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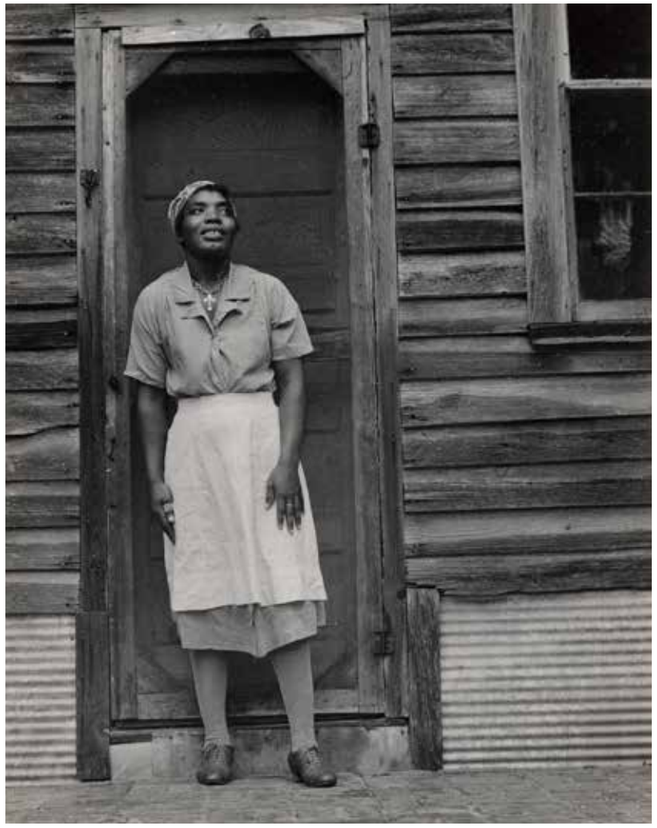


Got to Ease Up On

BY

NATHAN SALSBURG

Bessie Jones got the Holy Ghost in the vicinity of Fitzgerald, Georgia, on September 28, 1932. It didn't happen in a church but in a vision: a tall man approached her with three tickets representing three separate denominations. She chose the Pentecostal Holiness, thereafter taking up membership in the Church of God in Christ. The ecstatic mysticism of COGIC suited Bessie, who from early girlhood was acutely attuned to portents, signs, and superstitions, cultivating an abiding sense of the spiritually sublime in her work, her relationships, and, especially, her music. She nurtured a prodigious repertoire of songs—hundreds of them, for work, play, worship, instruction—as both a rite and as a vocation. For Bessie, music was a means of honoring her enslaved ancestors, as she called them, and uplifting her hard-driven contemporaries. "Those folks were going through some hardships," she told the scholar John Stewart in 1978, "and all those good songs, and the meanings of those songs, the Lord gave it to them. It was handed down to them without any schooling. And that's why I've been so delighted to keep it going the old way—the way they had it."

Jones joined the Spiritual Singers of Coastal Georgia after moving to St. Simons Island in the early thirties. The group had been organized around 1915 by Lydia Parrish (wife of painter Maxfield Parrish) and their charter was a conservative one—preserving through performance the antebellum spirituals and shouts, the deep African roots of which had remained largely untouched due to the relative isolation of the sea island. Thus the addition of Bessie to their ranks was remarkable. She contributed material inherited from her step-grandfather, Jet Sampson, a prolific singer and multi-instrumentalist born into slavery; ring plays picked up as a girl in South Georgia, around Dawson; work songs learned from convict road gangs, Bahamian fishermen, and Gulf Coast roustabouts; and hymns and songs for worship gathered from a good half-dozen black churches.

