

**THIS STORY IS A TRIBUTE TO MR. RAYMOND BLACK,  
THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR BECOMING A WONDERFUL  
FRIEND WITH, AND CONVINCING**

**“Mr. STEVIE WONDER” TO RECORD AT**

**“STUDIO IN THE COUNTRY”**

**BOGALUSA, LOUISIANA, TO MAKE RECORDS  
& HAVE FUN FOR MONTHS?**

**I am hoping this will be a chapter in a book I am trying to complete**

**“The Studio in the Country Story”**

Have you, your Family, or your Friends, ever wondered, today, or long ago, HOW IN THE WORLD “STEVIE WONDER” CAME TO “STUDIO IN THE COUNTRY”, BOGALUSA, LOUISIANA TO RECORD, STAY AND ENJOY THE STUDIO, THE PEOPLE OF THE AREA, AND JUST HAVE THE BEST TIME EVER RECORDING, AND BEING IN LOUISIANA FOR MONTHS? I STILL DO. THE ANSWER IS EASY. This Miracle WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY ONE MAN, RAYMOND BLACK, with a little help from all the Studio Staff, many of whom did not even know the project was being attempted, and if they were aware, thought Ray was crazy to attempt making a wonderful dream such as this one come true. Ray’ s Dream was as big as another Bogalusa Native, maybe much Bigger! Here is MY RAY BLACK TRIBUTE and the story of how Ray Black Brought “Stevie Wonder to “Studio in the Country”, Bogalusa, Louisiana.

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**I have to say that one of the Greatest Blessings in my life was to meet and know, very well, Raymond Black. Ray was the Vice-President of “Studio in the Country”, a fantastic studio session drummer, a great musician, one of my best friends in life, a man with the greatest character, integrity, kindest of heart, and an honest soul, that this other country boy has ever known in any Person I have ever met.**

**Hopefully, this will erase the well believed notion that the owner of the Studio, was a “one person wonder” who should get all the credit and glory for the Studio. Believe me, as I have said before, The success of “Studio in the Country” was a total “Team Effort”.**

**I have spoken many times about the “Studio in the Country Team”. This is a concrete example proving many statements of the past I spoke are completely true. This is definitely the Greatest Example of the credit due “Many Others” and most of all, Ray Black. There was never a “one man show”. The Dream was a Dream of Many!**

**Ray and I have known each other since grammar school, though Ray is 3 years younger than me. Our Friendship was very strong from the time we were very young and many years before “Studio in the Country” was a twinkle in my eye and even years before I even told Ray about my idyllic Dream.**

**I knew Raymond Black and his Family well, four boys altogether in their Wonderful Family, and I absolutely loved and adored their parents, “Uncle Buddy, and Aunt Louise Black”, as I loving Spoke of THEM.**

**Two of Ray’s brothers, Paul, and Alan, worked at the studio as well, accomplishing Great and Important jobs which were critical to the success of the Studio. Both went on to have wonderful careers. Paul**

**continued on to Los Angeles, California as a great engineer, doing many projects with John Haney Productions, such as “The Doors, Judy Collins, Rita Coolidge, and Jackson Browne”, etc. Alan became a Well-Known and Respected attorney in Slidell, Louisiana. Lee was the only member of the “Family of Brothers” who, as a young man, did not work at the studio. Lee has been successful operating many businesses in many places, as he did for years in Bermuda.**

**To all of you who have supported “Studio in the Country”, you should know How Important and Valuable Ray Black has been to the City of Bogalusa, Louisiana, “Studio in the Country”, Our Country in general, the Music of this Entire Country and Abroad, as well as to all the people who Love Music as one of Their Support Mechanisms.**

**Ray Black’s and my favorite “Artist in the World” was and is “Stevie Wonder”. Even before “Studio in the Country”, when a new “Stevie Wonder” album would be released, Ray and I would buy it immediately, go out onto my back porch, and play the new album “Loud as Possible” and endlessly and go “wild” listening to Steve. We were astonished by Steve’s Creativity Abilities. We peculiarly went “uncontrollable and into a space of euphoria” when “Talking Book” was released with “Superstition” on it. Good Gracious, what a Genius Steve is! Read on and see what Ray Black caused to happen. Good Happenings!**

## **The Key People Who Helped Raymond Black and me.**

### **“Gary Olazabal”**

**aka Gary Adante. Engineer / Composer / Producer**

**Gary O, as he is Affectionately Known, is a Supremely Talented and Experienced Music Producer, Composer, and Audio Engineer.**

**Gary O Began his career in 1971 as a staff engineer for “The Record Plant Los Angeles”, Gary worked his way up to become Co-Producer / Chief Engineer for Stevie Wonder from 1975 to 1990. Since 1990, as a founding partner in Noisy Neighbors Recording Studios, Gary has been one of the driving forces in music and sound-design for hundreds of projects from film and television to video games. Gary worked at Le Gonks West, Hollywood, CA as well. Next, Gary was found by the gentleman Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft and owner of Vulcan Productions, who, after meeting Gary and realizing what an incredible talent he had found, Paul Allen hired Gary O to become Chief Engineer of Vulcan Productions. A great loss to all of us, Mr. Paul passed away. Today, Gary continues as Chief Engineer of Vulcan Productions. Please read about all of Vulcan’s Major Accomplishments. <https://paulallen.com/Creativity/Vulcan-Productions.aspx> Gary O was very instrumental in helping Ray accomplish his dream of getting Steve and all of his valuable “Team” of “Creation Wonder Specialist” to Louisiana. Gary O became a big fan of the Studio and has, to this day, maintained many very close Friends in Louisiana and we hope Gary O has memories of being in Louisiana for a long time. Everyone here would jump for a chance to see Gary O again in Bogalusa. We All Thank You So Much Gary O and Pray All is Well With You And Your Family. You are the Best!**

