

WHAT YOU CAN'T HEAR

| FEATURE |

FOR MORE THAN
50 YEARS, PEOPLE IN THE
NORTH ALABAMA TOWN
OF MUSCLE SHOALS
HAVE PULLED
COUNTLESS SONGS
FROM THE RED DIRT,
MIXING TOGETHER A BIT
OF LUCK, A LOT OF
HARD WORK AND AN
UNDERSTANDING THAT,
MAYBE, MUSIC IS JUST
IN THEIR NATURE.

by Haley Herfurth

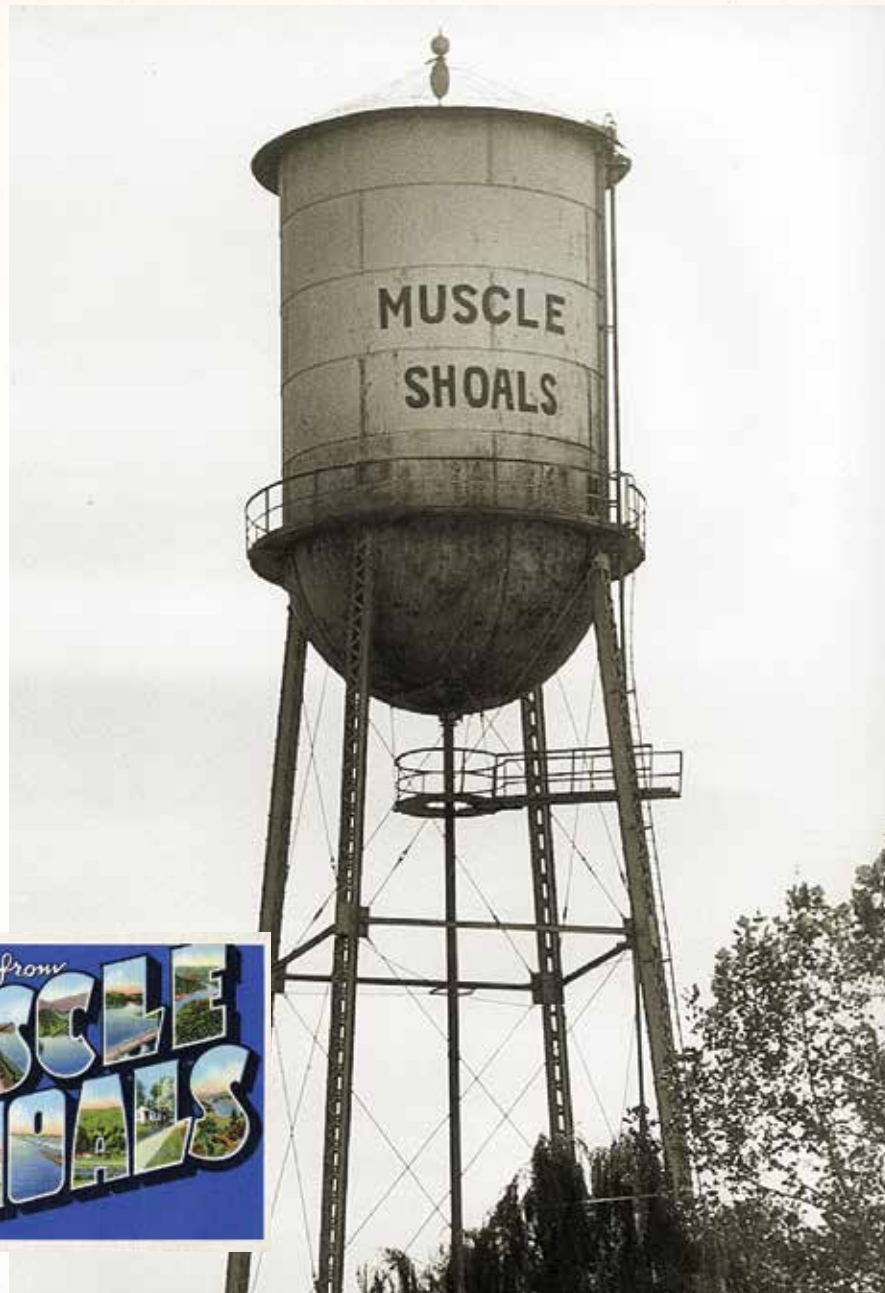
There is no sure answer for how it got this way. Some say there's something in the air, like every hollering folk song was caught up in the wind and scattered about, and that if you breathe it long enough, it catches in your soul. Others say it's in the water, like a thousand melodies are laid to rest at the bottom of the Tennessee River, piles of music notes and pretty lines and broken guitar strings, carried by the current into the next generation.

