

Muscle Shoals January 19, 2013

“Now Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers...”

Lynyrd Skynyrd – “Sweet Home Alabama”

Back when a huge chunk of American youth spent quality time immersed in the liner notes on the back of their latest vinyl LPs, an education was theirs for the taking. They learned of mysterious studios located in places like Memphis and Macon and Muscle Shoals and the names of the brilliant young virtuoso musicians who populated their house bands.

In Memphis at Stax Records Studio it was Steve Cropper, Donald “Duck” Dunn, Al Jackson, and Booker T. Jones, also known as “Booker T. & the MG’s.” In Muscle Shoals, Alabama, first at the Fame Studios and later at their own Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, you could find Barry Beckett, Roger Hawkins, Jimmy Johnson, and David Hood. They called themselves “The Swampers” and, among musicians, they were legendary.

The documentary film “Muscle Shoals,” which will have its premiere at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival on Saturday, January 26 at the Eccles Center, tells the story of both studios, the musicians who made them iconic, and the legendary names who traveled there to record.

The concept originally came to filmmaker Greg 'Freddie' Camalier when he and a friend found themselves looking at a map while on a road trip in southern Tennessee several years back. Noticing that they weren’t all that far from Muscle Shoals across the stateline in Alabama, they immediately got their target in their crosshairs and headed south.

Neither had been there previously although both were quite familiar with the town’s legend as a musical Mecca. One thing led to another and it wasn’t long before they had met Rick Hall, the founder of the Fame Studios and the central figure in any narrative that combines the town and its music. Freddie and his friend couldn’t believe it when they learned that no one had ever made a film about Muscle Shoals’ recording history.

“We were both curious as to why such an incredible story had not already been told, and as a result we were determined to bring it to life through the voices of those who were captured by its magic,” Freddie recalled. Some have passed on over the years, but just an inventory of those artists who recorded in Muscle Shoals is staggering.

Fame Studio itself can brag about the likes of Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Joe Tex, Duane Allman, Clarence Carter, Mac Davis, Paul Anka, Tom Jones, and Etta James? Now that’s enough to pique the interest of even the most casual fan.

Then we come to those who darkened the doors across town at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. The Rolling stones cut “Brown Sugar” and “Wild Horses” there back in 1969. Paul Simon cut “Kodachrome” and “Loves Me Like a Rock” in ’73. Bob Dylan recorded his grammy winning “Gotta Serve Somebody” in those hallowed halls. And Bob Seger left with “Katmandu,” “Night Moves,” and “Main Street.”

Word of mouth spread the love throughout the industry and the hits just kept on coming. After Willie Nelson recorded his concept album “Phases and Stages” with the

Swampers, which included the classic single “Bloody Mary Morning,” the secret was out. The bar had been raised and Muscle Shoals had arrived.

In a recent telephone interview with *The Park Record*, Camalier paused when asked the question about what he thought attracted so many famous artists to record in Muscle Shoals. He responded that he saw the answer as being too complex to adequately resolve in an interview context.

What drew artists to the banks of the Tennessee River in Northern Alabama is an intricate tapestry that runs throughout his film. And the finished product was too much of a labor of love for him to treat such an inquiry lightly. I feel like I need to see his film to properly come to terms with my question.

Freddie Camalier has other things on his mind, however: “Having now spent the last 4 years of my life consumed, enchanted, and challenged with the endeavor, I’m incredibly proud to be part of bringing this transcendent, heroic and incredible American tale to the screen and world. For me it has been a transformational journey...and one that has given me the opportunity to merge my passions for music and storytelling together for the first time.”