By the time folklorist Alan Lomax visited St. Simons with a stereo tape-machine in 1959, Bessie Jones and many of her songs had become fundamental to the ensemble (soon to be re-christened, by Bessie, the Georgia Sea Island Singers). Lomax was entranced. He invited her to New York City for the recording of her "oral biography," which, when it was completed, covered some thirty hours of tape, including reminiscences, ghost stories, tall tales, jokes, religious testimony, herbal remedies, and many, many songs. Over the course of these sessions, the principals discovered that they were compiling the raw material for a large-scale pedagogical project to which, over the next twenty years, Bessie Jones would devote herself with religious fervor, teaching the old-time songs, plays, and lore to children and adults alike, across the country, in kindergarten classrooms and folk festivals, nightclubs, the Poor People's March on Washington, Jimmy Carter's inauguration. Her vision was one of radical egalitarianism, inspired by the enduring collective, expressive folk traditions—occupational, recreational, spiritual—of the black rural South and her ardent faith in a kind of ecstatic liberation theology, which found activist application in the civil rights movement. It was the right time for Bessie to do her work.

The entirety of Bessie Jones's oral biography is available in free streaming audio through the online archive of Lomax's Association for Cultural Equity. What follows is one small excerpt, particularly illustrative of Bessie's mystical worldview and the often-visionary oral poetry in which she expressed it.

* * *

God made the whole world's flowers—every tree, every bush—and had to make different flowers to make a bouquet. That's for us to pick in together; we's for Him to pick in together. Had to make different color for a bouquet for Him. We's His flowers. He pick us as He want to.

A lot of folks in the grave today on account of someone called them "nigger." 'Cause they got mad about it. Didn't understand. I remember a white lady, my white lady told me, says, "People get mad about that, Bessie, but they ought to be glad that they are one." I still is as mad at her right then, and I said, "Now, what are you talking about?" I would go on to read it and I find it on there, where the Lord said that would be: that slang name on earth for what we're the Ethiopians. And we're one of the greatest people on the face of the earth. If you would just understand it, see. And we's a nation. And everything. But I just didn't know it. And I was talking to my daughter-in-law about it, and she's pricked against it, you know, and I kept on talking and after she got saved, and go further 'way with the Bible, and began to read, and I ease up on and ease up on—you got to ease up on, you know; you can't feed a baby off of bones, you know; you got to give him milk, you know—and so I just ease up on, ease up on till I got her to see it. Now she's as happy with it as she can be. She understand it. It's just a slang word, Jesus said, that earthy name they call you. And then it goes on that way, over there. It's in Acts—Apostles, I think it's around the fifth chapter, but anyway, you see straight-out nigger, the first nigger convert. That's Enoch. And Queen of Sheba was so black, it's pitiful. She's as black as my son. Real dark. Like pretty smooth black skin, had long black hair—that's Queen of Sheba. The greatest queen. And the prettiest woman of the time. And Jesse was a black man, you see. That was Mary's father. And Mary is Jesus's mother. Where he say that I am of the Ethiopian tribe. Root and offspring of David. You know David black.

The colored peoples and the nationality of peoples—I'm talking about the nation of people—all over the country, to my eye and my belief, everywhere in the world, I believe we should realize that peoples are just people. And you're human and you got to die. We all realize and know that God don't think no more of you than he do of me. That's what we oughta see. If God loved you—I was talking to a white lady then—if He loved you more than He did me, He wouldn't let you have to even birth a baby: He'd let your childrens come on up to you before you. You got to get 'em like I get 'em. You got to go through what I go through it. You got to shed blood. You got to die for that child. That's right. You got to stink like everybody else. That's true. Everything is right. But if God thought any more any different in it, well, He would make it different.

You Don't Know What You Mean To Me

BY

JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

"Seriously?" said the teenage girl working behind the desk at the office of the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Totowa, New Jersey. "You're like the fourth person in the last couple days to ask about him." It was a humid Thursday afternoon in early July, and I was looking for Dave Prater's grave. A middle-aged woman working nearby chimed in: "Who was he, anyway?"