It could have been fate or God or good luck, or some quiet agreement between the three, because the world needed music with guts and depth and dirt under its nails, and Muscle Shoals was the place to dig it up.

Perhaps it grew from nothing at all, from silence, from the ringing stillness of an Alabama night, when one old woman chose to breathe fire from a harmonica just to fill up the quiet. Or it could be that its own people grew it up from the ground, because resilience and talent can sometimes equal success if enough stubbornness is added in.

Maybe what matters is what that first foot-stomping tune turned into, as artist after artist came to the Shoals to coax music out of their bones, and that they still come, songs in hand, because the magic has yet to abandon it.

Previous page: George Jackson, the songwriter behind Bob Seger's hit "Old Time Rock and Roll" by the Old Railroad Bridge in Sheffield, Alabama; above, the Muscle Shoals water tower; inset, a postcard from 1948



Muscle Shoals incorporated into a town of a few more than 700 people in 1923, birthed 20 miles south of the Tennessee line in the shadow of the Wilson Dam, which sits just north of town and spans the Tennessee River between Colbert and Lauderdale counties. Commissioned during World War I by President Woodrow Wilson to help power nitrate plants for munitions, the dam

remained incomplete until 1924 and barely used until 1933, when President Franklin Roosevelt commanded that the rushing waters bow to the Tennessee Valley Authority. The city forms part of an Alabama quartet of sorts called the Quad Cities, encompassing Florence, Sheffield, Tuscumbia and Muscle Shoals.

In the late 1950s, three local boys saw something in that patch of dirt

others might not have noticed, and opened FAME Studios (short for Florence Alabama Music Enterprises). Rick Hall, Billy Sherrill and Tom Stafford first rented rooms above the City Drug Store in Florence for the recording studio. In the early '60s, when Hall split from Sherrill and Stafford to take on the enterprise alone, it moved to an abandoned tobacco warehouse on Wilson Dam Road in Muscle Shoals. There, country and soul artist Arthur Alexander recorded "You Better Move on," FAME's first hit record, the proceeds from which built the company's current facilities on Avalon Avenue in Muscle Shoals.

Rhythm and blues artist Jimmy Hughes was the first to record at the new location, cutting his hit "Steal Away" in 1961. In the mid '60s, Percy Sledge (from nearby Leighton, Alabama) recorded his hit "When a Man Loves a Woman" at nearby Norala Studios, owned by Quin Ivy, a Mississippi native and proprietor of a record store in Sheffield who often wrote songs with Hall. "There were a number of studios in the area, but Hall is the one who was really determined to make it no matter what," said Carla Jean Whitley, who earned her master's in journalism from The



Etta James recorded at FAME, as did Wilson Pickett, above, second from right; below, FAME Studio A in the 1960s

University of Alabama in 2004 and is the author of *Muscle Shoals Sound Studio: How the Swampers Changed American Music*. "You have to credit him as the grandfather of the entire scene."

Under Hall's guidance, FAME rolled out hit after hit in the 1960s. In 1968, Hall produced Etta James' *Tell Mama* album, one of her biggest hits; the record was also published by FAME Publishing, a division of the original company.



Also in the late 1960s, Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler brought rock 'n' roll/R&B singer Wilson Pickett to FAME, where he recorded hits like "Mustang Sally" and "Land of 1,000 Dances." Wexler later brought newly signed artist Aretha Franklin. It was at FAME that she cut her double-sided smash "I Never Loved a Man" and "Do Right Woman." Otis Redding produced and recorded two classics there—"Sweet Soul Music" and "You Left the Water Running," respectively.

Eventually the group of musicians that was formed to back the studio's recording artists grew into a





Rick Hall, at FAME in 2010, was one of the founders of the recording studio; below, Carla Jean Whitley is the author of Muscle Shoals Sound Studio.

“Brown Sugar” and “Wild Horses” there in December 1969, quietly rolling into North Alabama without any fanfare or applause. “Most of the locals didn’t know anything was going on,” said Patterson Hood, a Muscle Shoals native who is the frontman of the alternative country/Southern rock band the Drive-By Truckers and whose father is David Hood of the Rhythm Section. “They didn’t even know the Stones were in town; it probably would’ve been a disaster if they had. It was still a very conservative place.”

