

W.C. HANDY MUSIC FESTIVAL

'YOU HAVE TO FEEL IT'

CANDI STATON: LEGENDARY CROONER WHO'S HEADLINING THE W.C. HANDY MUSIC FESTIVAL



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Calling from her New York hotel hours before taping her second appearance in nine months on "Late Show With David Letterman," soul-music legend Candi Staton says, "I live it as I sing it, you know."

Her new album "Life Happens" contains several smoldering ballads, including "Close To You" and "Go Baby Go." And, yes, Staton sings each of them inside-out.

"You can't really do a ballad unless you put your heart, soul, mind, everything you have into that particular song," Staton says via phone. "You have to feel it. There are so many scenarios, and we won't go into a bunch of stuff, but my life has been such a turmoil at times. Sometimes I go back and reflect, like an actor would do to play a part. And you go there."

DETAILS

What: Candi Staton with guests Donnie Fritts and John Paul White

Where: Norton Auditorium, University of North Alabama, Florence

When: 7 p.m. July 26

Prices: \$40 general admission, VIP \$150

More information: www.wchandymusicfestival.org/festival.htm

album(s) ("Here We Rest" "Live in Alabama") and he wanted to meet me. (David Letterman) really loved the "Muscle Shoals" movie, the documentary. And they chose that song for me to do, and somehow they got in touch with Jason and John and that's how we hooked up. And after the show was over, I asked them, "Would you do it with me on the record?"

White will be guesting with Staton when she headlines the 2014 W.C. Handy Music Festival — which runs July 18-27 across myriad Florence, Sheffield and Muscle Shoals venues — with a 7 p.m. July 26 show at Norton Auditorium (N. Pine St., Florence). Tickets (\$40 general admission, \$150 VIP packages) are

Staton, still fit and gorgeous at 74, really goes there on "I Ain't Easy to Love," the instant classic that opens "Life Happens." A sinewy, strutting midtempo track written by Muscle Shoals songwriter James LeBlanc, finds Staton trading verses with Americana stars John Paul White and Jason Isbell, amid gritty Wurliitzer fills and sweltering horn lines. The trio absolutely killed it when they performed the song on Letterman last October.

"I had met John Paul at the Americana Awards in Nashville a few months before," Staton says. "But I'd never met Jason (before Letterman) but I realized Jason had done one of my songs ('Heart on a String') on his



Candi Staton, far right, and B.B. King, second from right, in a 1974 photo. (Courtesy photos)

available via ticketleap.com, Handy Festival Headquarters (217 East Tuscaloosa St.) or by calling 256-766-7642. Other artists playing the festival include Spooner Oldham, Bonnie Bramlett, Pine Hill Haints, The Pollies, James LeBlanc, Tosha Hill, Dave Anderson and many more. A complete schedule is available at wchandymusicfestival.org.

Before departing for the Ed Sullivan Theater to sing for the July 15 Letterman broadcast, Staton took time for a 20-minute interview.

Candi, "Young Hearts Run Free" was a disco smash for you in 1976. Did you ever go to the notorious New York disco Studio 54?

All the time! I was there at least once a week. When I was in town, I stayed at 54. It was such a wonderful experience being there with everybody. First of all, you never knew who you would see: Any music star or movie star or big deejays.

Any interesting people you remember hanging out with at Studio 54?

[Laughs.] Well, Diana Ross. I hung out with her and took pictures with Diana. And Stephanie Mills one night. Off the top of my head, it's been such a long time ago ... There were just many movie stars that came though, I didn't get a chance to dance with them or anything but you knew they were there and it was just a great mix.

On "Life Happens," you reunite for several tunes with pro-

ducer Rick Hall, who oversaw some of your best vintage cuts like "I'm Just A Prisoner" and "In The Ghetto." How has Rick changed as a producer and how has he remained constant?

He's more exact. We had a good time, but he wants perfection now more than anything else. Back in the day he would let us get away with a bad note. As long as it had feeling, Rick would let you get away with it. "Rick, I need to change that line. Can I go back in?" He'd say, "I wouldn't touch that with a 10-foot pole." Why? Because soul music is feeling and he had a feel there he didn't want to touch. Now he's more respected and wants to do everything correct, but it's still good. We sit around and laugh a lot. We love to eat together and talk about old times.

