other societal development, however, the concept album did not evolve equitably across racial and societal lines. The most noted early example of this type of album construct is the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), which is largely seen as the work that put the concept album on the map. As John Covach notes, “In many ways, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* initiated the era of ‘album-oriented rock,’ which celebrated the idea that the album as a whole is more important than any single song on it.”<sup>2</sup> But this new “era” left much music behind. In particular, music of this same time period by African American artists has not often been viewed through the lens of “album-oriented” music or, more specifically, the concept album.

It is not until albums such as Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Goin’ On* (1971) and Stevie Wonder’s *Talking Book* (1972) that the language of concept albums begins to be applied to African American music.<sup>3</sup> But these works were released some four years plus after *Sgt. Pepper*, and thus the discussion of concept albums in rock music—written by white artists and aimed overwhelmingly at white audiences—was already well underway. Another influential African American artist, however, made waves in the late 1960s with what should be considered a pioneering work in the genre of concept albums. I refer to Isaac Hayes and his 1969 album *Hot Buttered Soul*. Those who have documented soul music in the 1960s have often referred to this

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<sup>2</sup> John Covach, “The Hippie Aesthetic: Cultural Positioning and Musical Ambition in Early Progressive Rock,” in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis*, ed. Mark Spicer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 74.

<sup>3</sup> David Brackett, “Soul Music,” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014, <https://doi-org.proxy.wexler.hunter.cuny.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2257344>.

album as groundbreaking, opening the door to later works such as those by Gaye and Wonder. Both Rob Bowman and Robert Gordon, in their respective comprehensive histories of Stax Records, discuss *Hot Buttered Soul* in this way. Yet Hayes's work has not generally been examined as a concept album in popular music scholarship.

In this thesis, I argue that *Hot Buttered Soul* is an early exemplar of the concept album genre and has been overlooked as such. By thoroughly examining the album's unique context and contents, I make the case that the work was more than merely a door-opener to later concept albums by African American artists. I will first consider the historical situation in which *Hot Buttered Soul* was created, focusing on the environment at Stax Records, the Memphis-based record label that produced a plethora of influential music by African American artists in the 1960s and 70s, and for which Hayes was initially a backing musician and songwriter. I will discuss how the unique conditions at a very specific moment in Stax's history provided Hayes the artistic freedom to explore new musical territory that ultimately led to this album's creation.

With the historical context laid out, I will then move toward an analysis of the contents of the album. To do this, I must first attempt to define the term "concept album." While no definitive text has been written on the idea of the concept album in and of itself, I will provide a review of scholarship related to this idea, including an overview by Marianne Tatom Letts in her 2010 book on Radiohead's *Kid A*.<sup>4</sup> This overview is complemented by Letts's general outline of various types of concept albums and their makeup. Letts's work, in combination with additional sources by Martina Elicker, Travis Stimeling, John Covach, and others, will be used to help formulate an approach toward characterizing an LP as a concept album.

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<sup>4</sup> Marianne Tatom Letts, *Radiohead and the Resistant Concept Album: How to Disappear Completely* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Having established this approach, I can then apply it to *Hot Buttered Soul* via a thorough examination of the album's lyrical and musical content. In terms of a lyrical theme, there is a thread of Hayes's infatuation with women that traverses the entirety of the album's four songs: "Walk On By," "Hyperbolicitysyllabicesquedalymistic," "One Woman," and "By the Time I Get to Phoenix." Furthermore, what makes the joining of these four songs particularly unique is that only one of them—"Hyperbolic"—was written by Hayes himself. Instead, Hayes joined together works by other artists (Burt Bacharach, Charlie Chalmers, Jimmy Webb, etc.), broadly keeping the lyrics intact but making notable changes to their linguistic, generic, and musical portrayal.

This will lead to the more boldly conceptual nature of the album, which surfaces with an analysis of the music itself. Taken together, the music and lyrics work in tandem to create the album's trajectory. Here I will provide an analysis of the structure of the album, including its tonal characteristics, how those characteristics interact with one another and with the lyrics, the structure of each song, and instrumentation. While this theoretical analysis will be important to show the coherence of the album as one unified whole, deeper investigation will show how Hayes utilizes orchestration, vocal technique, and genres in a conceptual way as well. These characteristics are, by nature, very much integrated with one another and this album serves as an example of that. In fact, it is through the interaction of these elements that the album achieves a higher-level conceptuality—namely, the assertion of black identity. David Brackett's research on genre will be used to show how Hayes's linguistic and musical choices help make this artistic statement. Brackett's comparison of "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" as interpreted by Hayes and Glen Campbell will be of particular interest here to examine the specifics of how "intersubjective

awareness of the audience—‘addressivity’—is in play on both musical and verbal levels.”<sup>5</sup> A brief examination of the album’s cover art will be used to show how Hayes furthers the idea of black identity through this album.

Finally, throughout this thesis, societal context and the racial tension of the time will be considered in order to show Hayes’s motivations for writing such an album, as well as the barriers he faced in creating an album of this scale. I will also reference prior research on such institutional barriers more broadly. Even an analysis such as the one in this paper perpetuates a racially oriented imbalance, as the means through which I analyze *Hot Buttered Soul* were largely created for the interpretation of rock music, overwhelmingly by white musicians. Thus, I will propose a rethinking of elements that make an album “conceptual” and argue that examination of current thinking in regard to concept albums is just as important today as it ever has been given the status of albums like Lamar’s *DAMN*.

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<sup>5</sup> David Brackett, “Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 25, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2005): 83.



## **Chapter 1: Stax History and the Memphis Soul Music Environment**

Important to classifying a work as a concept album is an examination of the circumstances that preceded, and set the table for, such an album's creation. With *Hot Buttered Soul* having been released in 1969, a look at some aspects of the popular music production environment during the preceding years is warranted. Technologically, the LP was beginning to influence popular music production, and its influence would only grow throughout the latter half of the 20th century through the present day. First introduced in 1948, the LP allowed for a greater amount of musical information to be stored on a single disk.<sup>6</sup> Initially, the LP was predominantly used for classical music, but this would change as popular music artists began to recognize the technological innovation of the long-playing record as an artistic opportunity.

As mentioned above, the 1960s in particular saw the evolving use of the LP give rise to what we now refer to as a "concept album." The ability to create lengthier albums led artists and producers not only to package more music onto a single record, but also to reimagine the internal relationship among and between the songs contained therein. This artistic form of music production ran contrary to the industry's orientation around the hit single at the time, in which most music was conceived on a song-by-song basis. As Robert Gordon puts it, "The business was built around the hit."<sup>7</sup> At the outset of the 1960s, these hits were almost universally released as singles on 7-inch vinyl discs that would play at 45 rotations per minute, thus giving them their shorthand name, "45s."

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<sup>6</sup> David Buckley, "Album," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi-org.proxy.wexler.hunter.cuny.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.47210>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Gordon, *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2013), 41.

With the popular music industry oriented around the production of 45s, the move toward an album-oriented approach would require the rethinking of entrenched ideas. Early concept albums across different genres would not have been possible without unique sets of circumstances that allowed for increased artistic freedom in the studio.

In the case of *Sgt. Pepper*, for instance, the Beatles' tremendous popularity led to the creative environment that allowed for the album's production. On one hand, given the success they had achieved by 1965 alone, the group had an artistic independence and freedom through which they likely could have produced just about anything they wanted. Still, with *Sgt. Pepper*, the sense of an artistic direction was more notable than it had been in their previous works, to a large extent due to increased fatigue with their celebrity at that point. As Gould notes, "The Beatles' sense of the studio as a sanctuary from the fishbowl of fame reached its apex during these months, and in this insular environment, the experimentalism of *Revolver* became the established rule."<sup>8</sup> This experimental approach, combined with the ability to snap their fingers and summon any musical tool they wanted, allowed the Beatles to impose their artistic will in this project.

And impose they did. Take this anecdote:

When it was determined that nothing less than a forty-piece orchestra was needed to fill the twenty-four-bar gaps in "A Day in the Life," they turned the session into a gala affair: inviting friends, providing tables of food and drink, and asking the musicians (drawn mainly from the London Symphony and Royal Philharmonic) to appear in formal dress.<sup>9</sup>

Or this anecdote, about the use of life-sized likenesses to create the famous *Sgt. Pepper* album cover: "[T]he main reason for creating the image in this cumbersome manner was to create a sense of *occasion*: to imbue this historically impossible gathering of famous people with the

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 387.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

semblance of an actual event.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, *Sgt. Pepper*’s reputation precedes itself, and a list of anecdotes is almost superfluous when trying to prove the album’s illustriousness. But here the point is to show that this earth-shattering concept album came about due to a set of circumstances that set up a specific artistic and creative moment through which a strong-willed group of artists could create something new and, in this case, monumental.

In a similar way in the early 1970s, country artist Willie Nelson would impose his artistic will in order to record several concept albums including *Yesterday’s Wine*, *Phases and Stages*, and *Red Headed Stranger*. The country music industry at the time generally viewed rock as artistically and intellectually pretentious, standing “in direct opposition to Music Row’s constructions of country music as an approachable, unassuming and ‘down home’ musical tradition and of its artists as common people who enjoyed entertaining people just like themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Nelson needed to find a way around this, however, if he was to create a work that artistically conveyed himself in an authentic way. He admitted that the way he enjoyed playing made his sound “noncommercial for all those Nashville ears who were listening for the same old stuff and misunderstood anything original. They didn’t know what to do with me.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Nelson worked within the system, and recorded his first concept album, *Yesterday’s Wine*, with RCA Victor. This album, however, would end up being his last project with that label, after which he took a break and sought a more sympathetic label that would allow him to more freely express himself. Yet the *Yesterday’s Wine* sessions “reveal that Nelson was given great liberty to compose a work that reflected his changing musical and intellectual

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Travis Stimeling, “‘Phases and Stages, Circles and Cycles’: Willie Nelson and the Concept Album,” *Popular Music* 30, no. 3 (October 2011): 390.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 391.

interests, despite the expenses that RCA Victor could not expect to recoup from radio airplay and record sales.”<sup>13</sup>

Even though the stories of the Beatles’ and Nelson’s first concept albums differ drastically, the artistic strains are not dissimilar. In both cases the musicians were ready to do something different, uninhibited by expectations. In both cases they were able to exert their artistic will upon the studio sessions in which the albums were composed. In other words, these were not works upon which large groups of producers and industry executives had their grubby paws, at least during the creative process.

