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Where the notes run deep

Muscle Shoals, Ala., is home to the Swampers, FAME Studios and many legends of soul, rock, country and blues.

by Cheré Coen

You probably know the place from Lynyrd Skynyrd. Muscle Shoals and Florence, Ala., nestled at the top of the state along the Tennessee River, own a special kind of history that resonates with music, a place to pick you up “when you’re feeling blue.”

The area is home to many recording studios, some recently opened such as The Nutt House by Shreveport native Jimmy Nutt or NoiseBlock Music Group by songwriter Gary Baker, who won a Grammy with his hit *I Swear*. The walls of FAME studio, now celebrating its 50th year as a recording studio and publishing house, tell the early history of the Muscle Shoals sound — photos of Etta James, Aretha Franklin, Candi Stanton, Otis Redding, and the list goes on and on.

“We are the beginning and we will be the end,” said Rodney Hall, president of FAME. Hall loves to talk about the old days, when stars flew in from Nashville and Memphis to record, touching down amid cotton fields in a dry county.

“It really was a miraculous thing when you look back on it,” he said. “They weren’t coming here to sit in the lap of luxury, that’s for sure.”

All of the early albums of The Osmonds were recorded at FAME and area girls chased Donny Osmond when he rode his bicycle down the rural streets. When Wilson Pickett flew into Muscle Shoals during segregation and was greeted by FAME founder Rick Hall at the airport, he thought it was the sheriff coming to take him to jail, Rodney Hall said.

Numerous R&B stars cut albums in the area with white backup musicians, explained music historian Robert Palmer, something unheard of during that time. That ended with the death of the Rev. Martin Luther King.

“That’s really when the soul music stopped (in Muscle Shoals),” he said, adding that rock singers and country musicians later became the norm.

FAME’s back-up musicians later started their own studio, the Muscle Shoals Sound in nearby Sheffield, and called themselves the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section. When Lynyrd Skynyrd sang in Sweet Home Alabama that “Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers...” they were talking about these musicians who backed up numerous bands, including Wilson Pickett, Paul Simon, Joe Cocker, Willie Nelson and The Rolling Stones. Leon Russell gave them the name of “Swampers.”

“An argument can be made that Muscle Shoals was the birthplace of Southern rock,” Palmer said.

Ex-Swamper David Hood now plays with The Decoys, but toured for a while with Traffic. Despite his illustrious history and his stories of when The Rolling Stones came to town, Hood is a modest man

and a working musician trying to make a living in tough times.

Still, the legend of the Swampers is every strong, he said, especially abroad. A cab driver in London recently asked him where he was from and he replied, "Muscle Shoals." When the cabby started reciting Lynyrd Skynyrd, Hood said he was a Swamper, causing the cab driver to halt the car and demand a photo, gushing like a rabid fan.

Songwriters and musicians love Muscle Shoals and Florence for both the musical history and camaraderie. Or maybe something else.

"It's really an enchanted little area," Nutt explained. "I don't know what it is. They call it the 'Singing River,' back to the Native Americans. So, something attracts the musicians here."

Nutt has worked with Drive-by Truckers, Sons of Roswell and Jimmy Buffett, plus one of the Buffett's Coral Reefer Band members, Mac McAnally, lives in Florence and records there.

Stop by the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in Tuscumbia and be amazed at both the musicians and songwriters who have emerged from the northern Alabama towns situated on the "Singing River." It might be something in the water, after all.
