

# Bringing back the old

## Famous Shoals sound studio being refurbished

By Robert Palmer April 15 1999  
STAFF WRITER



DANIEL GILES/TimesDaily

Noel Webster, left, who is restoring and renovating the studio at 3614 Jackson Highway, talks with Dick Cooper, who was a frequent visitor during the building's Muscle Shoals Sound era.

Webster, 35, bought the dilapidated hulk of the old studio more than a year ago with plans to restore it to its former glory as one of the world's most famous hit recording factories. SHEFFIELD- It's not unusual for Noel Webster to wake up in the basement of his work-in-progress to find ace session guitarist Pete Carr picking out a new tune on a corner sofa.

"Pete comes by every day to play guitar," said Webster, surveying the piles of debris and new carpentry work inside the former Muscle Shoals Sound Studio at 3614 Jackson Highway. "He wakes me up almost every day."

Carr's unannounced arrival at the former recording studio one day late last summer is exactly what Webster, a Chicago native, wants from his seemingly daunting project.

it to its former glory as one of the world's most famous hit recording factories. "The city had condemned it when I bought it," he said. "I've been hauling stuff out

of it, cleaning it up and repairing what had rotted. Now, I'm beginning to put things in." The studio and control room will look - and more importantly sound - much as it did when four Muscle Shoals session musicians opened it in 1969. It will have analog equipment, including the original control board from Capricorn Studios, and digital mixing capabilities, he said. The studio yielded an astounding string of hit music.

DANIEL GILES/TimesDaily

# Heard around the world

Muscle Shoals Sound is seen as the embodiment of 'treasure and terrible beauty'

"It is a name inextricably tied to this idea of the best, the elite, The connoisseur's brand of Southern soul."

By Robert Palmer  
March/11/2001



Noel Webster blows a billow of cigarette smoke as he sits on the couch that was in the original Muscle Shoals Sound studio on Jackson Highway in Sheffield. Webster is trying to return the studio to its original state.

Knock at the front door of 3614 Jackson Highway in Sheffield sends owner Noel Webster out of the darkened recording studio and through the clutter of offices under renovation. The door opens and the bright sun of a cool after-noon back lights a man with a look of uncertainty on his face. "Y'all still have washers and dryers here?" the man Webster grins and shakes his head. "No, man. Not anymore." The unassuming block building at the top of the hill on busy Jackson Highway rarely gets a second look from most Shoals residents.

Its gray paint is peel-ing, and, until recently, tall weeds and stunted trees obscured it. In recent years, it housed a used washer and dryer business and slowly fell into disrepair. The narrow building once was the home of one of the most famous Recording studios in the world. Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, which in 1969, produced a stellar array of hit singles. Artists as diverse as the Rolling Stones, Paul Simon, the Staple Singers, Bob Seger, Rod Stewart and Willie Nelson traveled to northwest Alabama for a little of the magic the studio – and more importantly, the musicians — could deliver. Webster Bought the old studio last year and has begun restoring it to its past appearance. The actual studio and control room look much as they did and are ready for recording. "That says a lot," Webster says after the man looking for washing machines leaves. "People just don't know." Indeed, the presence of recording studios in the Muscle Shoals area is as much a part of the business landscape as gas stations and banks. The music business here is taken for granted — too much so for pioneering record producer and studio owner Rick Hall.

For years, Hall has said that he and others succeeded despite Muscle Shoals, not because of it. Local officials, he says, have never recognized that recording studios are industries that create jobs and wealth in the community. More importantly, the musicians, studios and producers gave Muscle Shoals an international reputation on a par with Memphis and Nashville. As founder of FAME Recording Studios and Publishing, Hall / launched Muscle Shoals as an inter-national recording center, first gaining attention with Arthur Alexander's "You Better Move On" in 1962. For the next 10 years, Hall and his stable of session musicians helped create a brand of Southern soul that has left a permanent mark on popular music. Among the FAME hits from that era are Aretha Franklin's "I Never Loved A Man (the Way I Love You)," Jimmy Hughes' "Steal Away," James and Bobby Purify's "I'm Your Puppet," Wilson Pickett's "Land of 1000 Dances," "Funky Broadway" : and "Mustang Sally," Etta James' "Tell Mama" and Clarence Carter's "Patches." Muscle Shoals legend grows Hall's assertion that music made in Muscle Shoals truly is international in its influence readily is proved by writers and fans around the world.

"As the years go by, the legend of the place seems to grow and grow, and more and more people' the great records that were made there by Aretha Franklin or Travis Wammack or even the Osmonds — the poppier stuff," said writer Barney Hoskyns of London in a telephone interview with the TimesDaily last week. "It is a name inextricably tied to this idea of the best, the elite, the connoisseur's brand of Southern soul," Hoskyns said. Hoskyns has written a number of books on popular music, including one of the definitive works on soul, "Say It One Time For the Broken Hearted: Country Soul In the American South." He is editorial director of [rocksbackpages.com](http://rocksbackpages.com), a new Web magazine. Even the name Muscle Shoals carries instant recognition among serious fans of the music, he

side “The name is extraordinary – it works in its favor,” Hoskyns said. “It kind of hooked me in, this particular brand of soul being made in a place called Muscle Shoals. I wanted to go there when I was 14 or 15. It became very seductive to me. I wanted to see the place that gave birth to this particular sound. “There is immense poetry in the way those records were made and the depth of those records,” he said. “The sound of David Hood’s bass Noel Webster wants to return Muscle Shoals Sound studio to its original glory. Playing — it seems to go with the name of Muscle Shoals. Yet there is sparseness and economy of playing, which is a hallmark of soul.” Hoskyns said he later made a pilgrimage to Muscle Shoals and the FAME studios. “I went to FAME and stood there in the room where ‘I Never Loved A Man’ was made – and Spooner’s (Oldham) Wurlitzer electric piano was still in that room — it was amazing to me,” he said. Muscle Shoals’ deep soul music has made a lasting impression on fans in western Europe. John R. Smith, a cell engineer in Oxford, England, began reading record labels on his favorite recordings in the late 1960s and saw that Rick Hall and FAME were bywords for “classy hard soul.” “It’s the emotional vocal content coupled with a unique organic instrumental feel” that makes FAME’s classic soul records special, Smith said in an e-mail interview with the TimesDaily.

The Muscle Shoals sound also found its way to Africa in the late 1960s and changed the perception many there had of the American South.

“I was then a very young man, a radical young man back at Radio Senegal, the country’s only radio network,” said Idrissa Dia in an e-mail to the TimesDaily. He is a senior editor at Voice of America in Washington, DC. “I noticed a very interesting phenomenon with the listeners and my fellow students at the University of Senegal: People would make bitter comments about the perceived evil of America in the South, in Vietnam, in Chile, etc. But when the music Muscle Shoals was on, all that would disappear,” Dia said. “And we would marvel at the fact that the musicians backing our idols were all white Alabama boys. “That made us think, and realize that American society was more ‘to, and author of “Soulsville U.S.A; complex than we were led to believe,” he said. Dia said he passed up an offer to go to work for Radio Moscow — because he wanted to come to Muscle Shoals and meet Rick Hall and the musicians who made the records. He got to meet the music makers and is a close friend of Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section Guitarist Jimmy Johnson. “I don’t want to go on and on, but it’s astonishing to us that Muscle Shoals itself does not see the treasure it has in its midst, just like most people don’t realize the ‘terrible — beauty’ that FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio embodied in the difficult years of the 60s and early ’70s,” Dia said. Internet galvanizes fans \* Fans of Muscle Shoals music were galvanized more than a week ago when word spread via the Internet that Hall was fighting the construction of a billboard next door to his studio. Hall said the billboard violates city sign ordinances. He also said it is emblematic of the lack of respect shown to the music industry. Muscle Shoals Mayor David Bradford received e-mails from around the world opposing the city’s permit for the sign, and the Times-Daily’s Web site became a battle-ground for those opposed to the billboard and those who saw no harm in it. The vehicle for the fans’ rally to FAME has been the e-mail news group SouthernSoul, moderated by \*

Houston, Texas, computer technician Terry Westbrook. “This has definitely been one of the high points for the list as far as a people coming together and rallying around a situation,” said Westbrook, who started the email group three years ago as a common meeting point for fans of Southern soul. He said the history of the Muscle Shoals music industry is well known to soul fans, from its genesis above the City Drug Store in downtown Florence to its expansion in the 1970s and ’80s into pop, rock and country.

The heart of the whole thing is Rick Hall,” Westbrook said. “Of course, it goes back to the drug store in Florence. Rick took that nucleus and made an industry out of it. So many people know about it because of (writers) Peter Guralnick, — Barney Hoskyns and Rob Bowman.

Recording capital of the world because of number of hit records recorded per capita, Muscle Shoals has earned its place in pop music history, said Rob Bowman, a music historian and professor at York University in Toronto

The Story of Stax Records. “In some ways, (Muscle Shoals) is a microcosm of what is happened in Memphis but it is just as important,” he said.

FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises) and Stax in Memphis parallel each other in many ways, he said. “Both started with little labels from studios that were production companies, as well,” Bowman said. “Stax, American Studios, FAME, Muscle Shoals Sound — they were all started by white people, but they were involved in the making of black culture with both involved. It was sort of a rainbow coalition before it was fashionable,” he said Both Stax and FAME gained wider national exposure in the mid-1960s when Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler began using the studios, Bowman said, but both survived after his departure. Stax fell on hard financial times in the 1970s and was forced out of business. The Stax studios and offices later were bulldozed. Muscle Shoals once had a dozen studios, but only three still are operating. Some fear those remaining could find themselves under the dozer’s blade like Stax. “I remember the disappointment I felt when I visited Liverpool for the first time and found the remnants of the Cavern Club and the whole Mersey Beat scene,” said Karl Tsigidinos, a radio and TV journalist in Dublin, Ireland, of the Beatles’ original venues.

“It was inconceivable to me that a city could let such a heritage be destroyed. Similar destruction has happened in Dublin to its musical heritage,” he said. “Yet both cities now promote musical tourism as a major source of revenue, and expect visitors to accept awful facsimiles of the real thing.

“For very little effort, the Muscle Shoals area could preserve the likes of the FAME studio and though it may never again be the center of the musical universe (as it once was), it could at least act as a lightning rod for music fans all over the world,” Tsigidinos said.

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# Thrilling Sounds: Project revives famous studio

Robert Palmer  
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SHEFFIELD – The thump of Owen Hale’s bass drum shook the well-seasoned wooden floor of 3614 Jackson Highway Studio on April 1, marking the rebirth of a world-famous studio and an anniversary that no one playing the recording session realized until later.

Hale, along with a group of crack Muscle Shoals and Nashville musicians, recorded 11 tracks during a 13-hour session that Sunday for the studio’s first project, Tommy York and Thrillbilly. The next day, studio owner Noel Webster learned the significance of April 1 to the building he bought more than a year ago.

On April 1, 1969, four local session players incorporated as Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, breaking away from Rick Hall’s highly successful FAME Recording Studios in a risky move to take control of their destinies. Within a year, the new studio grabbed the attention of the world with R.B. Greaves’ “Take A Letter Maria,” a Top 10 hit. Dozens of hits followed, all recorded in the cinder-block building on Jackson Highway.

“I had no idea April 1 was the date that Muscle Shoals Sound started,” Webster said. “I thought we were just late getting the project started.” In fact, Webster didn’t know the history behind the building when he bought it. Webster grew up in Chicago and moved to Huntsville when he was 15. Webster had been performing at a Sheffield club and commuting from Huntsville when a couple of local police officers who are friends took him to the empty building one night to look around. “I bought it, and I didn’t know this was the original Muscle Shoals Sound,” Webster said. “I started doing some research on the Internet, and I found out what I had. That’s when I decided to re-create it to what it should be.”

Muscle Shoals Sound’s original owners – Roger Hawkins, Jimmy Johnson, Barry Beckett and David Hood, known as the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section – moved out of the Jackson Highway studio in 1978 after buying the former Naval Reserve building at the end of Alabama Avenue, overlooking the Tennessee River. Webster said that was the only Muscle Shoals Sound Studios he was aware of. The rhythm section sold the studio to Malaco Records in 1985. When Webster took possession of the original studio, portions of it were near collapse. It had been empty for months and once had served as a second-hand appliance store. Webster said he originally wanted to create an all-modern recording studio with the latest digital technology – until he ran a sound test on an analog tape recorder.



MATT McKEAN/TimesDaily

"I knew I had to put it back," he said. "There's no other room that sounds like this." He has assembled vintage recording equipment that, combined with the acoustics of the room, yield a rich, deep, warm sound that cannot be achieved with digital equipment. However, a Pro Tools digital mixing program is being installed.

"It sounds so dog-gone good," York, a self-described 25-year veteran of a honky-tonk band, said after overdubbing a vocal track. "It's so warm and creamy. You don't hear that on the radio anymore. We're using no computers or vocal tuners." The studio has a reputation for magic – of producing recordings that contain something attainable nowhere else. Webster said he discovered the room's magic right away and is intent on keeping it intact. Part of the key to the sound is a back-to-basics approach to recording. "I want to make records for the benefit of the song. I want to capture more of a performance than an edited vocal," he said. Sounding uncannily like Florence native Sam Phillips, the founder of Memphis' Sun Records where rock 'n' roll was birthed, Webster said he is going for something more elemental than what is heard on radio these days. "I'm going to do it like they did in the 1950s. I want a raw, honest performance off the (studio) floor," he said. "We're selling emotion, and that's worth more than selling an antiseptically clean performance." "We're not under anybody's thumb to tell us how to make records, and we're not going to do it the way they do it in Nashville," he said. "If you've got talent and you've got something to show, why cover it up?"

York, 48, of Cullman, is convinced that hooking up with Webster was the right decision. He said he has a wealthy backer who gave him the choice of using any studio in the country. York, who has worked in Muscle Shoals studios since 1976, said Webster and the revitalized studio were obvious choices.

"We finished recording 'Katie Did' (a York-penned blues) and I glanced in the control room, and I thought I saw a tear roll down the engineer's cheek," he said. "I said, 'Naw, I didn't see that.' But I looked again and sure enough, the guy had a tear rolling off his cheek onto the board. The song we got on that session genuinely moved him."

That is exactly the kind of reaction Webster said he is looking for. He said having good musicians and giving them the freedom to do their best work is an essential part of a producer's job.

The musicians on the York project include Mike Chapman on bass and Chris Lucinger on guitar, both veteran Nashville players who have worked with Garth Brooks, keyboardist Johnny Neal, Rossington-Collins Band organist Tim Sharpton, Little Richard guitarist Kelvin Holly and Muscle Shoals Horns saxophonist Harvey Thompson.

"We tell the players what we are looking for, but we let them play what they feel," Webster said. "That's what we hired them for. It's an unconventional way of recording in this day and age."



MATT McKEAN/TimesDaily

Singer Tommy York works on a song at 3614 Jackson Highway Studio with studio owner Noel Webster.

Webster's experience as a producer is limited, but he is not daunted. He fired a Nashville vocal coach on the York session and took over the duties of co-producer. Webster, 35, got his start as a sound technician at Huntsville's Von Braun Center, then worked as a concert sound technician on world tours for top rock bands.

The activity at the old studio has captured the attention of Muscle Shoals musicians – including the original owners.

Guitarist Jimmy Johnson and bassist David Hood have given their blessings to Webster's work and have visited the studio to offer historical perspective to his careful restoration work.

"I was in there, and we played some of the old hits that were cut there. To hear them played back in the same control room on the same console was eerie – but comfortable," Johnson said. "It felt good."

Webster bought an MCI 400 control board from producer Johnny Sandlin that was used in the original Capricorn Studios in Macon, Ga., where the Allman Brothers Band recorded. Johnson said that is the same type of board the rhythm section used.

“Noel is really doing it right,” Johnson said. “Not only can he keep the old thing alive, he can do a lot of sessions from all over the world. He’s a real lover of what went on there, and I’m excited for him.”

Hood said he has been following Webster’s progress and is pleased with what he has accomplished. He also said he is glad someone saw the potential of the building.

A few years ago, when the old studio was a near-derelict used appliance store, Hood said he took some friends from France to see the building.

“I almost cried after we left, to see what had become of it,” he said. “It almost broke my heart.”

The rhythm section tried for years to buy the building from its owner to expand it, Hood said. They even bought all the land around it, but the owner would not discuss selling it. That’s when they bought the Naval Reserve building. Hood said Muscle Shoals Sound had expanded into publishing and production and desperately needed more space.

“Noel has the naA\_vete we had when we bought that studio, and that’s what it takes; because if you knew everything about the business, you wouldn’t take an old building and try that,” Hood said with a grin.

Beckett, who lives in Nashville where he is a much-in-demand producer, said Webster has the potential to recapture the feel of the original studio.

“I think there is some magic to the place, especially if you’ve got good musicians,” he said. “Those that he had on that session are really good players.”

“He can be successful if he can get a hit out of there,” Beckett said.

Hawkins, who convinced the other rhythm section members to join him in the studio venture in 1969, said knowing music is being recorded in the old building again is satisfying.

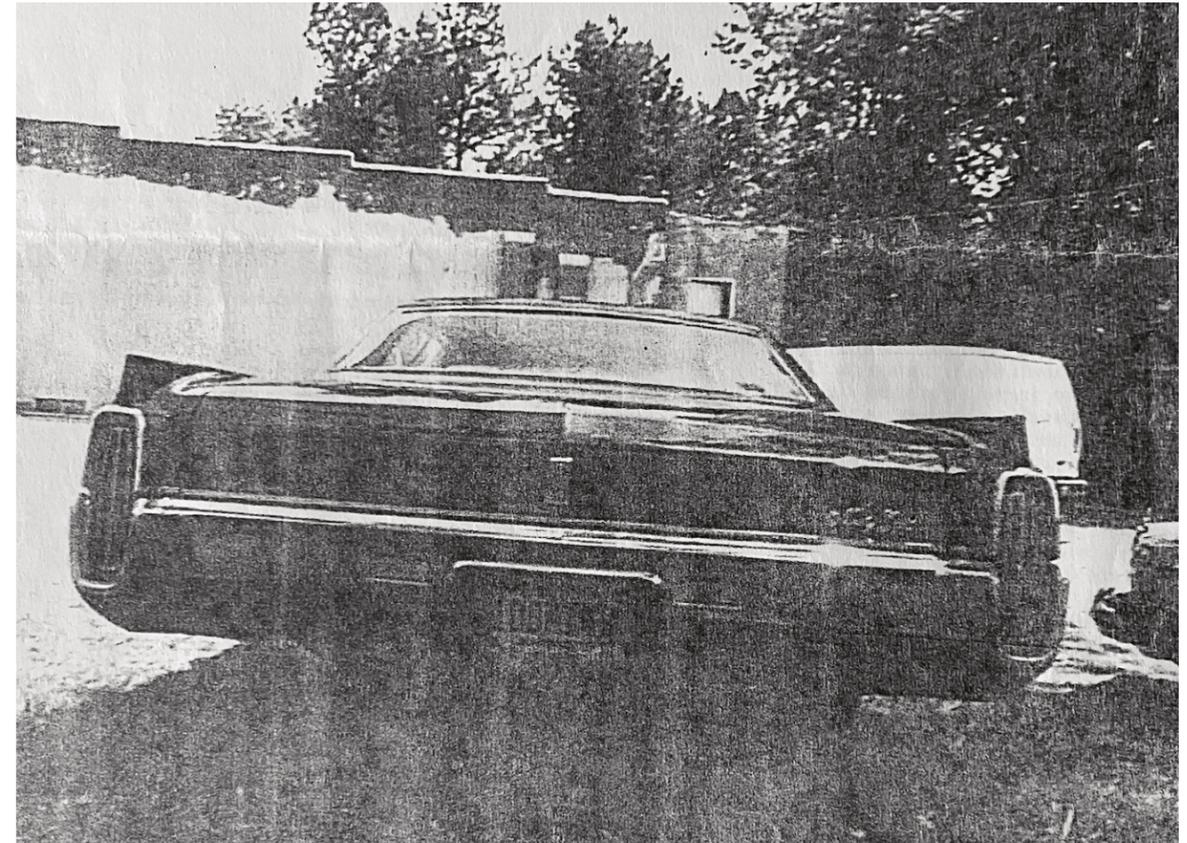
“I drove by there the other day, and I saw (York’s) bus and an old van with a peace sign painted on it, and I just grinned real big,” he said. “I thought, ‘Wow, I just hope they get to experience what we got to experience there.’”