The point being made as it relates to this thesis is that, in two different genres of music (rock and roll and country), a pioneering conceptual work was created only under circumstances of artistic freedom. The environment and circumstances that led to the recording of the respective albums were crucial in allowing them to have been made at all.

### **Stax Records Backstory**

In 1969, Isaac Hayes had the chance to impose his artistic will in the recording of *Hot Buttered Soul*. This opportunity came as a result of its own unique set of conditions that arose at Stax Records, the label from which Isaac Hayes’s musical career was launched. In order to understand the circumstances that led to the recording of *Hot Buttered Soul*, an overview of the history of Stax is in order. Upon creating the album, Hayes was not a well-known commodity outside the music industry as he served primarily as a songwriter, producer, and backing musician in Stax’s studio. Indeed, Hayes did not have the level of musical resources available for production that the Beatles or Willie Nelson did. Although the logistical and financial

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 396.

circumstances surrounding the creation of Hayes's album were different than that of the aforementioned artists, interestingly similar *artistic* circumstances nonetheless came about.

Any discussion of African American popular music in the 1960s will no doubt focus in large part on two influential recording studios: Stax Records and Motown. The environments at these two labels, based in Memphis and Detroit respectively, could not have been more different. Stax, referred to as “the little label that could,” was seemingly stumbling its way into hits as Motown grew into a more polished juggernaut.<sup>14</sup> Motown staff musician Jack Ashford, whose nickname was “the tambourine man,” notes that the label had an “assembly-line type procedure.”<sup>15</sup> Due to this machine mentality, Motown was churning out pop hits: “Motown’s songs were manufactured for pop success. They were bright and inviting, emphasizing the backbeat with a tambourine. . . . Motown’s music was full of appeal, easily digestible.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, the creative priorities at each of the labels reflected the production mentality. As Bowman puts it, Motown tended to be “composition- and product-oriented” while Stax was “performance- and process-oriented.”<sup>17</sup>

Stax’s markedly less industry-driven approach was a reflection of the general vibe of the studio. An old theater-turned-recording space, outdated equipment, and a relatively laid back and often disorganized business environment is what would greet artists and those in the music industry upon stepping foot inside Stax. As Bowman notes, “The story of Stax Records is about as improbable and unforeseeable as any tale could possibly be.”<sup>18</sup> There were positive and negative aspects of this relaxed atmosphere. On one hand, the “little label that could” was

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 1997), 378.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Ashford, quoted in Gordon, 70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Rob Bowman, “Stax Records and the Impulse Toward Integration,” in *Issues in African American Music*, ed. Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 139.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

developing a distinct sound that began gaining recognition across the country. “The whole Memphis-soul feeling—outside of the southern nightclubs, nobody had ever heard that laid-back, barely-make-it-to-the-next-measure bluesy soul feel,” said Terry Johnson, a member of Stax’s first house band The Mar-Keys. Johnson continues, “It was different from Motown with the strings and the background voices and trying to pop up black music so white people would buy it.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the relaxed vibe led to an environment built on trust, an ethos that would ultimately lead co-founder Jim Stewart to a critical legal oversight in 1965 upon striking a distribution agreement with the larger Atlantic Records.

### **Open-door Policy**

The racial underpinning of what was happening at Stax was nothing short of revolutionary in its own right. When Jim Stewart, a white banker who played country fiddle on the side, founded the record company as Satellite Records in 1957, he knew next to nothing about music being made by African Americans, much less had any intention to be involved with the production of such music. In fact, Gordon notes that neither Jim nor his sister Estelle Axton could remember how they ended up recording their first African American group, the Veltones.<sup>20</sup> A moment that was much more ingrained in their collective memory, however, was when local musician and DJ Rufus Thomas and his seventeen-year-old daughter Carla walked in Satellite’s front door, uninvited, at their new 926 East McLemore Avenue studio in 1960.

Had that moment happened anywhere else in Memphis (or the broader American South) at the time, it would almost certainly have caused strife: “Rufus’s simple act of entering on his

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10.

own terms was actually no simple act at all.”<sup>21</sup> Given the fraught racial environment in the 1960s, Rufus and Carla’s entrance would have been seen as a political act in most circumstances. Stax, however, was an anomaly that served as an oasis of sorts. The symbiosis at the record label fostered an unprecedented level of cooperation, mutual understanding, and fraternizing among people of different racial backgrounds. The genesis of this environment was, in many ways, that moment when Rufus and Carla walked into the building. Rather than instigating conflict, this moment led very quickly to the first recording to come out of Stax (then still Satellite), which “would announce the new studio’s presence.”<sup>22</sup>

Equally as important to the racial dynamics at play in this moment was the spirit of giving anyone a chance. It would not take long for word of the new studio to spread throughout the South Memphis neighborhood where it was situated. As this happened, the location became a hangout, of sorts, for local and aspiring musicians in town. This was made even more so the case when Axton opened the Satellite Record Shop where the once movie theater used to house its concession stand. “We would dance out on the side-walks,” said vocalist William Bell, describing the scene outside the shop. “I’m sure it was good for business because the kids dancing would attract potential buyers. Satellite Record Shop was like the entertainment center for the neighborhood.”<sup>23</sup>

The by-the-seat-of-your-pants nature of the early days of Stax is quite humorous in many ways. While the kids were dancing outside the studio to the tunes of Estelle Axton’s record shop, inside “every day was something new. Jim [Stewart] didn’t know anything about the recording equipment, and I’m not sure the Chips [Moman] knew that much—just enough to get a one-track

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>23</sup> Willam Bell quoted in Gordon, 39.

machine and some microphones up and running, kind of hit-and-miss.” This accounting by Don Nix, who started his career as a saxophonist for the Mar-Keys, exemplifies something that would never really go away at Stax, at least throughout most of the 1960s. Even as the process became more routine and production more normalized, Stax never really lost this improvisatory essence. But, somehow, it worked. Nix adds, “You’re at the right place at the right time and the right stuff happened.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Memphis vs. New York**

The way Stax worked was completely foreign to just about everyone else in the music industry at the time, particularly executives in New York. In the early 1960s, Atlantic Records initially became involved with distribution of select artists who were successful early on at Stax. In the summer of 1963, Atlantic’s chief engineer Tom Dowd was sent by the label’s co-owner Jerry Wexler to Memphis because malfunctioning equipment had delayed recording for over two weeks. Upon arriving at Stax, Dowd “was in for instant culture shock. ... Dowd first noticed that one complete wall of the control room was taken up by an unbelievably huge playback speaker—part of the sound system of the old movie theater and positioned on what had been the theater’s stage—the likes of which he had never seen in a studio.”<sup>25</sup> Wexler would also be astonished in the same way about how Stax functioned. This led the Atlantic executives to view the studio and its operations almost as a novelty item, stuck in time yet able to produce some of the most relevant music of its day.

As Atlantic, and particularly Wexler, became more involved with Stax’s artists and producers, a need arose for the formalizing of a contract. In fact, a handshake distribution deal

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<sup>24</sup> Don Nix, quoted in Gordon, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 43.



had been in place between the two companies for about five years by 1965.<sup>26</sup> This handshake deal points to an underlying sentiment of the first few years of Atlantic and Stax's working relationship. Despite the yawning gap between how they functioned—one company with its pulse on the forefront of the music industry and the other in its own separate world, largely *isolated* from the industry—their interactions would largely rest on one core value: trust. Ever since Wexler first became tuned in to what was going on in Memphis in the late 1950s, he was always fascinated by the way first Satellite and then Stax functioned. In time, he and Stewart would become friends, and while each placed confidence in the other, the need for a formal contract would test the New York vs. Memphis versions of what this confidence meant.

On May 17, 1965, Jim Stewart made a major blunder. As Bowman describes it, “In one stroke of a pen, for one dollar, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton lost the rights to their entire catalogue.”<sup>27</sup> Prior to getting into the music industry Stewart's career was in banking, and he had built Stax from the ground up. Surely Stewart, with the help of a lawyer, could have understood the contents of a distribution deal. But rather than a lack of legal savvy, *per se*, Stewart's mistake was founded in the concept of trust: “it is important to understand that Jim Stewart was every inch a product of the fraternal, personalized South. . . . Stewart trusted Wexler implicitly; he didn't read the contract or consult a lawyer, or feel the need to do so.”<sup>28</sup> While Wexler pleaded ignorance to the clause in the agreement that signed the catalog rights away to Atlantic, Gordon sees it in a more sinister light: “[Jim Stewart] signed like Jerry [Wexler] knew he would, like anyone who knew Jim knew he would.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Gordon, 108.

## The Rise of Bell and Hayes

Appropriately for the Stax environment, after the 1965 signing of this agreement, Stewart and his colleagues went on for several years blissfully unaware of what he had just done. During this time, perhaps the most important figure to Stax's history other than Stewart and Axton was brought on board. Al Bell had been a DJ in Memphis in the early 1960s and had established a relationship with Stax, playing their records on his radio show and ultimately taking some of those records with him when he worked at a radio station in Washington, DC. With Stax's growth had come the need for someone who was an expert promoter and Bell fit the bill. But Bell turned out to be much more than that. From the outset, he also served as a songwriter and recruiter of new artists. This led to Bell being installed as vice president and co-owner of Stax after just a few years. By 1972, he had bought the company from Stewart.<sup>30</sup> Bell clearly was looking to take Stax in a new direction, moving the label's artists beyond the southern markets and into the larger U.S. cities.

Corresponding with the hiring of Bell and his subsequent rise in status at Stax was the concurrent rise of Isaac Hayes. Hayes's entrance into the Stax world was just as coincidental as many of the other artists. Although he had little piano experience, he had been improvising via gigs in Memphis and was picked up by Floyd Newman's band. He wrote Newman's hit "Frog Stomp" and played piano on the recording: "That's the first time that Jim Stewart had ever heard him [play piano]. Isaac had an unbelievable ear. He was playing things he didn't even know he was playing."<sup>31</sup> As is the fortuitous nature of many of Stax's musicians, Hayes benefited from the fact that Booker T. Jones (of Booker T. and the MGs) had gone to college, and Hayes became a regular in the studio.