Rick got in touch with me after I did two albums for EMI and he came to one of my performances here in New York and he asked me that night, "Don't you think we have another hit in us?" and I said, "I don't know." He said, "Would your want to try?" So we started talking and we set a date to go to Muscle Shoals, and at the same time they were filming the "Muscle Shoals" documentary so I was blessed enough to get into that. I'm glad we did it. It brought back old memories — we had to sit around and talk about the many years we spent together. The many albums. We did over 50 songs together, so we had a lot to talk about.

You're featured prominently in the 2013 "Muscle Shoals" documentary. Was there anything you discovered about Muscle Shoals music from participating you didn't know before?

There were some things I didn't know about the other artists, like Wilson Pickett and Percy Sledge. I didn't know anything about the "singing river," the background of Muscle Shoals. The movie explained so much. But I was there and I know what effect it had on me. We would stay in the studio sometimes all night. We would sleep on the couch and wake up the next morning and go eat breakfast, go to the hotel and take a shower and come back and finished what we started the day before. (Muscle Shoals) is so country and away from everything. People would come from Detroit or California and they could concentrate completely on music. There wasn't anything to distract them.

There was no Studio 54 in Muscle Shoals.

No, no, no.

Are there any recent, well-known female singers you feel are carrying the flag?

I like Beyonce's voice, I like Rihanna's voice, I like a lot of the girls' voices.

'Shoals Sound' author details favorite songs recorded there

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Carla Jean Whitley knows a lot about Muscle Shoals.

For the past year or so, the managing editor of Birmingham magazine has been researching and writing her first book, "Muscle Shoals Sound Studio: How the Swampers Changed American Music."

The book, a history of the famed recording studio in northwest Alabama, details the many superstars who have recorded there, the songs they sang, and, of course, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, a group of studio musicians better known as the Swampers.

In advance of her book's debut and her first booksigning July 21 at 4 p.m. at the Alabama Booksmith in Homewood, Whitley put together a list of her favorite songs that came out of Muscle Shoals Sound.

1. "Everlasting Light" by The Black Keys: I could choose any track from The Black Keys' Grammy award-winning album "Brothers" and call it a favorite. There was a fair bit of ruckus following the band's time in the Shoals; read the Rolling Stone piece "The Black Keys' Muscle

Shoals Odyssey" for a look at why the band was disappointed in its recording experience in Sheffield. Even so, the work The Black Keys recorded in Alabama has been among their best, in my opinion.

2. "Wild Horses" by The Rolling Stones: The Stones recorded only three songs in the Shoals, and I could easily label "Brown Sugar" or "You've Got to Move" my favorite from the session. But "Wild Horses" captures my heart with Mick Jagger's gentle crooning, and earns bonus points for being partially composed in the bathroom at Muscle Shoals

CARLA JEAN WHITLEY

MUSCLE SHOALS SOUND STUDIO

HOW THE SWAMPERS CHANGED AMERICAN MUSIC



(Courtesy)

Sound. (My best creative work often comes when I'm isolated, too!)

3. "Free Bird" by Lynyrd Skynyrd: The "Skynyrd's First and ... Last" version of the iconic rock song doesn't have the same drive as the single we've all come to know and love (or loathe). But I still dig it because of its place in music history. It's interesting to hear this earlier take on the famous song. I'm also biased toward Skynyrd as they hail from Jacksonville, Fla., where I was raised.

4. "For What It's Worth" by Cher: Cher was the first act to record at Muscle Shoals Sound after its 1969 opening. Although the resulting album, "3614

Jackson Highway," wasn't a hit, it was met with critical acclaim. There are several great covers on this record, but I favor her cover of "For What It's Worth," written by Stephen Stills and made most famous by Buffalo Springfield.

5. "Take a Letter, Maria" by R.B. Greaves: Cher's album wasn't a hit, but the studio found its first big one shortly thereafter. R.B. Greaves' horn-flecked kiss-off song shot to No. 2 on the Billboard charts. It was Muscle Shoals Sound's first taste of hit making, and the song endures 45 years later.

6. "Careless Whisper" by George Michael: OK, I haven't actually heard the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio version of this song; it was released in Japan, and I haven't been able to track it down. But I thoroughly enjoy the Wham! interpretation we know so well stateside, and I walked around singing "Careless Whisper" for days after I realized George Michael had recorded in the Shoals.



Carla Jean Whitley

TURN IT UP

Listen to these and other songs recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio on Carla Jean Whitley's Spotify playlist. Connect with Whitley and learn more about the book at carlajeanwhitley.com.

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