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# New York Press

## Muscle Shoals: A Pilgrimage to the Heart of Southern Soul



I’ve spent five days with a dozen friends in a beach house on Dauphin Island, off the coast of Alabama in the Gulf of Mexico. For nearly a week I have worn a sarong, and had my toenails painted by beautiful women in coconut-shell bikinis. I have lounged in a hot tub until I’m shriveled, and danced out the wrinkles until dawn. I have crawled from the midnight surf and slept on the beach, gently illuminated by the winking orange lights of the oil rigs far offshore. I have played beer pong in the morning under an electric blue sky while the fishing boats trawl and the pelicans dive, and eaten Gulf shrimp so large and tender they could make a man cry, and did. It hasn’t sucked.

By now I should be in New Orleans, finishing my vacation wandering the French Quarter with a hurricane in my hand, flirting with the bartender at Checkpoint Charlie's or eating catfish po' boys at the Pearl. Instead I'm on a hair-raising seven-hour drive north on I-65, past countless truck stops and fast-food joints, on a road where if you're not doing at least 80 then you're getting run over by little old ladies in F-150s. It's crazy, but I can't help it. Muscle Shoals is calling The Shoals, or Quad Cities, are comprised of Florence, Sheffield, Muscle Shoals and Tuscumbia.

Nestled along the banks of the Tennessee river in the northwestern corner of Alabama, this sleepy, picturesque region was known as the "hit recording capital of the world" from the mid-1960s to early 70s. Along with Macon and Memphis, Muscle Shoals formed the third point in a Golden Triangle of soul music, and for nearly a decade produced some of the most original and unforgettable music this country has ever heard. The list of artists who recorded here is staggering: Aretha, Otis and Percy; the Staple Singers and the Rolling Stones, Paul Simon, Lynyrd Skynyrd and countless others. And backing many of these artists, on more hit songs than you probably ever realized, are the same four musicians: bassist Dave Hood, whose performance on "I'll Take You There"—a vocal remake of the Harry J. Allstars' reggae classic "The Liquidator"—is perhaps the Everest of bass lines; Jimmy Johnson, whose understated chukka-chuck guitar earned him the title "king of chink," and not for his love of lo mein; the technically awesome Roger Hawkins, who is perhaps the Bach of drums; and Barry Beckett, whose percolating keyboards glued the whole thing together. Together they formed the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, a group that was so incredibly inventive and funky that as one story has it Paul Simon, upon hearing one of their records, asked who "those Jamaican musicians" were.

Four white boys from northern Alabama, that's who. Mention Muscle Shoals today, and most people simply scratch their heads and look perplexed. What happened? Why isn't Muscle Shoals, musically speaking, as well known as Nashville, Memphis or, hell, Seattle? Why has it been, for all but a small percentage of music industry types and aficionados, completely forgotten?

3614 Jackson Highway It begins with a wrong turn. Traveling south on Rte. 43 through Muscle Shoals I miss a left and wind up on a smaller two-lane street. I'm early for my first appointment, so I decide to see the sights before turning around. I look at a street sign to get my bearings and the hairs on my arms begin to rise. I go another block and see a small, hopelessly forlorn flagstone building, alone in an overgrown lot. I hit the brakes hard, nearly causing a pile-up behind me, and screech into the gravel driveway.

Some addresses

speak for themselves: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, say, or 10 Downing Street. For lovers of Southern soul music that address may very well be 3614 Jackson Highway, the site of the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. The Rolling Stones recorded "Brown Sugar," "Wild Horses" and "You Gotta Move"

here. This is where Mavis Staples told Barry Beckett to "play, play your piano now," and implored "little Davey" to play his bass on "I'll Take You There." Don Covay recorded his best work here, including his Superdude and Hot Blood albums. Cher titled an early solo album simply

3614

Jackson Highway.

I get out of

the car, grab the camera and take a snapshot of the front. There is plywood inside the windows, weeds and crabgrass everywhere. It looks like the loneliest building in the world.

I call George

Lair, curator at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, to tell him I'm in town. He asks where I'm at and when I tell him he perks up. "You're at 3614?" he asks. "Have you gone inside and met Noel? He's the fellow who's fixing up the place." George tells me he'll be going to lunch soon, so we make a plan for later. I walk around to the back and go down some steps. The door is open.

Noel Webster

is doing dishes. He's wiry, wearing shorts and a baseball cap, with long dark hair halfway down his back. I tell him who I am and what I'm doing, and he shakes my hand. "You came to the right place," he laughs, "come on in." In a flash

he's at the fridge, pulling out burgers, buns and fixings. "We had a big barbecue here yesterday. You hungry? We got tons of food." Soon I'm devouring a delicious cheeseburger with potato chips. Noel tells me that 3614 still draws a small but steady stream of fanatics.

“People who know, know,” he says. “During spring break we had something like 150 people come by here. It was insane. Just last week, a group of four girls from Notre Dame drove all the way down just to see the place. We can’t go up to work on the roof without someone screeching into the parking lot and screaming SKYNYRD!” He shakes his head. “This town is like Mayberry on acid.” We go upstairs.

The studio is remarkable, a humble single room with a small vocal booth and a glassed-in control room. Noel has found the original furniture and wall sconces, and even tried to match the original color on the walls. “They had everything in storage,” he says. “When they moved out of this building they took an inventory of every single thing, down to the pens and paper.” He points to the ugly orange vinyl furniture in the corner. “The Rolling Stones sat on those couches.” For audiophiles,

3614 isn’t just a recording studio, it’s The Room. Noel stomps on the floor, and there is a solid thrum that vibrates through me. “Hear that? This whole floor is like the top of an acoustic guitar. You play a note on the bass and the drummer can feel it over there. That’s how those guys were able to lock in so tight, so rock solid. Of course, they weren’t bad players, either,” he adds with a wink. “Hell, Ted Turner could come down here

and build a ten-billion-dollar megaplex, state-of-the-art recording studio, and know what? Nobody’d give a shit. It’s all about the feeling, man—you just can’t buy what this room’s got.”

Noel tells

me that he is originally from Chicago, but that his family moved to nearby Huntsville when he was 15. Now 35, he says he decided to move to Muscle Shoals a couple

of years ago, in order to set up a rehearsal and recording studio for his band.

He says that when he bought 3614, he had no idea of its significance. “I just needed a place to keep my equipment and make music. The building had actually been condemned by the city. Most recently it had been a washer-dryer sales and repair place. “When I got in here I found out the building’s history and whoa, my whole life just changed.”

Noel takes me into the control room and reaches behind one of the monitors. He pulls out some pieces of paper and hands them to me. They’re track sheets, which studio engineers use to write down what’s on each track of the master tapes. “They’re original,” he says. “They were in storage, with the other stuff.” As a former engineer it’s like being handed one of Shakespeare’s quills. I put them carefully into my valise.

Alabama Music Hall of Fame Noel hops in the rental car and guides me to the Hall of Fame. George Lair isn’t back from lunch yet, so we sit outside and have a cigarette, and a minute later George pulls up. He invites me into his office and Noel takes off to explore the museum. Opened in 1990,

the Hall of Fame is an important first step in bringing people to the area, but by itself it’s not enough to correct the lack of understanding about Muscle Shoals’ greater significance. George says that the problem is primarily one of promotion. “When people hear ‘Nashville’ they think Country music,” he says. “Nashville made itself successful through a partnership between the music industry and the local community. That’s what we’ve got to do here, if people are ever going to understand.” I ask him what he would like people to think of when they hear the name Muscle Shoals, and after some thought he answers, “the Muscle Shoals sound. It’s not pop. It’s not country, like Nashville, or rhythm & blues, like Memphis, but a blend of the three. Songwriters love saying they’re from Muscle Shoals for that reason, because then they’re not going to get locked into One style.” George walks me through the exhibits. The number of artists who were either born in Alabama or made their mark there would be impressive for an entire country, let alone for a single state: Hank Williams and Tammy Wynette; Nat King Cole, Lionel Richie and Sun Ra; Alabama and Wet Willie. The thick, stapled list George gives me, titled “Facts about a few of Alabama’s Music

Achievers,” reads like a who’s who of American music. George takes me into a workroom, where there’s a giant tarp covering something. We Each take a corner and peel it back. It’s a huge Bonneville convertible that used to belong to Nudie, the clothing designer. The car is a wonder, every Bit as flamboyant as the suits Nudie designed for country music stars over the years,

like the memorable marijuana, poppy and dinosaur suits he created for Gram Parsons and the Flying Burrito Brothers. The interior of the car is upholstered completely with tooled leather, there are pearl-handled revolvers for door handles and a rifle mounted to the rear hood. Each seat has its own holster with a real, functional pistol; even the steering column shifter is a long-barreled six-shooter. George explains that they are still restoring the car, and when it’s Finished it will be put on display.

When my tour is finished I go to the gift shop, where I pick up a shot glass, bumper sticker and refrigerator magnet—the holy trinity of cheesy tourist stuff. There are dozens of great CDs for sale, but my budget will only allow one, so I decide on a recent release from Travis Wammack, an obscure session guitarist who is generally credited with inventing the fuzz guitar sound that came to dominate rock music in the 1960s. The seminal reissue of Wammack's early work, *That Scratchy Guitar from Memphis*, features the 16-year-old wunderkind's paint-peeling solos and frenetic picking work. Remembering the fuzzed-out frenzy of tracks like "Scratchy" and "Night Train" makes me smile, so I pick up Wammack's new disc, *Snake, Rattle and Roll in Muscle Shoals*. I pay for the stuff and go out to the lobby. Noel is regaling George with his idea for a Hard Rock Cafe-style restaurant in Muscle Shoals. Noel is animated, talking fast. When he's done I thank George, then Noel and I head out to the car. "How'd your talk with George go?" I ask. Noel pulls down his cap and snorts. "Man, I think I talk way too fast for these folks. I don't think he understood a word I was saying." The Palace My next appointment isn't for another hour, so Noel suggests a stop at the Palace, a renovated drug store and soda fountain that had its grand opening a week earlier. It's a big deal in sleepy downtown Tuscumbia, the beginning of what Noel hopes will be a sustained revitalization. We sit at the counter and Noel orders a chocolate shake. I order the same, then change my mind. I tell the waitress what I want. She asks me to repeat myself. "Black and white shake," I say. "What's that?" "Vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup." She crinkles her brow. "Chocolate what?" "Syrup. Surr-up," I trill. I make a motion like I'm squeezing an upside-down bottle. "Did you say chocolate surp?" "Yeah, chocolate surp," I say. She carefully writes it down and walks away, still looking completely perplexed. I'm glad I didn't ask for an egg cream. Noel is shaking with laughter. "Shit, man, you nearly blew her mind. Look over there, they're having a conference about it." I look. Indeed, four waitresses are huddled around, staring at the order ticket like it's a dead snake in the road. Noel nearly falls off his stool.

Another waitress, a fine young thing, comes over and asks in a hard voice to explain what strange and exotic creation I have requested. "Vanilla ice cream," I say, "with chocolate syrup. Or surp. Either is fine." The girl runs back, another huddle. One of the waitresses looks over her shoulder and gives me a dirty look. They're all wearing Palace t-shirts. On the back it says "We treat folks the way they used to be treated." Hmmm. "You've done it now," Noel chuckles, "you've gone and created a major incident in downtown Tuscumbia. They'll be talking about it for weeks." I'm feeling suddenly very hot. A gentleman and lady walk up. The man and Noel shake hands and Noel introduces us. We exchange pleasantries, then the man and the lady go over to a table and sit down. "You know who that was, don't you?" Noel asks. I shake my head. "That was Roger Hawkins." Noel tells me that Roger isn't playing drums anymore, because of some health problems. "He's got a ringing in his ears, real bad, and I think a problem with his back. It's really a shame." We get our order and enjoy the milkshakes, which are delicious, without further incident. When we're done Noel snatches the check and pays. Back at the car, I get my valise and pull out one of the original Muscle Shoals track sheets. "What are you doing?" Noel asks. "I want Roger to sign it," I say. Then I pause. The man's having lunch, and if I've already caused so much trouble just by ordering a milkshake, then *Disturbing A Legend During Lunch* might get me six months on a chain gang. "Oh hell, just go in," Noel prods. I do, and Roger listens patiently while I tell him who I am and what I'm doing here. He smiles slightly and takes the pen. He signs the track sheet, hands it back, and I thank him profusely and duck out. "What did you say?" Noel asks when I get back to the car. "I told him it was for you," I say. *That Scratchy Guitar* As we drive through town, Noel continues his improvised, unofficial history of the area. "In the 30s and 40s there used to be a bully in town," he tells me, "and this guy was really, really mean. He had a saying, 'Nobody will ever run over me.' Well, when he died, know what they did? They buried him in an intersection, right in the middle of the road, so every day people drive right over him." Noel interrupts his soliloquy. "Travis Wammack's over there." He points to a small brick building. "His studio?" I ask. "Not exactly," he explains. "I mean that's his blue van. He's probably in there recording. Want to go in and say hi?" We pull into the parking lot and I get my bag from the Hall of Fame gift shop. I pull out the Travis Wammack CD I've just bought. Noel smiles when he sees it.

“Shit, man, did you just buy that? Hell, bring it in and have him sign it.”

Travis is leaning back in a swivel chair with two men. He looks good, youthful despite the graying beard, still trim and with a wicked look in his eyes. It’s the look of an unrepentant hellraiser and prodigious guitarist. Travis and his two companions, both named Donnie, look amused as I shake their hands and unwrap the CD. There is some argument over what’s the best pen to use, but it gets done. We sit and make small talk for a few minutes, then take off.

“I feel like a boob,” I say in the parking lot, looking at the CD. Noel laughs.

“Are you kidding? They love that shit. Absolutely eat it up. I bet it blows their minds, this New York guy coming in and knowing who they are.

Travis could walk into the Family Dollar across the street and nobody would look twice. Here you come all this way and act like he’s a rock star.”

We pull back into the road. Noel is still laughing, something he does wonderfully often. “Did you think in a million years when you came down here that you’d be meeting Roger Hawkins in an ice cream shop, or get Travis Wammack to sign your new CD? The Good Lord will provide,” he says. A day ago I might have laughed at such a statement. But now I just nod. “Come on, let’s go see what’s happening at FAME,” he says. FAME

FAME, which is an acronym for Florence, Alabama Music Enterprises, is the 800-pound gorilla of Muscle Shoals. Although the region had long had a fertile music scene, it wasn’t until a Sheffield bellhop named Arthur Alexander came to a young producer named Rick Hall with a song called “You Better Move On” that the true golden age of Muscle Shoals began. The song did well, and the next single Hall produced, on his newly formed Fame Records label, was Jimmy Hughes’ “Steal Away,” which broke into the Top 20. As Hall has said in an earlier interview, “I was batting a thousand, and nobody could tell me anything!” In the Muscle Shoals musical mafia, Hall is probably the capo di tutti capi. He has a reputation for being reclusive and unapproachable, at least to strangers, and handles all interview requests through his son, Rodney. In photographs, Hall frequently wears his mustache waxed and twirled up at the edges, like his other gig is tying virtuous women to railroad tracks. I’ve been told he rarely grants interviews. I decide not to push it.

Daniel Beard, the studio manager, shows me around. He says that the entire recording industry is in a slump, and that Nashville is hurting, which only hurts Muscle Shoals more. Much of FAME’s continuing success, he says, is centered around the publishing arm of the business, trying to place songs with new and established artists. One of FAME’s writers recently hit paydirt with the mega-smash “I Swear.”

Walking into Studio A is like walking into any number of old photographs I’ve admired over the years: here’s Jerry Wexler standing next to a young Aretha Franklin; here is Spooner Oldham working with Dan Penn and Chips Moman on their latest song. In the control room we talk about mixing consoles, outboard equipment and echo chambers, then I buy a t-shirt and move on. When we get back to 3614 I’m exhausted. The sun, the heat and the driving have all taken their toll, and I’m nodding off—on the same couch Keith Richards probably once nodded off on, in fact. Noel offers me a place to crash, but I’ve spent the past week sleeping on beaches, hammocks and roof decks. I sorely need a proper bed. I find a cheap, clean room at the Holiday Inn in Florence, and halfway through a can of Coors Light my eyes begin to close. It’s not even 7:30. It’s all I can do to get over to the bed before I fall straight across the covers, fully clothed. For the next 12 hours I dream of Travis Wammack playing guitar in a sarong and Mavis Staples singing in a coconut-shell bikini. Muscle Shoals Sound Studio Dave Hood is pressed for time. He’s got to drive to Nashville for a photo session that Fender guitars has organized. “It’s for some kind of publication,” he explains, “and they want to get pictures of all these bass players. We’ve been trying to set it up for a couple of weeks, and today is the only day it worked out for all of us.” Dave says that he’s picked a favorite bass, a 1956 Fender Precision, but doesn’t know what they expect him to wear. “From April to October, I’m in shorts.” He pauses thoughtfully. “I hope they like my legs.” I’d never know he was in a rush if he didn’t tell me; Dave takes me on a leisurely tour of the new Muscle Shoals Sound. Gold and platinum records line the walls: “Chain of Fools,” “Respect,” “There Goes Rhymin’ Simon” and many more, stretching up to the ceiling. Does he have a particular session, or record, that stands out to him as definitive? “I just recently listened to the Staple Singers’ Beatitude: Respect Yourself, maybe for the first time since we did those sessions. I have to say, listening to that record again, all the way through, I think we were doing some pretty advanced stuff, stuff that hadn’t ever been done before, how it blends gospel, pop and soul.” Dave explains that the studio was sold to Malaco Records in 1985, and that eventually the four Rhythm Section members went their separate ways. Three are still in the area, but keyboardist Barry Beckett has gone on to a successful career in Nashville. Dave is clearly eager to keep playing, but admits that there aren’t as many gigs as before, and that most of his work is for blues records, a style he admits to never being particularly crazy about. “But hey, it’s work,” he shrugs. He notes the time and says he has to get on the road if he’s going to make his photo session.

I tell him there's just one more thing, and hand him the track sheet to sign. Gone Hollywood After leaving Muscle Shoals Sound I swing by 3614. Noel is already in overdrive, getting the studio ready for a session. "I've got some of the original guys from the band Cowboy coming in this afternoon," he says. "They're cutting some new tracks, and I'm worried we're going to get rained on big time in the studio." He's looking through the yellow pages, trying to find a roofer who will spray an extra layer of tar where the roof joins the outside walls. He's not having much luck. "Well, I guess it's back to using the big cans to catch the leaks," he chuckles. Bobby Whitlock emerges from the front offices. Whitlock is one of the members of Derek and the Dominos, and is the first bona-fide Rock Star I've met since arriving. I learn that he's sleeping in the front offices while his new house is being renovated. He had been staying at a hotel, but at Noel's urging has decided he'd rather be here. I soon understand why. Whitlock picks up one of the vintage Stratocasters from a rack and plugs it into a classic Marshall stack. He begins wailing out a series of blues-rock riffs and progressions at an ear-splitting volume. When he's done he puts down the guitar and pumps his fists in the air. "GodDAMN, that feels GOOD!" he screams. We all grin at each other and nod. Noel has sung the praises of the Hollywood Inn, a nearby soul food restaurant, so we break for lunch. At the Hollywood we are greeted by Feedie, a tall, immaculately dressed black man. We go into the back room, a former bar, which Noel calls "the smokin', spittin' and cussin' room." Two beauties in hospital scrubs are enjoying fried chicken, mashed potatoes and cigarettes. We pull out our Marlboro Lights. Feedie is playing a kind of down-home dozens with one of the waitresses. They're the floor show, snapping on each other in an hilarious, rapid-fire exchange, accusing each other of trying to reserve the best tables for their friends, tearing up one another's tickets, stealing tips. Noel points to the cashier, an ancient black man hunched over the register. "Every once in a while the old man gets ticked off," he whispers, "and will yell at those two, 'Hush Up That Jive Shit!'" On the way back we stop to see the gravestone of Arthur Alexander, one of the early soul giants from the area. We pull into a hilltop graveyard and Noel points out a large black stone with musical notes inscribed on it. "Arthur died several years back, and there was no money for a headstone. It was such a shame. About six months ago there was a big benefit, and everybody, I mean everybody, came out and played. It was pretty amazing. We gave all the money to the family."

