

## **The Box Tops: Setting the Record Straight (Puremusic.com, 3/2004)**

Last month we reviewed a great book by Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis*. Subsequently, I got an email from my friend Gary Talley, one of the original members of the Box Tops, a group that is profiled in some detail in Gordon's book. (Check out our review of Gary's landmark video, *Guitar Playing for Songwriters*.)

Gary said in his email that the author had gotten some of the details of their story wrong, and that he'd appreciate the opportunity to set the record straight. Well, no more than I'd appreciate the exclusive, I replied. And, knowing I was dealing with a musician, I figured, if he actually writes anything, we'll print it.

I was very pleased when Gary sent something a few days later, and said that we could feel free to edit it, that it was probably way more than we were looking for. Not at all, I countered, we weren't going to touch it, we liked it just as it was. He mentioned that Robert Gordon had also erred on the subject of the breakup of the band, but that that was a whole different story. Well, let's not stop now, I said, let's get it all done while we're here, right? And by the end of the week, Gary's account of the demise of the Box Tops arrived, and it was very entertaining.

So here it is, the Box Tops rebuttal, a Puremusic exclusive! And for those of you who'd enjoy hearing some of their classic tunes while you read, we've included a few audio clips from *Soul Deep: the Best of The Box Tops* on our Listen page. • FG

## **The Box Tops: Setting the Record Straight A firsthand account by Gary Talley**

*It Came From Memphis* by Robert Gordon is a fascinating and largely factual account of the Memphis music scene from 1949 through the late 70s. I've read it at least three times, and loved it. However, several of the references to the Box Tops are inaccurate and misleading. I have been a member of the Box Tops since 1967 (when we were still called The DeVilles) until today. We broke up in 1970 and reunited in late 1996.

Alex Chilton, our lead singer, is by far the most famous member of our group, and deservedly so. His voice was the signature sound of the Box Tops, and "The Letter," "Cry Like A Baby," and "Soul Deep" were driven by his singing and Dan Penn's production more than anything else. The other members (myself included) were expendable. We knew this at the time, partly because Alex was the only band member who had a real contract with Bell Records. The rest of us were contracted to Roy Mack, our manager, who had the power to hire and fire us.

Alex also founded Big Star, his highly influential “power pop” band of the early 70s. However, Alex was not the *only* member of the Box Tops to play on subsequent Box Tops recordings. The only other member of the original group that Robert Gordon chose to interview was John Evans, who was also the first to *quit* the band. The book quotes John saying, “We played on ‘The Letter’ and ‘Break My Mind,’ that’s the only other thing.” As far as the first album is concerned, that’s accurate. But John had quit the band before the second album.

In 1996, Arista (originally Bell Records) released a Best of the Box Tops compilation CD called *Soul Deep*. The guy (who deserves to be nameless) who wrote the liner notes, cited *It Came From Memphis* as a source for his assertion that “Alex Chilton was the only band member to play on any recording after ‘The Letter’.” It amazes me that it actually says that on our own record!

Other journalists have made the same assumption. A few years back, Nashville journalist Robert Oermann (who is a friend) mistakenly included the Box Tops in a list of “Milli Vanilli” type bands! He later printed a retraction. He also mentioned *It Came from Memphis* as a source.

Not only did our manager and his notorious attorney screw us (and Alex) out of most of our money, the other members of the band (Danny Smythe, Bill Cunningham, myself, and later Thomas Boggs and Rick Allen) did not get credit for playing on subsequent records. Several songs included on the *Soul Deep* compilation did not include a single studio musician on the rhythm track, including the monster hit “The Letter” (which sold between 4 and 7 million records, depending on whom you ask).

Not only did the rest of us not get any credit (by journalists) for playing on records, we found out later that on the Musician’s Union contracts that were filed for our record sessions, our names were purposely omitted. The studio musicians at American Studios were under contract with Chips Moman, and they got paid for every Box Tops session that was booked, whether they were there or not. The members of the band, including Alex, were actually *paying the studio band for every record that we ourselves played on*.

The American Studio band was one of the best rhythm sections ever. Maybe the best. We weren’t nearly as good or as fast as those guys were. Not even close. They cut many of our rhythm tracks while we were out touring 25 days a month for three years. They were and are some of my biggest musical heroes, especially guitarist Reggie Young. I have no quarrel with them, or our brilliant producer Dan Penn. (Chips Moman and bassist Tommy Cogbill produced our last album and singles.)

To get ripped off by crooked managers and attorneys is bad enough, but for all the other members of the band (whose names I mentioned earlier) to be continually ignored and discredited is somewhat galling, to say the least.