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<sup>30</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville, U.S.A.*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Hayes's star within Stax would continue to rise in teaming up with songwriter David Porter. Porter had been hanging around Stax for quite some time, and Estelle Axton was a big advocate for his talent. But the money from making music was not enough to live off of (he had a wife and child), and he took up selling insurance to boost his income. Again we have a classic Stax story. Hayes tells of the day he met Porter: "David approached me with the intention of selling me an insurance policy. ... During our conversation, we discovered that we had similar interests. He said, 'Ike I'm a lyric man, and you're a music man, let's do like Holland-Dozier and Bacharach and David!'"<sup>32</sup> The output of the Porter-Hayes songwriting team was prolific, with "Soul Man," "Hold On, I'm Comin'," and "I Thank You" being some of their most successful collaborations with the artists Sam (Moore) and Dave (Prater).

All of the aforementioned disparate strands of Stax history—the label's founding by Stewart and Axton, the laid back, open, and often circumstantial environment, Al Bell's injection of marketing savvy, and Hayes's rising profile—converged at one moment that would begin as the unfortunate realization of Stewart's earlier legal folly, but ultimately result in some of Stax's most financially successful and high-profile years. The 1965 signing of the Stax-Atlantic agreement came back to haunt Jim Stewart and company in 1968, when Warner Bros. bought Atlantic. As Gordon describes, "The contract that Jim had signed in 1965, formalizing the handshake, actually did not formalize the handshake but rather it slipped handcuffs on him, establishing an entirely new relationship, a very good one for Atlantic and very bad one for Stax."<sup>33</sup> In a crushing blow, this was where Stewart's trust-based outlook failed him: "I had not read the fine print in the distribution agreement. In '65, I allowed that to get by me. So, I

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<sup>32</sup> Gordon, 102.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

suddenly realized that I'm in the record business and it's not all peaches and cream."<sup>34</sup> By virtue of this contract, when Stax severed its ties to Atlantic, it lost rights to the entire catalog it had built up through the label's existence thus far.

Following the loss of the catalog, Al Bell worked toward a solution. Ever the innovator, Bell matched the magnitude of the loss with an idea of equal weight. Rather than working over years to restore the catalog, he concocted a bold plan to restore it all at once with brand new recordings. The project would ultimately produce thirty singles and twenty-eight albums in eight months, a monumental feat considering Stax had been around for just short of a decade at that point and had released just forty-three albums in that time.<sup>35</sup> The massive release would be somewhat of a mixed bag. Putting out that much music at once, while an enormous accomplishment in terms of sheer volume, inevitably led to the glossing over of some of the individual works of which the release consisted. Bell accepted that criticism, but nonetheless "he and others ultimately saw those weekends as among the company's proudest moments, as it aggressively asserted its independence and its ability to be a diversified, full-service record company."<sup>36</sup>

### **Hayes's Moment**

Just prior to the mass release, the prolific songwriter Hayes, at the suggestion of Bell, gave a try at recording and releasing an album of his own. The work was titled *Presenting Isaac Hayes* and proved to be an unsuccessful venture. The album was "recorded spur of the moment following a Christmas party with only bass and drums accompanying his piano and voice."<sup>37</sup> By

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>35</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>37</sup> "Isaac Hayes," Stax Records, accessed April 29, 2019, <https://staxrecords.com/artist/isaac-hayes/>.

some accounts, the musicians had been drinking a bit too much before going into the recording session.<sup>38</sup> *Presenting Isaac Hayes* ultimately gained little traction and yielded disappointing sales. But it is not difficult to see where the experience of creating this album may have influenced his future works. The LP contains just five tracks, three on side one and two on side two, and is very improvisatory in nature. As we will see, the idea of using the LP to record longer songs as a means of expression will play heavily into *Hot Buttered Soul*. Hayes only needed the circumstances in which he could insist that he have full artistic control over a project in order to be able to make his next album something he could hang his hat on.

It is here where the story of *Hot Buttered Soul* begins in earnest, as what was initially an unfortunate event for Stax became a fortunate one for Hayes. As discussed above, upon the loss of the Stax catalog, Bell would need all hands on deck in order to make his goal of a new, instant catalog come to fruition. As part of this, Bell turned to Hayes once again and requested that he make an album. Still reeling from his first album, Hayes was not especially keen to repeat the experience. But Bell wanted this catalog, and was willing to give Hayes much more freedom in order to make it happen. This, in addition to the fact that a new album would be part of the massive release, eased the burden on Hayes: “Al said, ‘Man you got carte blanche ... I was under no format restrictions and I had total artistic freedom. There were twenty-seven other LPs to carry the load, so I felt no pressure.’”<sup>39</sup> With this relaxation of expectations, Hayes jumped on board: “I didn’t give a damn if it didn’t sell because I was going for the true artistic side, rather than looking at it for monetary value.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 181.

<sup>39</sup> Hayes, quoted in Gordon, 225.

<sup>40</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 181.

This moment warrants reiteration. To use Hayes's words, he had arrived at a point in his career where he was given complete freedom to explore his "true artistic side." It is here where the story of Hayes's artistic trajectory begins to intersect with that of the Beatles or Willie Nelson. Getting there was truly unconventional. Hayes did not have the Beatles' popularity and access to resources, and his path did not parallel Nelson's either. But regardless of the avenues taken, Hayes found himself in a position to take advantage of an opportunity to write and record an album completely of his own volition, without anyone else treading on his artistic capacity.

### **Institutional Barriers**

In the early days of concept albums, this opportunity was rare. Particularly in African American music, it was "common practice at the time" to assemble an LP by including a few hits, and then filling out the rest of the album with "B-sides and covers of recent R&B hits."<sup>41</sup> As Bowman has noted:

Up to this point, Stax had been a singles-oriented company. ... When two or three of an artist's singles became hits, additional tracks would be quickly recorded so that an album could be issued. In 1969, under Al Bell's directive, most artists at Stax would record ten to twelve tracks for an album. When that was completed, the company would then select what they thought should be a single.<sup>42</sup>

Bowman adds that "most black LPs were hurriedly and cheaply recorded to capitalize on a string of hit singles."<sup>43</sup>

It would be easy to characterize this as a music industry-specific issue, with large record companies looking to make as much money as possible on the artists and thus sticking to what they knew: singles made money. But unfortunately, there was an institutional underpinning to

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<sup>41</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

this as well, namely the idea that an African American audience was too poor and too artistically uninitiated to appreciate longer-form artistic works. Bowman puts it bluntly: “Up to this point, virtually everyone in the record industry simply assumed that the black audience was neither economically equipped nor aesthetically interested in purchasing LPs in large numbers. Consequently, black artists were not afforded the luxuries enjoyed by their white counterparts in crafting extended songs or album concepts.”<sup>44</sup>

Elijah Anderson uses the term “white space” to refer to a place where “stereotypes can rule perceptions, creating a situation that estranges blacks. In these circumstances, almost any unknown black person can experience social distance, especially a young black male—not because of his merit as a person but because of the color of his skin and what black skin has come to mean.”<sup>45</sup> As noted above, these dynamics were certainly at play when Rufus and Carla Thomas spontaneously entered what was then Satellite Records. To build on Anderson’s point regarding “what black skin has come to mean,” we might turn to a quote by James Baldwin:

Those representatives of White Power who are not hopelessly brainwashed will understand that the only way for a black man in America not to be obsessed with the problem of how to control his destiny and protect his home, his women, and his children is for that black man to become in his own mind, that something-less-than-a-man which the Republic—alas—has always considered him ... and when the black man, whose destiny and identity has always been controlled by others, decides and states that he will reject the identity imposed on him, and control his own destiny, he is talking revolution.<sup>46</sup>

This sentiment was no more strongly felt than when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life was taken by James Earl Ray’s bullet on April 4, 1968. The Lorraine Motel was nearby Stax’s McLemore Avenue studio and often served as a meeting spot for Stax employees. The reverberations of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>45</sup> Elijah Anderson, “The White Space,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (January 2015): 13.

<sup>46</sup> Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, (New York: Scribner, 2003), 263–64.

King's assassination, needless to say, had a profound impact on the environment at Stax. To say that the event served to motivate Hayes's work would be an understatement. Anything Hayes wrote from this point forward was sure to be a statement of his identity, his voice, and his desire to change society. In Hayes's words, "It affected me for a whole year. I could not create properly. I was so bitter and so angry. I thought, What can I do? Well, I can't do a thing about it so let me become successful and powerful enough where I can have a voice to make a difference. So I went back to work and started writing again."<sup>47</sup>

It would be just a short time after King's assassination that Bell would approach Hayes about recording his sophomore album. With Bell giving Hayes nearly unlimited creative space to write the album, Hayes would, in his own way, enter the cultural "white space" about which Anderson wrote. The idea of white rock artists making concept albums had been in the air for several years by 1969. Yet at this point industry leaders still did not believe an African American audience would also be interested in such musical works, which did indeed create a situation that estranged blacks, to use Anderson's words. With the motivation of America's racial strife, combined with Bell's granting of unprecedented artistic freedom, Hayes was about to change that. In the tradition of Stax Records, Hayes, like Rufus and Carla before him, entered the "white space" with his creation of a pioneering concept album, initially uninvited but ultimately embraced.

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<sup>47</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 144.



## Chapter 2: What Makes an Album Conceptual?

Placing *Hot Buttered Soul* in context as a concept album, specifically, requires setting forth parameters of what is to be expected from such an album's musical and lyrical content. But these parameters can prove to be somewhat ambiguous and elusive. After all, given its artistic origins, there was no dictionary "definition" of a concept album prior to one being created. The subject necessitated the term, so to speak. Beginning in the 1990s, much scholarly attention was given to concept albums by progressive rock artists. Popular musicologists found in that music a richness and complexity akin to nineteenth-century Romantic music. In such research, several scholars have attempted to contribute to a definition of the concept album.