### **“Nathan Watts”**

**Nathan Watts is one of Steve’s Closest and Dearest Friends. Nathan is The Most Respected Bass Player in the World. Nathan has been Steve’s Master Bass Player for Almost 50 Years. Nate is the also the most sought after Bass Player in the Studio Session World when he is home in the Los Angeles Area, *(or to play sessions anywhere in the world)* when Nate is not in the Studio with or on Tour with Steve.**

**Once Steve’s team got to Bogalusa, Louisiana and “Studio in the Country”, Nathan Watts, Steve’s Extraordinary Bass Player, was extremely helpful in knowing how to make use of this new World of creative possibilities that exist at “Studio in the Country”. Nate helped to make it all happen and made so many**

**Friends. One small problem, Nate was most often found at the “Bogalusa Western Wear Store” buying hats, jeans, boots, cowboy shirts, Collector Knives (Gerber and every other kind of expensive knife), and cowboy belts (with giant buckles). To this day, Nate is still Friends with many of the people at the Studio and All the Local Folks that Nate met and has remained his Friendship within Louisiana. Our Hearts here in Louisiana are Filled with Gratitude For You Nathan. Thank You So Very Much For Everything Mr. Nathan Watts!! Many Prayers For You and All of Your Family!**

### **“Calvin Hardaway”**

**Even though Calvin had management duties for Steve every minute, Every Night, Calvin, Steve’s Brother, would go to the old A & P Grocery Store with a lot of the Studio people to help, (*across from the “Famous Floyds Sandwich Shop” who produced the best hamburgers, hot dogs, and chili, best in the South of Louisiana, sorry to say but Floyd’s is a vision of yesterday*) and Calvin would buy every piece of chicken, pork, beef, and fish left on the shelves, (*A & P was the only 24-hour store in Bogalusa*) bring it back to the Studio, cook it all UP, (*we had (8) 55 gallon drum BBQ pits at the Studio, Calvin is a great chef I might add*) invite, for not only everyone working in the Studio, but as time went by, Calvin invited mostly local people who the “Wonder Entourage” had met and become Friends with, most of South Louisiana some nights. Calvin would delight in everyone’s Happiness. Calvin was a huge supporter of everyone at the Studio and every new Friend he met while having fun in Louisiana. This fun went on every day for months. Thank you, Calvin, for all you did for everyone you touched while you were in Louisiana with us! Many Prayers to You and Each and Every Member of Your Family**

### **“Josette Valentino”**

**Josette was a very sweet, intelligent, friendly young lady and part of Steve’s Management Team and his on site Personal Manager. Josette was critical in the success of the entire project for Steve and All of the Wonderful People who were here with Steve. (*and the Studio’s wonderful people as well*) Josette became a Friend to every one of us here at the Studio and everybody who was lucky enough to have met her, run in to her, and especially all the folks in Louisiana who got to really know and Love Josette. I will never forget You Miss Josette or any of our visitors from California. Thank You So Very Much Miss Josette Valentino. Wherever you**

**are, we all in Louisiana Pray that Your Life is Wonderful and Safe for You and Every Member of Your Family.**

### **Entertainment (and The Best) Attorney, Johanan Vigoda**

**Born in New York, Johanan Vigoda was best known as the hard-nosed attorney who negotiated "Stevie Wonder's" "LifeTime" deal with Motown, which gave Steve creative control over the contents of his recordings. Mr. Wonder later included Vigoda as the judge who is sentencing the young man in the story to 10 years in prison in the extended version of Stevie Wonder's hit "Living for the City."**

**Johanan Vigoda also negotiated the Beatles first label deal in the U.S., representing Vee-Jay Records and was also one of the first attorneys for the legendary "Atlantic Records".**

**We Thank You So Much Johanan For All of Your Hard Work in Helping Ray Black and All of The Studio Team make Our Dream of Steve coming to record at "Studio in the Country", a Reality. Thank You For Believing in All of Us and coming down often to visit us and take convertible rides, in Daddy's Collection of Antique Cars. Daddy loved You and We All did as well, we all enjoyed the rides through the country side and to other towns looking for Your Grapefruit Produce. Boy, You sure enjoyed Your Fresh Grapefruits. You Could Peel'um in Seconds Flat. We All Love You Johanan!**

**We Know You Are in Heaven Now and We Pray For All of Your Family. We Pray for All of Your Family Who are missing you as we all do. Thank You again for Everything Mr. Vigoda. Peace Be With You. May God Bless You and All of Your Family Johanan.**