As one half of Sam & Dave, Prater's voice can be heard on some of the most enduring r&b recordings of the last half-century. In the mid-sixties, Prater and his partner, Sam Moore, crafted a live act so unparalleled in its sweaty tent-revival ecstasy that Otis Redding, sick of being upstaged by his opener, once claimed: "I never want to have to follow those motherfuckers again." Yet since his death in 1988, the man who was best known to the world simply as Dave has receded from the popular history of sixties r&b, erased from our pantheon of soul legends.

After I told the women that Dave had been a famous musician, they remained perplexed as to the recent surge of interest in his grave. "Was it a recent anniversary, or anything like that?" Not as far as I could tell.

"Can you think of any reason why everyone would be visiting now?"

I could not.

Five months earlier, a small town in south-central Georgia was hosting its own Dave Prater remembrance. Ocilla, Dave's hometown, is best known for its Sweet Potato Festival, held every autumn since 1961. Residents from the surrounding area participate in cooking contests, compete in the pageant to determine the annual Miss Georgia Sweet Potato, and buy t-shirts that say *Rise & Shine, It's Tater Time.* Ocilla, which has a population just north of 3,000, is also home to the region's largest private employer, the Irwin County Detention Center, where hundreds of undocumented immigrants are indefinitely detained in what the Georgia A.C.L.U. has described as "substandard conditions."

In February, fifty-some-odd members of the extended Prater family traveled to Ocilla from all over the country to attend Dave Prater Day. On a Friday afternoon, several hundred people gathered downtown. It was chilly, even for February, and food trucks sold hot cocoa and coffee for a dollar. The celebration began with a talent show, where a few locals sang George Strait and Hootie & the Blowfish. Prater's granddaughter Shalonda won the competition with her rendition of "When Something Is Wrong with My Baby."

Throughout the day, Sam & Dave played over the PA, but something was missing. Dave's son Chris had remixed songs like "Hold on, I'm Comin'," editing out Sam Moore's high-tenor parts and turning the duo's greatest hits into triumphant Prater solo records. Later on, traffic stopped during a moment of silence, and a congressman from the Georgia House of Representatives read a resolution officially recognizing Prater as a "distinguished Georgian." At one point, four rectangular green signs were unveiled that would adorn each of the major roadways into town. They read:

Home of
"Dave Prater"
Sam & Dave – "Soul Man"
1997 Georgia Music
Hall of Fame Inductee

Ocilla's Chamber of Commerce had decided to honor Prater as part of its celebration of Black History Month. It was the first time the town had ever recognized its most famous native.

"It should have happened a long time ago," said Mayor Horace Hudgins. Hudgins moved to Ocilla from nearby Homerville in 1987, a year before Dave Prater lost control of his Chevy and crashed into a tree on Interstate 75, just twenty-five miles west of his hometown. Prater had been driving home, as he did at the end of every tour, to visit his mom. He was fifty.

"Sam was the heavens, his voice was almost not human," Bruce Springsteen has said. "But Dave rooted their music in the dirt and in the earth." From the beginning, Sam's other-worldly high tenor overshadowed Dave's low harmony, and for a variety of reasons—some

"Bessie Jones, St. Simons Island, Georgia" (1941), by Edward Weston. © The Lane Collection. Photograph Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

personal, some practical, some musical—the history of Sam & Dave has been rewritten in the nearly thirty years since Prater's death so as to diminish Dave's contributions. In *Sam and Dave: An Oral History,* the only book published on the duo, Dave isn't mentioned until page 42.

Almost everyone I talked to who had worked with Sam & Dave throughout their career said a version of the same thing: Dave was the secondary member of the group. When I called John Abbey, a British music industry veteran who produced Sam & Dave in the seventies, he apologized for having almost nothing to say about Prater. "To be very honest with you, I didn't really get to know Dave anywhere near as I did Sam," he said. "Dave was, frankly, the junior member of the team."

Steve Alaimo, a sixties pop singer who produced Sam & Dave's earliest singles in Miami, went as far as to estimate that Sam & Dave was "ninety percent Sam and ten percent Dave."