We leave the cemetery and a stunning blonde in a convertible pulls alongside us at a stop light, teasing her honey hair and singing along to Rick James' "Super Freak." Noel snorts and slaps his knee. "How perfect is that? It's like a babe bomb went off down here. You can't believe how many beautiful women there are. Trouble is, most of them wind up with illiterate redneck assholes." If Muscle Shoals is ever to revive itself and reclaim its rightful place in pop music history, then Noel Webster might well play a vital role in that renaissance. Although he has his reservations—a full day later, for instance, he's still worried that George Lair didn't understand a thing he was saying, and he frequently mutters things like, "They're probably going to run me out of town"—Noel takes some obvious pleasure in his outsider status. "It's actually helpful that I'm not from here. These other guys "It's actually helpful that I'm not from here. These other guys have so much history between them. I don't know what went down or who did what to whom, or what bad blood there might be, but none of that matters to me. My job, as I see it, is to bring people together. "None of us can make it if we don't all work together," he adds, as we pull into 3614 for the last time. "There's plenty of work out there for all of us. We just have to get it here." We shake hands, he runs off to make his session and I give the building one last look before pulling out onto Jackson Highway. Soul Clan I'm not looking forward to meeting Jimmy Johnson. The legendary guitarist and producer has sounded gruff and intimidating on the phone, and has given me the distinct impression he'd rather have minor dental surgery than entertain some pushy stranger from New York. He has explained that he is flying out of town in a day or so and has a lot to take care of, but I persist, and when I tell him I'm leaving town in a few hours he finally relents. Jimmy's office, in a building adjacent to his father's house, is a riot of equipment, CDs and papers. He appears to be overwhelmed with work before his upcoming trip. On top of it, he's having printing problems. A file that looked fine before is now all wrong. Luckily I'm able to help, and the problem is soon fixed. The new pages are printing fine, and Jimmy is pleased. The tension I felt in the air is dispelled. Just when I think my technical prowess has won him over, Jimmy focuses a hard gaze on me. "What kind of article are you going to write?" he asks. When I start to give him my standard line he waves me off. "I mean, is it going to be positive or negative? Because a lot of writers, you know, have an agenda. I just want to ask you up front, so I know where you're coming from." want to ask you up front, so I know where you're coming from." I tell him, as honestly as I can, that although I have come as a fan of the music, I also want to know why the region is languishing in obscurity while Nashville has flourished. He nods slowly. "Nashville's done it right," he agrees. Like George Lair, he believes the problem can only be cured by promotion, promotion, promotion.

Jimmy, who is still very much in demand as a producer, is passionate about another area: artists' rights. He says that the modern recording contract treats artists "basically as slaves," and says that he is working to correct that through his own company. "A lot of big artists have recently spoken out about the abuses," he says. I mention Prince and Courtney Love. At the mention of Love's name, Jimmy leans over the desk. "You want to know something about Courtney Love?" His voice drops to a growl, and his finger punches every word into the desktop: "Courtney...Love...is...fucking...right." The phone rings constantly. I hear him explaining to one caller that "you can't make it unless you get a band together and write your own material. There's no Colonel Parker with a cigar who's going to come up and make you a star. I'd help you if I can, but I can't offer what I can't give. You have to do it on your own." When he hangs up he looks at me. "I have to tell it to them like it is," he says. I ask Jimmy who his biggest musical influences were. "Basically, all the black guys," he says. "Jimmy Reed, Robert Johnson, Chuck Berry." He says that the key to his distinctive style was, ironically, not to stand out but to blend in, to become a part of the drums and bass. "Nothing I do on its own would really stand out," he says, "but if you took it away, you would notice a lack." Just like his playing, it's an amazing understatement. We go into the studio next door for some pictures. In the room with me are Jimmy, his father Ray, son Jay and grandson JJ. Jay is the leader of the Southern Rock Allstars, and Ray was a local celebrity in his own right in the 1930s and 40s, as Country Ray. Jimmy and Jay have recently produced an album of Ray's favorite songs, with Ray singing. Ray gives me a copy, and I ask him to sign it. As the elderly Johnson leans over the mixing console and signs his name in a shaky hand he whispers to me conspiratorially: "I signed one of these for Sam Phillips." Before leaving, I pull out the track sheet. Jimmy takes a big Sharpie and signs boldly across the center. You Better Move On

The weather news is not good. Major thunderstorms are expected over most of the state for the next two days. In fact, the only part of the state that is not going to be affected is the southernmost strip, including Dauphin Island. I have two choices: I can stay another day and possibly be caught in vicious thunderstorms, turning my seven-hour drive into a 12-hour nightmare, or race the storm and spend a few more days on the beach. I stop into what appears to be the lone bohemian enclave of Florence, a coffee shop with the word "espresso" spelled correctly in the window and a chap with a goatee and beret sitting at an outdoor table. I go in and ask for an iced cappuccino. "Sorry, don't have that," the barista drawls.

Iced coffee? "Naw, didn't make none today." Iced anything? "I kin put some coffee in a cup with ice if that's what you want." Well, fuck me in the mouth, it'll have to do. Properly fueled, I begin the long trip back to Dauphin Island, where I'll stay for a night or two, alone, before flying out of New Orleans. Tonight I will sleep in the hammock on the roof deck, under a blanket of stars, lulled to sleep by the sound of the waves and the gentle Gulf breeze. With any luck I'll be there by midnight, a 12-pack of Coors Light and some frozen pizzas under my arm. Sarong optional. I hit the Interstate, get the Dodge up to 85 and look for something good on the radio.

# Music promotion

By Terry Pace and Robert Palmer

Nov 16, 2002

Jeff Lanham rarely stops moving. Lanham wasn't sure what he would find when he rolled into the area five months ago with a truckload of personal possessions and a business plan that taps into the Muscle Shoals music industry.

A native of Sacramento, Calif., Lanham has been in the music business most of his life. He has been involved in artist management and staging concerts. Now, he's striking out on his own with Jeff Lanham Presents, an artist-management and concert-promotion company.

Though born and raised on the West Coast, Lanham has spent time in the South and always wanted to come back. An enthusiastic hunter and fisherman, he decided to move to the Shoals on the advice of his friend, rock 'n' roll songwriter Bobby Whitlock.

"I spent a lot of time in Memphis, and I had been to Muscle Shoals a couple of times in the past," Lanham said. "I got to a point in my life where I wanted to make a move, and Bobby said, 'Why don't you come to the Shoals?' The place has everything I love - great hunting and fishing and a lot of great music."

Whitlock moved to Tuscumbia a year ago. He has recorded with Eric Clapton ("Layla") and George Harrison ("My Sweet Lord") and co-wrote some of the early 1970s' best-known hits, including Derek and the Dominos "Tell the Truth."

Lanham said moving to Muscle Shoals feels like the right move for him. Taking a cue from one of his heroes, the late concert promoter Bill Graham, he has formed his company with an office at the historic 3614 Jackson Highway Studio "With most of what I've done in the music business, I've managed to be in the right place at the right time with some pretty decent ideas," he said. "I've had some ideas rolling around in my head that I wanted to try make happen. This seemed like the right place at the right time."

Artist management, concert promotion and booking are Lanham's three areas of emphasis. He already is talking to artists for management contracts. He is also courting jazz artists Ken Watters of Huntsville and Anthony PapaMichael of Atlanta, along with guitarist Kat Dyson, who has worked with Prince and is touring with Cyndi Lauper.

"I'm interested in trying some new and exciting things - some unorthodox things," Lanham said.

"I'm not putting any limits on it. I'm looking for acts in this region, but I'll sign somebody in Germany if I decide I want to work with them."

Lanham, who worked with legendary artist-manager Robert Fitzpatrick in California for four years, said managers and artists must have a special bond in order for the relationship to be mutually beneficial.

"Chemistry between the artist and management is critical," Lanham said. "I'm not going to sign anybody who I think I can't help and do something with."

"With my management contracts, I like to position myself so that my client and I have at least a year to make the noise we need to make," he said. "But I'll offer any act an out at any time. If it's not gelling, they can go at any time."

Lanham keeps a copy of Graham's biography, "My Life Inside Rock and Out," on his office bookshelf. Graham began promoting concerts in California in the 1960s, opening the legendary Fillmore auditoriums in San Francisco and New York. He also was closely associated the Grateful Dead's live shows.

"Bill Graham did it best -- he invented it," Lanham said of Graham's legendary live shows. "I spent my childhood studying it, figuring out how to do it."

"With Graham, the magic was always there - every single time." Lanham said he plans to stage a major concert in the Shoals early next year. He recently approached the Tuscumbia City Council about staging concerts in Spring Park.

Surrounded by telephones, computers and a fax machine in his small office, Lanham said he and his business partner, Autumn Mott, sometimes kick back at night and absorb the ambience of 3614 Jackson Highway, owned by Noel Webster. The building, which Webster has renovated as an analogue recording studio, was the home of the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

"Everybody in the business knows and loves this building. I sit here at night and think about it sometimes," he said. "Some great records came out of here, and those records won't die because they are so great."

Muscle Shoals is not the bustling recording center it once was, but the industry is still alive and kicking. FAME Recording Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios are still busy with songwriting, publishing and cutting sessions. The Pro-Duce Section, a new production and development company formed by Mac McAnally, Gary Baker and Walt Aldridge, has a contract with Universal Nashville. Lanham said the activity in the studios is ripe for expansion.

"Muscle Shoals is alive and well, but we are going to have to go out and get it," he said. "A lot of us come from the old school - we don't want to do the Britney Spears thing. We want to do real music here."

"I'm not a music Nazi; I don't fault Britney Spears or anyone who's doing well in this business," he said. "But there is a whole new breed in this business, and we've got to figure out how they do business."

Lanham said he wants to find alternative outlets for the rock, soul and rhythm and blues artists he grew up listening to. He said those artists are still making great music. Lanham said he will encourage the artists he signs to record in Muscle Shoals.

Terry Pace can be reached at 740-5741 or [terry.pace@times-daily.com](mailto:terry.pace@times-daily.com).

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## Historical note

By Russ Corey

Nov 13, 2005

SHEFFIELD \_ Gene Ford spent many days in the Shoals gathering information needed to get local buildings on the National Register of Historic Places.

Time after time, he has passed 3614 Jackson Highway, an address that stuck in his mind for some reason.

Could it have been the Rolling Stones movie "Gimme Shelter," which briefly featured the Stones kicking back in a tiny recording studio listening to tracks from "Sticky Fingers"?

Could it have been the cover of Cher's 1969 album "3614 Jackson Highway?"

It was all that and more, so it was only fitting that Ford be given the task of gathering information necessary to nominate 3614 Jackson Highway, the site of the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ford said that from 1969-78, Muscle Shoals Sound Studios was responsible for countless hit records by artists such as Bob Seger, Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, Lynnyrd Skynyrd and Rod Stewart.

Muscle Shoals Sound was the home of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, also known as the Swampers.

Eventually, the studio moved to a new location on Alabama Avenue in Sheffield, and 3614 Jackson Highway remained vacant until 1999, when it was purchased by Noel Webster.

Since then, Webster has restored the studio, and two years ago, he asked the Alabama Historical Commission about getting it added to the National Register of Historic Places.

"We tried to save everything we could," Webster said, adding that musicians can still get the same sound there as they did in the '70s. "It's still a working studio."

If it receives its designation as a National Historic Landmark, Ford said, Webster would be eligible for tax credits on renovations and added protection from civil condemnation.

"We're trying to tie this into a music corridor between Nashville and Muscle Shoals," Ford said.

Webster added Memphis, Tenn., into the mix. Memphis is the home of Sun Recording Studios, where Florence native Sam Phillips made Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison household names. Webster said Sun Studios is the only recording studio on the National Register of Historic Places.

Webster said Sun Studios is the only recording studio on the National Register of Historic Places. It's also one spot tourists familiar with the South's musical heritage visit in Memphis. Webster said tourists travel to Sheffield to the old Muscle Shoals Sound location and on to Nashville, Tenn.

Webster said he frequently has visitors, either those who search for the studio on their own or those brought by Swampers who still remain in the Shoals.

Ford said he has sent a nomination form for the studio to the Alabama Historical Commission, where it will be reviewed and possibly returned for changes.

Once it's approved by the Alabama Historical Society, the nomination will be sent to the Alabama National Register of Historic Places Review Board.

Upon its approval, Ford said, the nomination will be sent to the National Park Service for consideration.

"Hopefully, this will all take place in a year or so," Ford said.

Ford and Webster are confident the studio will receive the historic designation.

Webster has plans to display memorabilia from the studio's heyday and offer tours during the day. He said recording sessions can take place in the evening. "I just want people to come enjoy it," he said.

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# Webster has plans for studio

By Russ Corey Nov 21, 2005

SHEFFIELD -- Noel Webster has ambitious plans for a vacant building behind 3614 Jackson Highway.

Actually, it's three buildings separated by interior walls and Webster has distinct plans for each one.

In 1999, Webster purchased the nondescript stone building at 3614 Jackson Highway, the

The original home of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

He restored the studio, going as far as replacing the original sound and recording equipment down to the very model numbers.

The building has also been nominated for inclusion in the National Record of Historic Places.

Webster now wants to develop the largest of the three buildings behind the studio into a venue designed specifically for live music.

Alcoholic beverages would be available, he said, but music will be the primary attraction.

Plans include a 20-foot by 20-foot stage and a sound system.

"It will be more like a concert hall or event center," Webster said.

"There will be no Bud signs, no racing, no Budweiser promotions, no TVs for sports," he said. "It will be themed around Muscle Shoals Sound."

The middle building will house an office and apartment, Webster said.

The building closest to the rear of the studio will be home to an art gallery, coffee shop and gift shop.

Webster envisions a more laid-back atmosphere with couches lining the walls and a small corner stage for acoustic performances.

Webster also wants to develop a portion of the property for outdoor performances in an area he sees as a small natural amphitheater.

He wants to build a small stage and invite vendors to sell food during the events. On Sundays, he said, it could be utilized by churches.

"It all works to supplement the studio," Webster said.

The buildings are being cleaned out and Webster hopes to have the music hall completed by the first of the year. Webster said the area is zoned for business and his neighbors are behind the venture.

"My neighbors do want this to happen," Webster said.

Sheffield Mayor Billy Don Anderson said even though the property is in a business zone,

Webster would have to get approval from the city's planning commission.

"We want to have the blessing of the planning board," he said.

Anderson also envisions developing a portion of downtown Sheffield as a music and entertainment district.

He said the emphasis will be on attracting people from outside the Shoals.

"This is a much bigger project than just trying to attract local people," he said

Russ Corey can be reached at 740-5738 or russ.corey@timesdaily.com.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2005

### ➔ DBT Lyrics Tour - Ronnie and Neil

Meanwhile in North Alabama, [Wilson Pickett](#) comes to town  
To record that sweet soul music, to get that [Muscle Shoals sound](#)

Meanwhile in North Alabama, [Aretha Franklin](#) comes to town  
To record that sweet soul music, to get that [Muscle Shoals sound](#)

One morning before I headed out to take some pictures for this series I picked up the TimesDaily over breakfast and was greeted with the following article:

#### [Webster Has Plans for Studio:](#)

In 1999, Webster purchased the nondescript stone building at 3614 Jackson Highway, the original home of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

He restored the studio, going as far as replacing the original sound and

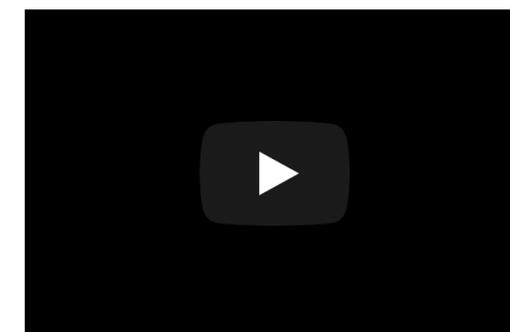
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Spotlight Video



recording equipment down to the very model numbers.

The building has also been nominated for inclusion in the National Record of Historic Places.

...

'It will be themed around Muscle Shoals Sound.'

I decided to make the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studio my first stop for the day. I had planned on snapping a few quick pictures of the front of the building before moving on to some other Colbert County/DBT landmarks. When my dad and I pulled up to the Studio, Noel Webster was standing outside directing a bulldozer that was clearing a spot next to the studio that will be the outdoor theatre. I introduced myself and told him what I was doing. He invited my dad and I to come inside the studio and check things out. When we walked in the back door Noel flipped the light switch and the sound system started playing "Wild Horses" by the Stones. Noel started to show us around and, honestly, we could have spent a couple of days in the place in order to see everything. It was, to say the least, stunning the amount of history this small, ex-casket factory, contained. I would calculate that Billions of dollars worth of music was created and produced here. Noel pulled out pictures, album covers, framed pieces of the old wall that had signatures on it from artist all the while spitting historical tid-bits in his rapid-fire manner of speech. I was so enthralled that I had to force myself to take some pictures along the way. Before we left, Noel asked my dad and I if we wanted to see something that no one had seen since the '70's. We said "Of Course" and Noel went to the basement and returned with the old ledger books that contained the dates and dollar amounts charged to the artists who worked there. L.S, Aretha, Bob Seger, Wilson Pickett, Rod Stewart and a host of others were contained in these ledgers. It was amazing.

Noel told us about Dylan walking down to the river bottom and chatting with the local fishermen who had no idea who he was. Hard to imagine... He showed us a great picture of Duane Allman buck nekkid standing in the woods behind the studio. He told us so many stories that I'll probably update this post as I remember them...

I won't go into the detailed history of this place and the players. The links below supply a history more comprehensive than anything that I could state. You can check out who recorded at [FAME](#) and [Muscle Shoals Sound](#).

I want to the Noel for being so gracious and for a tour of a lifetime.

[Welcome to Muscle Shoals AL. The Hit recording Capitol of the World](#)

## Spotlight Links

- [Shipper Law Firm - Pacific Attorney](#)
- [Interview with Patterson Hood](#)
- [DBT Concert Pic Archive](#)
- [AAW on Twitter](#)
- [AAW YouTube](#)
- [Wescar Wacing](#)
- [My Athens GA Getaway](#)
- [The Drams in San Luis Obispo](#)
- [AAW MySpace](#)

## Me

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## Drive-by Truckers

- [Patterson Hood's MySpace](#)
- [3 Dimes Down](#)
- [One of These Days](#)
- [DBT Yahoo Group](#)
- [Knuckle Sammitch](#)
- [Cooley's Birthday Party](#)
- [DBT Concert Pictures Archive](#)
- [DBT in Literature](#)
- [DBT Live Shows](#)
- [DBT Merch](#)
- [DBT Lyric/Picture Tour Archive](#)
- [DBT Sundries](#)
- [DBT WIR/News Archive](#)
- [Drive-by Truckers](#)
- [John Neff's MySpace](#)
- [Nuci's Space](#)
- [Patterson Hood](#)
- [PHood Live Shows](#)
- [Shonna Appreciation Society](#)
- [Spooner](#)
- [Wes Freed](#)

## Jason Isbell

- [Jason Isbell Blog - NEW](#)



[Muscle Shoals Sound](#)



Cooley's wearing this t-shirt during "Marry Me" in Live at the 40 Watt



[Willie Nelson](#)

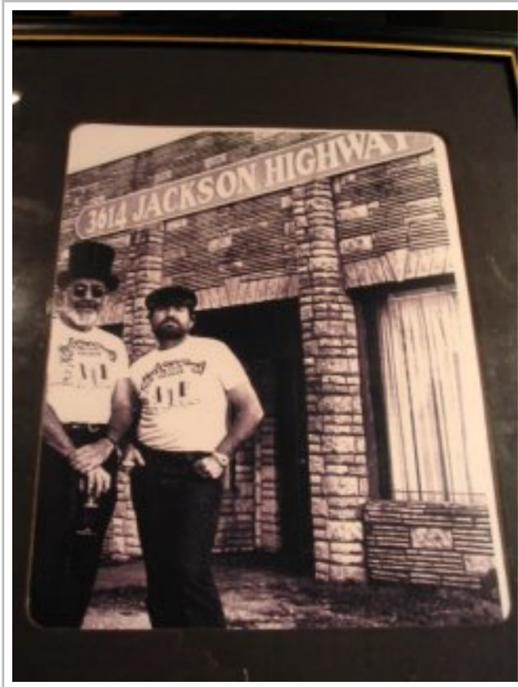
- [Isbell Concert Pictures Archive](#)
- [Sirens CD Release - Opening Acts](#)
- [Sirens CD Release Show](#)
- [Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit](#)
- [Jason Isbell's MySpace](#)
- [Jason Isbell Booking](#)

