

Musical History

The four towns that comprise the Shoals area are jam-packed with music and activities.

"MUSCLE SHOALS" IS THE BUZZ AGAIN, thanks only in part to the eponymous documentary that debuted at Sundance Film Festival in 2013. The film recounts the area's musical roots, which date back to the late 1950s. It became a hotbed for the recording industry in the 1960s and '70s, and at one time claimed a higher ratio of hits per recording sessions than any other music industry town.

Now, bands such as The Civil Wars, The Secret Sisters, The Bear, Drive-By Truckers, Jason Isbell and Birmingham's own St. Paul and the Broken Bones boast ties to the area, and their success has returned northwest Alabama in the national spotlight. But they're only part of the reason to visit the Shoals region, which includes the cities of Muscle Shoals, Florence, Sheffield and Tuscumbia.

W.C. Handy Festival

The Father of the Blues may be famous for the song "St. Louis Blues," and that city is home to The National Blues Museum. But did you know W.C. Handy hails from Florence? Celebrate his legacy with the annual W.C. Handy Festival, scheduled this year for July 18 to 27. The music festival features performances from musicians both well-known and yet-to-be discovered—a perfect representation of this musical gold mine. Candi Staton will headline this year's festival, with support from John Paul White and Donnie Fritts. Learn more about the area's musical history at the W.C. Handy Birthplace, Museum and Library.

FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios

The local music industry has included as many as a dozen recording studios at a time, but FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound are the two best known. FAME's Rick Hall is generally considered the godfather of the Shoals recording industry. The studio's history dates back to the mid '60s and includes classic acts such as Aretha Franklin, Clarence Carter, Etta James and the Allman Brothers. And although

FAME is open for tours, it remains a working studio; recent projects include Dylan LeBlanc, Jason Isbell and Angela Hacker.

After leaving FAME in the late '60s, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section opened Muscle Shoals Sound in nearby Sheffield. The studio saw artists such as the Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Cher and The Staples Singers record in its original location, and Rod Stewart, Bob Dylan, George Michael, among others, after it moved in the late '70s. The studio has seen better days (The Black Keys famously mouthed off about its condition after recording their 2010 Grammy award-winning album "Brothers" there). But the Muscle Shoals Music Foundation and Beats Music are now working to renovate it, and tours take place every weekend.

Alabama Music Hall of Fame

The Shoals' music heritage is rich, but Alabama's talent is certainly not limited to this corner of the state. You'll learn about this area's history and much more at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame. Exhibits focus on beloved acts such as Hank Williams Sr. and Sam Phillips, best known for discovering Elvis. Walk through the band Alabama's tour bus, and peer into a working recording studio. If you can catch curator Dick Cooper, you'll find a fount of local music knowledge.

Pegasus Records

With all of this great music history, you've got to take some of it home with you. Pegasus Records is the place to go for CDs and vinyl. The store offers an extensive selection of widely released music and albums with area ties, past and present. Be sure to check the shop's concert calendar, as it's the place to buy tickets to a number of local shows.

Shoals Community Theatre

Before you head to town, check the schedule for the Shoals Theatre. The intimate venue hosts community theater productions as well as concerts by local and national

touring acts (and sometimes artists like Jason Isbell, who meets both distinctions!).

Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa

The Shoals area has traditionally been as weak in live music performances as it has been strong in the recording industry, partly because it was dry until the early 1980s. Venues are on the rise, and Swampers bar in the Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa is almost always a sure thing, according to FAME Studios President Rodney Hall. Whether the act is acoustic or plugged in, the music is sure to please. The resort is part of the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, and courses at the nearby RTJ site The Shoals offer another way to unwind.

Billy Reid

A trip to the Shoals isn't complete without a stop at Billy Reid. The designer's high-end clothing is sold at 10 eponymous stores in such design-savvy cities as New York, Charleston and Nashville, Tenn. But Florence is home. The shop has also hosted music and arts events (including W.C. Handy Festival performers), and is an integral part of the city's creative community.

Alabama Chanin

Like Billy Reid, Natalie Chanin's Alabama Chanin has also been on the receiving end of international attention. The hand-stitched clothing and lifestyle brand focuses on organic, sustainably sourced materials. Factory tours are held at 2 p.m. on weekdays. Stop in a bit early to peruse the store and dine in the café (which emphasizes organic and local ingredients). Alabama Chanin also offers workshops and events throughout the year. ■

About the Author

Carla Jean Whitley is managing editor of Birmingham magazine and author of "Muscle Shoals Sound Studio: How the Swampers Changed American Music," which will be published by The History Press on July 22. Learn more at carlajeanwhitley.com.

Details

Alabama Chanin
462 Lane Drive, Florence
256-760-1090
alabamachanin.com

Alabama Music Hall of Fame
617 U.S. 72, Tuscumbia
256-381-4417
alamhof.org

Billy Reid
114 N. Court St., Florence
256-767-4692
billyreid.com

Fame Studios
603 E. Avalon Ave., Muscle Shoals
256-381-0801
fame2.com

Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa
10 Hightower Place, Florence
256-246-3600
marriott.com

Muscle Shoals Sound Studio
3614 Jackson Highway, Sheffield
256-394-3562
msmusicfoundation.org

Pegasus Records
612 E. Tennessee St., Florence
256-767-4340
pegrecords.com

Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail
990 SunBelt Parkway, Muscle Shoals
256-446-5111
rtjgolf.com/theshoals

Shoals Community Theatre
123 N. Seminary St., Florence
256-764-1700
shoalstheatre.org

W.C. Handy Birthplace, Museum and Library
620 W. College St., Florence
256-760-6434
florenceal.org

W.C. Handy Music Festival
July 18-27, various locations throughout the Shoals
wchandymusicfestival.org

For more, go to visitflorenceal.com.

BY CARLA JEAN WHITLEY
ALABAMA MEDIA GROUP FILE PHOTOS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Marriott Shoals Hotel and Spa, W.C. Handy Music Festival, W.C. Handy Birthplace, FAME Recording Studios, Alabama Chanin and inside FAME.