## **Steve, aka “Stevie Wonder”**

**During their visit to the Studio, Steve, his Family of Musicians, Engineers, and Everyone in his Krewe (*Louisiana Spelling*) would all go camping out, go fishing, go to run the rapids in many rivers and creeks, water ski, play foosball, play air hockey (Steve beat Ray in the annual “Air Hockey Championship Masters of “Studio in the Country”, our annual air hockey event), for which Ray had been the champion the last 4 years, Ray was depressed for a long time after his loss and we asked Ray, “hey Ray, it is one thing to loose, but how does it feel to be beaten by a player who is brand new to the sport and is incapable of seeing”? (Ray did not take that easy), play tennis, ride horses, play golf, go trail walking, go dirt biking (*“Gregory Arthur Phillinganes” could not be pulled off, grabbed, knocked off, or gotten off a dirt bike in any way, once he jumped on one. Being raised in Philly, Greg had never seen, much less ridden a bike, much less a dirt bike. His mother was very strict on Greg practicing piano, every spare minute of his day. Greg, during this time, was Steve’s Wonderous Keyboard Player. Greg is the Epitome of Keyboard Players, Arrangers, and currently the Band Leader on many TV shows and Specials today all over the world. I would bet that Greg has never ridden another dirt bike in his life*), go to Jazz Fest, go to Zesto, (get that fried chicken and chili dogs) and go to the Pine Cone Café on Fourth Street, with Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Fisher, (Mrs. Fisher was an outrageous cook and made the best “of everything”, including fried seafood, home style plate lunches, and the best pies in the universe. Sadly for us but Great For Heaven, the Fishers are now in Heaven) go to Acme Café, (*any time day or night, the only restaurant open 24-7 in Bogalusa, Gary O met his favorite server, “oh! Miss Ruby” at the Acme!*) to have the best home style cooking around, (*especially anything at the Acme. “George Graham Sr.’s”, The Best chef North of New Orleans, best fried chicken plate lunches with rice, salad, or mashed potatoes, everything was wonderful just like “Mr. George’s fried chicken, chicken fried steak, the Special Haddock Fish “Mr. George” would fry for me, and the open face country roast beef sandwich, unbelievable desserts, what a treat!”*), go to The Strawberry Festival in Hammond, Steve loves Strawberries, have Crayfish boils on Bateman’s Lake and at the Studio, (*many of Steve’s Family had not even heard of Crayfish, they absolutely loved Crayfish! Everyone was always asking for more Crawfish!*) and in Steve’s case, once he asked (almost demanded in Steve’s Special Way) that I teach him how to drive a car, yes a real car, a car with the teacher (me) in it each time along with Steve, that was to be one of Steve’s most favorite things to do during his long stay in Louisiana. (Mr. Herrington at Valley Recap set up the PVC guides with recapped tires on the top of each of the posts in a 11-14 acre cornfield. In no time, the posts were all gone and Steve went driving onwards) **We All Had The Most Fun We Ever Had while Steve and his Wonderful Family of Fantastic People were in Bogalusa and in Louisiana!****

**We did experience small, 1 or 2 little problems, during all of the FUN. In the end Ray and his younger Brother Alan would always fix everything. Alan was the**

**coordinator of all planned as well as unplanned entertainment, any entertainment at ALL. Alan was the first person any of the California Troops would come to for any help or to gain the results they needed. Alan's trips with everyone, all other the place, were of tales of "Huckleberry Finn", but true and up level. Alan made sure everyone was happy. He started with us at the Studio in his teens. No wonder Alan became a great attorney! The first problem that Ray and Alan had to solve was when Our Great, Jack-of-All-Trades, our Studio Employee and Friend of Everyone, Mr. Bill Goddard, after a long foosball tournament at "Fat Albert's" (Ricky Adam's, God Rest Ricky's Soul Please, Place (bar) in the old Redwood Hotel) with a big group of Steve's and Studio's Friends, ran the Studio's Datsun pickup truck through Mr. Clarence Paul's, Steve's long time "Almost a Father Like Friend", and a very special person to us all of the Studio Folks, and a Motown Executive and a pass producer of Steve (Hits), front wall of his room at the Sportsman Inn while taking some of the group back to the motel from "Fat Albert's". Needless to say, an unwanted surprise for Mr. Clarence at the time it took place, but Mr. Paul rolled with the punches like a champ (especially for one who could have had things end much worse).**

**Way before that small incident, about 2 weeks after his arrival, Steve told me to stop the Sheriff's Details and Patrols I had set up, as I had previously set up for any Major Artists recording at the Studio and staying at the Circle K Ranch (Studio Ranch) , or at the Sportsman's Inn, where a good number of Steve's Family and Friends were also staying. Steve had rented the entire South Building of the Sportsman Inn. Each and Every Room in the South Building. Over the project length, I think at least 200 people visited for a short while and then left. These people were journalist, Motown Executives, Johanan, touring planners, The Rolling Stone and Ebony Magazine Executives, etc.**

**I stopped the protective details immediately upon Steve's request. Steve said the details and patrols were not needed because the local People of Bogalusa and the surrounding area were too wonderful and could surely be trusted as the trust given to any of Steve's Friends. This also meant there would be no guards at the guard house at the entrance road to the Studio. (The old North entrance that is no longer in use and the guard house is no longer standing).**

**We even took Steve to a nighttime Jazz Fest Event featuring Ella Fitzgerald. We took Steve on stage to meet Ella for the first time, then Steve and Ella sang "You Are The Sunshine of My Life" together, meeting for the first time, as though they had sung that song a thousand times. The crowd, Quint Davis, myself, and all of the entire Krewe of Steve's and the Studio's, (we all went to New Orleans in a school bus**



**I had rented from a Friend) went absolutely crazy to hear this History Being Made! Steve was even picking up a Southern Accent! (just a small one)**

**On one Friday night, we were all camping on the eastern Island in Bateman's Lake, right across from the Bateman's Lakeside Home. Steve had purchased all of the best camping gear for everybody, Alan made sure of this. We went camping a very often during all of the recording sessions. Camping was a favorite, as well as cooking outside, for Steve. Steve can cook very well, outside! We had portable stoves that were more complicated and had more features than the stove in my house! Steve got us all the best camping gear money could buy. I think Steve, and All of His Los Angeles Family, knew they were not in California. I think they liked that a lot, even with the alligators.**

