

# Memphis Flyer

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## Bobby Whitlock talks Memphis, Stax, "Layla," and more.

by [ALEX GREENE](#)



Bobby Whitlock and CoCo Carmel

Talking to Bobby Whitlock, best known as a keyboardist for Eric Clapton, George Harrison, and others, it's easy to summon up that era when Memphis was seemingly the biggest small town on Earth.

"Dewey Phillips used to come over to my grandmother's house when I was a little fella. You know, I've always sang, and he'd say, 'You need to get that boy to Nashville!' So, when I was 12, I did a studio recording of a song called 'The Lord's Prayer' for Ted Mack's Amateur Hour. I won, and the grand prize was a Brownie Instamatic camera and a six-pack of chicken legs."

When I note that it sounds like he still had one foot in the country back then, he tells me, "I had both feet in the country when I was a kid! We chopped cotton and did all of that hard work."

But for a nervy country boy in that looser, less wary time, there were more adventures to come. As a teenager playing with the Counts, he visited another recording studio, this one on McLemore Avenue. Asked to join in on some clapping, he found his way onto a hit piece of vinyl titled "I Thank You" by Sam and Dave. His fellow hand clappers were Isaac Hayes and David Porter.

"I was privileged to be one of the few people to walk into Stax when they were recording. I watched Booker play that organ many, many times." As it happened, he wound up being a Stax artist himself. "I was the first white act signed to Stax' newly formed Hip label. They have my 45 hanging on the wall at the Stax Museum now."

From there, the chicken legs just kept coming. Stax brought a talented California couple known as Delaney & Bonnie to Memphis. Upon hearing Whitlock's group play, they asked him to join them, and Whitlock left for Los Angeles the next day. Delaney & Bonnie & Friends soon caught the attention of George Harrison, who tried to sign them to Apple Records. They went on to join Clapton's Blind Faith on a world tour, eventually incorporating both Clapton and Harrison into their group of performing "friends." And this was just two years after Whitlock had first lent a hand for "some of that old soul clapping" on a Stax track.

That loose group of players was recruited by Harrison to record his first solo album in 1970. "The first piano playing I ever did was on *All Things Must Pass*. I played organ and pump organ on almost all of that record. But the B3 was taken one day, and Eric said 'Why don't you just play piano on this one?' So I started playing, and it sounded like Jerry Lee or Memphis Slim or my mom or something."

Out of this time, Clapton's Derek and the Dominos was born, as was their career-defining album, *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*. Whitlock wrote and played through the 1970s, first with Clapton and then as a solo artist. Any fan of music from the era knows Whitlock's playing, if not his name.

Not long after, Whitlock retired from the music industry. "I didn't drop out of music; I just dropped out of the public scene. I didn't have anything to offer the disco era or the '80s. I wouldn't compromise my art, my craft, my integrity for the sake of being a rock star. I was already that."

Whitlock lived on his Mississippi farm for much of that time, doing occasional session work. He now lives near Austin with his wife, CoCo Carmel. The couple now tours together. In Carmel, a saxophonist, audio engineer, and producer,

Whitlock has found a sympathetic musical colleague. "She puts a foundation down for me, real support. That's the role I played in Derek and the Dominos."

The duet plays new originals and revisits the classics that Whitlock is famous for. With their upcoming Memphis show a homecoming of sorts, I asked Whitlock if he's ever tempted to move back. "No!" he exclaimed. "Well, I thought about it once. That was in the middle of a nightmare. ..."

*Bobby Whitlock and CoCo Carmel play The Warehouse on June 2nd.*

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