

THEY PICK ME UP WHEN I'M FEELING BLUE

The Singing River, The Swampers, and the Muscle Shoals Sound

Presented to:

The Atheneum Society of Hopkinsville, KY

By:

Brandon Killebrew

October 2, 2025

Just east of downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, the French Broad River flows down from the Smoky Mountains and joins the Holston River from the north. This confluence results in the larger Tennessee River, which continues through Knoxville before flowing generally southward towards Chattanooga. Past Chattanooga, the river eventually flows further south into Alabama, where it heads generally westward and bisects the northern quadrant of that state, passing Huntsville along its way. In the northwest corner of Alabama, the river turns northward again, briefly forming the border between Alabama and Mississippi, before re-entering its namesake state and forming the border between two of Tennessee's three Grand Divisions. As it approaches western Kentucky, it is dammed at Gilbertsville and forms what we know as Kentucky Lake; and it eventually joins the Cumberland and the Ohio Rivers at its terminus near Paducah.

The Tennessee River cuts a swath across much of the mid-south United States and forms an economic region known as the Tennessee Valley. Along its banks lie not only the three aforementioned cities, but numerous smaller towns and communities which are all tied to the river in their own unique ways. Given the rural nature and the perceived socio-economic position of the region, it would seem unlikely that any of the small towns along the Tennessee River would become a hotbed of mid-to-late 20th century pop culture. But that's exactly what happened in one such town; and that town's surge into national prominence is the subject of my paper tonight, which I have entitled:

THEY PICK ME UP WHEN I'M FEELING BLUE: THE SINGING RIVER, THE SWAMPERS, AND THE
MUSCLE SHOALS SOUND

In northwest Alabama, twenty miles south of Tennessee and thirty miles east of Mississippi, the city of Muscle Shoals lies along the southern bank of the Tennessee River. Muscle Shoals makes up just one city of a quad-city region known collectively as "The Shoals"; it is joined on the south bank by the cities of Sheffield and Tuscumbia. Across the river and

connected by three bridges lies the largest of the four cities, Florence, Alabama. The etymology of the Shoals region's name has long been a topic of debate; some hold that the early settlers in the region found the shallow areas in the river – due to the “shoals” or sandbar formations – were rich with mussel shells. Unaware of the correct spelling of mussel, the settlers named the area Muscle Shoals, incorrectly spelled M-U-S-C-L-E. Another theory contends that the swift current through the shoals made paddling difficult, and thus required a lot of muscle to traverse this part of the river. Yet another theory holds that the bends of the river look like a man's muscle. All of these ideas seem plausible enough, but no one seems to have a definitive answer on the origins of the region's name.

Pre-dating the settlers, the indigenous Yuchi tribe called northwest Alabama home and held a deep connection to the river. They called it Nunnuhsae, which translates to “The Singing River”. Yuchi legend held that the waters were home to a woman with a beautiful singing voice, who frequently serenaded the tribe. Forced out of the area in the 1830's and onto the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma, the Yuchi left the Singing River behind, only to find that the waters in Oklahoma did not sing.

The story of the Yuchi, their relationship with the Singing River, and their removal to Oklahoma is best preserved by a man named Tom Hendrix. Hendrix is the great-great grandson of a Yuchi woman named Te-La-Nay who journeyed the Trail of Tears away from her beloved Singing River. Homesick, and unable to find the lost joy in the silent rivers of Oklahoma, Te-La-Nay broke away and undertook a five-year journey by herself to travel back to Alabama. Sadly, after five years of hardship traveling back to her homeland, she found that the river no longer sang to her. Her story was passed down through generations to Hendrix, who documented this in a book written in her memory, and also dedicated 30 years of his life to the construction of a stone memorial wall, over one mile long. Although Mr. Hendrix passed away in 2017, his tribute wall to his great-great grandmother is open to the public as a reminder of the Yuchi, their forced removal, and the Singing River's legacy to the region.

Of course, the waterscape of the river itself has changed over the years. In the late 1800's the Muscle Shoals Canal altered traffic patterns away from the hard-to-navigate shoals, and later dams and management from the Tennessee Valley Authority created reservoirs that virtually eliminated the shoals and any "singing" that may have been present from the natural water flow. While the river may no longer "sing", this legend sets the stage for a rich musical tradition through the coming years.