Bill Cunningham, our bass player, went on to get a music degree, studied in Europe, and beat out hundreds of other classical bassists to get the gig in the White House Marine

Orchestra, playing for all White House functions during both the Ford and Carter administrations, including the Camp David Accords. His name does not appear in *It Came from Memphis*. Neither is original drummer Danny Smythe mentioned in the Gordon book. Drummer Thomas Boggs and bassist/keyboardist Rick Allen, who joined the band after Danny and John left, played on the *Dimensions* album. I played and sang on our recordings from 1967 til 1969.

For three years, the Box Tops toured constantly. Our financial statements were two or three months behind. Our manager and his attorney were getting their money right off the top, so the band was paying for *everything* from pencils to studio time. We'd had two Gold records and were getting an advance of \$150 a week apiece. The band was exhausted from touring. Alex and I were the only original members left at the end of 1969.

We booked a tour of England for December. Our records had done well there and we were excited. Our tour was scheduled to end a couple of days before Christmas. We arrived in London three days before our two week tour was supposed to start. We checked into a little hotel on Bayswater Road across the street from Hyde Park. I spent the first two days walking around London, overtipping waitresses who called me "Duckie" and bartenders who called me "Gov'nah." Almost got run over several times crossing the street until I got used to looking to the right first.

Rehearsal day came, and we piled into two of those black London cabs. Our rehearsal space turned out to be in the basement of an elementary school while school was still in session! As we walked in with our guitars, we were surrounded by boisterous six-year-olds with funny accents. We were led to the basement, where our gear for the tour was supposed to be set up for us.

Our equipment rider had specified what amps, drums, keyboards, etc., were to be provided for us. What waited for us was quite unexpected. We were greeted by our opening act, a West Indian Reggae Band called King Ollie and The Raisins. Their equipment was what we were going to have to use on the tour. Instead of the Ludwig or Slingerland drums, there was a tiny drum kit identical to the one I received for my birthday when I was 10 years old. It had a palm tree on the bass drum head, came from Sears & Roebuck, and I had destroyed it in one day. Instead of the Fender amps, there were Marshall P.A. amps, not guitar amps. The not-Hammond B3 organ was a tiny Farfisa, but it did have a big wooden Leslie cabinet. We soon learned that the loud clunking sound we were hearing came from the broken rotating speaker in the Leslie, which banged against the cabinet every time it turned.

We must have looked shocked, because King Ollie and the Raisins were shouting "It's de bes' geah, mon! Mashall is de bes' geah!" After talking a while to Ollie & Co., we decided we should have a band meeting. This is really serious. You don't have a band meeting for just any little thing.

Ollie & the Raisins retired to the parking lot for a “smoke break.” We debated on whether or not to try to play on the toy/inappropriate gear. Our first gig was that very night in Ipswich! We called our manager in Memphis from the phone in the principal’s office. (No cell phones, remember.) He called the English promoter, a guy named Arthur House. I’ll never forget that name. Arthur says, “They play on the other band’s gear or they don’t play.” While waiting for a call back from our very wealthy manager, we took a vote. We decided that, as much as we wanted to play, we wouldn’t play on the unprofessional/shitty equipment. But wait a minute. Where’s our new bass player, Harold? Harold had replaced Bill Cunningham on bass just two months prior.

While we were looking for Harold, our very wealthy manager called back said Mr. House wouldn’t budge and we said we wouldn’t play. Surely in a city the size of London there was a real drum kit and a couple of Fender amps. But NOOOOO. In the meantime Harold was on his way to Ipswich with King Ollie and the Raisins, smoking gigantic spliffs in their van, not knowing the rest of the band *was not coming!* Little did he know, when he got to Ipswich, he was goin’ to have lots of ‘splainin’ to do. Harold & The Raisins played to a somewhat hostile Ipswich crowd and never knew why we didn’t show up until about three o’clock the next morning when they dragged back into London.

So we had a fabulous European vacation for the next two weeks, in which I got to play on a session at Abbey Road studios, met Peter Noone, went to Paris, got stuck in France without a passport, ate at the Tennessee Pancake House in London, and saw Eric Clapton and George Harrison play with Bonnie & Delaney. But that’s another story.

Alex and I quit in February of 1970.

The original band (Alex, Danny, John, Bill and myself) re-united in Memphis in 1996 and recorded an almost live-in-the-studio, mostly first-take, minimum overdub album titled *Tear Off*. It came out on Last Call Records and was released in Europe and got great reviews. Our next gig is in Euless, TX, on April 23rd. For more info, see our excellent website: [www.boxtops.com](http://www.boxtops.com). • Gary Talley