**Early that Saturday Morning, I woke up and looked out of my tent. Only Steve and I were awake. It was still during sunrise. There was a fleet of canoes just a little bit west of us, just about 100 yards from Steve and me. (I later found out the young people in the canoes were from the "Youth Group of the Superior Avenue Baptist Church", out for group canoe practice, (annually) for the upcoming " Parish Wide Baptist Youth Canoe Races.) Steve was a little over knee-deep in the lake, taking a bath in his underwear. Steve's existing senses are greater than any seeing human, he heard the group and thought they were on the other side of the island. For once, Steve misjudged, the canoes were now about 50 yards down the lake, and on our side of the island at this time, headed right at Steve's and all of the camper's way! I had on my bathing suit, and a "Studio in the Country" Eagle Baseball Shirt. I immediately ran to, jumped in the lake, and tackled Steve. He was shocked and asked me wildly, "What In The World Are You Doing Evans?" I asked Steve to wait to speak for a moment, Please. In the meantime, we heard laughter and as the kids were paddling by, saying, "that's 'Stevie Wonder' in the lake, I think, could it be?". Steve immediately knew what had happened!**

**In a few minutes, Steve and I were laughing so hard our stomachs aching! Steve felt like he was an average "Joe", I could tell that moment would be etched in his memory for a lifetime, a great memory always. I could feel this and I was joyful in my soul that Steve got to feel like one of the common folks, and not carry the weight of SUPERSTAR on his shoulders, for just a wonderful moment in time, in the countryside, in the Louisiana Swamps. You know me, I was crying in joy for Steve. Steve so deserved this moment. I will never forget that moment. I am crying just writing about it.**

**Incidentally, I wanted Steve to have the most comfortable place for him to stay. I moved out of my personal house, moved to the Circle K Ranch, and asked Steve to stay in my house, as my guest. At first, Steve said that doing all of that was too much to ask. In the end, I talked him into it. We moved Steve into my home. At the beginning of his stay, my neighbors thought this arrangement might cause a stir having the most “Famous Artist in the World” staying next door. Maybe outsiders and stranger might hear where Steve is and snoop around and be a danger to everyone, especially the Children. The end result was quite different, everyone, including the Neighborhood people, were relieved and were confident that no dangerous elements were hanging out and becoming a problem to fear.**

**When Steve left for the last time, the Neighbors had a going away party for Steve and all of his Friends. Steve had made the impression of a “Lifetime” on the country people of Bogalusa and Louisiana! How Special Steve is as a Person.**

**Over time, Steve played, with Wonderlove, at the Bogalusa Jr. High School and The Bogalusa High School. Steve attempted to play at all the schools in Bogalusa and Washington Parish, over the months. Unfortunately, the news of Steve playing in Bogalusa became World Wide News and people came out of the woodwork, hoping to see Steve, tens of thousands of people. Unfortunately, the available law enforcement officers did not have the number of professionals needed, or the technology, to make it happen safely, as well as the needed ability to protect all of the people who might have come to see Steve, Steve and Wonderlove and all of both “Teams’ would be in danger as well. Sometimes, good plans just don’t work out.**

**During the times Steve played live for the children, he talked honestly and freely with as many of the students as he could after playing or running into anyone of them, he might run into daily. Steve always made everyone feel welcome and all the advice Steve offered was great advice, I know, I was there. Steve performed these shows out of the goodness of his heart. I, William Semmes “Bleu” Evans, can tell you from *My Heart*, then and now, Steve, “Stevie Wonder”, is one of the Finest Humans ever, with the most caring Heart of Any Person I know. Steve is also the Most Incredible Songwriter, Singer, Musician, Artist, Person, and Parent you would want your Family to meet and emulate. How Blessed We All Are, Yesterday and Today, for Experiencing Our New and Wonderful Friend, Steve! There are no words to thank you for taking a chance and changing the lives of so many people, Incredibly for the BEST. Thank You “Mr. Stevie Wonder”, Steve, as**

**you really prefer to be addressed, for Everything. That is all I can say but my Heart says more to YOU. Thank You Again From the Bottom of My Heart Steve! Everyone in this World and Especially Louisiana People are sending Many Prayers and So Much Love to You and Each and Every One in All of Your Families.**

**DEAR STEVE,**

**EVERYONE IN LOUISIANA AND THE WORLD IS SO VERY SORRY ABOUT THE PASSING OF “MISS LULA MAE” AND “MISS RENEE”. WE ALL KNOW THAT BOTH OF THESE WONDERFUL WOMEN ARE IN HEAVEN ABOVE, WITH GOD, OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN, AND HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST, OUR LORD AND SAVIOR. WE ARE SO VERY SORRY. THIS LOVE AND THOUGHTS OF HELPING YOU AND ALL OF YOUR FAMILY’S SORROW, WE ALL SEND IS FOR YOU STEVE, AND EACH AND EVERY MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY. GOD BLESS YOU ALL!**

### ***The Words of “Raymond Black” Today***

**As we spoke about it Bleu, I wanted to put a timeline together describing a context on how this wonderful event, for us all, took place. I am attaching a copy of a letter I wrote to Gary O, written on our fancy letterhead, back in 1976.**

**You know once I started listening to Steve’s Music, once he broke away from Motown’s control, to do his own production work, it was all just amazing to all of us, the music he was creating at this point.**

**I must have begun wanting to work at getting him to record with us around 1972, before the Studio was completed. Remember way before that time, you and I would get any new “Stevie Wonder” Album and get out on your porch and just marvel at the music we were actually hearing. Beginning my quest, I finally began studying Stevie’s album**