In 1873, the city of Florence saw the birth of William Christopher Handy, the son and grandson of Methodist ministers. Raised in a strict Christian home, Handy had a love of music, not only church music but also the many spirituals and folk songs that had been passed down through generations. Handy – W.C. as he was called – saved up enough money to purchase a second-hand guitar. However, his parents were strictly against secular music and saw the guitar as a "devil's instrument", forcing him to return it, and encouraging him instead to take up the more respectable cornet. In 1892 at the age of 19, W.C. left the Shoals and began traveling the Midwest, taking jobs playing music when he could. Of course you know that there is a western Kentucky connection - Handy lived for a time in Evansville, Indiana and frequently played in Henderson, Kentucky, which is where he met his wife. Handy continued to move about, building his own publishing company and his reputation as the "Father of the Blues". Needless to say, W.C. Handy could and probably should be the subject of his very own Atheneum paper, but for the purposes of this presentation, it is to be noted that the "Father of the Blues" spent his formative years in the Shoals. W.C. Handy died in Harlem in 1958.

Another native son of the Shoals was a young radio DJ on the air in Florence in the 1940's. His radio station, WLAY, was known as an "open format" station that played both white musicians, meaning country music or "hillbilly music" as it was commonly known, as well as black musicians who played Delta blues and spirituals and folk songs. This DJ, a young man by the name of Sam Phillips, took his love of all styles of music and eventually moved to Memphis, where we know that he founded Sun Records and raised up stars like Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and of course the biggest of all Sun Records stars,

Elvis Presley. Sam Phillips and Sun Records will forever be tied to Memphis, but Sam's formative days and his love of music originated on the banks of the Singing River.

Muscle Shoals' eruption into the national music scene began in earnest under the watch of a man named Rick Hall. Rick was a native of the Mississippi delta and the son of a sawmill worker. Rick Hall's life was marked with tragedy from an early age; when he was four years old, his brother died when he fell into a pot of scalding water his mother was using to wash laundry. As a result, his parents' marriage fell apart and his mother abandoned the family and began a life of prostitution, leaving Rick's father Herman to raise Rick and the remaining siblings. Rick admired his father, who shared with Rick a love for music, particularly southern gospel music. During World War II, Herman took a job with a defense contractor, moving the family briefly to Cleveland, Ohio. It was in Cleveland that Rick was introduced to Rhythm and Blues music for the first time. It was a smoother, urbanized type of black music, unlike the grittier Delta blues that Rick had been familiar with. Rick fell in love with R&B music, but when the war ended, the Hall family returned to northwest Alabama.

During high school, Rick played guitar in a country band. But school was not for Rick, and after dropping out and serving a brief stint in the Army, Rick married his first wife, Faye, in 1955. But just 18 months after their wedding they were involved in a car crash that took Faye's life. Then, just two weeks after his young wife's passing, Rick's father Herman was killed when a tractor rolled over on him.

These tragedies took their toll on Rick, and he turned heavily to drinking and immersing himself in the only positive thing he'd had for much of his life - music. He met a fellow musician named Billy Sherill, and they became musical partners, writing songs together and forming a band known as the Fairlanes. As songwriters, Hall and Sherill found modest success, having written songs that were eventually recorded by Brenda Lee and Roy Orbison. That type of success what most musicians aspired for - a big break in Nashville. But Rick Hall and Billy Sherill weren't patient enough for that, and they decided to form their own music publishing company based in the Shoals. In 1959, along with a third partner, Tom Stafford,

they formed Florence Alabama Music Enterprises – better known as FAME. They set up their first recording studio in an upstairs room above a drugstore in Florence, living in that space as well. But the partnership, under Rick's obsessive nature, began to crumble, and eventually Sherill and Stafford signed over their ownership of FAME to Rick, leaving the upstart music studio under his complete control – which is exactly what Rick wanted. Billy Sherrill went on to Nashville to become one of the most influential record producers of 1960's and 70's country, playing an instrumental role in the careers of George Jones and Tammy Wynette, among many others. But Rick Hall, back in Muscle Shoals, took his ownership of FAME and re-established the studio, eventually building out a new facility in a former tobacco warehouse.

During this time, Rick remarried and began working a day job selling cars at his father-in-law's used car lot and playing with the Fairlanes in none other than Fort Campbell, Kentucky on the weekends.

It was also during this time that he produced FAME's first hit record, an R&B track entitled "You Better Move On", recorded by a young blues musician and Shoals native by the name of Arthur Alexander. After garnering support for the record by several regional radio stations via a "Vodka tour", Rick eventually secured a deal with California-based Dot Records, including a 3% royalty each for himself and Arthur Alexander. Rick used his share of the royalty to complete construction on his own studio building in 1962 in Muscle Shoals, where it still exists to this day.

Despite the success of "You Better Move On" and the deal with Dot Records, Rick still struggled to land a long-term working relationship with a record label. He did eventually, however, form a relationship with an Atlanta-based producer named Bill Lowery. Lowery, recognizing Hall's ear for production and engineering, began sending acts to Muscle Shoals to record with Hall; included in this group was a Georgia musician named Ray Stevens, who eventually became a Nashville staple and a novelty musician, and acts such as The Tams and Tommy Roe, who both scored major hits recorded at FAME.