The biggest influences the area has had on the music industry may have come from what you can’t hear, Whitley noted. The rural location of the Shoals was the draw for many performers. “It’s so out of the way; even today it’s not particularly easy to get to,” she said. “That has given musicians freedom to do whatever it is they want to do. There aren’t the pressures of being involved in an industry city.”

Rodney Hall, Rick’s son, who earned his master’s degree from UA’s Culverhouse College of Business in 1991 and is the president of FAME, said the small-town atmosphere provided fewer distractions for musicians. “The ruralness of the area, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, meant there wasn’t a lot to do besides sit on the porch with family and friends to play music,” he said.

The early 1970s saw great success for both FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound, though the styles of the individual studios diverged, with the first taking on more country music and the second focusing on rock ‘n’ roll. At FAME, The Osmonds

fame of their own, becoming known as the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section. The original four members moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1964, making room for a second group of musicians that Lynyrd Skynyrd would later memorialize as “the Swampers” in their hit song “Sweet Home Alabama”: guitarist Jimmy Johnson, bassist David Hood, drummer Roger Hawkins and first pianist Spooner Oldham, replaced later by Barry Beckett. The rhythm section backed Pickett’s “Mustang Sally,” Franklin’s smash “Respect”

and James’ “Tell Mama,” impressing musicians and executives across the country.

In the span of a decade, Muscle Shoals had ridden into history on the harmonies of two-dozen hits, finding its place alongside music cities like New York, Los Angeles and Nashville. Artists were coming from all over to record there, betting that a hit could be heard in their songs if they sang them from that sweet spot a half-hour from the state line; and they were right.

In 1969, Johnson, Hood, Hawkins and Beckett left FAME to found Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, setting up shop in a small brick building off Jackson Highway in Sheffield, proceeding to spin swampgrass into gold. The project was partially financed by Wexler, who had formed a good working relationship with the musicians during projects at FAME, and who brought Cher there that same year to record her sixth studio album, *3614 Jackson Highway*, which took its title from the address of the studio.

The Rolling Stones recorded



recorded hits like “One Bad Apple” and “Yo-Yo.” Rick Hall was nominated for a Grammy in the Producer of the Year category in 1970. Bobbie Gentry, one of the first female country music stars to compose her own material, recorded her album *Fancy* there, and singer/songwriter Mac Davis recorded four gold albums. Famous guitarist Duane Allman

heard the level of quality in musicianship of the guys who are playing in the studio,” Whitley said.

Lynyrd Skynyrd recorded its entire first album at Muscle Shoals Sound in 1971 and 1972, although the songs weren’t released until later in the band’s career. The studio relocated to a larger building nearby in 1978, and Bob Dylan recorded

“Gotta Serve Somebody” there in 1979. Julian Lennon recorded *Valotte* there in 1984, but recordings slowed down after that, and in 1985, the studios were sold to Jackson, Mississippi-based Malaco Music, which also bought the Muscle Shoals Sound publishing rights. Malaco later closed the studios, and

the building was sold to a film and television production company.

In 1999, a sound producer named Noel Webster from nearby Huntsville, Alabama, purchased the old Jackson Highway building and refurbished and reopened Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. In 2010, American rock duo The Black Keys recorded their 2011 Grammy-winning album *Brothers* at the resurrected location. Webster sold the



studio to the Muscle Shoals Music Foundation in 2013; the foundation plans to turn the historic building into a museum.

The 1980s brought continued success for FAME, which published Ronnie Milsap’s hit “There’s No Getting Over Me,” written by FAME songwriters Walt Aldridge and Tommy Brasfield, who also wrote hits for artists like Ricky Van Shel-



Clockwise from top left: The Osmonds recorded at FAME in the 1970s; the Swampers and friends posed in front of the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio; the cover art for Cher’s album; Rodney Hall followed in his father’s footsteps by taking the reins at FAME.



ton and Alabama. Rick signed the band Shenandoah in 1987, which recorded four albums and had seven No. 1 records in a row. FAME Publishing produced John Michael Montgomery's 1994 hit "I Swear" and Tim McGraw's 1995 song "I Like It, I Love It," written by Rick's son, Mark.

FAME is still going strong: Alternative country/Americana artist Jason Isbell (a former member of the Drive-By Truckers) has recorded all but one of his four studio albums there (the first, *Sirens of the Ditch*, was partially produced by Patterson, who also played on several songs). And FAME Publishing has handled all of them. The Drive-By Truckers recorded part of their album *The Dirty South* at FAME, and they also backed and produced Bettye LaVette's 2007 album *The Scene of the Crime* at the studio. In April 2014, the studio released Atlantic Records artist Anderson East's album *The Muscle Shoals Sessions: Live from FAME*, and the team is hard at work on a compilation album of classic Shoals songs, with covers by artists like Alicia Keys and Willie Nelson.