"How do you say who's responsible for what?" Alaimo mused, resorting to a sports analogy: "The quarterback does everything, but it's the lineman who picks up the fumble. Without the lineman, the quarterback couldn't have had the ball in the first place." In Sam & Dave, Dave was the lineman.

Dave Prater was born to a pair of sharecroppers in 1937, the seventh of ten children. When Dave was seven, his father died in a fire, leaving his mother, Mary Pressley, to raise the children. As a boy, Dave took to singing, both at the Mt. Olive A.M.E. Church that his family attended each Sunday, and at work, picking tobacco with his siblings in the fields after school. "He never took lessons," said Dave's older sister Bertha McMath, shortly after Dave passed away. "It was just a talent given to him by the Good Master."

One of Dave's first public performances was at his high school graduation, where he sang a rendition of the Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune "You'll Never Walk Alone." During his thirty years as a professional singer, Dave Prater took the song's title quite literally. He preferred, always, to sing with others. After graduation, he fled to Miami to sing with the Sensational Hummingbirds, his older brother J.T.'s gospel group. Then he had a chance meeting at a nightclub talent show with Sam Moore, the angel-voiced tenor with whom Dave would perform on and off for the better part of twenty years. Finally, when Prater's relationship with Moore became strained beyond repair, he sang with Sam Daniels, a high school English teacher from Miami whom Prater enlisted to tour with him in the eighties, much to Moore's chagrin, as "The New Sam & Dave Revue."

Despite all of the pain and disappointment it caused him throughout his life, Prater remained eternally committed to singing as one half of a pair, wed to the notion that one can achieve something making music with a partner that cannot be achieved alone. "When you're by yourself," Prater said in the early seventies, after his brief attempt at going solo, "sometimes you look up in the sky for that other voice, and it ain't there."

Music's inexplicable alchemy is a frightening thing, and we tend to make sense of it by rewarding individual stardom whenever possible. We lionize the auteurs, those who appear to have absolute authority over their own music: Jimi, Joni, Woody, Nina. But what does it mean to be famous not for the sound of your own voice, but for the sound of your voice blended with another's?

"A lot of these duos have problems with each other over the years," said John Regna, a Florida-based artist manager who served as Dave Prater's agent in the eighties. "They're so friendly onstage, and then the next time they talk to each other is on the next stage. They have different dressing rooms; they get to the gig in different vehicles. It's very interesting, from a sociological point of view."

The Louvin Brothers, Simon and Garfunkel, the Righteous Brothers, Sam & Dave. It's no surprise that in a culture so intent on celebrating the stardom of selfhood, the two halves of a singing duo often grow apart.

"The fact is that together, Sam and Dave were *magical,*" David Porter said, a word he kept returning to. As the man who cowrote, alongside Isaac Hayes, nearly every one of Sam & Dave's biggest hits at Stax Records, Porter had a ringside ticket to the duo's peak years in the mid- to late-sixties. "I was happy to see that there's an interest to look into Dave and give him some notice, because he deserves that," he told me.

Compared to Sam's tenor, Dave's gritty baritone possessed a pedestrian frailty. Because his voice seemed so mortal, so *attainable,* Prater had a way of wringing every ounce of emotion out of the simplest of lines, turning an aphorism like "When something is wrong with my baby, something is wrong with me" into a world-ending cry of compassion. His voice was a triumph of finding beauty through, and in spite of, human limitation. While Sam fluttered through falsetto, Dave scratched and fought against his own range, arriving at a deep, unassuming sensitivity. Sam made singing seem easy; Dave sweat his way through each line. Like Dave himself, his voice was humble.

Prater thrived in the shadows of Sam & Dave, reveling in his role of seasoned harmonizer, jubilant supporter, occasional front man. Moore usually handled the interviews. "Some artists are great at telling stories. They understand the nature of the interview, and they understand that if they give good interviews, they're going to get good press," Rob Bowman, author of *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records,* explained. "Dave Prater was not one of those guys."