In such definitions, a comparison often arises between the concept album and the Romantic song cycle. In fact, Martina Elicker specifically refers to concept albums as "Song Cycles in Popular Music" in the title of her 2001 article.<sup>48</sup> Elicker's article focuses in large part on separating the idea of a concept album from other types of albums that may contain just about any common thread: "Broad definitions [of a concept album] include basically any album that has some sort of underlying theme tying the songs together; that is, it also includes soundtrack albums, Broadway show recordings, greatest hits albums, tribute albums, charity records, Christmas albums, compilation and live albums."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, such a definition does not provide much clarity in terms of pinning down just what a concept album is. Arguing for the conceptuality of a "greatest hits" album, for instance, would surely raise more questions than it answered. Upon further analysis, Elicker comes up with her own definition: "a concept album in

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<sup>48</sup> Martina Elicker, "Concept Albums: Song Cycles in Popular Music," in *Word and Music Studies: Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field*, ed. Walter Bernhart, Werner Wolf, and David L. Mosley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 227.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

popular music is an album by either one artist or a group which contains a unifying thread throughout the songs—be it musical, thematic, or both.”<sup>50</sup>

Such a definition for the most part rules out greatest hits albums, tribute albums, charity records, and the like. Nonetheless it still leaves those of us attempting to show the conceptuality of a particular album with few parameters to work with. Yet many interpretations maintain this level of looseness of definition. The *Grove* music encyclopedia, for instance, does not contain an entry dedicated specifically to the concept album. Instead, David Buckley notes in his entry on the album more broadly that concept albums “consisted of a selection of songs either unified by one pivotal idea ... or built around a narrative sequence.”<sup>51</sup> Due to this lack of clarity, it seems that everyone who writes in some way about concept albums (this paper included) gives a definition that best suits their needs. John Covach says, “The most useful definition of the concept album views it as a collection of songs that somehow tell a story or at least address the same general topic or set of topics—the ‘concept’ of the album.”<sup>52</sup>

Yet Travis Stimeling, in analyzing Willie Nelson’s concept albums, undoes some of the threads from the definitions enumerated above. “Nelson’s work complicates many commonly held beliefs about the concept album that are drawn from progressive rock, including especially the necessity of musical and narrative unity,” Stimeling writes in an analysis of the album *Yesterday’s Wine*.<sup>53</sup> As laid out in the previous chapter, Nelson created his albums with some level of disenchantment toward the executives in the country music industry. But that did not mean that Nelson’s turn toward the concept album completely eschewed marketing. Instead, he carefully assembled the albums so that each song could also be released as a single. That said,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>51</sup> Buckley, “Album.”

<sup>52</sup> Covach, “The Hippie Aesthetic,” 74.

<sup>53</sup> Stimeling, 393.

“[w]ith the exception of two medleys that introduce and conclude the album’s A side, each of the songs is musically and lyrically independent from the rest of the songs on the album.”<sup>54</sup>

While muddying the waters of how musical content factors in the making of a concept album, Stimeling continues by bringing in an important element of such works, the cover artwork: “To outline and reinforce the narrative that Nelson had created, therefore, he joined with songwriter Dee Moeller and RCA Victor producer Felton Jarvis to explicate the concept on the album’s record jacket, exploiting the full potential of the LP as a physical object.”<sup>55</sup> To further this point, if a unifying thread was difficult to decipher in any way via the music itself, the cover art could often fill in the gaps or, in Nelson’s case, provide the lens through which to listen to the album. Such artwork would prove highly influential on a broad swath of the body of concept albums produced over time. Covach adds, “Album packaging added a new dimension to concept albums, with cover art and illustrations playing a central role and sometimes providing information that makes the story or unifying themes clearer or more obvious.”<sup>56</sup>

With the sources cited thus far, there is still a sense of choose-your-own-definition that permeates the literature on concept albums. Marianne Tatom Letts provides perhaps the most detailed analysis of concept album definitions and scholarship in her book on Radiohead’s *Kid A*. In doing so, Letts recognizes that “scholarly articles and mainstream music reviews generally treat the term as self-evident, trusting that most people know what a concept album is without needing it defined.”<sup>57</sup> This sets up an analytical trap, of sorts, that Elicker’s definition starts to dig out of while leaving much up to interpretation—the reason for this being that a “unifying thread” is incredibly subjective. One listener’s clear unifying thread is another listener’s loose or

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Covach, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Letts, 13.

coincidental similarity. As Letts notes, “A listener intent on listening to an album as a whole instead of in piecemeal three-minute chunks defined by the tracks can always, by being sufficiently clever, turn the running order into a mark of cohesion, constructing her own ‘concept’ from a narrative or at least a consistent theme.”<sup>58</sup>

Similar to what I have laid out in this chapter thus far, Letts goes on to analyze previous literature on concept albums, including a list of definitions by Donald Clarke, Edward Macan, Bill Martin, Paul Stump, and William J. Schafer, replicated in respective order below:

- “an LP intended to be integrated on a set theme”
- the “practice of tying a series of songs together by using both a reoccurring melodic theme and a program—that is, a unifying idea or concept which is developed in the lyrics of individual songs”
- the process of “taking the album itself as the level at which the music, production, cover art, and so on come together as a complete work of art”
- “the texts of a Romantic rock aesthetic ... [that] proved forerunners of a new social and economic sensibility in rock” (with regard to progressive rock), and
- an “‘extended work’ for rock.”<sup>59</sup>

The many implications of the varying interpretations in this list are dizzying. To be sure, the overwhelming majority of research into concept albums has dealt with the rock and progressive rock genres. Nonetheless, picking apart these definitions in order to filter out the tendencies toward rock genres (both overt and covert) proves daunting. Luckily, Letts has already parsed some of this out. Figure 1 shows her “Taxonomy of the Concept Album,” what amounts essentially to an overarching conclusion of what constitutes a concept album having taken prior research and exemplars of the genre into consideration.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 14.

Figure 1: Letts's Taxonomy of the Concept Album<sup>60</sup>

- I. Narrative (akin to novel, film, stage musical)
  - A. Plot
    - 1. Explicit
      - a. Timeless/mythic (“once upon a time”)
      - b. Flashback/flashforward (non-chronological)
    - 2. Implied
      - a. Constructed by the listener with little effort (causal relationships between events)
  - B. Characters
    - 1. Protagonist
      - a. Sympathetic
      - b. Anti-hero
    - 2. Aspects of one character’s psyche
    - 3. Singer as protagonist or actor (see thematic/lyrical below)
- II. Thematic (collections of songs)
  - A. Music
    - 1. Recurring motives that comment on action
    - 2. Orchestration/instrumentation (strings, winds, electronica)
    - 3. Genres (classical, folk, rock)
    - 4. Broad themes denoted by instruments or motives (brass choir as heroic, acoustic guitar as simple and pure)
    - 5. Key/mode associations (one key or closely related keys; major/minor modes)
  - B. Lyrics
    - 1. Songs on a given topic (death, environmental concerns)
    - 2. Sung by a character but not containing a narrative other than a stage show (emcee/host)
    - 3. May include key/mode associations (sad lyrics over minor music)
- III. Resistant (unified but resists interpretation)
  - A. Non-explicit plot/characters
    - 1. Doesn’t carry through entire album (tenuously linked episodes)
    - 2. Protagonist dies or is completely absent
  - B. Musical discontinuity
    - 1. Musical elements may contribute to dissolution of plot or failure of protagonist
  - C. Unclear “concept”
    - 1. Listener may be responsible for figuring out the concept
    - 2. Artist may deny that any concept is present
  - D. Lyrics
    - 1. Blur the action or intent rather than defining it

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 22.

The “resistant” concept album is a new idea in Letts’s work and is largely presented to support her arguments around Radiohead’s *Kid A*. To this point, Letts herself says, “Concept albums can be broadly characterized as either narrative or thematic.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, for the sake of this thesis, the “resistant” category can be disregarded. That said, upon a closer look at her elaborations of these categories, there are more ideas to go off of, but these ideas are not necessarily more concrete. Looking at the paragraph in which Letts sets out parameters for her “narrative” concept album, for instance, the reader finds several sentences such as: “The characters *may* be imaginary or *may* exist only as aspects of the protagonist’s psyche, as *may* the action [emphasis added].”<sup>62</sup> In this paragraph, terms such as “may,” “might,” or “often” serve as qualifiers a dozen or so times.

This is not to fault Letts’s characterization, but more so to say that defining a concept album remains elusive. The more one attempts to apply concrete language to it, the more exceptions have to be made. In many ways, it might be easier to tell when a work is *not* a concept album than when a work, specifically, is one. A concept album is *not* merely a collection of singles. Similarly, as Elicker alludes to, a famous crooner recording a group of Christmas carols does not a concept album make—or at least, it does not *necessarily* make one. Harry Connick, Jr. could theoretically record a series of Christmas songs in a specific order, interspersing interludes based on some sort of common melody that was intended to tell the story of Jesus’s birth in coherent manner. Such an album would be much more difficult to exclude from the concept album anthology. Even here, a seemingly simple attempt to exclude certain works from the concept album genre gets clouded.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

All of this said, perhaps the challenges in pinpointing an exact measure of what *does* constitute a concept album is not a bug, but a feature. What this feature allows for is a great deal of artistic freedom. Concept albums should be looked at not as a constraining idea but a liberating one. In particular as it relates to early concept albums such as *Sgt. Pepper*, or, as I argue here, *Hot Buttered Soul*, the use of the LP as a longer-form medium allowed for a plethora of ways to create conceptuality. The details and specific techniques are important and often intentional, but only insofar as they help the artist communicate the message they seek to convey. This is what makes the historical trajectory laid out in Chapter 1 of this thesis so important. Hayes, like the Beatles before him, was at a very specific point in his career and seized on an opportunity to express himself in a way that he had not previously been able to.

Rather than attempting to synthesize each piece of information in this chapter into my own analytical definition of a concept album, I instead will apply the broader ideas laid forth by previous writers to my argument and include some of the more nuanced and detail-oriented elements as supporting evidence. Letts's outline will serve as the primary foundation for the argument, as it most clearly lays out in definitive terms some of the crucial analytical elements of a concept album. In so doing, however, I by no means intend to declare that my approach is any more definitive than the approaches laid out here. The concept album has always been difficult to define, and it would seem to remain that way presently. Nonetheless, looking at album-length works through this lens is not a futile exercise. As many of the references in the preceding two chapters have alluded to, the concept album was and is still in many ways seen as a "higher" form of art than a collection of singles (whether it should be or not is another question that lies outside the realm of this thesis). Such an association being established, it is important to consider all types of popular music across genres and socio-political groups as having the potential to be

viewed in this way. In the following chapter I will analyze *Hot Buttered Soul* in depth, highlighting some of the characteristics of a concept album laid out in this chapter, while also not losing sight of the bigger picture of what Hayes was doing, creatively and socially.