**covers, to see where Steve was recording and who was working with him as engineers and producers, etc., in order to find a passage into any means to contact him, tell him about the Studio, and truly get Steve into “Studio in the Country” to Record. That was my wonderful Dream!**

**It came together as a plan when I zeroed in on Gary O. As being an assistant engineer on Steve’s earlier albums, I figured I may try to call him directly to see if I could talk to him, gain his respect, his help, and actually get to talk to Steve. Going to the Bogalusa Library was definitely the correct thing to try. I remember doing this and I remember books and information were broken into two large phone books, being that Los Angeles is so large.**

**I found a Gary Olazabal in West Los Angeles and went forth and gave him a call late one afternoon. Gary answered. I was shocked and relieved. I told Gary why I was calling and he gladly told me he would be working with Steve that night at “Record Plant Los Angeles”. We chatted a bit more and I mentioned the Studio and why I was trying to contact Steve. I could not believe how cordial and nice Gary O was to me and I thanked him and we ended the call after a wonderful conversation. How excited I was to have gotten, as I imagined, to at least first base. The very same night, I called the Record Plant and spoke to the receptionist, and I don’t remember what I told them, but that my main reason for calling was to speak to Stevie, and by some miracle, they patched me in to the Control room and they put him on the phone.**

**The basis of our conversation was first, that I was so inspired by his music and felt the need to reach out to him and tell him about “Studio In the Country”. Next, that we would love to get some information to him to consider recording with us. He was very nice and I was nervous. Steve said he was recording the “Fulfillingness’ First Finale” Album. Amazing! Steve told me to send any information I had to his**

**Attorney, Mr. Johanan Vigoda, at Black Bull Music, Steve's Publishing Company and base of Steve's operations, located in New York City, New York. After a short but meaningful conversation, I thanked him and we ended the call with one major success for Louisiana, the Studio, and me, Steve said he would take my calls in the future, just call the "Record Plant Los Angeles", or if he had changed Studios, he would get the information to me. Steve said he would alert the receptionist, and also the owner, to put through any calls from a "Mr. Ray Black", and if he had moved to another Studio, Steve gave the powers that be, the authority to make me aware of where he had moved to record. When the conversation ended, I think I fell on my couch and screamed Halleluiah! I immediately called Bleu, and he could not believe it! Bleu was hollering louder than I was as well! What a DAY!**

**I sent a brochure and information packet to Mr. Vigoda at "Black Bull Publishing" and I called him as well. After a couple of conversations with me, Mr. Vigoda seemed to be at ease with my concept and the fact that my concept was in line with Steve's Vision. Now, we were comfortable talking together and we had an honest and clearly open contact established. Mr. Johanan Vigoda, who was actually "Steve's Number One Attorney", started at this point, to put in motion the necessary actions to set up a real meeting between Steve and Bleu. Finally, we had a relationship between the Studio and "Stevie Wonder's" Management Team! Now, with Johanan, we needed to organize a meeting between Bleu and Stevie at the Midem Music Festival in France and let Bleu create a relationship, and the best thing to happen would be the chance of a sincere Friendship between Bleu and "Stevie Wonder". I told Bleu just to be himself and that I had faith in him. I told Steve, Mr. Vigoda, Gary O, and a new person from Steve's Management Team, Josette Valentino, all about Bleu Evans, the creator, designer, builder, and owner of the Studio. I did this so Stevie and his Team would have a good knowledge of Bleu, the Studio, and all of the Studio's Team, because at "Studio in the**

**Country”, it was a Team that made everything work. Nobody was aware of, and more of a believer in the Team concept than Bleu Evans. Bleu was, and I know he is a TRUE Believer today. I wanted Steve to realize that he was not dealing with a group of “*uneducated or uncaring rural people*” but a real group of Professionals. All of the Team were honest, hardworking, people that Steve could count on, as well as Authentic Music Recording Professionals, who’s respect and admiration for Steve was sincere, who could be counted on, and would be valuable in continuing to support Steve’s journey into new creative spaces with a team of very attentive and interested Studio personnel. Steve’s team, that shared the dream for Steve to reach new levels in Studio Recording Techniques, in a new creative, private, secluded and focused environment, realized that when assisted by people who shared Steve’s vision and hard work to reach a new plateau, and people who knew that giving true and total support to each and every one of Steve’s Team was our main goal. At this point in time on our journey, Josette Valentino took control with Gary O, to help plan a trip for Bleu to go to France to meet, talk, and get to know Stevie. The trip would last for a week. We were Praying for Bleu and Steve to start a true and trusted Friendship during the meetings. Bleu is contemplating his trip and preparing in his mind, day and night, Bleu stopped recording, until the goal was completed. We were all thinking as Bleu, what in the world do we all need to do to prepare “Studio in the Country”, Bogalusa, Louisiana, and all of our friends, families and local people to handle, preform on all levels of professionalism and respect, show true friendship, to allow Steve, All His Family, Friends, and Technical Team, to have a fun, a rewarding, productive, and wonderful time, with no mistakes, to make possible the “Stevie Wonder” Historic Recording of His Music in The State of Louisiana, a successful reality. I am Praying to the Lord each day for my dream of bringing “Stevie Wonder” to “Studio in the Country” and recording his wonderful Music, to his satisfaction, a thing that will really happen in the end. Ray Black**

**The letter I wrote to Gary O, two years later, talks about of the meeting and the time, Bleu and Stevie enjoyed in France, but that we did not hear anything more. We were all disappointed and heartbroken. I thought I had failed, Ray Black.**

**The letter went out to Gary O in 1976, to try to convince Gary O to come visit the Studio to see, feel, and investigate everything for possible work recording Stevie at “Studio in the Country”.**

**P.O. Box 490**  
Bogalusa, La 70427  
February 2, 1976

Bogalusa (504) 735-822  
New Orleans (504) 523-1266

A Subsidiary of



Mr. Gary Olazabal  
c/o Crystal Sound Studio  
1014 North Vine  
Hollywood, California 90038

I certainly appreciate your returning my call here at the Studio. I was very interested in the article I read in Modern Recording about the session with Steve. His music really astounded me so much that a couple of years ago I had to call him and tell him about the Studio. As I told you on the phone, Steve met with Bill Evans, the owner of the Studio, in France



At Midem in 1974, Bill told him a lot about the Studio and he had planned to come check it out. I guess he got tied up, and he never made it.