But Lowery's business still wasn't enough to keep FAME afloat, and Rick Hall continued bringing in local talent looking for more hits. In 1964, Shoals native Jimmy Hughes scored a top-20 R&B hit for FAME with a recording of "Steal Away" on FAME's own newly-formed record label.

This hit established FAME and Muscle Shoals as a serious contender in the music scene, in particular the R&B genre, breaking through a stronghold that had been held between Detroit and Memphis. It also became a foundational era for the studio's session players who provided what would become a signature sound for FAME: four musicians called the "Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section". This core group included Barry Beckett on keyboards, Roger Hawkins on drums, Jimmy Johnson on guitar, and David Hood on bass.

The Rhythm Section, each talented musicians in their own right, along with other revolving players including a horn section, were critical contributors in creating what would become known as "The Muscle Shoals Sound". Rick Hall recognized their talents and he continued bringing in artists to match up with the Rhythm Section. Among the musicians supported by the Rhythm Section was a young man local to the Shoals who worked by day as a hospital orderly, often singing to patients and doctors on the job, and performing with an R&B group on weekends. That young singer was Percy Sledge, who recorded this track at Norala Sound Studio in Muscle Shoals —owned by a friend of Rick Hall—where the Rhythm Section were on loan to play on this record.

Although Hall didn't produce "When a Man Loves a Woman", he was heavily involved in its promotion, ultimately drawing the attention of Jerry Wexler at Atlantic Records. Hall and Wexler forged a business relationship that led to Wexler sending Atlantic artists to Muscle Shoals to record at FAME.

One of these artists was an Alabama native whom Wexler had signed to Atlantic but felt had not yet found his groove. Wexler hoped that Rick Hall and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section could draw out the raw soul that he knew Wilson Pickett had, but hadn't emerged in the studio yet. Pickett was skeptical; having grown up in Alabama, he didn't believe recording

with a group of white musicians and producer would yield anything positive. But Wexler sent him anyway, and the magic of the Singing River descended on Pickett's recording session at FAME in 1966, giving us his signature hits, "Land of 1000 Dances" and "Mustang Sally", both of which have had staying power in our musical landscape for nearly 60 years.

Another new artist that Wexler sent to Muscle Shoals was a young woman, age 25, with a powerful voice. Memphis-born and Detroit-raised, this artist was steeped in soul music, but was released from a contract with Columbia Records after recording mediocre songs that didn't showcase her full talent. Wexler signed her to Atlantic and hoped that Rick Hall and the Rhythm Section could bring out her best just as they had done with Wilson Pickett.

In January 1967, Aretha Franklin arrived at FAME and recorded "I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)".

The recording turned into Aretha's breakout hit, but things went south quickly when they began recording the next track, "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man". Versions of the story vary depending on who is telling it, but the general consensus is that Aretha's husband, Ted White, accused a member of the horn section of flirting with Aretha, and demanded that Rick Hall fire him. Hall obliged and fired the trumpet player, but tensions continued to build after that and the session blew up entirely and was shut down for the day. Later that evening, against Wexler's advice, Hall went to Aretha and Ted's hotel to apologize for the incident, but the tension escalated again, and the next morning Aretha and Ted left Muscle Shoals. This left Wexler furious with Rick Hall, and their working relationship essentially ended as a result.

Although Rick Hall was out of the picture, Wexler wasn't done with the Rhythm Section. He invited the musicians to continue their work with Aretha. A few weeks after the altercation at FAME, the Rhythm Section traveled to New York to continue recording with Aretha Franklin, completing the interrupted track of "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" and, most famously, what many would consider Aretha's best known hit, "Respect". So, while "Respect" was not recorded in Muscle Shoals, it did indeed feature the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section as musicians.

Hall was angry about this, and his relationship with the Rhythm Section began to suffer. The session musicians had grown tired of Hall's controlling ways and unsatisfactory pay rates, and began considering a new plan, a studio and publishing company of their own to compete directly with Rick Hall and FAME. Jerry Wexler, who himself wanted to punish Rick for the altercation with Ted White, offered capital for the new venture and a steady stream of Atlantic Records artists. And so in April 1969, the doors of Muscle Shoals Sound Studio opened under the ownership of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section – Jimmy Johnson, Barry Beckett, David Hood, and Roger Hawkins. The group had worked to secure a new location in a small, nondescript industrial building about a five- minute drive from FAME.

The Sound Studio's first artist was none other than Cher, who not only recorded her album there, but named the album after the studio's location – 3614 Jackson Highway, and used a photo of the group in front of the building as the album's cover, giving the brand-new studio some serious credibility. The album itself was mostly Cher covering other artists and was not commercially successful, but was and is a key part of the story in the studio's opening and evolution.