## The Drams

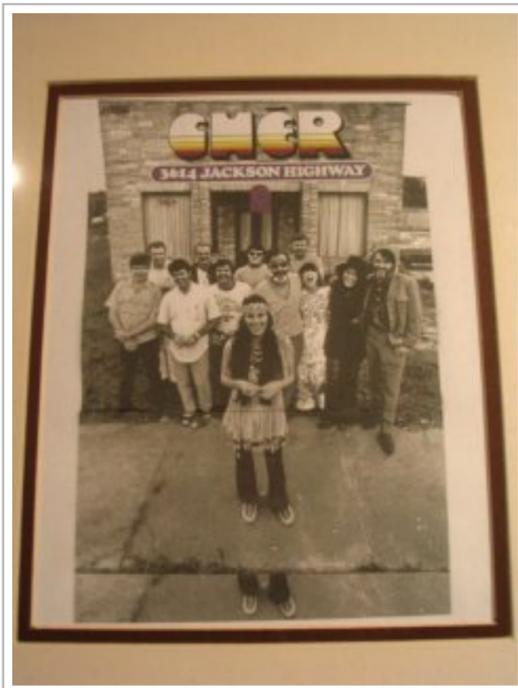
- [Drams Winter 07 Tour Review](#)
- [Drams in San Francisco](#)
- [The Drams in San Luis](#)
- [The Drams](#)
- [Drams Message Board](#)
- [The Drams Yahoo Group](#)
- [The Drams Live Shows](#)
- [The Drams Concert Post](#)
- [Tour Diary](#)

## Music

- [The Peoples Music - NEW](#)
- [Audra Brown](#)
- [Baxendale Guitars](#)
- [Centro-Matic](#)
- [Drive Like Hell](#)
- [Eddie Hinton - DH Doc](#)
- [Eddie Hinton MySpace](#)
- [FAME](#)
- [Fiddleworms](#)
- [Financial Rock n Roll](#)
- [Garrin Benfield](#)
- [Glossary](#)
- [Kimberly Morgan](#)
- [Largehearted Boy](#)
- [Lauderdale](#)
- [Lynam](#)
- [Marah](#)
- [Muscle Shoals Sound](#)
- [Parasites](#)
- [Slacker Country](#)
- [Slobberbone](#)



[Cher's Album Cover](#)



[Fame Recording Studios](#)

- [Sons of Roswell](#)
- [Southern Shelter](#)
- [The Dexateens](#)
- [They Wydelles](#)
- [Wilco](#)

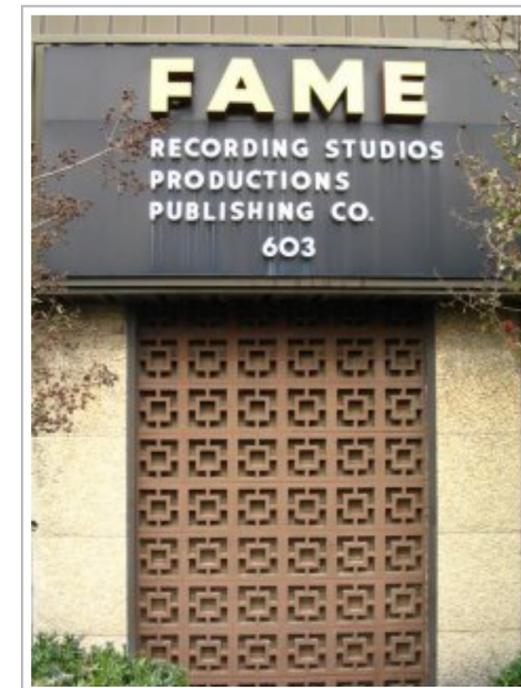


#### Blogs, etc

- [Alablwg](#)
- [AMERICAblog](#)
- [Atrios](#)
- [Bloodless Coup](#)
- [Blue Gal](#)
- [Crooks and Liars](#)
- [DailyKos](#)
- [Facing South](#)
- [Ghost of the Coast - Dixie Butcher](#)
- [Howard Wolfson - Gotham Acme](#)
- [Huffington Post](#)
- [Media Matters](#)
- [Peace Takes Courage](#)
- [Raw Dawg Buffalo](#)
- [Rawstory](#)
- [Swampland](#)
- [Talking Points Memo](#)
- [The Day Jobs](#)
- [TheLeftistRight](#)
- [ThinkProgress](#)
- [Willard's Garage \(Jyl Freed\)](#)



Patterson gives a good history lesson on FAME [here](#). Just scroll down the page and you can see the band standing in front of FAME when they recorded TDS.



Let's head on back to Muscle Shoals Sound



#### Palau

- [Palau](#)

#### Damn Good Peoples

- [ABAT - New Zealand](#)
- [Adam Smith Photography](#)
- [Aztec Graphics](#)
- [Chicks101 - Keith Harris](#)
- [Crimson Kennels](#)
- [Digital Syndicate - Keith Harris](#)
- [Do it for Johnny](#)
- [Ellie Scully](#)
- [Firecraker Family - Kim Moore](#)
- [Lumber One](#)
- [Pointy Pointy](#)
- [Rock Candy Jewelry Design](#)
- [Shipper Law - Palau Attorney](#)
- [Squadron Photography](#)
- [Steve Richerson \(Trash\)](#)
- [Thrasher Photography](#)
- [Wheelhouse Entertainment](#)

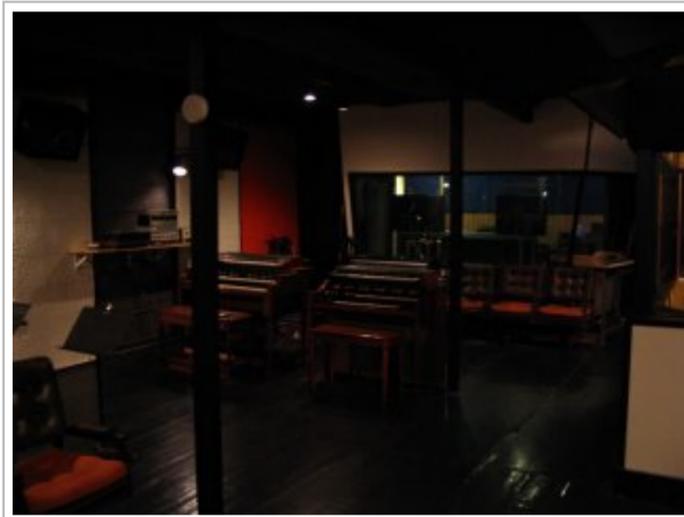


#### Posts of Interest

- [1 Year Anniversary Post](#)
- [Chinese Democracy](#)



The First [home](#) of the Swampers aka the [Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section](#), [David Hood](#), [Jimmy Johnson](#), Donny Short, [Roger Hawkins](#) and [Barry Beckett](#).



Meanwhile in North Alabama, [Lynyrd Skynyrd](#) came to town To record with [Jimmy Johnson](#) at Muscle Shoals Sound

- [Most Educated Cities in the US](#)
- [Palau Trip](#)
- [Turning "Bubbas" Into Democratic Voters](#)

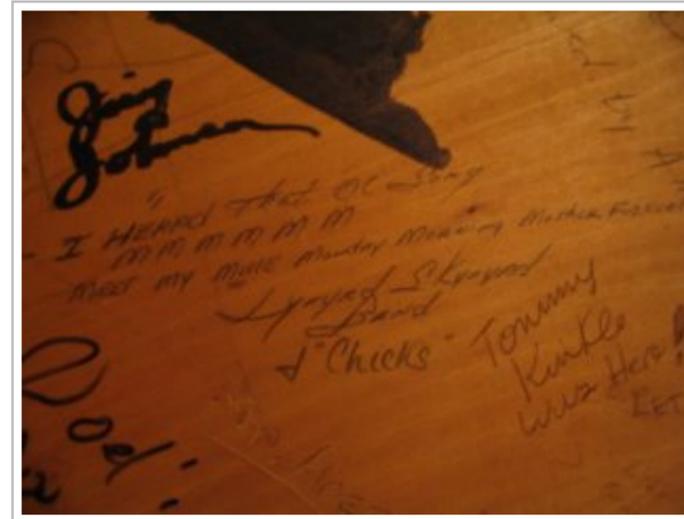


### Labels

- [18 Wheels of Love](#)
- [40 Watt](#)
- [400 Unit](#)
- [72](#)
- [Abu Gonzo](#)
- [accountability](#)
- [ACLU](#)
- [Adam's House Cat](#)
- [Aftermath USA](#)
- [Alabama](#)
- [Alabama Chanin](#)
- [Alabama Politics](#)
- [Alabama Theatre](#)
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- [Amelia's Mechanics](#)
- [American Idiots](#)
- [Anders Parker](#)
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- [Athens](#)



Click on this pick to see what Skynyrd had written on a door.

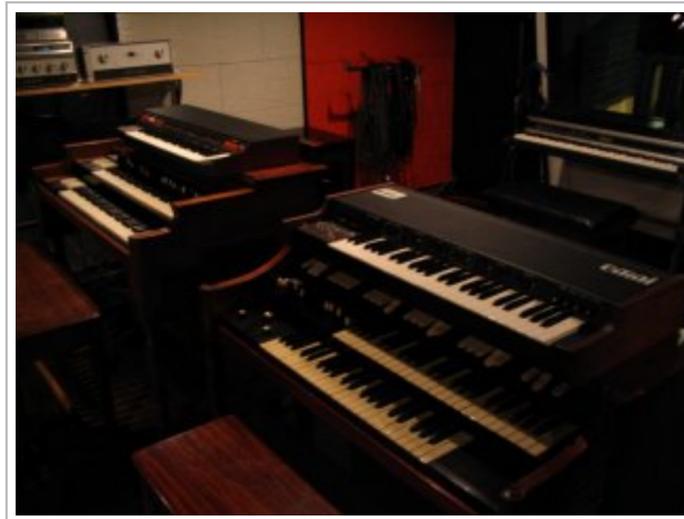


They have an entire wall in the studio that's been covered with plexiglass. This one tile has the names Annette Snell and Jerry Powell. Noel told the story that Annette had died in a plane crash a few days after she signed the wall. Jimmy Johnson's brother was on that plane and perished too.

The other name is Jerry Powell. Noel said he was connected with Skynyrd. Notice the date, Oct. 19, 1977. This was the day before that fateful plane crash in the Louisiana swamps that killed Ronnie and the others. I haven't been able to find anything that connects Jerry with Skynyrd other than having the last name as Billy. Still... erie.

[Annette Snell](#): ...Annette cut the brilliant "Its All Over Now"/"Promises Should Never Be Broken" at Muscle Sholas before her tragic death in an air crash on her way back to Alabama....

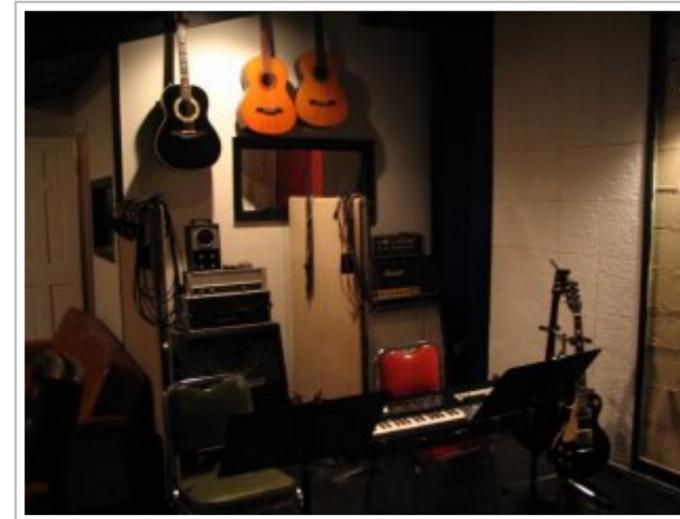
- [Atrios](#)
- [Attorneygate](#)
- [Audra Brown](#)
- [austerity](#)
- [Ava Lowery](#)
- [Ayn Rand](#)
- [Bad Boys Bad Boys](#)
- [Baucus](#)
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- [bidness](#)
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- [bigots](#)
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- [Billy Reid](#)
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- [Birmingham](#)
- [Birthday](#)
- [bling](#)
- [blogging](#)
- [Bloodkin](#)
- [Bob Masse](#)
- [Booker T](#)
- [Box of Spiders](#)
- [Boycott Arizona](#)
- [Boys from Alabama](#)
- [BP](#)
- [Brent Best](#)
- [Brighter than Creation's Dark](#)
- [Broken Social Scene](#)
- [Browan Loller](#)
- [BT WIR](#)
- [Buttholeville](#)
- [California](#)
- [Camp Amped](#)



Blackfoot



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- [Cee Lo](#)
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- [Christopher Moore](#)
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- [Daddy's Cup](#)
- [DADT](#)
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- [Daily Kos](#)
- [Daily Show](#)
- [Dallas Hudgens](#)



Bob Se"ager. Who ever wrote it misspelled his name.



- [Danny and the Champions](#)
- [Darwin Award](#)
- [Dashboard Savivors](#)
- [David Barbe](#)
- [David Hood](#)
- [David Lowery](#)
- [David Shipper](#)
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- [DBT WIR](#)
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- [environment](#)
- [evolution](#)
- [F\\*ck You](#)
- [Fainting Goats](#)

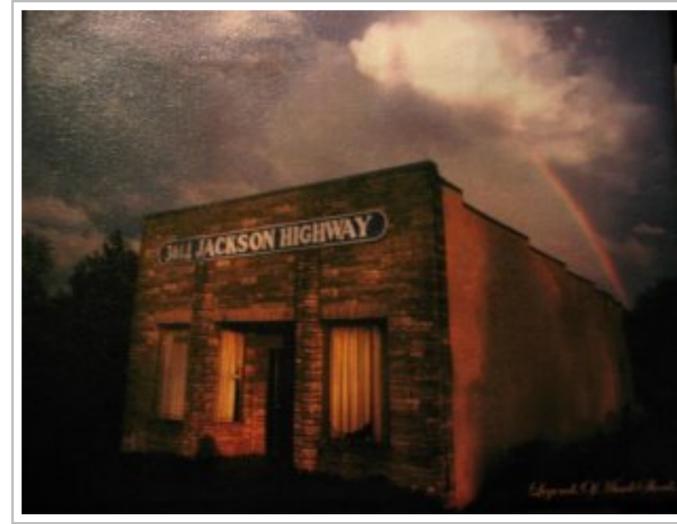


The [Rolling Stones](#) 'Wild Horses' was written in this bathroom.



"Another attraction was that the studio's small-town location was far away from big-city distractions and prying eyes. "The town never impinged upon anyone," says Wexler, recalling a day when the Rolling Stones ordered breakfast at the local Howard Johnson's. "One little waitress said, 'Are you a group?' One of the members said, 'Yeah, we're a group. We're Martha and the Vandellas.'"

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- [FAME](#)
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- [FAUX News](#)
- [FDR](#)
- [Feist](#)
- [Feral Fire](#)
- [Fiddleworms](#)
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- [Go-Go Boots](#)
- [Goddamn Bush](#)
- [Goddamn Lonely Love](#)
- [Golden Gate Bridge](#)
- [Gore](#)



Posted by [AAW](#) at [12/17/2005](#)

[this is the best](#) [G+](#)

Labels: [Alabama](#), [David Hood](#), [Drive-by Truckers](#), [FAME](#), [Lyrics Tour](#), [Muscle Shoals Sound](#), [Swampers](#)

### 5 comments:

[Angie](#) said...

Hey sugar--  
I've been away from the group for a while (missed many, didn't miss a few). I am thoroughly enjoying your tour. I appreciate you showing what our home really is. Working in Florence....man, driving across that River every damned day, listening to Muscle Shoals music or DBT, blue skies, and hearing "Thank God for the TVA" ..... I LOVE ALABAMA! And I love that damned band! Thanks for showing others how rich and layered home is. I'm just sorry we couldn't feed you home cookin or Dale's. Let us know the next time you're in town. The choice will be yours! Any way you might be makin' the Athens shows? Thankee--  
Angie From Moulton

[5:43 PM](#)

[JPW](#) said...

Angie,

I'm glad you're enjoying the tour and it is good to have you back over on the list. I'm one of those expatriate Alabamians who struggles with the "duality" Love it and I hate it.

Next time I'm home I'll take you up on some home cookin'. Wish I could make the Athens shows but it is just too far to fly and I ain't got enough dough. Hopefully, they'll be in Cali soon.

J.

- [Grammy](#)
- [Gravity's Gone](#)
- [Grayson](#)
- [Great American Music Hall](#)
- [Great to be Alive](#)
- [Gulf Coast](#)
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- [Hell No I Ain't Happy](#)
- [Hemingway](#)
- [Here Come da Judge](#)
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- [James McMurtry](#)
- [Japan](#)

# Frozen in time

By Bernie Delinski     Mar 19, 2006

Vehicle after vehicle buzzed along Jackson Highway, steered by motorists who didn't even notice the unassuming building.

Inside, a pair of speakers played the Rolling Stones' 1971 song, "Wild Horses," a classic that was born inside the building -- the original Muscle Shoals Sound studio.

Raising his voice above the music -- and somewhat in frustration -- Noel Webster says the building deserves more recognition for its place in musical heritage.

"There's so much history here," said Webster, who purchased the building in 1999. "That's what I'm screaming, and everybody just passes it by. They don't notice."

That soon may change. The building has been approved by state officials for a spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

The next step is to take the matter to the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service for approval. Webster said a nomination typically is approved without a problem once it reaches that point. He looks for the approval any day now.

In addition to the recognition, a place on the registry assures preservation of the building.

As Webster discussed plans for the studio, the music switched to Bob Seger's 1976 song, "Night Moves," another of the multitude of hits created at the 3614 Jackson Highway studio.

Local musicians known as the Muscle Shoals Swampers spent countless recording hours alongside famous singers and bands, helping churn out hit after hit.

"It's staggering the amount of songs and the percentage of hits," Webster said, thumbing through the studio's massive discography list. "It seems like everybody who walked in here left with a hit."

Webster has major plans for the building, assuming the federal park approval is granted.

A building on the property sits behind the studio. Webster envisions a bar called "Backstage," with a \$50,000 sound and video system.

"People can come and listen to local talent perform," he said.

It wouldn't be a standard bar. It would only open for events. During the day, it would be more of a museum to complement the original Muscle Shoals Sound, Webster said.

He also is considering an outdoor stage for special events.

Walking back inside the studio, Webster was met with the 1973 Paul Simon tune, "Loves Me Like a Rock," another product of 3614 Jackson Highway.

Webster frequently mentions the building by its address because it has a place in music lore.

The address is on a sign that lines the front of the studio. It was the focal point of the cover of Cher's 1969 album -- the first recorded at the studio. In fact, the album was titled "3614 Jackson Highway."

Since that time, photos of the building have been featured on and inside several albums, and is recognized by music buffs worldwide.

A sense of history is thick within the old studio. Musicians often told about literally feeling the beat from the floor's thick oak beams throughout the studio while a song was being recorded.

"That's something that other studios can't duplicate," Webster said.

The kick drum used by the band Alabama is at one section of the studio, Webster said, as the stereo switched to The Rolling Stones' 1971 song, "Brown Sugar," an early product of the studio.

A Hammond piano at the studio was given by musician Buddy Whitlock. Webster pointed to a tape echo provided by the group, Rush.

As the stereo began playing the studio's 1971 product, the Staple Sisters' "Respect Yourself,"

Webster discussed his vision for the building. It could be open for tourists during the day and recording sessions at night.

He showed photos of old recording sessions featuring Lynyrd Skynyrd. Webster spoke of the Staple Sisters' 1972 hit, "I'll Take You There," which not only was recorded at 3614 Jackson Highway, it also was written about the studio.

Webster said the studio looks basically the same as ever, which he believes is important.

"Maybe it can be the inspiration for the next generation of Muscle Shoals hits," he said. "No matter what, we have to maintain the integrity of this building, its feel, its history, its people."

And, as though on cue, the stereo switched to the studio's 1974 hit, Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years."

Bernie Delinski can be reached at 740-5739 or [bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com](mailto:bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com).

# A Place in Time

Mar 26, 2006

Thumbs up to Noel Webster, owner of 3614 Jackson Highway Studio, for his efforts to have the storied recording studio placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The original site of Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, the world-famous Sheffield address had fallen into serious disrepair until Webster bought it and restored it in 1999. An incredible array of hit singles were recorded at MSS. Our musical heritage must be preserved, and this is a good step toward doing that.