### Chapter 3: Analyzing *Hot Buttered Soul*

Isaac Hayes's awareness of his audience was acute. In the process of creating *Hot Buttered Soul*, he tested out his version of "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" on local audiences in Memphis. In discussing the clubs where he performed the song, Hayes recounts, "Now, this place, the Tiki Club, was predominantly black. Across town was Club Le Ronde, a predominantly white club. I did the tune there the same way, and the response was the same."<sup>63</sup> In many ways, such a cover of a popular country-pop tune was prime material for success with both audiences. The Glen Campbell version of the song, for all intents and purposes, was aimed at a white audience. The story told in the lyrics, however, deals with emotions that are universal. But the musical language of Campbell's version would not have registered with black audiences in the way that it did with white audiences. Hayes recalled, "I was targeting the black listening audience. Very few black people knew about 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix.' But I broke it down and rearranged it where they could understand it, where they could relate to it."<sup>64</sup>

A closer look at the specific elements of "Phoenix" will follow as part of the album analysis, but important to recognizing the overarching conceptuality of the album is an examination of how Hayes plays with ideas of genre. As mentioned above, *Hot Buttered Soul's* four songs consist of just one original Hayes composition and three cover versions. All of the covers are of material written by white songwriters, although two—"Walk On By" and "One Woman"—were first recorded by black artists. Nonetheless, Hayes puts his specific artistic stamp on each of the songs.

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<sup>63</sup> Gordon, 225.

<sup>64</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 182.

David Brackett explores the musical treatment of “Phoenix” by both Glen Campbell and Hayes in his research on genre in African American music. In particular, he looks at how the two different versions of the song have characteristics that communicate with different audiences.<sup>65</sup> While Brackett’s analysis focuses predominantly on the album’s final track, the attributes he points out are an important lens through which to look at the entire album, and such a lens will be used as part of the analysis below.

Additionally, Dai Griffiths has explored the implications of performing and recording cover versions, particularly of known songs. In so many instances of recording a new version of a song, it is nearly impossible to separate the social and cultural from the musical. As Griffiths notes, “[Cover versions] help to raise retrospectively for the textual study of popular music useful points of comparison around questions of identity and political power.”<sup>66</sup> The 1960s, in particular, were a time in which these questions came into sharp focus. By asserting his African Americanness in this album, Hayes pushed back against cultural expectations of the time. In this way, the album’s conceptuality rises not only from the songs he included, but in *how* he performed them. The first and last songs on the album—“Walk On By” and “By the Time I Get to Phoenix”—are no ordinary performances of previously written music. Rather, they are an epic reimagining of the original. Gordon quotes Hayes as saying, “I felt what I had to say could not be said in two minutes and thirty seconds. I was all about feeling.”<sup>67</sup>

This long-form expression within a song echoes rock music at the time, and specifically points to what Covach calls a “psychedelic-symphonic cover.” In referring to these types of covers, he uses examples such as the Vanilla Fudge cover of the Supremes’ “You Keep Me

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<sup>65</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 82–87.

<sup>66</sup> Dai Griffiths, “Cover Versions and the Sound of Identity in Motion,” in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. Keith Negus and David Hesmondhalgh (London: Arnold, 2002), 51.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, 226.

Hangin' On,” and the Yes cover of Paul Simon’s “America.” In defining such a cover, Covach states, “The cover is psychedelic in that it contains a kind of musical trip, filled with contrasts; it is symphonic because of those same contrasts (which gesture toward classical music), but also because of the organic principle that governs the structure.”<sup>68</sup>

While Hayes’s music largely comes from a different tradition than that to which Covach refers, similar musical elements are at play. Important here is that it is the *differences* between Hayes’s music and that of the psychedelic or progressive rock traditions that make *Hot Buttered Soul* unique. He applied the large-scale ideas to which Covach refers in a very specific way to convey his own form of artistic expression. Hayes’s album includes extended instrumental solos, yes, but it also includes music that, to Hayes’s point above, communicated directly to African American audiences. The forthcoming analysis will take all of these elements into consideration in an effort to show how this album broke ground not just in terms of the length of the songs and their grandiosity, but with the musical tools used to achieve these large-scale ideas.

### **Lyrical Thematicism at a Glance**

Before delving into each song, individually, it will be useful to take a bird’s-eye view of the lyrics. Lyrical thematicism is, in many ways, in the eye of the beholder. Nonetheless, multiple definitions outlined in Chapter 2 allow for an album to be considered conceptual by mere virtue of containing a lyrical theme. Examining the lyrical content of *Hot Buttered Soul* yields a not-so-subtle topic that runs through the course of the album, namely Hayes’s infatuation with women. The lack of subtlety in the album’s lyrical theme was apparently

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<sup>68</sup> John Covach, “Yes, the Psychedelic-Symphonic Cover, and ‘Every Little Thing’,” in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches*, ed. Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett (New York: Routledge, 2019), 282.

translated directly from Hayes's life. According to his friend Mickey Gregory, "That was all he lived for. Women. Nothing was more important to Isaac than women being attracted to him." Hayes's stage MC Randy Stewart makes a similar point: "Isaac was a woman freak. He had women all over Memphis. Get them a house, a car. Women, women, women."<sup>69</sup>

The album's lyrics run through episodes in which women affect Hayes (in his role as the singer) in some sort of meaningful way. "Walk On By" tells the story of someone who cannot bear to see his former lover again ("Oh just let me grieve / In private 'cause each time I see you / I break down and cry"). Hayes explains the strangely titled second song, "Hyperbolicsyllabicsesquedalymistic," as follows: "We just wanted to tease people with all these syllables. The tune actually was talking about a beautiful affair that you had with this woman and you wanted an encore, a repeat." The third song, "One Woman," depicts a man going through an internal tug-o-war between two women in his life ("One woman is making my home / While the other woman's making me do wrong"). Finally, the lyrics of "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" depict time passing by as the singer travels away from his home and the woman whom he has left behind slowly realizes that he might not return. The woman is caught off guard, as depicted with particular poignancy in the final lyric of the main body of the song, "She just didn't know I would really go." Analyzed solely based on Letts's two principal parameters for a lyrically thematic concept album—that is, the songs all deal with a given topic and they are sung by a single character—*Hot Buttered Soul* fits the bill. As the following song-by-song analysis will show, however, the more boldly conceptual nature of the album surfaces with how the music and lyrics work in tandem to create the work's trajectory.

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<sup>69</sup> Gordon, 238.

## “Walk On By”

In musical theater, overtures are often used to get the audience’s attention and set the tone for the work—what is commonly referred to as a “curtain raiser.” To say that *Hot Buttered Soul* opens with a curtain raiser is almost an understatement. This opening packs a punch starting from the first snare drum kick. The scale of the album is presaged by the first forty-one seconds of “Walk On By,” an epic orchestral flourish that pulls out all the stops, including strings, organ, guitars, and a female vocal choir, all building the intensity in hyper-dramatic fashion. Similar to an opera overture or a symphonic opening movement, the orchestra in this moment establishes the B-flat minor tonic of “Walk On By.” The bassline begins by tracing an octave downward from Bb2 to Bb1, jumping back up to F2, setting up the dominant pedal and resolving back to B-flat. As will be shown below, the note B-flat is present throughout nearly the entire album in prominent fashion. The strings open by outlining a B-flat minor chord, presenting the opening key in which “Walk On By” takes place. The background vocals enter about halfway through this opening gesture, leading to an emphasized cadential six-four, the strings highlighting the suspension with a swaying rhythmic figure. The drums also join in on building this early climactic moment, with the drummer hammering the kick drum and cymbals in eighth notes underneath the dominant pedal, before the strings accent the resolution. Just as quickly as the grandeur entered, it goes away.

Following the overture, the next minute and thirty seconds consists of a tonic vamp. Like a heartbeat, the B-flat bass note pulsates fifty times on beats one and three of each measure before Hayes’s voice enters. Over this extended vamp the guitar introduces a bluesy theme with intense tremolo distortion. The guitar solo continues through an improvised portion into a jarring section where the instrument itself seems to be weeping. Finally, at the 2:10 mark, the body of

the song begins in earnest. Appropriately enough, the first lyrics are “If you see me walking down the street / And I start to cry each time we meet,” echoing the gestures in the guitar. These opening minutes are a grand exercise in the types of contrasts Covach mentions as characteristics of psychedelic-symphonic covers, which will continue throughout the song and album.<sup>70</sup>

The many ways in which Hayes builds the intensity of the song are remarkable. Despite the grandiloquent opening, with the large orchestra and prominent guitar solos, by the time Hayes arrives at the main body of the song, the instrumentation is completely stripped down. This renders the entrance of Hayes’s soothing, deep voice as its own surprise. Hayes comes as close as possible to whispering the opening line, “If you see me walking down the street,” over sparse instrumentation. But the listener should not be fooled by the quietness and introverted sound, as the guitar comes back in suddenly at 2:20 with a vengeance, punctuating the phrase with just two notes—F and D-flat—that jolt us back into Hayes’s highly emotional state.

The strings and backup singers enter once again as the lyrics reach the title of the song. Here Hayes begins taking a great deal of liberty with the melody. As Brackett notes, “Hayes approaches these 1960s updates of Tin Pan Alley song craft as a jazz singer (or some pre-rock and roll pop singers) would, ornamenting and embellishing phrases, never singing an entire phrase ‘straight.’ The soul-gospel influence is prominent in the many melismas and interjected moans and hums.”<sup>71</sup> In “Walk On By,” this melody shaping is even more noticeable, because the backup vocalists *are* singing the melody “straight,” to use Brackett’s word. Example 1 provides a sample, clearly showing the straightforward rhythms in the backup line (the only vocal part of Hayes’s version of this song that truly bears any resemblance to the Warwick version) while

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<sup>70</sup> Covach, “Yes, The Psychedelic-Symphonic Cover,” 282.

<sup>71</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 83.

Hayes's line wanders about. This is yet another way in which Hayes heightens emotion, using this jazzy method in order to maximize expression.

Example 1: "Walk On By," Interplay Between Background Vocalists and Hayes's Lead Vocals (2:40)

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the background vocalists' line in the treble clef and Hayes's line in the bass clef. The background vocalists sing: "You don't see the tears just let me grieve in". Hayes's line features a triplet of eighth notes: "that you don't see the tears" followed by a triplet of eighth notes: "so just let me grieve". The second system continues the background vocalists' line: "pri - vate cause each time I see you..." and Hayes's line: "in pri - vate cause each time I see - you...".