The reason I wanted to talk to you is that I know you work with him now and I know Steve is always looking for new concepts. I believe our atmosphere here is the most relaxed that could be used for recording (for both artists and engineers). It is very private and secluded out here and we have plenty of nature around us to make this Studio a beautiful concept. Gary, I know it is out of the way from the music industry in Los Angeles, but that makes it much more unique. As for the Studio itself, ask Tom Hidley about our room and control room. At the moment are wired for a 48 board which we hope in the future it will be a custom-built Helios. Also, we have a large acoustic chamber in the back of the Studio. Of course, we have noise reduction, plenty of outboard equipment, and very dependable 3M tape machines.

We would love to have you come stay a while and study or facility. If you ever have some time, you could come and stay at our ranch house and enjoy the country and some of the night life of New Orleans which is only 60 miles away.



Gary, if you would, please give Steve my best wishes and tell him we are looking forward to seeing him come down and cut some tracks in a new atmosphere with new sounds. I cordially invite both of you to see Studio in the Country. I hope to stay in contact with you and if you ever have any questions, please call me. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Ray Black

Not much time passed before we got the call from Josette Valentino at the Studio one night. Josette told us that she and Gary O would like to set up a visit to come down and check the Studio and all of us out.

The two of them flew down and spend a little over a week with us and we had a great time! They loved it! They stated that Stevie wanted to do an album with his band Wonderlove, and that “Studio in the Country” would be a great place to get them out of the City to concentrate in a secluded and wonderful Studio.

1977 - The Big year. Wonderlove comes down and starts on their album and a few weeks later, Stevie comes down and ends up spending several months, this time with us.

**Because of Raymond Black’s persistence, honest and heartwarming conversation about “Studio in the Country”, and his honesty to Stevie and Ray’s Love for Stevie as a person and musician, “Mr. Wonder” was willing to take a chance on the next step to come to Bogalusa to record, a move that Steve decided to take.**

### **Going Back in Time**

**Josette called, with Gary O, and informed Ray and I that Stevie was going to ‘MIDEM’, “Marché International du Disque et de l’Édition Musicale”, in Cannes France, which is organized annually, in and around the “Palais des Festivals et des Congrès” in Cannes, France. We in the Music Industry in the United States call this conference “MIDEM”, “The World Conference of the Entertainment Industry”. I went to "MIDEM" as an American Delegate for 7 years. All facets of the industry are represented at “MIDEM” and some of the most important deals and relationships in the entertainment industry are created at “MIDEM”.**

## **Bleu's 1974 Trip to France to Meet "Stevie Wonder"**

**Mr. Johanan Vigoda, Gary O, Josette, Ray, and I, set up a meeting with Stevie and I to take place in Cannes France at "MIDEM". That year, in early 1974, I arrived in Cannes. I stayed at "Hôtel la Villa Cannes Croisette". Rick Wakeman, of The Group "YES", was across the hall from me, and Stevie had the Presidential Suite at the "Carlton Hotel" on the beach, Cannes Best!**

**When I got there, Josette had given me a room number to call her at the "Carlton Hotel" to speak again with her. I called her as soon as I checked into my hotel. Josette answered. Miss Josette asked me if I could be at the Carlton Hotel's main Lounge and Entertainment Venue, The "Cabaret", at 2:00 PM local time, Cannes, the next day? I said I most definitely could! Miss Josette said, "please just walk up to the entrance of the "Cabaret" and I would be greeted by some of Stevie's Staff and be shown into the venue and introduced to Stevie". What happened was a little different!**

**At 1:45 P.M., I was a nervous, shaking, guy on the street from Bogalusa, Louisiana. I was standing on the city's waterfront promenade, "La Croisette", which epitomizes the city's glamour with its high-end shops and luxury hotels, including the belle époque-style InterContinental "Carlton Hotel", where Stevie always stayed. I was waiting to go in and meet "Stevie Wonder" and continue making "Ray Black's Dream" of "Stevie Wonder" coming to "Studio in the Country" to record in Bogalusa, Louisiana a reality.**

**My following actions would take Ray Black's Unbelievable, multi-year Dream and Journey, to the next step of completion, to hopefully a successful dream of Ray Black's and to bring happiness and fulfillment to All of Our Studio "TEAM". That is, if I did not make a mistake. I was determined to be "myself", honest, true to Ray, and true to all of the Studio Staff, and show my character and humble nature. My entrance and trip into the "Hotel Carlton" to meet and talk with Stevie were wonderful, but not at all what I expected!**

**At exactly 1:57 P.M., I walked into the "Carlton Hotel", as the doorman opened the double doors for me as if I were Royalty! I immediately saw, on the left side of the main room of the hotel lobby, a neon sign, with The "Cabaret" lit up and beautiful. There were 4, large, serious, well dressed young men, standing at the closed doors which lead into the "Cabaret". I was amazed that this venue, during this day of "MIDEM", was not open to the public. Only Stevie Wonder could bring about that to happen!**