TimesDaily

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

**National Register of Historic Places**



14



## National Register of Historic Places

### Example: Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, Sheffield, Alabama

- n Significant nationally for its role in popular music industry from 1969-1978
- n House band, the Swampers, renowned for versatility, recorded across the spectrum from rock to funk to reggae to country
- n Demonstrates through scholarly and popular investigation the impact of this studio and the house musicians and engineers on the course of popular music.
- n Listed in 2006



## National Register of Historic Places

### Criteria Consideration G and historic districts

- n Properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years can be eligible for listing if they are an “integral part” of a historic district that qualifies for listing
  - These properties do not have to be individually eligible or of individual exceptional importance
- n Requires explicit justification to show that they qualify as “integral parts”
  - Demonstrated by documenting that the properties date from within the defined period of significance and are associated with one or more of the applicable areas of significance

# Shoals Sound

By Russ Corey

Jul 2, 2006

Roger Hawkins said he never realized at the time the significance of what went on inside the building at 3614 Jackson Highway.

"I get a strong feeling that something really unique happened there," said Hawkins, who played drums with "The Swampers," the original Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section.

From 1969 through 1978, Hawkins, bassist David Hood, guitarist Jimmy Johnson and pianist Barry Beckett owned Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

Some of the biggest hits recorded in the Shoals were born in the nondescript stone building on Jackson Highway.

The once condemned building is now on the National Record of Historic Places.

"I look back at it now and can't believe the body of work we did there," Hawkins said. "To be with Jimmy Johnson, David Hood, Berry Beckett, creating music every day, seeing eye to eye. It was a very unique situation and a very unique place."

Gene Ford, an archeological historian with the University of Alabama's Office of Archeological Research, said the National Park Service unanimously approved the studio's selection for the register in early June.

Ford did exhaustive research on the history of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios and presented his findings to the Alabama Historical Commission. The commission had to approve the nomination for the National Register of Historic Places. Ford said there was a little apprehension in the selection process because a building normally must be considered as historically significant for at least 50 years. But there are exceptions, which Ford cited in his research.

Much of what he stated revolved around the amount of hit recordings that were made at the studio by artists including Wilson Pickett, Bob Seger, The Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Albert King, The Staple Singers, Boz Scaggs, Rod Stewart, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Tony Joe White, Blackfoot, Willie Nelson, Jimmy Cliff and others.

"I discussed how the musicians themselves felt about the Muscle Shoals sound," Ford said.

He quoted noted author Peter Guarlnik, who said Muscle Shoals Sound was part of the "holy trinity of soul and funk with Motown and Stax."

Ford said the studio's owner, Noel Webster, can place a historic marker at the studio if he wishes. "At this point for Noel, it's status more than anything else," Ford said.

Webster purchased 3614 Jackson Highway in 1999 and began remodeling the facility. He said he wanted to bring the studio back to the condition it was in during its heyday.

He purchased recording equipment, pianos, soundboards, monitors and placed them in the same locations they were when the studio was operational.

Webster said he purchased the same equipment, sometimes down to the same model numbers. "It means this is authentic in every way, it's here and available to the whole world," Webster said of the designation.

"This has affected so many people's lives for so long," he added.

Webster said he will continue improving the building so it can operate as a museum.

He's rebuilt the front office and built two galleries inside the studio that house photos from recording sessions. There is also the bathroom door and pieces of the bathroom wall that was signed by artists such as Wilson Pickett, who simply wrote, "Pickett."

Webster said the studio will be open Tuesday through Saturday from noon until 6 p.m.

"We're putting stuff out on the Internet right now," he said.

Webster said he has been frustrated to hear that many people have been told that the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studios no longer exists.

He said some artists have been told that the building had been leveled.

In 1979, the Swampers moved the studio to an old U.S. Naval Reserve building near Riverfront Park in Sheffield, where it remained open for another four years.

But Webster points out that the hit recordings Muscle Shoals Sound Studios is known for were recorded primarily at the Jackson Highway site.

Hawkins said most people in the Shoals during that time were unaware what was going on around them.

"We didn't advertise," he said. "All our contacts were out of town."

Ford said he is not going to write a nomination paper seeking National Historic Landmark designation for the studio.

He said National Historic Landmarks represent the top 3 percent of sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ford said he was encouraged to seek national landmark designation by the reviewers with the National Park Service.

Written on the wall in a corner of the studio is "David Hood played bass here from 1969-1978." Hood, the rhythm section's bassist, said he played music in the building much longer than that. "I recorded there when it was Fred Bevis' studio," Hood said.

Hood said he is happy to see the studio get national recognition.

"The place has a lot of good memories," Hood said.

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## Still Like That Old Time Rock and Roll

### *An Almost-Famous Alabama Music Studio Is Open for Tours.*

Story by Nancy Jackson / Sept. 15, 2006

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The Rolling Stones recorded there. So did Lynyrd Skynyrd, Paul Simon, Willie Nelson, Cher, and other musicians. In fact, much of the music of a generation was created in the tiny town of Sheffield, Ala., at a recording studio called Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. Once condemned, the small stone building that was the birthplace of hits like Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock 'n' Roll" has been painstakingly restored, listed on the National Register, and in March of this year opened its doors to the public. Although the closest interstate highway is almost 60 miles away, more than 2,000 visitors have already found their way to this historic gallery of American pop culture.

"It's the music that brings them here," says Noel Webster, the studio's current owner. "The songs made here have been the themes to people's lives. They all know the music, but they don't know the place where it all happened, so I want to share it with the world."



The out-of-the-way music studio (©Noel Webster)



Lynyrd Skynyrd's first album

A former casket warehouse built in 1945, the studio was opened in 1969 by four local musicians who became its famous house band: the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, also known as the Swampers (immortalized in Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama"). Until 1978, the Swampers hosted scores of famous musicians and recorded dozens of hit albums in the Jackson Highway studio. In fact, of the 400 albums recorded there, more than 50 went gold or platinum during the 1970s.

"This place was different because the Swampers owned the studio," says Gene Ford, an archaeological historian with the state's Office of Archaeological Research, who researched the building for the National Register listing. "It wasn't owned by big record moguls, so they had license to do what they wanted to do. During the 1970s, a lot of musicians were fighting death by disco, and the industry took a lot of [decisions] out of the hands of the musicians. At Muscle Shoals, musicians were free to create, and the studio helped launch and maintain a lot of careers."

After the studio moved to another location in 1978, the building was home to an appliance dealer and a record store before it was abandoned, and it was eventually slated to be torn down by the city in 1999. That year, Webster, a Chicago native and musician, was working in the area and looking for a place to record his own music. One night, friends showed him the abandoned studio by flashlight, and he purchased it immediately.

"I didn't know what I was getting," Webster says. "I just knew it was a studio, and I needed a place to record." But as soon as he began making repairs to the building, visitors like a local musician who served as a session guitarist at the studio during its heyday started dropping by to tell Webster what he'd bought.

"When I realized all that happened here, I knew it needed to be preserved," Webster says. As he cleaned up the building, repairing water damage and hauling out more than nine tons of trash, Webster began discovering relics of the past: the bathroom door and portions of the bathroom wall signed by artists Wilson Pickett, Wayne Perkins, and Cat Stevens; the still-intact vocal booths where performers like Luther Ingram and members of Blackfoot left signatures or notes to the Swampers. Webster also consulted archival photographs and the Swampers to make the studio look exactly as it did in 1969, when Mick Jagger penned "Wild Horses" in the bathroom. He acquired the original vinyl sofa and chairs, which were stored nearby, and ordered exact replicas of the vintage recording equipment used there during the 1970s, down to the same model numbers.



Inside the studio (© Noel Webster)

The result is a unique living-history museum: While visitors can peruse photos of legendary recording sessions, search for famous names on the walls of signatures, and watch footage of the Rolling Stones at work in the studio, musicians can use the classic equipment to record a new album with the famous Muscle Shoals sound. "The sounds that came out of this room cannot be duplicated," Webster says. "I've recorded in lots of studios, and the sound in this room just works. The building shakes when you play in it."



The secret of "that Muscle Shoals sound" (© Noel Webster)

Word has slowly traveled through the music industry that the old studio is open for business, and while mostly local musicians or those from nearby Nashville have recorded there recently, Webster has had calls from producers across the country and the world who want to find out if the studio is really back. "We had people wanting to come record [when we had] holes in the floor and no recording equipment," he says. "They want to come here to get this tone and to work in this room."

While the studio's name is well-known in the music world, it's been virtually unknown by the general public, even the locals who lived nearby while all its history was being made. "I never really thought about what was going on there at the time," says Roger Hawkins, former studio owner and drummer for the Swampers, along with bassist David Hood, guitarist Jimmy Johnson, and keyboardist Barry Beckett. (The partners sold the studio in 1985;

it was on the market again in 2003.) "We just went to the studio to go to work every day and most people didn't know what we were doing. We weren't trying to hide anything; we just didn't publicize. But it's flattering that other people think it's an important place."

For some, the studio is more than just an important place. During a recent week in August, more than 100 visitors showed up at the studio's doors, paying \$10 for a peek inside. One family from St. Louis arrived in the parking lot at 4 a.m. to sleep in their car until daylight, when they wanted to take photos in front of the building like the one that appeared on the cover of Cher's 1969 album, 3614 Jackson Highway, the building's address.

"People are taking pilgrimages to see this place," Webster says. "They show up with album covers hanging out their rental-car windows, and when they come in, they're just blown away by all that happened here."

# Bathroom walls have story to tell

Feb 26, 2007

I have heard about that-bathroom.- Specifically, I'd heard about the bathroom walls and door. Whenever I'd pass along that famous "3614 Jackson Highway" address, I'd want to stop by and check it out.

That's because the bathroom of the building at the address, the old Muscle Shoals Sound Studios, has an interesting history.

Noel Webster, who owns the building and is renovating it into a museum and working studio, said it all started with Johnny Wyker, member of a band called "American Eagles."

"The story about it is in (music producer) Jerry Wexler's book," Webster says. Johnny Wyker took out his pocketknife and carved out "American Eagles" into the wall." Webster said Wexler was, well, let's just say less than pleased about that. But it turned out to be the start of a tradition.

From then on, numerous musicians would write their names, usually in pen or marker, on the walls and door of the bathroom.

Since then, those plywood-looking panels have been removed, but not all have been destroyed.

Today, Webster is trying to preserve sections of that old wall. He already has several framed, and intends to do so for others that he has at the studio.

Webster showed me one section of the wall.

Within a matter of seconds, he was able to point out autographs by Donnie Fritts, Cat Stephens, David Hood, Spooner Oldham, former "Rolling Stones" guitarist Wayne Perkins and members of Lynyrd Skynyrd and-Blackfoot.

"Every time I look at it, I see something a little bit different," Webster said. "I can't believe it all survived."

One of his favorite sections is called "Name the Nukes." Webster is unsure how it originated, but wonders if it somehow is related to the group, "Nuke the Whales."

Anyway, the section asks you to, as the section implies, name the nukes. That's followed by an ongoing list: Nuke and Laura, Nuke Skywalker, Nuke Box, Nukes of Hazard -- you get the idea.

Webster said that's an example of the quirky things that provided fun breaks during recording sessions in the studio during the 1970s.

"That's some of the silliness that was perpetuated here," Webster said.

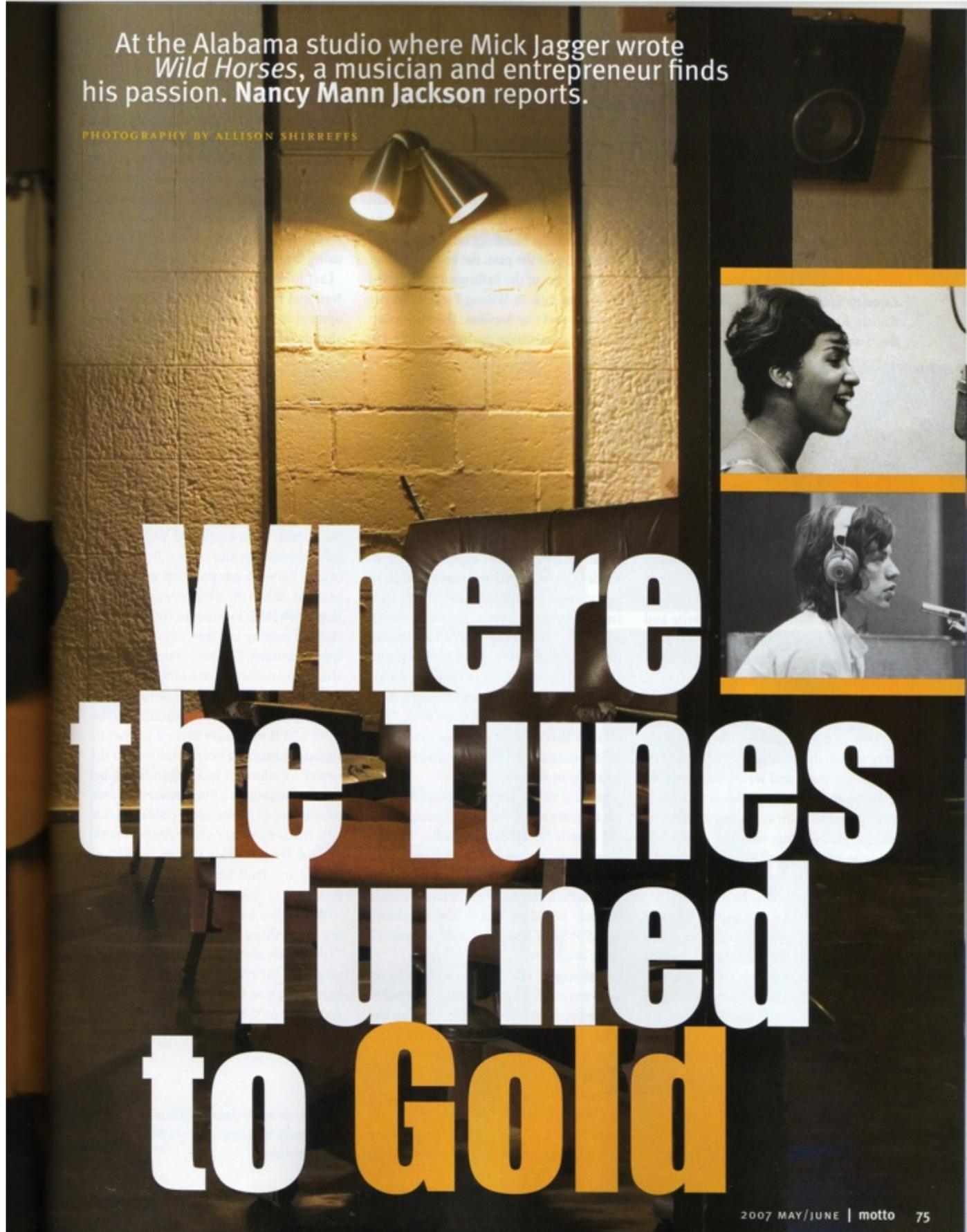
And how's this for a little piece of history on the bathroom: Rolling Stones lead singer Mick Jagger once locked himself in there for two hours and wrote the 1971 hit song, "Wild Horses," in there.

I enjoyed the visit to the studio, and I'll just bet I stop by some time again real soon. Heck, after seeing the writing on the wall, wild horses couldn't drag me away.

Staff Writer Bernie Delinski travels aimlessly throughout northwest Alabama and southern Tennessee in search of ideas for "Where's Bernie?," which appears Mondays and Fridays in the TimesDaily. He can be reached at 740-5739 or [bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com](mailto:bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com).

At the Alabama studio where Mick Jagger wrote *Wild Horses*, a musician and entrepreneur finds his passion. Nancy Mann Jackson reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLISON SHIRREFFS



# Where the Tunes Turned to Gold



What's your motto Noel Webster?

“Obstacles appear when you take your mind off your goal.”

**A**retha Franklin recorded there. So did Bob Dylan, Cher, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, Paul Simon and others. In fact, much of the seminal music of a generation was created at the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, a tiny recording studio in Sheffield, Ala. The studio was opened in 1969 by four local musicians who became its famous house band, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, also known as the Swampers (immortalized in Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama*). Until 1978, the Swampers hosted numerous famous musicians and recorded hundreds of hit albums in the small studio on Jackson Highway. In fact, of the 400 albums recorded there during the 1970s, more than 50 went gold and platinum.

However, when Noel Webster bought the place in 1999, he didn't know any of that. The Chicago-born songwriter and musician spent years on the road, working 35 world tours for bands like Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones. By the late 1990s, Webster just wanted a place to write and record his own music. While playing nightly gigs in Alabama, he began looking for that place of his own. One night, friends showed him the abandoned Jackson Highway studio by flashlight — and he bought it immediately. His plans were to refurbish the building, which had been vacant for years and was condemned by the city, and create a personal recording studio. But as soon as Webster began repairing the building, visitors — especially aging local musicians who played at the studio during its heyday — began dropping in to tell him what he'd bought.

“When I realized all the history that had happened here, I decided this place had to be preserved,” Webster says. “I wanted to share it with the world. The music that was made here has been the music of generations, the theme of people's lives. Everybody knows the records, but they don't know the place where it happened.”

### Changing Direction

By accepting the challenge to reopen the studio and share its story with the world, Webster became more than a musician.

By necessity, he has added remodeler, museum curator, tour guide and storyteller to his list of occupations.

Refurbishing the studio — repairing water damage, installing new wiring and hauling out more than nine tons of trash — took Webster almost six years. As he cleaned up the building, he began discovering relics of the past: the bathroom door and portions of the bathroom wall signed by artists such as Wilson Pickett, Wayne Perkins and Cat Stevens; the still-intact vocal booths where performers like Luther Ingram and members of Blackfoot left signatures or notes to the Swampers. Webster also consulted archival photographs and the Swampers to make the studio look exactly as it did in 1969, when Mick Jagger penned *Wild Horses* in the bathroom. He even acquired the original vinyl sofa and chairs, which were stored nearby.

Rather than installing all the latest recording equipment as he'd originally intended, Webster ordered exact replicas of the vintage equipment used there during the 1970s, down to the same model numbers. “The way they construct studios now is very different, but we did a sound test and recorded some stuff on different formats, and realized we didn't need to change anything,” Webster says. “The sounds that came out of this room can't be duplicated. The building shakes when you play in it.”

As word slowly spread through the music industry about the rehabilitation of the old Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, Webster began fielding requests from other musicians who wanted to record there and accomplish the famous “Muscle Shoals Sound” heard on tracks like Franklin's *R-E-S-P-E-C-T* and The Staple Singers' *I'll Take You There*.

“Although I rebuilt it as a place to record my stuff, so many artists wanted to come here that I decided to open it up and raise some capital that way, putting my own [music] career on the back burner,” Webster says.

Because the original equipment is missing at other legendary studios like Memphis' Sun Studio, Muscle Shoals “is the last place in the world where you can

go in the same hit-making factory and not only get a cool experience by being there, but you can also get the exact same sound,” Webster says. While the studio has mostly been used by local musicians and those from nearby Nashville, producers for well-known bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd and U2 have expressed interest in using it for upcoming projects.

Last June, the studio was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and opened to the public for tours, and has already welcomed more than 2,000 visitors. A true living history museum, the studio allows guests to experience the history, and musicians to create new music in the same room.

### Finding a Passion

Although a number of musicians who worked at the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio during its heyday, including the Swampers, have supported Webster's efforts to renovate and reopen the original studio, his work has not been without opposition. When the Swampers moved to a larger, riverside location in 1978, the hits stopped coming and they only produced a few memorable albums before selling the studio to another record label. For more than two decades, those inquiring about the original Muscle Shoals Sound Studio were told it no longer existed or that its signature hits had been produced in the newer location. In fact, when that label sold its building to a film production company in 2005, *Rolling Stone* published that “the Alabama venue where Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Wilson Pickett, the Rolling Stones and Paul Simon all made classic records, has closed its doors forever.”

“When [the Swampers] left this building, everything stopped,” Webster says. “They made about four records in the location on the river. But for years, people have been told that this [original] studio was gone or that the hits were made in another location. Countless visitors have

A bathroom wall is signed by Wilson Pickett and Cat Stevens. Mick Jagger penned *Wild Horses* in this bathroom.

**“The music that was made here has been the music of generations, the theme of people’s lives. Everybody knows the records, but they don’t know the place where it happened.”**



told us they stopped at [another local studio] and were told that this building didn't exist. When the concierge at a local hotel told Lynyrd Skynyrd's Ricky Medlock that the original Muscle Shoals studio was still here and was really open, Ricky started crying. He couldn't believe it was real. It's been an ongoing struggle to get the word out that we're still here, and we're open."

Webster says earning a listing on the National Historic Register was a crucial accomplishment for the studio. "It brought

validity to everything we've done here," he says. "Some people don't want the truth to be told, but what the Swampers did here is phenomenal. It's too important to back down."