"People need to know that there really was a Dave," said Deanie Parker, who worked as Stax's in-house publicist during the sixties. "It is no surprise that Sam always surfaced in the spotlight and Dave seemed to have been hidden in the shadows. That was the difference in their personalities. Sam was the showman, he needed the spotlight. It fueled him. On the other hand, Dave was very quiet. You might read that as passive, but I think Dave just chose to be more reserved."

"He was very comfortable being the second banana," Regna said. If Sam Moore never quite accepted that his career was bound to the voice of his singing partner, Prater prospered in the unlikely arrangement. Prater's voice burst into life when it blended with Moore's, when the two delved into what David Porter has called "abstract harmony parts," the often unconventional, occasionally dissonant, frequently transcendent music that resulted when the two men shared a microphone.

The hit-making solo singer has it easy. His or her voice becomes immortalized: broadcast through car radios, mimicked in showers, worshipped in teenage bedrooms, canonized in "Best of" lists. "Every wedding you go to plays 'Soul Man,'" said Rosemary Prater, Dave's widow. "Every anniversary party, every sweet sixteen." Sing with a partner for a living, and if, forty years later, your songs are still being heard in grocery stores and basketball arenas, who gets to be remembered? At best, contributions and credits disperse. More likely, they're disputed.

The same two words that decorated Dave Prater's car and license plate also receive choice placement on the front of his gravestone: *Soul Man,* the title of his biggest hit. But the more curious inscription is on top of the gravestone: *You were always on my mind.*

"He was really adamant about that song," explained Rosemary at a nearby diner shortly after my trip to the cemetery. Rosemary was talking about Dave's two all-time favorite songs, "The Wonder of You," by Elvis Presley, a ballad he had always hoped to record, and Willie Nelson's version of "Always on My Mind," which meant so much to Dave that Rosemary could think of no finer inscription when her husband died one month after Rosemary turned forty.

A lifelong New Jerseyan, Rosemary is now

David Porter, Sam Moore, and Dave Prater at a Sam & Dave recording session at Stax Records. © API Photographers Inc/Getty Images

in her sixties. When she doesn't agree with another person's behavior, she will say things like "that's not my cup of tea" or "they're just going to have to reap what they sow." During our nearly three-hour conversation, she shared a number of anecdotes about Sam & Dave, like the time Ray Charles called Dave Prater at home in the seventies asking if he could produce a Sam & Dave record (the project never happened). Or the time Sam Moore played drums and sang for an entire show one New Year's Eve after the drummer didn't show up.

Rosemary first met Dave in 1973, at a Sam & Dave gig on the Jersey shore. Dave had taken a cab to the show from his hotel in Newark and paid the driver to stay until the end of the concert. But the driver took off early, and Dave needed a ride back to the Holiday Inn. Newark was on Rosemary's way home. The next day, Prater called her to see if she wanted to come to his show that evening. Before long, Dave had relocated to Paterson, where Rosemary lived. They moved in together, married in 1982, and he lived there for the rest of his life.

Prater's kids called him Daddy Dave. As road gigs started to thin out in the eighties, Dave spent more time at home, where he liked to cook fried fish, butter beans, and cabbage for Rosemary and two of his sons from his first marriage, who had moved up to Paterson from Miami. "Dave was a family person," Rosemary said. "He was very dedicated to his mother. If you didn't like his mother, you didn't like him."

"What you saw was what you got with him," said Willa Daniels, speaking on behalf of her husband, Dave's late-career partner, Sam Daniels, who now suffers from Alzheimer's. "Dave was non-pretentious. He was old school. He had this nickname for Sam—he called him Pete. I was just talking to Sam the other day—we were like 'Why did he call you Pete?' Sam said, 'I don't know, but I think he called a lot of people that.'"

