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The Riddle of Otis Redding The Soul Great Crashed into Lake Monona and Died 30 Years Ago with His Band — But the Legend Lingers

It is the stuff of Madison legend, and it is a legend that has neither faded nor been fully resolved in the three decades since a twin-engine Beechcraft plunged into Lake Monona on December 10, 1967.

That one of the seven people killed in the crash was 26-year-old Otis Redding, one of the world's hottest young soul singers, ensured that the events of that dank, misty day, 30 years ago next Wednesday, would pass into myth.

Stories told, retold, embellished, invented. Did anyone survive? Were drugs found on board? What became of the massive amounts of cash that Redding was known to carry? Was Redding himself at the controls of the plane, as an *Esquire* magazine article once asserted?

Otis Redding was the discovery of promoter Phil

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Walden. As a teen in the late '50s, Otis was going by the name Rockhouse and playing segregated clubs around his native Macon, Georgia. Walden brought him to Memphis and Stax studio, where Redding recorded his first hit, "These Arms of Mine," in 1962.

By 1967, there was no stopping him. He was huge in Europe and on the U.S. college circuit, and in early December Redding was in the studio in Memphis recording an album containing a soul ballad he was convinced would break him through to white audiences and superstardom. He'd begun writing it while living in a boathouse in San Francisco. He called it "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay."

After finished the song in the studio December 7, Redding began a planned tour with his band, the Bar-Kays. They played a gig in Nashville, and early on the morning of December 9 flew to Cleveland. They played three shows Saturday night and slept in. At 12:30 Sunday afternoon, the singer, six members of the band, and pilot Richard Fraser boarded the twin-engine Beechcraft at Cleveland's Hopkins Field and headed for Madison.

They were to play two shows at The Factory, a West Gorham Street club where Canterbury Booksellers now stands. Their scheduled warm-up band, The Grim Reapers, later gained fame as Cheap Trick.

Sometime after 3 p.m., with the plane 10 miles south of the Madison airport, flight control was transferred from Chicago Federal Aviation Control to Madison. At 3:25, when the plane was four miles south of the Madison airport, above Squaw Bay, the pilot was given clearance to land. That was the plane's last communication.

Three minutes later, Bernard Reese, a resident of the 4600 block of Tonyawatha Trail in Monona, standing in his backyard, heard a sputtering engine in the fog and low clouds above Lake Monona. Suddenly a plane flashed through the overcast sky, its left wing dipping, and hit the water with a loud bang about a half mile off the southeast shore. It rested

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on the surface for several minutes and then sank, by which time Reese had run inside and phoned the police.

It took the police boat with four officers 17 minutes to reach the site. The officer steering, Charles Campbell, was a pilot himself and familiar with the approach path. They ran into debris and one man floating with the help of a cushion—Bar-Kay trumpeter Ben Cauley, 20, the only survivor.

Cauley's recollections are included in the official Madison police reports of the crash. Sergeant Ted Mell, one of the officers in the boat, noted that along with Cauley, two others were found floating, not breathing, in the water—Bar-Kay Jimmie King and the pilot. From Mell's report: "They located no other survivors; however, they did pick up a small dark gray attaché case."

Redding's wife, Zelma, flew to Madison the next day with Twiggs Lyndon, who worked for Phil Walden, Otis's manager. After visiting Cauley in his Methodist Hospital room, the two went to the morgue—Otis's body had been found. He was strapped into the cockpit next to the pilot's seat and had not been flying the plane himself, as *Esquire* writer Robert Sam Anson had speculated.

From the report of officer Ralin Phillips: "There was a head wound on Redding, right between his eyes, plus several other cuts around his face and neck. The right leg was also broken. A search of the body of Redding produced one Bulova watch, one black leather billfold, and \$302 in cash." Also what appeared to be a package of marijuana, Phillips noted.

Zelma Redding wanted to know about the large amounts of cash Otis would have been carrying from the Nashville and Cleveland shows. A December 13, 1967, article in the *Capital Times* contained this passage: "Still missing is Redding's attaché case . . . which his wife, Zelma, and booking agent, Twiggs Lyndon, said he carried on the plane."

Was that the "small dark gray attaché case" referred

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to in Sergeant Mell's earliest report of the crash? I put that question to Mell in 1983, and he responded, "To be frank with you, I don't even remember any attaché case." At the time I also asked a Monona officer who worked the case, William Diebold, the same question. "You want something for the record on that attaché case?" he said. "You won't get it."

On December 13, a federal aviation investigator complained to Phillips that someone had rifled through luggage recovered from the crash. From Phillips's later report: "I later checked at the station and was informed that officers had been dispatched . . . to search this luggage for the money Mrs. Redding had reported her deceased husband had been carrying."

Yet there is no police report on such a search.

In the end, no great sums of cash were found—or if they were, they stayed with those who found them. All the bodies were eventually recovered. The police reports referred to marijuana on the plane, but a 1981 article in the *Madison Music Guide* said cocaine and opium were found as well. I can find no other mention of them, and no officers involved in the investigation ever spoke on the record about drugs other than marijuana.

The month after the crash, Phil Walden and Twiggs Lyndon released "(Sittin on) the Dock of the Bay" and it was the huge smash Redding had predicted, topping the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart for several weeks running and selling more than a million copies.

But Lyndon, who had come to Madison with Otis' wife, was headed for trouble. He stabbed a man and went to prison, and upon getting out died in a skydiving accident some believed to be suicide. Friends said he feared growing old.

Walden had problems as well. His Capricorn Records went through bankruptcy, and another of his stars, Duane Allman, died in a motorcycle accident in 1980. Capricorn

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Records survived, though, and Walden as president recently gave the Associated Press a nice quote about the "magnificence" of Redding's music. A 1992 CD, *The Very Best of Otis Redding*, sold more than 500,000 copies.

A reporter tracked down Ben Cauley, the one survivor of the crash, in 1992. Cauley and his wife, Shirley, were living in Memphis and had seven children. Cauley said he was working as a studio musician.

In 1986, the city of Madison erected some memorial benches in Redding's honor in Law Park. Last summer, with the opening of Monona Terrace, the benches were relocated—and rededicated—in the Evjue Gardens atop the convention center.

Zelma Redding didn't make it back to Madison for either tribute. Now 55, she lives on a 440-acre ranch outside of Macon. She said fans still show up to pay their respects to her husband, the soul legend who died 30 years ago in the frigid waters of Lake Monona. She recently told a reporter that kids who weren't even born when Otis died come and stare at the marble tomb where he rests, a short walk from the ranch.

The visitors weep, and when they've gone, Zelma does what she always does when she thinks of her late husband. She puts on an Otis Redding album, and remembers.