In fact, the opposition from others in the local music industry seems to have bolstered Webster's resolve to share the story of the original studio. And as the word gets out, he's having plenty of opportunities to do that. Recently, a family from St. Louis showed up at 4 a.m. to sleep in the parking lot until daylight, when they want-

Noah Webster spent six years refurbishing the famed studio.

ed to take photos in front of the building like the one on the cover of Cher's 1969 album, *3614 Jackson Highway*, named for the address of the studio.

"People are taking pilgrimages to see this place," Webster says. "They show up with album covers hanging out their rental car windows, and when they come in, they're just blown away by all that happened here." 

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance writer living in Alabama. She writes frequently about business, travel and Americana.

**“People are taking pilgrimages to see this place,” Webster says. “They show up with album covers hanging out their rental car windows...”**

# Awesome vibe

By Trevor Stokes     Jun 10, 2007

Muscle Shoals Sound Studio: Renowned recording studio, national historical site and, on Saturday, a wedding chapel.

The Sheffield studio hosted a wedding Saturday afternoon for groom Nate Elrod, whose family comes from Ohio, and bride Sherry Lee, whose family is from Hamilton. Its the studios fourth wedding, according to studio owner Noel Webster.

A bit of history seems necessary. On their way to Lees sisters wedding in Hamilton, the couple visited Muscle Shoals Sound Studio because of their interest in its musical heritage. I didn't know if it was still in existence, Elrod said. In fact, Webster was out mowing the lawn and gave them a tour of the studio that in its heyday, from 1969 to 1978, recorded such artists as Aretha Franklin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Rod Stewart and the Rolling Stones, one of the wedding couples favorite bands.

When we walked in, we couldn't quit smiling; it was an awesome vibe, said the bride, who added that the Rolling Stones Wild Horses was their song. Wild Horses was one of three songs the Rolling Stones recorded in secret at the studio for their album Sticky Fingers in 1969.

Flash forward 38 years to Saturday. After being together eight years and after six months of planning, in the last moments before the wedding, the nervous bride downstairs fixed her dress, a strapless white with black trim below the knee, as the groom upstairs waited in his gray pin-striped suit with open-collar shirt. It was time to get married.

Webster cued Wild Horses on the CD player as the bride walked upstairs into the main studio where her groom, guests and preacher awaited.

Bishop E.H. Peterson, of the Church of God of Prophecy in Vina, officiated.

Sound equipment surrounded the entire bridal party: a B3 organ donated by guitar aficionado Eric Clapton, a Marshal half-stack amplifier donated by rock guitarist Ted Nugent and a Gretsch Drum kit donated by Mark Herndon from the band Alabama.

About 30 people lined the studio wall and sat in seats during the 20-minute ceremony as Peterson prayed, read from Genesis and three times asked if there was any opposition to the marriage.

Mid-ceremony, Lee couldn't contain herself.

Im ready, lets go, she said.

Is it all right if I linger a little longer? Peterson responded.

You're fine, Lee said.

The preacher continued. Some say when he made woman he done a better job, he said, A wife is a good thing.

After the groom said I will to his vows, Lee leaned into her soon-to-be husband and said, Oh God.

You want me to rest a while? Peterson responded.

After the couple completed their vows and kissed, Wild Horses played lightly as the couple exchanged rings and the preacher said, Lord, we join these two together in holy matrimony: husband and wife.

He brought the church here, said studio owner Webster afterward of Peterson.

Once it was over, the new Mrs. Elrod high-fived the maid of honor, Lindsay Cordin, and several members of her party.

Cindy Lee, stepmother of the bride, said she was apprehensive at first, not just because of the novelty of the wedding spot, but its tight six-month schedule. We expected more chaos, she said, I thought it was charming.

The couple have planned a wedding reception in Ohio next weekend, which will include a pig roast.

As for Muscle Shoals Sound Studio? When were not giving tours, were recording; now were having weddings, Webster said. I don't know if well get in the wedding business.

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## Historic Muscle Shoals Studio Re-Opens

In 2005, Muscle Shoals Studio ([www.muscleshoalssound.org](http://www.muscleshoalssound.org)) closed its doors due to a lack of interest in financing the studio and more interest in Muscle

COMPILED BY SARAH BENZULY • AUG 1, 2007

In 2005, Muscle Shoals Studio ([www.muscleshoalssound.org](http://www.muscleshoalssound.org)) closed its doors due to a lack of interest in financing the studio and more interest in Muscle Shoals Sound Publishing. Now, studio owner/musician Noel Webster has reopened the facility. "When I realized all the history that had happened there," he said, "I decided this place had to be preserved. I wanted to share it with the world. The music that was made here has been the music of generations, the theme of people's lives. Everybody knows the records, but they don't know the place where it happened."

Webster has refurbished the studio (repairing water damage, installing new wiring, etc.), and rather than install up-to-date recording equipment, he ordered exact replicas of the vintage gear used during the 1970s — down to the same model numbers. "The way they construct studios now is very different," he added. "But we did a sound test and recorded some stuff on different formats, and realized we didn't need to change anything. The sounds that came out of this room can't be duplicated. The building shakes when you play in it."

"Although I rebuilt it as a place to record my stuff, so many artists wanted to come here that I decided to open it and raise some capital that way, putting my own [music] career on the back-burner."

This past June, the studio was added to the National Register of Historic Places and is open to the public for tours.

## Station features local musicians

By Russ Corey, Nov 13, 2007

What began as a special event to help launch WLAY's all-Shoals music format into FM radio is becoming a weekly live music program.

WLAY and Urban Radio Group are joining with Muscle Shoals Sound Studios to provide a venue for local bands and artists to perform and talk about their music, studio owner Noel Webster said. Beginning Wednesday, WLAY FM 92.3 will present "The Sessions at Muscle Shoals Sound," an hour-long program featuring local artists such as Lauderdale, Malcolm Singleton, Jordan Denton, Byron Green, Firewood, Dillon Hodges, Sons of Roswell and Jason Isbell.

If nothing else, Webster said, it will give a whole new crop of musicians the opportunity to experience the studio that produced many of the hits that helped the area become known as the "Hit Recording Capitol of the World."

"It's great for the museum and for the community," Webster said. Muscle Shoals Sound Studios is also a working studio and museum. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. "It will help let people know this little gem is still open."

The format will be simple. Solo artists or bands will come to the studio and perform several acoustic versions of their songs and share their thoughts with 105.5 FM disc jockey T.C. Kinkaide. The only prerequisite is that the artist writes and performs original material of any genre.

"Basically, it's a venue for local talent," Webster said.

Brian Rickman, regional director of programming for URBan Radio Broadcasting, said artists are already booked through February.

"It's wonderful," Webster said. "We're starting with Lauderdale this Wednesday."

The group's bassist, Corey Hannah, is looking forward to performing acoustic versions of the band's songs.

"It will be different and fun to strip it all down to the bare essentials," Hannah said.

He said the Shoals music format will expose people to the music of new local groups, especially people who might not have attended shows at local clubs.

"I've had people tell me already they've heard Lauderdale on the air and really like the stuff,"

Hannah said. "It's a great opportunity for the local bands to get the word out."

Rickman said the shows will be recorded at the studio and archived, possibly for release later as podcasts.

"In the meantime, we're putting highlights on our MySpace page," Rickman said.

He said he hopes the discussions become a roundtable for artists to talk about how to improve the local music scene.

Rickman said feedback on the Shoals music format has been "phenomenal" since the move to FM.

"This has never been done before," Rickman said. "This is brand new, which is why the radio trades and people in the industry are raising their eyebrows. I think it's a format that can work."

While the live shows will concentrate primarily on local artists, Webster said they will branch out to include artists from the Huntsville and Decatur areas.

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While the live shows will concentrate primarily on local artists, Webster said they will branch out to include artists from the Huntsville and Decatur areas.

"As time progresses, I think this will take on a life of its own," Webster said.

Russ Corey can be reached at 740-5738 or russ.corey@timesdaily.com.

# City to store vintage recording equipment

By Russ Corey, Mar 23, 2008

Mayor Billy Don Anderson said he will allow the owner of a local recording studio to store vintage recording equipment in a city building until the owner can devise a plan on how the equipment should be displayed.

Noel Webster, the owner of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios Historic Museum, has offered to allow the city to use the equipment to open a local museum of sound and film recording.

"This is the largest collection of recording and film equipment in the nation," Webster said at a recent city council meeting.

Webster said he is acquiring the equipment from the New York City-based Museum of Sound Recording.

The problem is, Webster has no place to store it.

Some of the equipment, dating from the 1950s to 1980s, is being stored in buildings Webster owns in Sheffield, but they are not large enough to hold everything.

"I have two truckloads of it here," Webster said. "It's all coming here if I have to store it in Huntsville."

Webster approached the city to see if they have a place to store the equipment until such time it can be placed in a local museum setting.

Anderson said he has offered Webster the use of the Brewster School building in the Village neighborhood. He said the building is secure and there are four large classrooms that can be used to store the equipment.

The mayor said Webster could use the building on a temporary basis.

In the meantime, Anderson has assigned Councilman Gary Scales to act as a liason between the city and Webster.

"He has a great interest in that field," Anderson said. "Gary is the perfect person to assign to Noel as his contact with the city."

In addition, Anderson said he asked Webster to create a plan on what he would like to do with the equipment.

Webster has said he would like to open a small museum behind Muscle Shoals Sound Studios Historic Museum, but the buildings are not nearly large enough to house all the equipment.

Webster also offered to let the city use the equipment to open a recording museum to earn revenue for the city.

"We don't have the funds to put a program together without seeing a plan," Anderson said. "At some point in the future, I want to see a plan submitted to the city on what he expects to do with the equipment."

Anderson also wants to know how it can be beneficial and profitable to the city.

One possibility mentioned during the council meeting and a later interview with the mayor was creating a museum at the historic Village school, which has a small auditorium which could be used for intimate musical performances, Anderson said.

Webster said all the equipment is in working order and could be used for recording seminars or recording projects by artists.

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# One-tank trip: Muscle Shoals, Ala.:

## Road of rock 'n' roll history runs through Northwest Alabama

By Tracey Teo

For the Journal-Constitution

Sunday, February 01, 2009

Nashville has long been known as the country music capital, and Memphis is the undisputed home of the blues and the root of rock 'n' roll. Tiny Muscle Shoals, Ala., once touted as the "hit recording capital of the world," is the birthplace of the famous Muscle Shoals Sound. It has never had the glamour of these more sophisticated Southern music meccas, and it's a world away from the L.A. music scene, but that's partly what attracted such diverse music legends as Aretha Franklin, the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart during Muscle Shoals' heyday in the '60s and '70s.

Muscle Shoals and its surrounding area, including nearby Sheffield, was an oasis from the limelight and gave musicians a place to focus on their work with no distractions. But the main reason artists flocked to this obscure corner of Northwest Alabama was to get that indefinable, funky sound that couldn't be duplicated elsewhere. Many attribute that trademark sound, a confluence of country, rock and soul, to the smokin' hot Muscle Shoals rhythm section known as The Swampers.

Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. In 1969, Cher released an album titled "3614 Jackson Highway," the address of the Muscle Shoals Sound

Studios (technically located in Sheffield) where the record was cut.

Although that was almost 40 years ago, Cher fans still show up to have their photograph made in front of this very unglamorous building.

"It happens all the time," studio owner Noel Webster said. "People make pilgrimages here."

Thanks to Webster, this building that was once vacant is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Fans from around the world arrive clutching albums and CDs by Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Rolling Stones and many other bands that made history here.

# Studio success due to the people, songs

By Russ Corey, Apr 1, 2009

Jimmy Johnson said it became a running joke that the new studio he and his friend Roger Hawkins purchased was incorporated on April Fool's Day.

Now, 40 years later, there is nothing funny about the number of hit records that were recorded at 3614 Jackson Highway by artists such as The Rolling Stones, Paul Simon, Bob Seger, Cher, Traffic, Boz Scaggs, Willie Nelson, The Staple Singers and others.

"We didn't have many people that thought we'd make it work," Johnson said.

One of Johnson's partners in the studio, bassist David Hood, said it was the people who worked inside the concrete block building who made the studio so successful.

Muscle Shoals Sound opened in April 1969 and closed nine years later when the owners moved to an old Naval Reserve station at the end of Alabama Avenue on the banks of the Tennessee River.

The original building eventually fell into disrepair until it was purchased by Huntsville musician Noel Webster in 1999.

On Wednesday, Webster hosted an open house to commemorate the 40th anniversary and let local musicians and others come by and relive some of the studio's glory days.

"Many of the signature hits that the rest of the world associates with the world-famous 'Muscle Shoals sound' - from Paul Simon's 'Loves Me Like a Rock' and the Stones' 'Brown Sugar' to the Staple Singers' 'I'll Take You There' and Bob Seger's 'Old-Time Rock 'n' Roll' - were recorded in that long, unassuming looking little rectangular building across from the cemetery on Jackson Highway," local music historian Terry Pace said.

At the time Johnson and Hawkins bought the building, Johnson was a guitarist and Hawkins played drums.

"Roger and I committed practically our life savings, which wasn't very much," Johnson said.

"We went to Barry and David. We needed a commitment and we made them partners. We gave them a share in the stock and guaranteed them a wage."

At the time, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, also known as the Swampers, had been working for Rick Hall at FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals.

"The original Muscle Shoals Sound occupies a very special place in the history of Muscle Shoals music," Pace said. "When those four musicians - Jimmy Johnson, Barry Beckett, Roger Hawkins and David Hood - left their role as FAME's house band and struck out on their own, it was a bold and risky move that really tested the strength and resilience of the music industry in this area."

Gene Ford, an archeological historian with the University of Alabama's Office of Architectural Research, was responsible for the studio being placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ford also prepared an application for the studio to be designated as a National Historic Landmark, which is the highest designation a property can achieve in the United States. That application has been at the National Park Services regional office in Atlanta for about a year, Ford said.

Thanks to Webster, this building that was once vacant is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Fans from around the world arrive clutching albums and CDs by Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Rolling Stones and many other bands that made history here. Some seem almost reverential as they check out old sound equipment and the instruments that were played on their favorite classic tracks.

Webster bought the studio in 1999 as a venue to record his own music, but with so much interest in the studio's history, he has been thrust into the role of tour guide, telling stories of legendary Muscle Shoals jam sessions.

Even the bathroom is a source of fascination. David Hood, a bassist for the Muscle Shoals rhythm section, left behind his signature, as did many other renowned performers. Legend has it that Mick Jagger penned "Wild Horses" here.

He said Muscle Shoals Sound Studios deserves the recognition because of the diversity of music that was recorded there and the ability of the rhythm section to move effortlessly from one genre of music to another.

"They were not bound by any sort of market forces or impediments," Ford said.

That point was illustrated by Hood, who said on one occasion, R.B. Greaves cut his hit "Take A Letter Maria" during an afternoon recording session. When that session was completed, The Rolling Stones came in to work on tracks that would appear on "Sticky Fingers."

Pace said he was among the many Shoals music fans who grieved as they watched the once great studio fall into disrepair until it was purchased by Webster.

Webster was performing in Sheffield one night in 1999 when two friends who were local police officers took him to see the old building.

"I had a studio in Huntsville," Webster said. "I had to have a place to put my equipment."

Webster purchased the building and began the painstaking task of obtaining some of the actual equipment that had been in the original studio, even down to the furnishings.

There are still recording sessions that take place at Muscle Shoals Sound, which is also a museum.

Johnson said he's grateful to Webster for keeping the studio alive.

"We tried every way in the world to get it, but we weren't able to," Johnson said. "The powers that be wouldn't sell it."

Johnson agreed with Hood that it was the people who made Muscle Shoals Sound special - not only the musicians, engineers and producers, but the songwriters.

"Back in those days we had Ava Aldridge, Lenny LeBlanc, George Jackson," Johnson said. "We had a lot of great writers."

Johnson said there were times when Muscle Shoals Sound Studios were responsible for 10 percent of the songs on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, the music industry standard for singles released in the United States.

Hood said he, Johnson, Hawkins and Beckett were determined to make the studio a success.

"We had a few hit records under our belts," Hood said. "It just seemed like a good idea to all of us. We were very nervous at first. We were very young and didn't know what a risky business that was to get into."

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## 50 STATES:Alabama

By Justin Rocket Silverman

September 22, 2009 | 5:21am

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Drop by the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in Tuscumbia.

*Alamy*

WHENRod Stewart first arrived in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to record what would become his hit single “Sailing” back in the 1970s,the British bad-boy rocker had quite the shock.

“I thought the band was black!” bass player David Hood recalls Stewart crying out. Hood and his band, The Swampers, had already recorded with the likes of Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and The Staple Singers (of “I’ll Take You There” fame).

Immortalized in the famous song, “Sweet Home Alabama” (“Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers . . .”), the band, the pride of this northern city just a few miles from the Tennessee state line, has recorded with more than a dozen superstar acts, from Bob Dylan to Paul Simon to The Rolling Stones.

Every one of these musical greats has passed through the unassuming Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, a physically unexciting affair with just a little more leg room than, say, the more famous Sun Studios in Memphis. (Legend has it that the Stones’ “Wild Horses” was written in the bathroom when Keith Richardsgot trapped in there as the band recorded another song outside.)

Today, the studio — bathroom included — is open for tours, as well as available to musicians looking to record on equipment that might be older than they are.

Noel Webster bought the place in 1999, and recently purchased a working 1961Capitol Records control console that Frank Sinatra sang through.

“People come here for the history, and then they fall in love with the sound of the building,” says Webster.

“It’s very real and doesn’t sound fabricated. We don’t cut, chop and puree audio. We just do live studio recording.”

Webster’s is not the only studio in town; an integral piece of the area’s rich musical heritage is Fame Studios, just three miles away. It claims a list of hits stretching all the way back to 1959. The band Alabama recorded here; today contemporary acts like the Drive-By Truckers keep the consoles humming.

How a place as nondescript as Muscle Shoals became such a musical mecca — the area is home to the growing Alabama Music Hall of Fame — is hotly debated by locals and tourists alike.

Four neighboring towns comprise the region that most people refer to as the Shoals: Florence, Tuscumbia, Sheffield, and Muscle Shoals are all clustered along the banks of the scenic Tennessee River, which used to be impassable here; giant boulders jutted out of the water and spelled doom for passing ships and barges. The Native Americans actually called it the “Singing River” after the sound of water passing around the stones.

In 1873,W.C.Handy, the “father of the blues,” was born in Florence. Handy’s father forbade him from pursuing a musical career, saying he would rather see his son “in a hearse” than on stage. Handy disobeyed Dad, and went on to a long and legendary career playing, writing and publishing blues music.

Working as a black performer in the South was a very different thing around the turn of the last century, and Handy was shot at, threatened

with arrest, and even lynching, for talking back to white men. Yet he eventually popularized blues music and made possible its evolution into jazz and then rock 'n' roll.

Today in Florence, the W.C. Handy Home and Museum has recreated the shack Handy grew up in, and has a freight car's worth of photographs, musical instruments and personal items sent back to his birthplace after he died in New York in 1958.

Modern musicians in Muscle Shoals talk about being inspired by Handy's global success, the ultimate local boy made good.

Residents also like to talk up the region's livability.

"Muscle Shoals is one of the nicest places to live in all of America," says Dick Cooper, a music writer and former curator at the Alabama Hall of Fame. Despite its location in the heart of the Bible Belt, Cooper explains that the region is often far less conservative than other parts of the state, even those in close proximity.

The Shoals' may not fit Northerners stereotypes of the Deep South, but the food served in its restaurants sure does. You name it, it's fried and on a plate for lunch. Delectable fried catfish, fried tomatoes, fried pickles, fried okra, fried steak, fried cornbread (otherwise known as hushpuppies) make a meal at Tusculmbia's Rocking Chair, about as far from a macrobiotic diet as you can get in the lower 48.

For those seeking more elevated tastes, both in cooking and in actual altitude, the 360 Grille in Florence is located atop a 300 foot-tall tower that slowly rotates around stunning views of the Tennessee River. (A revolving restaurant with good food apparently does exist.) Just don't rest your cellphone on the window ledge, or you may find it's traveled halfway around the restaurant by the time you notice it's gone.

For more information about the region, log on to colbertcountytourism.org and visitflorenceal.com. To learn more about Alabama as a destination, visit alabama.travel.

Shoals Sound

Top spots for hearing the Muscle Shoals Sound

1) Swampers Bar & Lounge — For upscale boozing and jamming, Swampers is the place. Located in the sprawling Marriott Shoals resort, the lounge features live music nightly. A great PA systems means guests can sit outside by the fire pits to enjoy a smoke and the night air, without missing out on any music (800 Cox Creek Parkway South, Florence [256] 246-3600).