Around the comfort of close friends and family, Dave was more outgoing. "My dad was hilarious," his son Anthony told me. "And he could dance."

"I do remember one thing," John Regna said, when I asked if he has any specific personal memories of Dave. "When we would all sit around and tell a story and laugh, his laugh was so hearty that you got a second bite at the laugh. You'd laugh at whatever the story was, and then you'd laugh because of how much he was laughing."

"Everybody who met Dave liked him," said Rosemary. "He was a joyful person. Did he have a bad side? I'm sure he did. Did he show it sometimes or a lot of times? I'm sure he did. I experienced both sides of it, but I take the good and forget the bad, because the bad sides were either tormented or imposed."

That Sam and Dave managed to perform together for two decades is some small miracle. It was a relationship perhaps fraught from the start: Prater, with his nine siblings, a quiet church boy from the country, and Moore, a smooth-talking, mischievous only child from Miami (in his sixties, Sam Moore discovered he was actually born in Macon County, Georgia, less than one hundred miles from Ocilla). "David and I were *never* really close," Moore says in *Sam and Dave: An Oral History*. Moore claims that a cultural divide created distance between him and Prater. "I'm hanging with people like Jackie Wilson, B.B. King, Chuck Jackson," Moore brags in the book. "Dave would try, but to tell you the truth, when Dave would show up, they would be very cordial to Dave. They weren't rude, but as soon as Dave would leave, they would laugh and they'd call him country."

Moore gave me a written statement when I asked to interview him for this story. "I've been accused of hating Dave," he wrote. "I never have hated him, even when things were a big and ugly mess. For better or worse, we were a team when it counted and our history is what it is."

"When Dave killed himself," he continued, "which is how I look at what happened, I never cried, I've never mourned and I'm not sure I even know why."

At the height of their success in the late sixties, Sam & Dave reveled in their newfound rock & roll excesses: women, drugs, customized planes and tour buses. Their success was due in large part to the group's unrivaled stage show, where Moore and Prater—masters of dynamics, of the quick stops and slow builds and pregnant pauses and dramatic climaxes from the bursting horn section of the Sam & Dave Orchestra—dazzled and delighted, reigning as the finest working old-school showmen in pop music. It was Sam & Dave's live act that later served as the primary inspiration for the Blues Brothers.

As the duo became increasingly popular, Moore exploited Prater's quiet disposition. "I took advantage there because I felt that was a weakness in Dave. I thrived on that weakness," he writes in *An Oral History.* "Years later, Dave would say aloud that I felt like I was better than him. Naturally, I denied it, but when you look back, it was true."

According to Moore, the duo's relationship became irreparably damaged after Prater shot his girlfriend, Judith Gilbert.

One night in December 1969, Prater and Gilbert went to see a concert by Little Anthony and the Imperials in Miami. When they returned home, Prater, overcome with jealousy over what he perceived as some sort of unfaithfulness earlier that evening, retrieved his gun from the bedroom and shot Gilbert in the head.

Gilbert, who survived the shooting, ended up marrying Prater shortly after the incident, and remained married to him for several more years. "It was a very tumultuous, miserable, surreal time for us," said Kevin Gilbert, Judith's son. In what has become arguably the most famous quote ever uttered by either Sam or Dave, Moore claims, in *An Oral History,* that after the shooting he told Prater: "I'll sing with you, man, okay? I'll sing with you. But I shall not ever, ever again speak to you."

The pair continued to work together on and off throughout the seventies. As bookings thinned out and the demand for soul and r&b waned with the rise of disco, both men developed a dependence on cocaine and heroin. "Dave took more dope than any other human I ever personally witnessed," the late Memphis producer Jim Dickinson writes in his unpublished memoir. The cover of Sam & Dave's 1975 album *Back at 'Cha* captures them at the height of their disorder: A tired-looking, full-bearded Sam ("I've started wearing a beard now, 'cause I'm ashamed," Moore has said of the period) is leaning on Dave, whose once-boyish, sweet smile has turned sinister, almost maniacal. By that point, because of contractual legalities, Moore and Prater were no longer working with Hayes and Porter at Stax. In the studio they were directionless, recording standards like "Under the Boardwalk" in a desperate search for a comeback.