At the end of this passage, the orchestra takes center stage as the violins, brass, and drums dramatically emphasize the D-flat<sup>11</sup> chord that helps close the phrase. This chord serves as a good example of what Mark Spicer calls the "soul dominant," consisting of a close-position IV chord over scale degree five in the bass.<sup>72</sup> In this instance the orchestration, with the violin tremolos and the accented hits in the brass and drums, serve to confirm this function in the form of a secondary dominant that resolves to G-flat (VI in the key of B-flat minor).<sup>73</sup>

This gesture returns three times, and despite the fact that instrumentally it is the same each time, Hayes nonetheless uses this musical moment to increase the lyrical intensity. In the

<sup>72</sup> Mark Spicer, "Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs," *Music Theory Online* 23, no. 2 (June 2017, [3]), <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.2/mto.17.23.2.spicer.html#FN0>.

<sup>73</sup> Spicer would interpret this moment as an "emergent tonic," with the resolution to G-flat bringing about the arrival of the song's true key.

first instance, the written words of the song read, “Make believe you don’t see the tears / Just let me grieve in private / ’Cause each time I see you I break down and cry.” The emphasized soul dominant chord, however, extends this verse via two extra measures in between the lyrics “I see you” and “I break down and cry.” Underneath the chord, Hayes speaks softly with nostalgia, “I just can’t help myself. I think of how tight we used to be.” This lyrical addition makes this moment all the more heartbreaking, as we get a glimpse at Hayes’s longing for the past. Slightly more than a minute later in the song, at the 3:57 mark, the music arrives at the same point and Hayes uses this technique once again to heighten emotion. Here, the written words of the song are “Foolish pride is all I have left / So let me hide the tears and the sadness / You gave me when you said goodbye.” This time, over the soul dominant chord (which falls between “you gave me” and “when you said goodbye”), Hayes is not speaking softly anymore as he says, “You gave me. I didn’t ask you for it. But you gave me.” The nostalgia of the previous verse has become bitterness. The moment returns one more time with even more heightened emotion. The verse repeats precisely and thus the lyrics are the same (“Foolish pride ...”), but this time, Hayes interjects with “You gave me. You put the hurt on me. You socked it to me mama.” The emotional pain is palpable.

Alongside these lyrical increases in intensity, the orchestration also becomes thicker and more pronounced. While the strings and background vocals were added in Detroit after Hayes and the band (The Bar-Kays) had recorded the songs in Memphis, Hayes was involved in arranging the orchestral parts. As Bowman documents, “while playing the rhythm track in his hotel room, [Hayes] hummed to each arranger the ideas he had for the string parts. Both the original tape and Isaac’s humming were recorded onto a second tape, which [Johnny] Allen and



[Dale] Warren used to orchestrate the parts.”<sup>74</sup> This team effort clearly pays off in the album, as the orchestral trajectory echoes that of Hayes’s vocals and songwriting. On the second iteration of the verse, flutes and trumpets give instrumental color to the repeated material.

After this repetition, at 4:30, the orchestral flourish from the very beginning of the track returns. At this point, the song has progressed so far it is almost as if it has entered another world entirely from the “curtain raiser,” which seems so long ago. Of course, the desire to revisit the past is part and parcel of the song’s meaning. Regardless of the reason for the reinsertion of the flourish here, it does not stop the progression of the song because once again the intensity is ratcheted up. This time the brass joins the orchestra, exploring the limits of their upper range (one of the trumpets reaches an Eb7). Just as Hayes’s emotional limits are being pushed, so are the limits of the instruments.

Immediately before this moment, however, the oboe introduces a theme that had not previously been heard in the song:

Example 2: “Walk On By,” Oboe Theme (4:11)



In the introduction of this theme, it is repeated two times over a two-chord vamp consisting of G-flat major and C-flat major. Here it is a curious little theme that extends the phrase ending by six measures before being interrupted by the boisterous opening orchestral gesture, which instigated a return to B-flat minor. This moment, however, proves to be nothing less than a seedling of

<sup>74</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 183.

what the theme is to become. After all of the musical ideas repeat once more, the song arrives at this same musical moment once again. This time, the flute takes the theme, and with it the rest of the song.

What started out as a small two-bar motive grows into a massive, six-minute vamp. The G-flat major/C-flat major alternation, earlier merely an extension of the VI chord in B-flat minor, continues for the entirety of those six minutes, and they support what becomes a huge improvisatory section, featuring solos by the organ and guitar, and extemporized vocals by Hayes. And the little theme that started in the oboe and the flute gets taken over by the entire orchestra: strings, brass and all. The listener is forgiven for assuming that at some point the music must return to the original ideas of the song, in the original key of B-flat minor. But it never does. This moment would support Spicer's notion of an "emergent tonic," as the song has slid into the key of G-flat major and rides that two-chord vamp all the way until the end.<sup>75</sup>

Hayes's lyrical improvisation pushes the emotional intensity even further in this portion of the song, saying things like "there's no dust in my eye" and "smoke ain't makin' me cry," and adding lengthy melismas to his vocals. At the 7:30 mark, Hayes's vocals drop out and the instruments take over for the final four and a half minutes of the track. The energy that has been building throughout is released. Perhaps at this point the woman did indeed "walk on by," and Hayes is left without anything to say.

The integration of the organ and guitar during this vamp provides for a fascinating combination of sounds, bridging gospel, soul, and rock genres. At several points, both instruments are improvising solos at the same time. Beauty, virtuosity, and cacophony becomes all wrapped up into one. These characteristics grow and grow until, eleven minutes and thirty

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<sup>75</sup> Spicer, [1].

seconds into the song, all drop out except for the drummer, who plays straight sixteenth notes on the hi-hat punctuated by syncopated rhythms on the snare and kick drums. There is no further lyrics, no tonal resolution, and no sense of relief. If anything, it feels as if the band and Hayes need to catch their proverbial breath. The hi-hat fades out and the song—the first quarter of the record—ends.

### **“Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymistic”**

In his analysis of Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*, Kevin Holm-Hudson discusses in-depth how songs on a concept album transition from one into the next. He compares the transitions between songs to techniques that were becoming common in film at the time, such as the “fade” in film being akin to the “fade-out” in music, or the “dissolve and direct cut” paralleling a direct cut from song to song.<sup>76</sup> In this thesis, I do not argue that Hayes used these ideas specifically to create a seamless flow between the tracks on *Hot Buttered Soul*. But the broader idea of recording this large-scale music for an LP, rather than song-by-song, surely lends itself to an awareness of how the end of one song is juxtaposed with the beginning of the next.

The transition between “Walk On By” and “Hyperbolicsyllabicesquedalymistic” (hereafter “Hyperbolic”) serves as an example of this. “Hyperbolic” contains a four-second introduction featuring merely the right hand of the piano and the drummer tapping on the cymbal. This gesture sets up the C-major dominant-seventh chord, which resolves to F-minor, the key of the song. At the four second mark, the song launches into the funk-jazz fusion groove that will remain for the rest of the track. Although interludes were not yet common in album

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<sup>76</sup> Kevin J. Holm-Hudson, “‘Worked Out within the Grooves’: The Sound and Structure of *The Dark Side of the Moon*,” in *‘Speak to Me’: The Legacy of Pink Floyd’s The Dark Side of the Moon*, ed. Russell Reising (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 75.

writing at this time, this two-bar introduction could be interpreted as a version of such an idea.

The end of “Walk On By” left the listener with a fading drum kit and no tonal resolution.

“Hyperbolic” begins with the ride cymbal, followed quickly by a quiet piano dominant-to-tonic resolution. In other words, the last thing heard in the first track and the first thing heard in the second track do indeed blend into one another. Surely, the transition between these two tracks without that brief interjection would be more jarring. Again, this is not to argue that this album is constructed seamlessly from track to track in the way that, for instance, Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* is. And perhaps the intention was for this introduction to belong solely to “Hyperbolic,” without consideration for how it works with “Walk On By.” Given how the rest of the album is constructed, however, to say that the transition between songs was not considered whatsoever would be hard to believe.

That said, the groove that follows the introduction takes the listener into a completely different sound world than that of “Walk On By.” The accented syncopation, wah-wah guitar, and sliding notes suggest a playful, even mischievous vibe. This matches with the lyrics, which Hayes was quoted above as saying are meant to tease. The song contains a made-up word or two. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Al Bell is quoted as saying the title is a word he “coined to describe those who abuse big words.” The first verse concludes with the phrase, “My gastronomical stupensity / Is really satisfied when you’re loving me.” What, exactly, “gastronomical stupensity” means is amusing to think about, but ultimately irrelevant. True to Bell’s characterization, the words in this song—real or made-up—often do not have any logical reason to go together. Case in point: the third verse which contains the line, “Cerebral, cerebellum, and medulla oblongata”; the point is that the woman with whom Hayes wants a “repeat” affair has hijacked his brain and heart, and he is unable to think straight.

Notably absent from this track is the orchestra. The strings, brass, and woodwinds, which played such a prominent role in “Walk On By,” creating a nostalgic, love-driven, heartache of a musical journey, are not needed in “Hyperbolic.” Instead, this song is lust-driven, propelled by carnal instincts and desires, and the music reflects that. The orchestra will return for the album’s final two tracks, and in this way it serves as a symbol of emotion on *Hot Buttered Soul*. The instruments were not used simply to “fill out” the sound, but instead are both implemented and avoided at very specific times.

Hayes’s vocal performance on this track also highlights the drastically different mood compared to “Walk On By.” Whereas in the first song, he entered almost whispering, here he employs a much more indulgent style, unable to get his lustful mind off of the woman about whom he sings. The phrasing is much shorter, and he utilizes vocal glissandi, breathy vowel sounds, and spoken moments to full effect. Simply put, Hayes’s voice is sexy. If this is not apparent enough from his vocal choices in the main body of the song, he intersperses vocal utterances throughout the closing piano solo that can be viewed as the sounds of sexual intercourse. Hayes continues down this path by breathily interjecting “Dig the groove, make your move” into the solo as well.