2) LA Fonda Mexicana — This unassuming Mexican restaurant is where locals come to hear the best live acts in the region. A big rear dining room becomes a concert hall on weekends, and when you need a break from the music, a small front bar is home to some of the chattiest folks in town. Regulars will even jump behind the bar to fetch newcomers a beer if the bartender is busy (1221 Florence Blvd, Florence, [256] 767-4600).

3) Rattlesnake Bar — One of the most unique drinking establishments in Alabama, if not the county. This brand spanning new joint is tucked under a massive rock outcropping underneath an operating horse ranch called the Seven Springs Lodge. The Rattlesnake has an old-fashioned saloon feel, complete with swinging doors in the front. A large porch hosts live music and a hitching post, where wranglers do indeed hitch up before heading in for a cold one (1292 Mt Mills Rd, Tusculmbia, 256-370-7218).

4) Coon Dog Cemetery — An active pet cemetery, reserved for raccoon hunting dogs only, there is live music here but once a year. However, on Labor Day, the grounds become a rollicking, frolicking jam session and buck dancing celebration. BBQ and a "liar's contest" round out this authentic Deep South experience (U.S.Hwy 72 to Alabama Hwy 247, follow signs [256] 383-0783).

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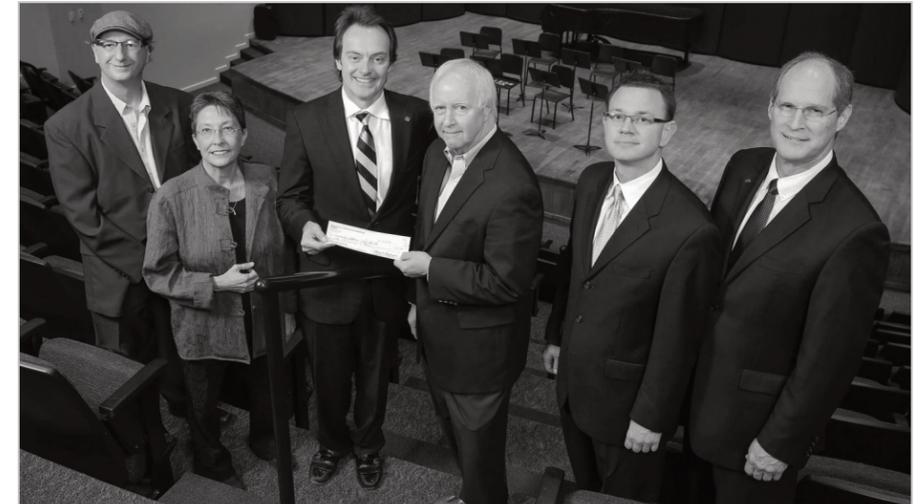
News Corp ▲

# UAH to construct world-class recording studio in newly renovated recital hall

"Written by: DianaLaChance  
NOVEMBER 11, 2014

## MUSIC

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(L-R) Noel Webster, Studio Manager; Johnna Doty, UAH's Director of Music Technology; Phil Williams, Alabama State Representative; Dr. Robert Altenkirch, UAH President; Dr. David Ragsdale, Chair of the Department of Music; and Glenn Dasher, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, at a check-presentation ceremony for the new recording studio.

Michael Mercier | UAH

Alabama has long made a name for itself as the go-to destination for music recording thanks to Muscle Shoals' legendary sound studios. And now The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) plans to bolster the state's reputation with the construction of a world-class analog recording studio in the newly renovated Roberts Recital Hall.

According to Johnna Doty, UAH's Director of Music Technology, seeds for the studio were planted shortly after construction began on the hall. "When they started taking the old recital hall apart, we starting

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putting together some ideas of how we could maximize the space,"she says.

It wasn't long before they reached a consensus;with a full season of ensemble performances already planned for the new recital hall, a recording studio was the next logical step. And not just any studio, says Doty, but an analog one. "We have a digital recording studio here already, but there's something so tremendous and warm and rich about analog audio," she points out. "It ends up being two completely different recordings, and we'll be able to teach the students both."

Though it's still in the early stages, the project is gaining traction. This September, State Representative Phil Williams (House District 6 in Madison County) presented UAH President Dr. Robert Altenkirch with a \$20,000 check to begin construction. And the hunt is already on for a soundboard that will serve as the studio's technological centerpiece. "It needs to be legendary," says Doty. "It needs to have a deep history and already be well-versed at recording hits."

Fortunately, the Department of Music has just the right person for the job. Noel Webster, former Muscle Shoals Sound Studio owner, recently joined the faculty as the studio's manager. "If you get the right equipment, they will come," he says of the soundboard that he hopes will eventually anchor the studio. "It's vintage in most cases and very hard to obtain, but once you get it, it's golden."

Webster also brings to the position a wealth of contacts from his many, many years in the music industry, which Doty believes can be leveraged to help grow the studio. "People are already banging down Noel's door to use his home studio!" she says. "We'll get people who'd rather record here than Nashville because our studio will be mastered by him."

And as the studio grows, she continues, so too will its clientele. "We have the capacity to show a film in the space and bring in an orchestra to do live film scoring," she says. "We can also get involved in gaming and entertainment arts, which is part of the president's strategic plan. We're even talking about starting our own publishing company!"

□ We have a digital recording studio here already, but there's something so tremendous and warm and rich about analog audio.

— Johnna Doty  
*UAH's Director of Music Technology*

It's an ambitious list of goals, to be sure, especially considering that the studio has yet to be built. But it's one that Dr. Dave Ragsdale, Chair of the Department of Music, believes will eventually redefine the role of the university within the arts community. "We have a community here that's invested in and heavily connected to the arts, yet UAH has been tangential to that community," he says. "This is the opening we needed, and the recital hall and recording studio will now serve as a new front door to the university."

*If you are interested in making a gift to support the studio, please contact the Office of Advancement at 256.824.2105 or donate online at [www.uah.edu/giving](http://www.uah.edu/giving).*

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# The Back Keys Classic

How The Black Keys made a modern Muscle Shoals classic  
Updated: Mar. 07, 2019 | Published: May. 16, 2018

By Matt Wake | mwake@al.com

It didn't hit Black Keys drummer Patrick Carney until the first time he heard the vinyl test pressing, at his New York apartment. His band's next album was going to change their lives. "I knew it would," Carney says now.

That album was "Brothers." Released May 18, 2010, "Brothers" distilled The Black Keys' bluesy sound into sharp, tight songs exuding contemporary appeal without sacrificing the band's nonchalant cool. "Brothers" launched top-five rock singles – "Howlin' For You" and the chart-topping "Tighten Up" – and achieved double-platinum sales. (That latter plateau, something rock bands now can literally only dream of.) The success of "Brothers" transformed The Keys, who not long before that were still touring in a van, into arena headliners.

Since much of it was recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound, the album also helped return that Alabama recording Mecca back to contemporary music conversations. And mainstream spotlight.

Still, "The process of making the record was a little bit different than it usually gets talked about," Carney says now of "Brothers."

"Even if you go on Wikipedia it's not really clear, what the hell, how the record was made. We only recorded nine of the 15 songs in Muscle Shoals, but it was the most important part of the process."

The story of "Brothers" actually begins in California. The Black Keys, an Akron, Ohio-founded duo fronted by bearded singer/guitarist Dan Auerbach, were playing some West Coast shows in 2008. Producer/engineer Mark Neill, who lived in the San Diego area at the time, had previously helped Auerbach set up a home studio and they'd become friends. During an off day or two, The Black Keys went to record with Neill at his house. The sessions yielded three songs, including sludgy stomp "Chop and Change," later to surface on "The Twilight Saga: Eclipse" soundtrack, and dynamic ballad "These Days," which became the closing track on "Brothers."

About six or nine months later, the band was gearing up in earnest to record their next LP.

"Dan and I agreed we wanted to have Mark engineer it and we wanted to leave town because we were working best at that point when we were able to get away from our personal lives," Carney says. "The original plan was to go to a studio in The South. And there were three studios we were looking at. We were looking at Royal in Memphis, Sam Phillips Recording Service in Memphis and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. Mark encouraged us to go to Muscle Shoals. There was a cool, real eccentric guy named Noel that owned it."

Webster, a local music producer and machine shop owner, had purchased the iconic Muscle Shoals Sound building, located at 3614 Jackson Hwy. in Sheffield, in 1999, a period when, Webster says, "the building was condemned, the city was going to knock it down and they gave me 90 days to get it up to code."

After acquiring 3614, as well as the building behind it, from a local doctor for a five-figure sum, Webster rebuilt the studio, which had a leaky roof overhead and dead dogs inside when he first acquired it. He was motivated to renovate Muscle Shoals Sound because growing up in Chicago he'd learned to play drums while listening to Bob Seger, Rod Stewart and Paul Simon tracks recorded there. Eventually Webster was able to get Muscle Shoals Sound listed on the National Register of Historic Places and attract some T-shirt-purchasing tourists.

Local bands, like Halo Stereo, and touring acts, including Band of Horses, came to record. Webster also acquired a large cache of vintage gear from a New York recording museum. He was selling some parts online, including eight-track Scully tape machine heads to Auerbach.

"I started to talk with Mark about a lot of stuff, and he's into vintage gear and that started a whole friendship there," Webster says.

A month or two before departing for their 10-day session at Muscle Shoals Sound, The Black Keys got together at Auerbach's studio and cut several tracks, including psychedelic-funk instrumental "Black Mud," riffastic "She's Long Gone" and poignant "Unknown Brother," all of which would end up on "Brothers." Another session around then that Carney recorded on his laptop yielded falsetto purr "The Only One."

The Black Keys at Muscle Shoals Sound. (Courtesy photo)

Carney and Auerbach arrived Muscle Shoals Sound on August 16, 2009, in a van filled with their instruments and other equipment.

Stepping inside Muscle Shoals Sound for the first, Carney says "was really cool because it was totally broke-down. There was some weird rubber flooring all over the live room. All the original baffles were up. I think one of the speakers in the control room wasn't sounding good, so we just decided since Mark has really cool old-school recording techniques that we were going to record the whole thing basically in mono anyway, as far as like drums, so we just monitored that whole album in mono."

Auerbach made a curious request early on, Webster says. "He made us take some pictures down, He didn't want Rod Stewart looking at him while he was recording, so that's the first thing we did was take the pictures out."

The funky surroundings suited The Black Keys, according to Carney. "I think Dan and I have always identified with underdog status and I think just being in that room in that kind of forgotten space was inspiring." There was also some intense personal stuff going on. About a week and a half before the "Brothers" Muscle Shoals Studio sessions, Carney split with his then-wife, who he'd been with for about nine years. "We were having normal problems you have when you get married to young type s—," Carney says. This gives added context to valley-wide "Brothers" track "Next Girl," which Carney recalls being one of the first songs they cut at Muscle Shoals Sound, along with the glam-gospel of "Everlasting Light."

"Whenever I go through a hard time I just listen to tons of music, so I think Dan and I were making each other playlist after playlist before we got down there, and when we finally got down to Muscle Shoals we were listening to tons of music.

It's August in Alabama, it's hot as f— and I think we listened to music that had a lot of space to it." Ann Peebles and Isley Brothers were among the artists they were frequently spinning. Neill, who was engineering and co-producing the sessions, brought his collection of classic Muscle Shoals vinyl singles for further inspiration." Of course, Dan and Pat had figured out (The Rolling Stones hits) 'Wild Horses' and 'Brown Sugar' had been recording in (Muscle Shoals Sound)," says Neill, who now is based in Valdosta, Ga. "And I think they thought that was a pretty cool thing." Looking back on the "Brothers" sessions there, Carney feels there are several things Muscle Shoals Sound's cozy confines brought out of The Black Keys, sonically.

"One, is that there's a basement," the drummer says, "that has about eight- or nine-foot ceilings if not higher and the floor is barely braced, so if you hit a kick drum in there or something it definitely feels like it moves the room a bit. That's kind of reminiscent to the kind of places that Dan and I recorded before, so it didn't feel like a studio, which I think helped. When we were making it, we were having a lot of fun. And there were definitely some songs on there I thought were really, really amazing or cool or whatever."

The Black Keys drummer Patrick Carney Tall, lanky and frequently sporting Buddy Holly-ish glasses, Carney checks in for this interview from the control room of his home studio in Nashville, where he now resides. His gold and platinum records are displayed on the wall there. But not his five Grammys – including three for "Brothers" – he keeps those on a shelf in the house he shares with his fiancé, the singer Michelle Branch. As a journalist when you're given a band's drummer to interview it's usually a let-down. But since The Black Keys are a two-piece and Carney has such an interesting personality and musical take, he's actually the guy you want to talk with. He's articulate, loose and funny, with a talent for dropping F-bombs in just the right places.

Perhaps the biggest impact on the "Brothers" material was The Black Keys had recently recorded an album called "Blackroc" of collaborations with hip-hop artists like Q-Tip, RZA and Ludacris. On "Blackroc," the band was super-focused on rhythm, which led to an import change in how they cut basic tracks, Carney says. "Right before we went to Muscle Shoals, Dan and I kind of locked into this groove of he would play bass and I would play drums. So rather than write with the guitar, I think a lot of it we were doing with the bass and the drums."

The Black Keys singer Dan Auerbach's handsome howl and Carney's syncopated grooves gave their "Brothers" tracks a sexy, dance-y feel. After the album was Released this helped The Black Keys significantly widen its fan base, going from being a band mostly only record store clerk dudes and other indie male types listened to, to a band all kinds of girls danced to. "We were just trying to get the thing to communicate to a broader audience," Neill says.

Although the band's road manager was around some it was mostly just Neill, Carney and Auerbach inside Muscle Shoals Sound working on the album. Neill had brought in some vintage instruments that shaped the sound, including a Gretsch drum kit with a relatively small kick drum. "The whole thing about kick drums," Carney says, "is the smaller the Kick drum the more focus, so therefore you can sometimes get the biggest kick drum sound out of a 20-inch kick, a 22 for sure.

You go bigger than that and it looks amazing onstage, but you might not want to record with it unless you're John Bonham."

After laying down bass and drums for a song, typically then Auerbach would track guitar, write lyrics and do vocals and Carney would add keyboards and percussion. Neill says, "'Brothers' is a very retro sounding record, but it's also very modern because the beats and the way the rhythm is constructed and the way the vocals play off it makes that."

Although Webster had the studio outfitted with two analog tape machines, Neill brought in his 1997 RADAR digital recording system to cut with. Carney and Auerbach also owned RADAR rigs, making it easy for them to later exchange hard-drives, if needed. Unlike says, Pro Tools, Carney says RADAR is a platform, "that has basically no editing capabilities so it was all done live." Neill's recording techniques produced a warmth reminiscent of analog. After Neill played Webster back some tracks, the studio owner was impressed: "That doesn't sound digital," Webster recalls saying. "That sounds like tape."

Neill had also brought in an old Studer console that folded up like a suitcase to track through. Carney recalls that console only having 12 channels, so while technically the RADAR system allowed for recording 24-tracks for each song, because of the console the band could only hear 12. So, overdubs had to be kept to a minimum.

The Studer recording console engineer/co-producer Mark Neill used on The Black Keys' "Brothers" album. (Courtesy photo)

"The record sounds massive and that's partially because there's so much space," Carney says. "There's not a bunch of s— filling up all the gaps. And I think if you listen to 'Howlin' for You,' that floor tom takes up a lot of room but there's really not much going on. It's drums, bass, two guitars, a keyboard, backing vocals, vocal, percussion. That's it. And having Mark there to capture everything so well, it was just kind of the perfect storm of us getting to our sixth record." Upon its release "Brothers" singles like the swampy "Howlin' for You" and whistle-powered jam "Tighten Up" connected in a big way. But like all truly memorable albums, "Brothers" was also well-stocked with killer deep-cuts. The dark triptych of "Ten Cent Pistol," "Sinister Kid" and "Go Getter" which opens side three of the double-vinyl, is particularly compelling. "Those three songs, that's like the core of the album," Carney says. "And those three songs if you look on like streaming services those are the least streamed songs, which is always the case. But they're some of my favorites." Neill recalls those cuts being recorded towards the end of the Muscle Shoals Sound session. "Those went down instantaneously," the producer says. "There was no deliberation on that. Those may have been one take."

Some of the keyboards used on The Black Keys' "Brothers" album. (Courtesy photo)

The Black Keys were staying at the Marriott hotel in Florence. Carney thinks his room was on a floor with an even number. One night while taking a break in recording, The Black Keys, Neill and Webster grilled out filet mignon steaks at the studio to celebrate Webster's birthday. Carney also recalls the studio owner taking the band to a family he was friends with, the Haynes, for a home cooked meal as well. Early in the band's time in the Shoals, they copped some local weed. "I don't even really smoke it to be honest, but that stuff I could really get into because it was so weak that I didn't get paranoid," Carney says. "I just wanted to hear music."

And we were smoking that like the whole time we were down there. It was just crappy weed. But it was perfect. And I think somebody could make billions of dollars selling it because it did exactly the right s—.” Perhaps this explains why the band often wore sunglasses while recording inside Muscle Shoals Sound. One night after sessions had ended for the day, Carney stayed up late getting high and listening to his iPod. At some point, he texted The Black Keys’ manager in Nashville that the band had to have a harpsichord at the studio the next day. Not the most common keyboard request. “I woke up the next day, didn’t even remember sending that text, he showed up with a harpsichord,” Carney says with a laugh. The harpsichord features prominently on dreamy “Brothers” tune “Too Afraid To Love You.” A cover of R&B singer Jerry Butler’s ’60s cut “Never Gonna Give You Up,” is probably the most “Muscle Shoals sounding” of the songs The Black Keys cut at Muscle Shoals Sound. Fuzz-guitar stands-in for where a horn section would normally be, on a Shoals classic. About 10 years earlier, Carney’s father had given him a CD containing Butler’s version. At Muscle Shoals Sound, the band and Neill had been tracking a song each day, but eventually they got stuck and wanted to just record a cover and Carney suggested “Never Gonna Give You Up.” On the very last day of the band’s MSS sessions, singer/songwriter and Shoals native Jason Isbell, whose star had yet to truly rise as a solo artist, stopped by. “We found out the whole time we were down there, there was a bar Jason was hanging out at right around the corner,” Carney says. “And I don’t think we even ever figured out there was a bar there. The whole time The Black Keys were in the Shoals, Carney was also looking for an apartment in New York. About a week after the 10 days of Muscle Shoals Sound sessions were done and the band left town, he moved to New York. After sitting on their recordings for a couple weeks, Carney wasn’t sure they had a song that would get played on the radio. “And we’d never had a song played on the radio, but it was our sixth album and I thought we should try to write one more song just to see what the f— happens.” So, in New York the band recorded one more song for the record, with the producer Danger Mouse, who’d they’d made their previous album, 2008’s “Attack & Release” with. That song was “Tighten Up.” It would eventually top the rock and alternative songs charts, but at the time the band wasn’t sure the tune fit in with the rest of album. They were also trying to whittle down the LP to just 11 songs. Eventually, The Black Keys decided to include everything. “We knew people would probably say that it was too long, but for us it was the only way it would work, 15 songs,” Carney says. The band enlisted Tchad Blake, whose resume includes work ranging from Tom Waits to Christina Aguilera, to mix the record. “And I think hiring Tchad Blake was one of the smartest decisions we made because he tied all the sessions together from San Diego, Akron, New York and Muscle Shoals,” Carney says. “And it all felt seamless.” Comments that appeared in two Rolling Stone articles, one several months in advance of “Brothers” release and another shortly after the LP’s release, caused somewhat of a stir back in Alabama.

In the first story, writer Christian Hoard describes Muscle Shoals Sound as a “rundown building in a ghost town.” (The photo accompanying the online version of the story is also of the wrong studio, nearby FAME Studios.) In the second story, Carney described the 3614 building as “a sweaty, ashtray, grandparents’-rec-room type thing.” Fans familiar with The Black Keys’ irreverent sense of humor saw that statement as a lighthearted joke but some locals not as familiar took offense. But the truth is Muscle Shoals Sound is a humble, cinderblock building. Which makes the staggering number of classics recorded there even more amazing and cool. And while the area definitely has charms there isn’t a whole lot to do as far as nightlife in the Shoals. Which is actually a good thing, if you’re trying to focus on music. Carney says, “I’m from Akron, Ohio, I lived there until I was 30 years old basically there isn’t s— to do there either! [Laughs] I love it – Akron’s my home. In Muscle Shoals, if you don’t know anybody, there’s nothing to do. And that’s why people go there to make records. That’s why there are all these good musicians there. If there was s— to do, do you think people would be sitting around learning how to play the f—ing organ? That’s the reality. It’s hard to get good at something when there’s tons of distractions and that’s what makes that place special.” After the 2013 film “Muscle Shoals” was released, Carney was “stoked” a documentary had been made about Muscle Shoals Sound and the area’s other famous recording facility, FAME Studios. The Black Keys at Muscle Shoals Sound. (Courtesy photo) “Only in America would you find this great pocket of musicians and studios that people with really good ears in New York knew they had to go down there to get the right s—,” Carney says. “I wish the music industry was still like that, because now people just call up like (the producer/DJ) Zedd, and he brings his computer around and they make whatever they make. But it will never feel as good as real musicians playing in a room. The thing that’s interesting to me about Muscle Shoals isn’t the studios, it’s the musicians, songwriters, it’s The Swampers, the producers. And the rooms are the closest you can get to it, the spot where it was made, you know? But really it doesn’t come down to the equipment or anything. It comes down to the playing. Which I think was also inspirational to Dan and I when we were down there. We felt at home.”