In 1977, Sam & Dave flew to England, where they recorded one of their last singles. It was a murky, soul-ballad rendition of Lennon and McCartney's "We Can Work It Out." A few years later, they broke up for good.

"There are many songs where I'm supposed to be a shadow, a silvery edge around Paul Simon's lead front part," Art Garfunkel once said. "I don't care if it's seven-eighths Paul and one-eighth Arthur. Look how the silvery edge makes the record work."

Dave tried to play quarterback just once, returning to Miami in 1971 after one of his temporary breakups with Moore to record two decent, if unremarkable, songs under his own name. "They just put 'em out and that was that. No promotion," he said shortly after. "Keep My Fingers Crossed," the stronger of the two, is a driving r&b number that tries too hard to emulate Porter and Hayes's Stax magic. The next year, Prater was back singing with Moore. Moore also had a tough time jump-starting his solo career, recording a high-profile solo debut for Atlantic Records that was thwarted when the album's producer, King Curtis, was murdered in 1971.

Throughout the seventies, Moore and Prater continued to rely on each other. David Porter, in fact, vehemently disagrees with Steve Alaimo's ninety-to-ten assessment of Sam & Dave. "He didn't know what he had to work with," Porter said, getting audibly agitated. "That's a *stupid* comment. If he had known what he had, he would not make a ludicrous statement like that."

During recording sessions, Porter would stand on the other side of the microphone, coaching Sam and Dave through their vocals. In the mid-sixties, the recording techniques at Stax were still rudimentary: mess up a take and you had to start all over again. If you listen closely enough to the first few seconds of Sam & Dave's "I Thank You," you'll hear a faint voice shouting "Yeah, baby!" in the background. That's David Porter, so excited about the magic taking place that he can't keep his mouth shut.

"Dave knew how to make what he did complement the effectiveness of what Sam would do," Porter concluded. "There was a uniqueness in Dave's flavor that made Sam come off better. And there was a specialness in Sam that made Dave come off stronger."