This six-minute piano-featuring section is another portrait of Hayes’s ability to build intensity over the course of a song. The solo begins in its lower register, below middle C, and slowly climbs the keys over the course of the lengthy vamp. By the five-minute mark (two minutes into the solo), it is in the octave above middle C, and over the course of the next minute it progresses to the higher notes. By the seven-minute mark, the entirety of the solo is up in the high register of the piano and at eight minutes, the rhythm changes. The syncopation is gone, and the snare drum is hammering out quarter notes on the beat while the piano is whipped into a

frenzied climax. It is not a stretch to make sexual parallels here either. The song ends with the piano oscillating between C7 and F7 as the energy propels through the fade-out.

### **“One Woman”**

If “Hyperbolic” feeds on the energy of lust, “One Woman” does the exact opposite. While I do not argue that *Hot Buttered Soul* has a narrative trajectory, it is plausible to interpret “One Woman” as an intentional contrast to the episode in “Hyperbolic.” Following the friskiness of the “affair” in “Hyperbolic,” “One Woman” serves as a reminder of the realities of life. The first woman Hayes describes in this song is his steady partner, as implied by the prechorus, “Her tender lips are always there to meet me / At the end of every day / You know, it’s always been that way.” When the prechorus returns, however, the lyrics have shifted to describe another woman in his life, “Her tender lips are there to greet me / That’s the way I start my day / But it’s too bad it doesn’t end that way.” The verses that describe his relationship with the two women give the listener a sense of how he feels about them: “I open the door to that little room that we call home,” and “I open the door to our favorite little coffee shop.” This lyrical storytelling indicates that Hayes has moved beyond the lust of the previous song into true emotions.

The music and orchestrations back up this assertion. Gone are the wah-wah guitar sounds and thrusting percussion of “Hyperbolic.” In their place is a lush orchestra that plays over a slow rock-ballad beat, complete with melodic woodwinds, rich strings, warm brass, and even a xylophone interlude. From a stylistic standpoint, this is the most conventional song on the album. In the key of B-flat major, it proceeds in a traditional form, moving from verse to prechorus to chorus, and repeating those elements along the way. The harmonic trajectory is traditional and

functional, and its runtime is just over five minutes—a “brief” song as far as *Hot Buttered Soul* is concerned.

Yet Hayes still presents the song with the sense of drama and build-up that he employs throughout the album. The jazzy vocal elements—ornamentation, back phrasing— that Brackett mentions are present here as well, particularly in the chorus. Furthermore, Hayes continues in his style of creating a dramatic trajectory. The first time the prechorus transitions into the chorus, he sings, “it’s too bad it doesn’t end that way,” while the second time this happens, Hayes’s lyrics are heightened: “oh it’s too bad, so sad, it doesn’t end that way.” With the extended lyrics, Hayes also shifts the notes upward, from a B-flat on the first “too bad,” to a D on the second one, which coupled with the added “oh” heightens the emotional moment. Additionally, at the end of the first chorus, Hayes sings, “now I’ve got to decide where I belong.” The second time this moment occurs, he sings, “now I’ve got to decide where I, where I, where I belong,” again placing the notes higher in his vocal range. The drum set also participates in this emotional elevation. As mentioned above, the song up until the second chorus has taken place over a standard rock-ballad beat in 4/4, with the hi-hat being struck in an eighth-note rhythm. At the second chorus, the hi-hat increases momentum, being struck in a sixteenth-note rhythm, propelling the song forward and increasing the urgency of the situation in which the singer finds himself.

### **“By the Time I Get to Phoenix”**

Until this moment, we have heard how Hayes’s infatuation with women has caused him all sorts of heartache and strife, led to difficult choices, made him do wrong, and everything in between. Or, as Hayes puts it in the opening of “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” “Love can make ya or break ya / It can make ya laugh, it can make ya cry / It can make ya happy it can make ya

sad ... In the case of jealousy love can make ya mad.” In these opening lines of the album’s final track, Hayes sums up the emotions of the first three songs. If Hayes himself has not gone through all these episodes in his personal life, he sings as if he has. With these experiences in mind, he launches into what is surely the most innovative portion of the album.

“By the Time I Get to Phoenix” begins with an eight-minute-and-forty-second spoken section. The bass, organ, and ride cymbal are the only instruments being played, with the cymbal keeping a slow beat on each quarter note and the bass and organ providing a soul dominant pedal chord (B-flat in the bass, with a close-position A-flat major chord in the organ). The bass plays the dominant pedal tone in a dotted-quarter note/eighth-note rhythm that will eventually seamlessly transition into the body of the song. Before that, however, the instruments hold onto these notes and rhythms, never changing, for the full length of the introductory section. Over this rhythm section, as Brackett describes, “Hayes ‘preaches’ a sermon on the ‘power of love’ that outlines a prequel to the narrative presented in the song.” Brackett continues, “This section of the song reinforces the sense that Hayes is participating in the soul genre, as he declares that he is going to do the song ‘my own way’ and ‘bring it down to soulsville.’”<sup>77</sup> Hayes is also clearly addressing the audience here. He indirectly references Jimmy Webb—“It was written by one of the great young songwriters of today”—and asks the audience to “bear along with me for a few minutes while I set it up. I want your imagination. I want you to travel with me.”

In “Phoenix,” the listener no longer has to search for ways in which Hayes builds the intensity of his songs. Here he unabashedly features this method of songwriting, front and center. The opening “sermon,” like a gospel reading (complete with organ underpinning), tells a story. The story, as Brackett notes, is a prequel to the original lyrics of Webb’s “Phoenix.” As

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<sup>77</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 86.



mentioned above, while we cannot know for sure whether or not the previous songs on this album document any literal life experiences of Hayes, the fact that the “Phoenix” story begins when a man from Tennessee moves to Los Angeles and falls in love is as close to a direct relation as any. Hayes was originally from Covington, Tennessee, a small town to the northeast of Memphis.

In short, the prequel proceeds to lay out a situation in which, after the man moves to Los Angeles, he and the woman get married. Quickly, however, their relationship takes a turn for the worse and it becomes clear that the man is being financially taken advantage of: “He bought anything that this woman’s heart desired ... he spent his last dime on the woman because he loved her.” The woman begins spending lavishly and ultimately cheats on the man. But the man is so smitten with this woman that he returns to her not once, but seven times. “But the heart can only take so much,” Hayes preaches, “And the eighth time this went down, he said ‘mama, I got to go’ / With tears in his eyes, he said ‘I’m gonna leave you baby’.” He finally gets in his 1965 Ford and drives away, attempting to turn around three times before he finally reaches the edge of the city, crying along the way. Hayes tells this story with such emotion and passion, it is hard to listen and not relate some element of one’s own life to this story.

It is as our protagonist drives away that the prequel transitions into the main body of the song. At this point, the track has already packed such an emotional punch that the introduction of Hayes’s singing voice is enough to bring many people to the verge of tears. Hayes recounts his first performances of the song at the clubs in Memphis in this way: “I said, ‘I’ve got to create a situation these folks can relate to,’ and I started talking and the conversation began to subside as I was telling the story. By the time I got to the [actual] beginning of the song everybody was

quiet. When I finished, man, chicks were crying.”<sup>78</sup> The main body of the song continues in similar fashion to the rest of the songs on the album. “Phoenix” is an emotional track, so the orchestra returns to provide a sensuous backing. Again, Hayes breaks from the written melodies and heightens the emotion with each repetition of the verse. Brackett notes, “This variation is evident not only in the high note that begins these lines in Hayes’s recording, but in the complex internal subdivisions of the beat, in the immense expansion of the melodic range of the line, and in the lengthening of the line to three-and-a-half measures from two-and-a-half.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, Brackett is laying out the characteristics of “Phoenix” that make it similar to the other three tracks on the album, as this thesis has explored.

Of particular interest in “Phoenix” is the ending, which is just as massive as the introduction. In Glen Campbell’s popular 1967 version, the song is in the key of F major. Only at the very end is there a pivot chord modulation to the key of D major. This modulation serves as a radio edit, however, and following its execution the song fades out in just a few seconds. Hayes uses the same modulation at the end of his version of the song, shifting from E-flat major to C major. Although the chord progression is the same—ii in the first key becomes iv in the second key, then progresses to V and resolves into the new tonal area—Hayes’s use of this modulation could hardly be more different than Campbell’s. For Hayes, this is a climactic moment. The key change falls on the lyric, “she just didn’t know that I would really go.” The woman in the story realizes that the man (Hayes) will not be returning this time. The key change corresponds with this realization and serves as the beginning of a seven-minute mixolydian vamp alternating between the C major chord (I) and a G minor chord (v). Over this, Hayes extemporizes on the moment of truth that has just occurred, “I don’t know how I’m gonna make it, oh no, but I got to

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<sup>78</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 182.

<sup>79</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 84.

go on ... you really really put the hurt on me, yes you did ... oh, mama mama, bye bye.” Despite all of the emotion that has taken place so far in the song, this vamp serves as its emotional height. The orchestra, as has been the case throughout the album, plays into this. The bass gets more active, the brass enters, and the organ begins its own improvisations. At the 15:08 mark, the intensity becomes too much for the sound system to handle, and a keen ear will hear some audio feedback (which itself seems to want in on the musical moment, hovering somewhere around the pitch C, the root of the tonic chord).

At this point, there are still about two and a half minutes remaining in the track, and Hayes hits us with one more emotional punch. At 16:08, the orchestra thins out and the piano enters with a soft and sweet solo. What follows is perhaps the most heartbreaking line of the entire album: “Little drops of water bleedin’ under my chin / You can look at me and tell all the pain I’m in, oh yeah, oh yeah, I’m gonna moan now.” And with that, the snare drum crescendos and the other instruments soon follow. The piano and the organ go into an improvised duet of sorts, and Hayes begins moaning. There is catharsis. There is struggle. There is sorrow. Finally, at 18:05, the orchestra cuts out suddenly. The piano, organ, drums, and bass softly bring us to the end. The final ten seconds feature the organ, alone, playing a C major chord that starts softly, and gets louder and louder, overwhelming the listener with organ sound until it suddenly cuts out, leaving nothing but its reverberation as the last moments of the album.