**I was wearing a "Studio in the Country" Shirt, black with gold iron on letters, a light brown "London Fogg" Jacket with a small "Studio in the Country" logo (Susan's Original), and the studio name and address on my left jacket front, blue jeans, blue socks, and brown penny loafers. At 155 pounds and at a little over 5'10", I felt like a very small person.**

**I gazed over to the entrance of the "Cabaret". I walked toward the closed doors, and I was immediately approached by all four of the young gentlemen. They were impressive, professional, not overly friendly, and direct to the point! The spokesman for the group said: "Excuse me sir, are you Mr. William S., also known as "Blue" Evans, as he held up an invitation like card with my name engraved on it for me**

**to view? I said, "sir", you are correct except my nick name is spelled "Bleu", not "Blue". The spokesman for the detail, they looked almost military, responded immediately and he said: "I am sorry Mr. Evans, the card will be immediately corrected. Please follow us into the "Cabaret", so we may introduce you to Mr. Wonder".**

**He also asked me if I was French, I said no, I am a country boy from a small town called "Bogalusa, Louisiana", in "The United States of America". All these gentlemen smiled and led me to the doors at the entrance of the "Cabaret". I felt by hearing their voices, that they were from California. That relaxed me and put me at ease somewhat.**

**As soon as we arrived at the doors, the gentlemen opened the doors right away, I was ushered in, and the doors were closed behind me, leaving one gentleman, "Mr. Stevie Wonder" seated at a 9 foot "Bösendorfer Grand Piano", and me, a shaking Bill Evans, as the only other person in the entire room. Again, as I stated, Stevie had the venue closed for our first meeting. What an amazing feat for anyone to accomplish during the packed "MIDEM" Festival. But this amazing man was after all, "The Greatest Songwriter, Singer, Musician, and Artist in the World", "Stevie Wonder".**

**As I walked in and stopped in my tracks, before I could say a word, Stevie asked me "are you Bleu, Ray Black's Friend and the owner of "Studio in the Country"? Remember, only "Stevie" and I are in this giant venue in the middle of the afternoon on "The French Riviera" with an army of serious but nice professional security guards outside the door. WOW!**

**I said: “Yes, Mr. Wonder, I am Bleu Evans”. Stevie’s first response was, and I will never, ever forget it, “Bleu, there will be no Sirs, no Mr. Wonder, and please if you will, call me Steve, I prefer that name, I am also “Stevie”, I appreciate that name when my fans call me “Stevie Wonder” it means a lot to me, please walk over here and sit down on the piano bench alongside me”!**

**Brimming with Overwhelming Respect for “STEVE”, I walked to Steve, sat down beside him on the piano bench, we shook hands, and Steve said, “Hello Bleu, I know your real name is William, what do you want me to call you”? I just said: “It does not matter but I would appreciate it if you would call me my nickname, Bleu”. Steve said, “Bleu it is, where do you want to start”?**

**Steve said he had requested several of his staff to "check us out" and everything about “Studio in the Country”, its staff, the design, equipment, console (at that point in time a Harrison 3232, which I had used recording “KANSAS”), and the property layout, was all very nice. Steve stated their information was quite impressive. Steve also said I have heard some of your and the studio’s recordings, Calvin played all of the recordings we were able to find in time for our meeting. For your information, my favorites that I have heard so far are Sammy Davis, Jr., Pete Fountain, ‘Gatemouth’ Brown, Memphis Slim, and Ronnie Kole. During the year 1974, a year after opening, I don’t think we had received any Gold or Platinum Albums, but they were on the way. I told Steve that the Sammy Davis’s ‘Candyman’, was recorded at MGM Recording Studios on North Fairfax in Hollywood, and the vocals were recorded at Bill Porter’s Studio in Los Vegas because Sammy was always at the “Sands Hotel” performing, this album was not at recorded at my studio. Steve asked if there might be a possible chance for Sammy to come to record at “Studio in the Country” in Louisiana? I replied confidently, “Yes Steve, Sammy and I are working**

on that as we speak". Steve said, "please let me know when, I might just come down to Louisiana for Sammy"! My response was "that would be Wonderful to have both of you in Our Studio Together, at the exact same time". Steve's next words were, "I have only met him 2 times, and I would be honored to see him again, especially Down South in Bogalusa". I said one word, "Wonderful".

Next, Steve stated, making his words very direct and clear, that he was greatly concerned about Bogalusa's History and the condition of Race Relations in the South. Steve said to me bluntly, "Are there any Bigots in Bogalusa"? I responded immediately, "Of Course there are some Bigots in Bogalusa Steve, but there are many, many more people in Bogalusa who are wonderful, caring, and real nice folks who don't care what color anyone's skin is, Louisiana People care about the true person much more. I responded with this statement as well, "I hate to say this, but I must, there is a large chance that Bigots live in Bel-Air, in Hollywood, where you live, probably just across the street as well". Steve again stated very clearly, "You may be correct my new friend, unfortunately, if you are right, that fact does not make life today easier or better, but your honestly in answering that question so quickly, makes me feel that I might be speaking with Ray. That is a good thing. I appreciate you and feel that you are honest and very comfortable with the person you are". I told Steve, "Thank You Very Much, I am".