Rick sold his shares of the FAME companies to his sons, Mark and Rodney, in the early 1990s, though he still produces frequently and



The current Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, and above, FAME studios

owns the building. "It's my home," Rodney said of the headquarters. "When [my brother and I] were younger, we would stuff records that were being shipped to radio, package them up, put postage on. I just remember hanging out with a lot of the musicians and writers and guys that were here. It was our daily life. I've probably spent more time in that building than I have any other, including any of my houses. It's been here my whole life. For me, it's just home."

Muscle Shoals was thrust back into the spotlight when the documentary *Muscle Shoals* was released in 2013 by Magnolia Pictures at the Sundance Film Festival. It was focused

on both Rick's work with FAME and the Swampers' work at Muscle Shoals Sound, and includes interviews from artists who recorded hits in the Shoals area, such as Franklin, Mick Jagger and Sledge, who died in April 2015. The documentary was a hit, prompting more tourism in the area. "Since the documentary came out, it's blown up," Rodney said. "When we make a recording, we'll always go to our car and listen to it, since that's where a lot of people listen to their music. Now tourists will come up and take photos of us doing that."

The renewed interest in the area means that while FAME is still operating as a full-time recording studio, it has also begun allowing tours, which Rodney said is a bit strange. "It's kind of weird; people who are fans of Aretha or Otis or the All-

man Brothers, they come here, and it's almost a kind of mecca. I've seen people cry at it, and I've seen them laughing and happy."

Rodney said the town still holds the same promise for musicians that it did in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. "It's a lot more laid-back situation than if you go to Nashville or New York or Los Angeles, [where] everyone's looking at their watches because they have another session across town," he said. Another secret of the Shoals' success, he said, has to do with how the studios approach their projects. "It takes a lot of hard work, and the people here take it very seriously because they know that for us to have our music heard, it has to be better, because we don't have the media outlets or the power of Warner Brothers or Atlantic Records. It's got to be *special*."

Patterson agreed with Rodney, saying it does take a certain type of work ethic, which he thinks all the original people involved in putting Muscle Shoals on the music map had. But he said it also takes something else: the willingness and ability to work together, something that goes beyond technical musicianship. "It obviously takes talent, and those guys had all that—but so did a lot of people who didn't make it," he said. "It takes perseverance and the ability to deal with and collaborate with other people. One of the best things you can learn is to listen to the other people you're playing with."

He cited as an example his working relationship with Mike Cooley, who fronts the Drive-By Truckers



The Drive-By Truckers posed in the old Lyric Theatre in Birmingham, Alabama: left to right, Brad Morgan, Patterson Hood, Jay Gonzales, Matt Patton and Mike Cooley.

with him. Cooley is also a Shoals area native, hailing from Tusculumbia, and the two have been in various bands together for nearly 30 years, culminating in the Truckers' 19-year (and counting) run. "When Cooley and I started playing together, we were young and green. We weren't good, but we were better together than apart. It took a long time to learn how to deal with each other on a personal level, but we hung in there because, musically, it was happening."

Maybe that's what Muscle Shoals has done all these years: worked and sweated and bled to put out record after record, song after song, because it was a responsibility. It was as though the area had been given a

gift, and it would have done the South, dealing with so much ugliness in the '60s and '70s, a disservice to let it pass by.

Understanding the history of the area and the state during that time is important in having a true respect for what the Shoals area has accomplished, according to Patterson. "It's an amazing story, what happened there with Dad and his peers," he said. "They did something pretty miraculous, considering the time and place. It was a very sleepy, Bible-Belt, conservative town in the height of the 1960s, with all the civil rights strikes going on. But these guys in this dry county ended up making all these amazing records."

People remember the music, every rolling beat, every piano key. They can carry a song in their soul for a lifetime; they'll map out their lives by it, take advice from it, name their children after it, despite the decades that pile up from the first time they heard it.

Maybe a place can do that, too—be shaped by songs into something that stands and grows even after the last note fades or changes into something new and necessary. And maybe what matters most is the old music, the kind rising from the water, carried in the air and resting in the quiet dark. 🌸

Some details were referenced from Whitley's book, Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, and the Encyclopedia of Alabama.