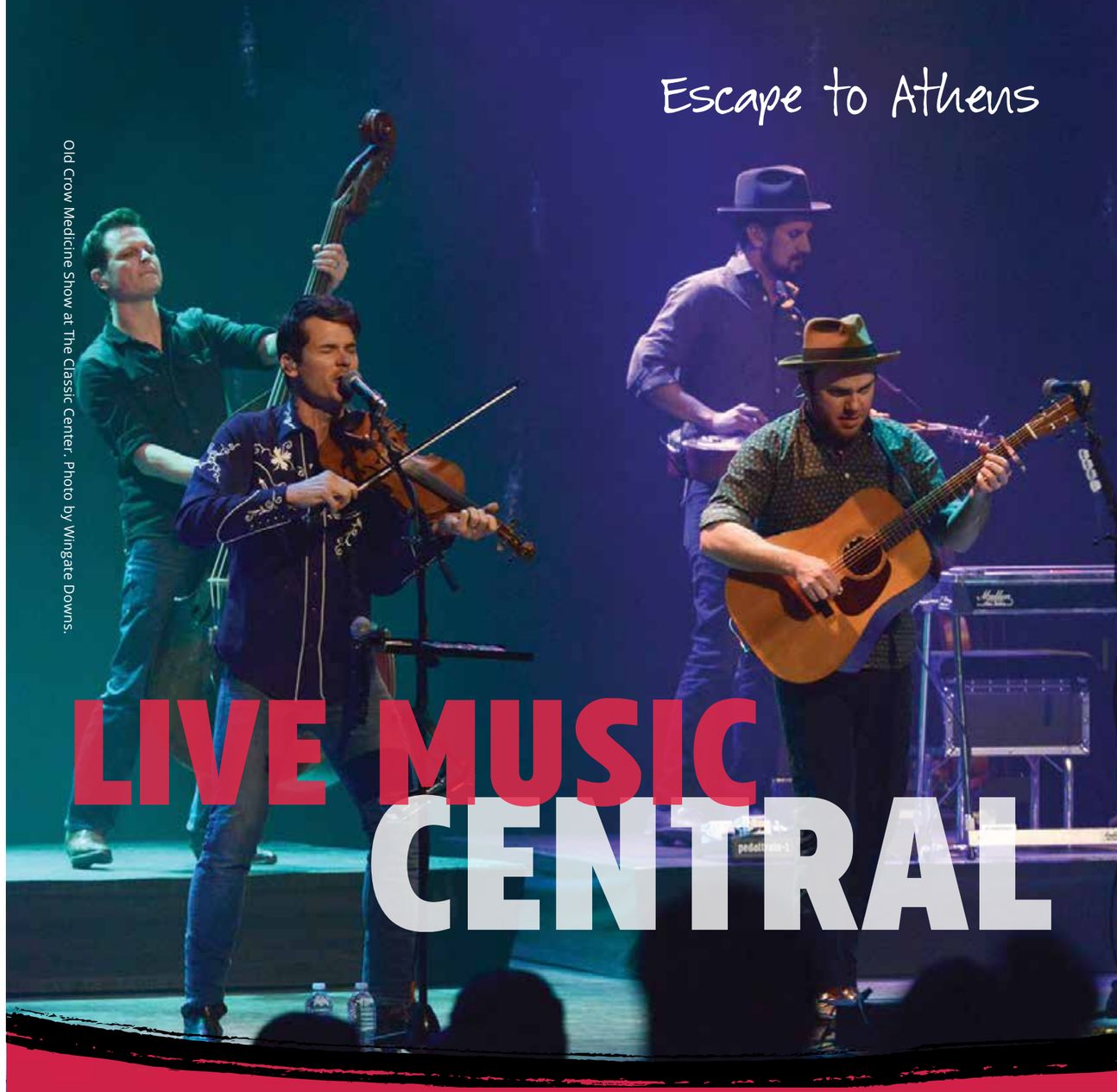
Porter told me that if he could have done one thing differently in his career, he would have produced a solo album with Prater—let Dave have the spotlight to himself. "Dave Prater has never gotten the proper acknowledgment he deserves. It was so obvious to me how great of a talent he was, and that could have been validated with the quality of that solo record. That's a missed opportunity that I wish I had not missed."

Six days before he died, Dave Prater took the stage for the last time. It was Easter Sunday in Atlanta, and Dave was performing as part of a Stax reunion concert alongside some of the label's biggest names from the sixties: Rufus and Carla Thomas, William Bell, Eddie Floyd, Johnnie Taylor, Isaac Hayes.

After the show, Prater was sitting around backstage with some of the other artists. The musicians all thought Dave, who performed with Sam Daniels, had sounded great, as good as ever, and they congratulated him for hanging in through the years. One of those musicians was Newt Collier, a trumpet player from the original Sam & Dave Orchestra, who noticed Prater quietly beginning to cry. "Everybody was telling him how good he sounded, and he just lost it, man," Collier remembered. "He couldn't take it."

Perhaps Prater was overcome by how well his set had been received, that he had been recognized, finally, by his contemporaries for having contributed an awful lot to Sam & Dave's music after all. Maybe he was thinking about his old partner then—noticeably absent from the bill that night—whom he hadn't seen in almost a decade. Or maybe he just agreed with the critic in the audience who wrote days later that Prater's voice "appeared to be shot" and his stage presence was "framed with apathy."

Before anyone else could notice him getting emotional, Prater stood up, without saying a word, and walked away.



Old Crow Medicine Show at The Classic Center. Photo by Wingate Downs.