Steve and I talked for over 3 & ½ hours, what a wonderful, comforting, and honest conversation we did have. We also had a lot of FUN. For example, Steve asked if I could play any instruments? I said I could play guitar and keyboards but nowhere in "HIS Class", and I am much more qualified performing other studio functions. Steve said "OK, add to this"! He started playing 'Ray Charles', "What'd I Say". I joined in on the piano, and things went pretty well. *Fun is what we had!* Steve

**then started to play Lenny Welch's, "Since I Fell for You". I started to sing, and Steve said lightheartedly, "Bleu, take over the grand piano, I think I've got this vocal".**

**It was at this time Steve stated the following, "Right now, I do not have any reservations about recording in Bogalusa, Louisiana, at your studio, with you and Ray, and I hope, many other professionals, and common people, like you and Ray. It is that thought that makes me feel good! Let's find out where this all goes. I would hope that you, Ray, and a lot of new people from Bogalusa, Louisiana, will become my new Friends".**

**We discussed what could be done next. Steve stated his idea was to send down his band "Wonderlove" for a few weeks, to begin in a short period of time. I imagined the time frame to be in weeks. Steve continued, "If they feel comfortable and no unfortunate actions have taken place, down to Bogalusa I will come with all of my entourage. Next, we will let everyone get to know each other and then we will record. I have a movie soundtrack I have been working on for years. We will start there and move forward if everyone is feeling happy and secure. What do you think about that country boy?" I responded "Steve, I absolutely feel your plan is Great"!**

**Every member of Steve's entire Family, Music and Authentic Family are Wonderful. I said, "Everyone in Bogalusa, Louisiana is going to feel So Blessed by Having You All Come Down to Meet Us All, Have a Wonderful Time, and Record Such Wonderful and Magical MUSIC With Us!" It did not happen by what we spoke about or on my time frame, 1974.**



**Our Dreams were now in the wind. I thought we were in motion. I was wrong. Not hearing from Steve soon after “MIDEM”, I knew Steve had been sidetracked. Even though a few phone calls occurred between Steve, Gary O, Josette, Ray, and me over the next 2 years, there was not even a plan for Steve, Gary O, Josette to make a visit, see the Studio, meet all of our Studio Folks, or to see and meet with us.**

**I love it when a plan comes together. In very early 1977, Everything came together. Ray’s 4 Years of dreaming became a Reality. Two years after I thought everything was in motion, my hopes fell to the ground. I had talked to Steve a couple of times, but so far nothing concrete had occurred to actually bring Steve to “Studio in the Country”. Ray decided to write a letter to Gary O. (*As displayed earlier in this chapter*). Gary O was really becoming the key to making things start happening for Ray Black and Bleu Evans.**

**All of these things happened because of One Great and Wonderful Person, *Raymond Black*, a Bogalusa, Louisiana Native and One of The Most Loving, Caring of Others, Honest, Strong, True to God, Also a Wonderful Parent and Grandparent, Along with Ray’s Wife, “Terry Black”! I Thank God Everyday for the Black Family Members from Bogalusa, Louisiana!**

**As stated previously, not long after Gary O responded to Ray’s letter, we got a call from Gary O and Josette Valentino. During that call, we all decided together for Gary O and Josette to come see the Studio and visit with us for little over a week. The Result: Gary O and Josette had a wonderful time and we had a great time having them as our guests. They fell in love with the Studio. With Gary O and Josette’s support, surprising things started to happen in Louisiana.**

**The rest is history. “Studio in the Country” has recorded parts of 4 of Steve’s albums including most all of the movie soundtrack, “Stevie Wonder’s Journey Through The Secret Life Of Plants”, an amazing group of song remixes, and there may be another album in our future in Bogalusa. Only the Lord knows that! For anyone who is a Stevie Wonder Fan, Please know this; Stevie Wonder would have never recorded at “Studio in the Country” if it had not been for the actions of Raymond Black. Ray and many others are responsible, not just a guy named Bleu Evans, for the existence and history of the Studio and all of the artists who visited us to record and make records. The music created at “Studio in the Country”, Bogalusa, Louisiana, is So Very Special, Yesterday and Today. Thank You Raymond Black and Each and Every Member of the “Studio in the Country Team”.**

**I thank all of those who kept the Studio going, as it is still making hit records today. The Additional Heroes are Gene Foster, Debbie and Pete Farmer, Benjamin Mumphrey, and The Studio’s Newest Director of Engineering, Jay Wesley. God Bless You and Much Love to All of You, from all the old guys, including the “Original Team”, Ray, and me.**

**Thank all of You Again and Especially Mr. Raymond Black for his Genius, Character, and the Fact that Raymond Black is a “One-of-a-Kind, Great, Honest, Humble Soul, Caring, and a Wonderful Man”. God has Blessed You Ray and All of Your WONDERFUL FAMILY! Our Lord is using You Ray to make the World Better, YOU have truly Blessed Us, Each and Every ONE!**

**All my best to all who appreciate Music and Bogalusa, Louisiana. I Pray You see Now that I was just one of the “Team” at “Studio in the Country” with the “Team” carrying the load!**

**So Many Others Stand with me and are Responsible for the History of "Studio in the Country". "Thank You and God Bless You "Raymond Black" and All the Entire "Studio in the Country Team". We can't make these stories up. Each one is real, lived as written, and the stories are True. We are All So Blessed by God!**

**Thank and God Bless Each of You Who Gave me "The Honor of reading this story" by giving your time and attention. Who knows, maybe this chapter I just finished in only months, may turn out to be part of a future chapter in a book" I am trying to finish for my Family and All of You. I hope so! Thank You All One More Time!**

**Many Prayers and Much Love to YOU and Each and Every ONE of Your Families.**

**Bleu**