### ***Hot Buttered Soul***

When viewed as one, the four songs on this album create a dramatic arc of their own, punctuated by the cathartic vamp at the end of “Phoenix.” In the first three songs, Hayes is under the spell of love, paralyzed by his infatuation with women—the lyrical theme of the album. In

“Walk On By,” a woman has left him and he begs her not to acknowledge him anymore. In “Hyperbolic,” an earlier affair with a woman has him yearning for more and he is unable to get his thoughts off of the woman’s beauty and appeal. In “One Woman,” he is caught between two women and unable to decide which way to go, as his feelings for both have become far stronger than he had expected. It is only in “Phoenix” when Hayes finally breaks the pattern. His opening rap shows that he was once infatuated with this woman, just as he was with the women in the first three songs. But finally, he elects to do something about it. In the episodes laid out in the first three songs of the album, he succumbed to the temptation of the women. Now, in “Phoenix,” he takes control of his own destiny. It is not without pain and anguish, but at the very least he can move on with his life, knowing he’s far from the temptation of the woman he left behind.

The closing minutes of “Phoenix” indicate this change more than just lyrically. The music also creates this arc. Up until the key change at the end of “Phoenix,” the entire album has been in flat keys, with no less than two flats in a key signature—“Walk On By” begins in B-flat minor, with G-flat major emerging in the final vamp, “Hyperbolic” is in F minor, “One Woman” is in B-flat major, and the first two thirds of “Phoenix” are in E-flat major. Not only is this true, but the note B-flat itself plays a prominent role in the album. Including the vamps in “Walk On By” and “Phoenix,” the bass sits on a B-flat tone for ten minutes and twenty seconds of the album. Statistically, this means that for nearly a quarter of the length of *Hot Buttered Soul*, the bass is playing a B-flat. Additionally, the songs holistically are in some form of the key of B-flat (major or minor) for about eleven and a half minutes, *not* including the vamps. Taken together, the album is either vamping over a B-flat in the bass or in a B-flat key for over twenty minutes—or approximately forty-five percent of the album. As shown in Table 1, this fact, combined with

the other flat keys that make up every moment of the album leading up to the “Phoenix” key change, create a harmonic trajectory over the course of *Hot Buttered Soul* that leads to this climactic ending.

Table 1: *Hot Buttered Soul* album trajectory

Album time (song time)	Song title	Key	Notable characteristics
0:00	“Walk On By”	B-flat minor	Opening orchestral flourish
0:42			Instrumental vamp over B-flat
2:10			Body of song begins
6:12	“Hyperbolic”	G-flat major	G-flat major emerges as tonic
12:00		F minor	
21:37	“One Woman”	B-flat major	
26:46	“Phoenix”	E-flat major	Hayes “preaches” over B-flat dominant pedal
35:26 (8:40)			Body of song begins
38:16 (11:30)			Climactic modulation
		C major	

I am not arguing that the tonal design of this album be read in any sort of large-scale Schenkerian way. What I am arguing, however, is that the key change at the end of “Phoenix” was used to full effect, not merely providing a cathartic trajectorial end point for that particular song, but providing one for the entire album. Structuring the album in this way parallels how Hayes structures all four songs on the album individually, building intensity and drama as they progressed. Furthermore, according to Hayes’s songwriting partner Dave Porter, “Isaac was excellent at harmonies.”<sup>80</sup> In relation to the Sam and Dave hit “Soul Man,” Donald “Duck” Dunn, bassist for Booker T. and the MGs, adds, “All those counterpoint things, those pieces that fit together, that was Isaac. ... He’s got everything moving around. It works. It just knocked me out. When he [wrote] it that day, I said, ‘Isaac, son of a bitch, he knows what he’s doing.’”<sup>81</sup> Hayes clearly paid close attention to how the music sounded harmonically, and was a go-to person for such musical craftsmanship at Stax. Given this compositional awareness, it is hard to

<sup>80</sup> Bowman, *Soulsville U.S.A.*, 114.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

imagine that he would have been *unaware* of the impact those final minutes of “Phoenix” had in relation to the album as a whole.

## Conclusion

At the outset of Chapter 3, I briefly summarized the lyrical content of *Hot Buttered Soul* and showed how it fit Marianne Tatom Letts's basic outline for a lyrically thematic concept album, namely, that the songs are on a given topic (Hayes's infatuation with women) and they are sung by a character in Hayes himself. To distill the analyses of the four songs above, I will conclude by showing how the elements laid forth also fit into Letts's definition of a *musically* thematic concept album.

Working from the bottom up, Hayes's album includes key/mode associations throughout. As mentioned in the previous section, nearly the entirety of the album is in a flat key area until a very specific moment in the final song. The move to C major at the end of "Phoenix" is associated with Hayes finally taking control over his interactions with the women in his life, no longer allowing his emotions to be beholden to their whims. Additionally, it is worthy to note the minor-to-major trajectory of the album. The first moment of the "curtain raiser" that begins "Walk On By" features the orchestra outlining a B-flat minor chord. The vamp at the end of "Phoenix" includes a repeated outline of a C major chord played by the trumpets. The respective use of those keys and gestures relates directly to the mood of the music and lyrics in those moments.

Numbers two, three, and four on Letts's list can be reviewed together, as they interrelate closely with one another. Orchestration and instrumentation are clearly a major part of this album. The lush sounds of the orchestra in "One Woman," for instance, help create the musical atmosphere that matches the lyrics of the song, in which Hayes is emotionally torn. The notable absence of the orchestra in "Hyperbolic"—the only song that does not feature the orchestra—is

also intentional, creating a lustful, flirtatious, and playful vibe. The orchestra would have seemed out of place if it was present in this song. Hayes also uses these ideas to play with the concept of genre throughout the album. The orchestra gives certain moments—particularly the opening—a symphonic flair. With the extended virtuosic instrumental solos, he participates variously in the rock and jazz genres. And of course, at the heart of Hayes’s music are the soulful sounds that, as Brackett notes, combine with the jazz influences to anticipate the R&B subgenre.<sup>82</sup>

This leaves us with the first point on Letts’s list of musically thematic characteristics: “Recurring motives that comment on action.”<sup>83</sup> William Drabkin defines a motive as “a short musical idea, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or any combination of these three.”<sup>84</sup> It is interesting, though not surprising, that Letts includes this in her list. For many rock concept albums, and later concept albums by African American artists that follow many of the ideas that early rock concept albums laid forth, such motives are present. This largely follows in a classical music tradition, where motives were often used as a structural device in opera or a symphonic work. The closest thing to this on *Hot Buttered Soul* might be the oboe and flute motive in “Walk On By,” explored above.

But if the idea of a recurring “motive” is to unify the album, perhaps this characterization merits rethinking. While *Hot Buttered Soul* contains elements of classical music—first and foremost being the use of a large orchestra—it does not necessarily follow in the classical *tradition* the way many contemporaneous concept albums in rock music do. For instance, the idea utilized in *Sgt. Pepper* of recalling, at the end of the album, music from earlier in the album is very much something done in a symphony. In the case of *Hot Buttered Soul*, it is not that

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<sup>82</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 83.

<sup>83</sup> Letts, 22.

<sup>84</sup> William Drabkin, “Motif,” *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi-org.proxy.wexler.hunter.cuny.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19221>.



Hayes avoids unifying the album with musical gestures, rather the musical gestures he uses are much more rooted in the African American musical tradition than they are in the classical music tradition.

As the analysis in this thesis shows, throughout the album Hayes used embellishments and back phrasing to heighten emotion at specific points. In several instances, he sings the embellishments at the same time the backup singers are singing the phrase “straight,” highlighting the meaning and emotion of the embellishment. Additionally, as referred to earlier in relation to Brackett’s research, Hayes interjects the “soul-gospel” influence with melismas, grunts, moans, and hums.<sup>85</sup> The spoken words at the beginning of “Phoenix” add to this influence, as does the use of the underlying organ, which calls to mind gospel music and African American churches. As referred to above, at the very end of “Phoenix,” Hayes points the proverbial arrow directly at these characteristics by stating, “I’m gonna moan now,” and proceeding to moan a variety of melismatic figures and gestures. These attributes, which are associated far more with soul music traditions than with rock, classical, or any other, are highly conceptual in nature. They might not be “motives” in the sense of a trumpet fanfare, hunting horn calls, or a guitar lick, but they serve the same purpose: to communicate a musically unified and artistically complete idea, just as any rock concept album of the mid-to-late 1960s would have done.

This assertion of conceptuality is supported by another element that builds the album’s cohesiveness: its cover art. As referred to in the Covach quote above, the art on album packages was often pivotal in furthering the themes of the album.<sup>86</sup> *Hot Buttered Soul*’s cover design, featuring a high angle photo of Hayes’s bald head, was an unquestionable statement of the

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<sup>85</sup> Brackett, “Questions of Genre,” 83.

<sup>86</sup> Covach, “The Hippie Aesthetic,” 74.

artist's identity as a black man. As Gordon describes: "His face is obscured because he's looking down, conveying humility, even as the wide gold chain around his neck proclaims a voluptuous arrogance. And there's skin everywhere: black, beautiful skin."<sup>87</sup>

Two years after the release of *Hot Buttered Soul*, Hayes would be enlisted to write the soundtrack for the blaxploitation film, *Shaft* (1971). This album truly pushed Hayes and Stax to the forefront of American popular music, and through this Hayes transformed how people thought about film music. Given the nature of this album as a soundtrack, *Shaft* was of course a unified work. In a 2009 article marking the reissue of the *Shaft* soundtrack, the popular online music magazine *Pitchfork* remarked, "'Theme from Shaft' was an intricate overture doubling as a character-establishing theme that made a title card all but redundant, and it proves how easy Hayes's transition from songwriter to film-score composer actually was."

In truth, anyone who listened with a critical ear to *Hot Buttered Soul* would have known this. Hayes's music is all about trajectory, as Hayes said himself. He can't say what he needs to say musically in just two and a half minutes. Thus, *Hot Buttered Soul* serves as a pioneering concept album of its day, one that has generally not been viewed as such. I hope this thesis shows why it should be considered in this category, and perhaps raises some questions for reexamining the lens through which we look at concept albums. As noted in Chapter 1, African American artists were unfortunately not provided with the resources available to create album-length musical ideas as early as rock artists were, because African American audiences were not seen as a viable market for such large-form music. In this way, Hayes deserves even more credit for breaking ground in this realm, entering the musical "white space" and defying expectations,

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<sup>87</sup> Gordon, 235.

showing that not only were African American audiences ready for music that sounded like *Hot Buttered Soul*, but that African American artists were more than ready to make it.

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