The first commercial hit for the studio came from a young singer/songwriter by the name of R.B. Greaves. Greaves, the nephew of soul legend Sam Cooke, recorded his self-titled debut album, including "Take a Letter, Maria", which rose to #2 on the Billboard Hot 100 and earned the studio its first gold record.

During that same time period, the Rolling Stones stopped in the Shoals to record at Muscle Shoals Sound, recording at night while Greaves recorded during the day. The Stones' sessions yielded three songs, all of which eventually ended up on their 1971 album "Sticky Fingers", including two that are well known to this day- "Brown Sugar" and "Wild Horses".

In the early 70's, Leon Russell visited the studio and his manager commented on the Rhythm Section's particular sound, calling it "swampy" and gave the musicians a new nickname that stuck: "The Swampers". Also around that time, a young, unknown band was forming in Jacksonville, Florida. The band, aware of the Swampers' reputation and seeking

help in finding their own sound, made their way to Muscle Shoals Sound Studio to record a demo album. Those tracks would not be released until years later, long after Lynyrd Skynyrd had cemented their place as Southern rock royalty. In 1978, the Muscle Shoals demo album was released under the title "Lynyrd Skynyrd's First and Last Album" and included the original arrangements of "Free Bird" and "Gimme Three Steps". Although the band's recording career was mostly focused in the Atlanta area, Lynyrd Skynyrd has long held that the Swampers played a tremendous role in establishing their musical identities, and famously paid tribute to Johnson, Beckett, Hood, and Hawkins in the last verse of what is generally accepted as Skynyrd's signature hit, "Sweet Home Alabama".

"Now Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers
And they've been known to pick a song or two
Lord, they get me off so much
They pick me up when I'm feeling blue, now how 'bout you?"

More artists began making their way to Muscle Shoals seeking the magic of the Swampers and the Singing River, upstarts and established acts alike. The Staple Singers, Etta James, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Bob Seger, Willie Nelson, and Rod Stewart are a sampling of those who descended on the Shoals during the 70's. Aretha Franklin even returned to work with the Swampers again long after they had helped her record her original breakout at FAME in 1967.

Over at FAME studios, Rick Hall continued to do well even without the Swampers. He formed a new group of studio musicians who became known as the FAME Gang. Expanding into country music as well as continuing his work with R&B, he produced records for artists like Clarence Carter, Mac Davis, Jerry Reed, Barbara Mandrell, Conway Twitty, Larry Gatlin, and even the Osmonds.

Throughout the 1970's both FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound continued putting out incredible music, much of which is woven into American culture even today, over 50 years later. At one point in the 70's, Swamper Barry Beckett estimated that at, on average, some 10% of the Billboard Hot 100 was recorded in Muscle Shoals. But all good things run their course, and by the early 1980's, the Swampers could see that musical tastes were shifting and gradually began slowing down their involvement in recording, choosing to work on individual projects such as producing, engineering, and mentoring other musicians. Today, David Hood is the only surviving member of the Swampers, and occasionally still makes appearances and gives interviews celebrating the Muscle Shoals story. Muscle Shoals Sound Studio is still open today as an active studio at its original 3614 Jackson Highway location, balancing its time between giving legacy tours and continuing to record new music. Contemporary artists who have recorded in recent years at Muscle Shoals Sound include The Black Keys, Chris Stapleton, and Lana Del Rey.

Rick Hall continued to be active at FAME into the 90's and was inducted into the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in 1985 and awarded a Grammy Trustees Award in 2014. Rick passed away in 2018, but FAME remains open in the care of his son Rodney Hall, both as an active recording studio and a tourist destination. Contemporary artists who have worked at FAME include Alicia Keys, Demi Lovato, and Shoals native Jason Isbell.

In 2013, a documentary entitled "Muscle Shoals" was released detailing the history of the Shoals' heyday. The film included interviews with Rick Hall, as well as the remaining Swampers of that time, along with artists like Aretha Franklin, Mick Jagger, Wilson Pickett, and Percy Sledge, among many others. The film is an excellent telling of the Muscle Shoals story and is highly recommended for those who are interested in this topic.

In closing, I personally hold the opinion that of all art forms, music is the greatest. I believe music has the ability to reach us, to speak to us, to touch us in ways that are both universal and deeply personal, often attaching itself to our lives and becoming a part of our individual stories. We recall music that is associated with key moments in our lives, to

relationships held and relationships lost, to triumph and to defeat. Each of us has a soundtrack to our lives, and I hope that my paper tonight brings to light that some part of your soundtrack probably found its origins in a modest town with a rich musical heritage on the banks of the Tennessee River.