Webster sold Muscle Shoals Sound to the Muscle Shoals Music Foundation in 2013, for a six-figure price, he says. He moved his studio and vintage gear to Huntsville, Ala., and still has the coffeepot The Black Keys brought to MSS because they couldn't find a Starbucks. He thinks some locals overreacted to the Rolling Stone stories. "It seemed to me that Pat was being funny and being a smart ass," Webster says. "During those 10 days we didn't hang out all the time or anything but we hung out enough I got to know them and they were nice guys and fun to be around." Webster recalls a reporter for a certain Alabama newspaper calling him up "for dirt" on The Black Keys, asking if "anything bad happened" while the band was at Muscle Shoals Sound. "I said, 'What do you mean dirt? They came here and made a record.' There was no animosity by anybody in that building. And they got a record out of there they couldn't get any place else, I tell you that." Webster says. The Black Keys also bought some vintage gear for him before loading up their van to drive back to Akron. While Carney was psyched upon hearing the "Brothers" test-pressing, longtime friend Matthew Johnson, founder of Fat Possum Records, which had released The Black Keys' strong Second ("Thickfreakness") and third ("Rubber Factory") albums, was not impressed. "He told me that we'd lost our mojo," Carney says, with a good nature chuckle. "He hated it." Millions of music fans would soon disagree. Through The Black Keys' previous five albums, hard touring and generally making blues-rock seem fresh again, the band already had the ears of indie-minded music obsessives. But "Brothers" became a legit commercial breakthrough. Before the album's release, Carney told his lawyer he'd be thrilled if "Brothers" sold 250,000 copies. It went on to do almost 10 times that. Then came accolades from Rolling Stone, Spin and MTV. The band performed on "Saturday Night Live." In this May 15, 2010 photo, Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys, performs at the Classic Car Club, in New York. (File / AP Photo / Microsoft Corp.) By this time, Black Keys songs had also scored a slew of TV and film placements, and even many TV commercials that didn't license their music now aped the band's signature sound. The end-sum result? One of the best and hardest working underdog bands reached saturation. The Black Keys didn't let up. Less than a year after "Brothers," the band's blue-collar work ethic had them back in the studio to make an album designed to rock the arenas that now beckoned. Fast, fun follow-up "El Camino" reached number two on the Billboard 200 upon its 2011 release. A notch above the number three 2010 showing by "Brothers." (Interestingly, although "Brothers" was recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound long after the studio's '60s and '70s prime, it's one of the best-sellers ever made there.) When a band blows up like that, if you've been following them their entire career, it's easy to take the new music for granted. But there's a reason "Brothers" became ubiquitous: the songs, sound and singing are just damn good. The material is as good as or better than any other rock LP released since. And The Black Keys history with Muscle Shoals Sound may not be over just yet. In 2017, Auerbach cut some solo tracks there. So far that material is unreleased.

Neill also recently returned to Sheffield, to produce tracks by rising blues-rockers Bishop Gunn. Drummer Patrick Carney remains a busy guy. An accomplished producer – he helmed the first two Black Keys LPs, as well as music for Branch the band Tennis and Netflix show "BoJack Horseman" – Carney was behind the board for upcoming records by singers Jessie Wilson and Calvin Johnson. So where does "Brothers" fall on Carney's list of favorite Black Keys records? "I'm having a kid in August and my kid when he asks me to hear The Black Keys, I would probably play him the first album," referring to 2002's "The Big Come Up." "Just so he got an idea of where it started. And then I would play him 'Brothers.' I can speak for Dan too that we're proud of all our records, but when it comes down to it, 'Brothers' is probably both of our absolute favorites." Although The Black Keys are currently on an extended break, it's difficult to imagine them not reuniting. Their last album, 2014's "Turn Blue," hit number-one. And like many longtime bands, Carney and Auerbach have gone through all kinds of crazy good and bad together, and since there are only two musicians in this group, those bonds are probably particularly close. There's a reason they titled the album "Brothers." The Black Keys

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NEWS

# Noel Webster: Restoring History, and Giving Chess Records a New Start – Part One

No Comments 17 Mins Read By Barry Kerzner · May 16, 2018 



**CHESS  
RECORDS LLC**

Abbey Road  
Studios, Hitsville  
USA (now the  
Motown Museum),  
Muscle Shoals  
Sound Studio,  
Chess, Sun

Recording Studio:

Speak these names  
and immediately  
the ghosts of

legends are

summoned to the forefront of our imagination.

Whether it's the Funk Brothers making Motown magic, Little Walter and Willie Dixon building the foundations of modern blues, the Beatles turning music on its head, Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis capturing the raw energy of early rock and roll, or The Swampers reinventing rock, soul, country, and folk, studios have long been regarded as shrines. They are temples where the faithful would gather to create the music we hold dear today.

These studios in particular and the labels that found life within their walls are generally accorded "holy grail" status; their mojo and magic inspires us yet today. Therefore, although preserving these hallowed halls would be an arduous undertaking, it would ultimately be an act of love and a declaration of

respect.

American Blues Scene recently spoke with producer, preservationist, and president of Chess Records LLC Noel Webster. In this first installment of our conversation, we discussed the Chess building located at 2120 Michigan Avenue in Chicago and the various possibilities there. Webster also spoke of what it takes to preserve a property correctly, and how he has reincarnated and is reinventing Chess Records. He also tells us why he is an advocate for artists retaining the rights to their own work (publishing rights, writing credit, etc.).

Barry Kerzner for ABS:

Later we can cover what you are doing now. I want to talk about Muscle Shoals and the 13 years you spent there; the Black Keys' *Brothers* recording there as well. I'm also looking forward to hearing your perspectives on Chess Records and what you are trying to do there. So, wherever you want to begin.

Noel Webster:

In doing these recording studios, I found a long time ago, a lot of these places have been lost to history. They just became, as Muscle Shoals Sound was, abandoned and the buildings were condemned. The

rights to names and all the stuff associated with it was just scattered to the winds, and no one was using it. There's always a lot of second-hand speculation. People's opinions are who owns what and— it's that kind of story.

What I discovered is all the gossip is false, in *every* case. When I moved out to Muscle Shoals, the studio was condemned and the city of Sheffield was going to knock the whole block down over there! I went ahead and bought the property, and it was amazing that, as a structure, we kind of treated it like an archeological dig. We took the garbage out and started with a fresh slate which was the studio itself, and started rebuilding all that stuff.

But, what happened during the course of that was the name was not trademarked. The artwork to the T-shirts was never copy-written or trademarked. There were no service marks. All that stuff was available and it was very odd that people weren't keeping that together. So, it was more than just rebuilding a studio and

putting the studio back in and go back to work. We had to take and bring all of the technical info regarding what the name and the plates and reviving it and bring all that back home to the same location.

When we did that we also had to go through, in addition to that, we went and did all the historical research with Gene Ford; he's an architectural historian in Moundville. We had to give it a designation. We had to go to the National Park Service and apply for Landmark Status where it's recorded with the Director of the Department of the Interior for Historic Places. That's a whole other process in addition to all the other processes.

Once it was secured, now it has a designation. Now, it's an actual historic site.

You are talking about the location at 3614 Jackson Highway, correct?

That is correct. In addition to that, while

we were building and getting all this stuff together, doing sessions and running the studio, my friends in New York donated the Museum of Sound Recording. They had been collecting this stuff for 34 years of equipment in this non-profit and they were running out of places to store it. It was in the RKO Theatre in New York, the old RCA building up there in Trenton, NJ.

Right.

They sent me down six semi-trailers of equipment, from our country's history. It was film, recording studios: Capital Records was part of it. The Mercury Theatre was part of it.

Nice!

There's all kinds of famous equipment that was used throughout history that people just got donated to them and they donated it all to me.

That's incredible.

I had to warehouse it behind the studio. So, we had all *that* stuff packed up in there. Over a three-year period, I had to deal with all that as well. I found a lot of it homes and some of it is still here in use. In vintage studios, you can count the major ones on your hand, now can't you?

Oh yeah, pretty much.

That aren't in business anymore. So, Chess [Records] was another one, and I'm from Chicago. I went up there and visited the place, and it was empty. [I thought] "Well, what's going on up here?" I got to talk to the building owners who don't even live in the city; they actually live in California. We're in the process of making a proposal for them to see which way they want to go with it. We'll propose what we have to offer and things like that.

One of the things with Chess, while I don't own that building, we can secure all the marks and do all the technical steps of the legal stuff on the opposite side of that to own the corporation name, to trademark,

to copyright, to do all that stuff — to protect it.

Right.

Then we can turn it over to its old location, and operate it out of there as well.

You're speaking about 2120 Michigan Ave, right?

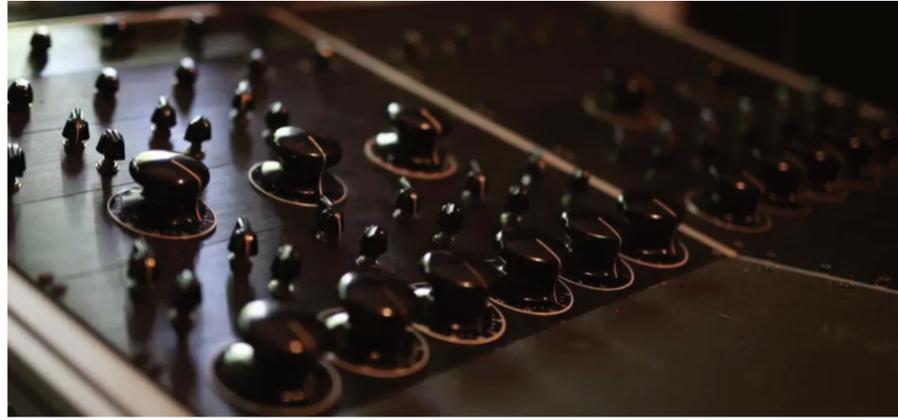
Michigan. Yes.

Marie Dixon; Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation had purchased that and they operated out of there. I'd interviewed her and visited there as well. So, to be clear, she's gone now; she left us a couple of years ago. The new owners...

Yeah; we're making a proposal to her son.

Ah. OK.

And his sister. They own the property.



*Console At Chess –Photo by Charlie Gillespy*

Right.

They said that they were more than happy to put our proposal in front of the board for their consideration. I think it would be a fantastic turn of events for that foundation to operate as Chess Records and to put the name on the building, which we own. So, if we can settle that up, I think that would be a wonderful thing. Then we could move forward perhaps making it a historical site as well, not just a Chicago city landmark. That's not a designation; a designation has to come from the National Park Service.

Right; the registry.

There's a lot involved in that. It takes several years to get done, but we can do that type of work. We're probably that only guys in the country that can 'cause we did it with Shoals Sound. If you're using some studios as a template John Schorr seems to do really well with that, and his marketing of Sun, and things like that. What it does is it preserves the building.

The way I did it is — Those places *are* history, but we're just passing through so someone has to protect that. Someone has to designate it, list it with the park service, protect it, operate it, and make it available for people to see.

Absolutely.

It's a combined effort of a lot of folks.

That has to go through the national registry to be legit.

Yeah – the National Park Service.

I believe the designation is listed on the Registry of Historic places; is that correct?

That is correct. What happened is, Chess Records is not on that. Motown is not on that.

Really?

Can you believe? Motown is a “state landmark.” [It]has nothing to do with National Park Service, so it has no designation. So, one day, I’d like to go up there and get Motown as well. We need to get these things locked in for these people because it gives them benefits; there’s lots of advantages to doing that.

Me and Gene seem to be the guys to do that. We’re doing Willie Mitchell’s place, Hi Records in Memphis. We started that project and hope to conclude with that at some point in the near future. Al Green did his stuff there with Willie Mitchell.

Chess is just one more of these studios that are very famous that needs to be

protected. And if we come to terms or agreement to say hey, they wanna put a recording studio in there, we’ll build a recording studio in there that’ll be historically accurate.

I advised them not to put a lot of junk in there, and Pro Tools and make some sort of new wave whatever out of that place. If they can keep it historical, then they can do some pretty cool stuff up there.

Yeah, we don’t want to put Trump Tower on top of Lincoln’s log cabins.

Honestly, that’s the problem. Time marches on; we all know that. I mean shipbuilding isn’t what it was like in Ireland in 1912 when they launched the Titanic; we’ve moved on. The thing is, that doesn’t mean that you don’t preserve the methods. It has to be preservation. For it be designated, you have to do it right.

You have to have the alfact materials, period pieces, things have to operate as they were in fact. We’ve located the actual equipment that came out of that building to begin with. It’s still in existence.

That's the Chess building you're referring to?

Yes. There's some money involved in obtaining that, not an outrageous amount but I think that they should go back with period pieces and make it authentic. The tighter it is, the better it is, the more authentic it is, and that's what you want to leave for prosperity.

So you have period pieces or the actual equipment that came out of there?

The actual — We have access to the actual equipment.

That's incredible!

The actual console, tape machine, yes sir. That's the level of integrity we would like to restore back in that location.

It has been done right and that's the point of doing all this work to get it nominated on the registers is to make sure it's right. At Muscle Shoals Sound we have the

exact stuff in there. Same tape machine, same console, same everything. Even though they went through transition, in different periods, we decided on a period and that's what we put in there and went rolling with it.

If they [Chess building] want to go to that extent, we can. If they don't then we can put period pieces in there and make it work. Still, when you walk in that room, it'll take your breath away.

As I'm sure you know; Jack White is huge into preservation of a different sort: vinyl and historical labels such as Paramount.

Yeah. He's been doing a lot of that stuff.

So, have you tried to contact and or work with entities such as that? Are you reaching out to folks to help you fundraise and contribute to make this happen?

No. Not at this point. At this stage, we wouldn't require any other people to get this to happen.

Got ya.

Now at some point if we decide... Our company at Chess *is* incorporated, so do have the ability to bring on members or investors. What happens is ultimately — it's not our property; it's not our choice. What we can do is offer them the use of the name and things like that and they can, in turn, give us an office up there or something like that so we can operate out of that location. That's what they would have to do in order for us to be completed.

It's entirely up to them [Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation at the old Chess building 2120 Michigan Ave] and what we would do is make our proposals, lay it in their lap and show them what we can do, and let them decide what they want to do. And, how much they want to be involved. I wouldn't suggest putting equipment in someone else's building, that belongs to me that is sitting in their building that we have no use of. Or chances of it being damaged. If you've ever been in any of these old studio museums, the first thing

that happens is all the knobs get stolen off the board. Things start coming up missing. Things get damaged. See what I mean?

For sure.

There are ways to protect and alleviate those problems. It's entirely up to the board up there if they want us involved or not. Right now, until we started Chess to bring it back to life as a label... There again, we had to own the artwork; all the artwork for Chess. I had to obtain that. We started the corporate name. We have a corporation that we operate under as Chess Records. All of our background documents for bookings and promotions; all the records that we do — all that type of legal documents — we had to do all that type of stuff to operate as a business. We're doing that right now in Huntsville, AL.

So, we can go to other studios, and Chess can be subsidized all over the place. We can use other studios under the Chess

logo. Does that make sense?

Right. If I'm understanding you correctly, ultimately you would like to do everything out of the Michigan Ave location?

Well, that would be another location, and that would be a wonderful thing to do to protect that building. That would be the ultimate goal if they choose to do so, yes.

The name of your corporation is Chess Records?

Chess Records LLC

The art work for example; like the artwork for Muscle Shoals Sound. Chess had two different logos. It one with the three chess pieces – that's in Chess Records Corp and there's another one that was Chess records that was the horse-head symbol later on in the seventies. Well, I'm the author of copyright. We secured it.

And, we're operating the corporation so... and we have an active studio. We have products coming out right now on Chess

Records. That's just part of the scenario of this, to be in Chicago at that location. That's entirely up to those people. We're here to help. When we make our proposals, hopefully we can agree on some stuff and get rolling. That would be a huge, huge thing for them to be able to use the name and logos on *that* building.

Yes, absolutely!

I think the City of Chicago would be very pleased with that as well as it would be a great advantage to them to do that.

So if I understand you correctly, the Michigan Ave building in Chicago and that proposal and all that goes with it aside, you are currently or about to issue music on Chess Records?

Yes sir. We've already recorded albums that are going to be released very soon. The records are already done and in the can.



*Noel Webster at Muscle Shoals Sound -Photo by Charlie Gillespy*

And those are new contemporary artists or old artists?

Brand new artists, and we have other people that are wishing to sign up with this label. The beauty of it is, as a record company, it would be wonderful to let artists work under that banner, without getting the publishing. Imagine that?

Run that by me again?

We'd be the first label in history probably to have artists use our brand, without getting their publishing. I have no interest in getting their publishing rights – royalties.

You're letting them keep all the rights to their own work is what you're saying.

Yes.

That would be huge!!!

That's unheard of. We record their product; we mix, we master, we manufacture that product. And then, we'll lease them the brand, and they keep all of their publishing and all their writers. That would be a wonderful business model for the artist because that's unheard of in this business.

See, every label that signs somebody, they'll sign them with the caveat that the label has the publishing – the distribution rights. We don't want to control someone else's career or their publishing. I have no interest in that. I have interest in making product and letting those guys run as far as they can.

I'm sure that you are familiar with the work of Mrs. Dixon and [Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation](#).

One of their big things was educating artists about how important their rights were.

Yes.

That was a considerable part of what they did.

Sure. That's what I'm saying. In keeping with the times, Willie Dixon thank goodness preserved his publishing. I think his son operates and controls all that because without it, those guys would just be getting writer's credit and the other half of the money would all go to the publisher. The publisher would dictate who when and why records their songs — without the consent of the artist. They can bring on other writers if they want to, dragging the artist's rights down to nothing which they do quite often.

I have no interest in being in that type of business. I'm here to make a product for people and put it out and keep that name [Chess Records] alive as an active living entity. Whether it's here in Alabama, whether it's in Georgia, or Nashville or

Chicago at that location.

In light of you putting out the product and a catalog, what about all the old recordings; the old catalog?

No, no, no. Totally different. The last stuff they recorded was in 1975 when that label ceased to exist. That is owned by UMG. They handle the publishing; they're a publishing company of publishing rights. They administer the rights to *that* catalog of all those previous artists.

So everything that Chess did up until and through 1975 when they closed down...

Yes. Somebody bought the publishing. It changed hands several times.

Yes it did. GRT, All Platinum, and right on down the line. There was a whole series of owners.

Yeah. Geffin, MCA, ... Yeah, they own that. That's a publishing company that owns that — *not* a recording studio. That's not Chess Records.

Yes.

See what I mean?

Yes. They own the material, the music, the rights to the publishing, etc.

Sure! And that’s fantastic. They can keep reissuing that forever. In any format. They can lease it to some movie rights; they have all kinds of options. You can do that in that world. But what we’re doing, has *nothing* to do with publishing.

Great. I just wanted to clarify about the old catalog versus what you’re doing because I know without fail, if I write an article somebody is gonna want to know “What about the old catalog?” So, thanks for answering that.

We have no interest or no knowledge of anything that happened back then, of 1975,prior. That is the publishing business, and we are not concerning ourselves with that. They’re two different companies; two different worlds.

Stayed tuned for the second installment coming soon...

*\*Featured Image Photo by Charlie Gillespy*

Chess Records LLC   Chess Records   Black Keys  
Noel Webster   Muscle Shoals Sound Studio

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Directorship of Roots N Blues N BBQ Changes Hands

Barry Kerzner



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for singers and songwriters

# How artists can capture 'Muscle Shoals' sound

### State of the art analog recording adds 'tone'

Artists and bands who value the concept of 'old school' recording are finding what they need at a unique studio in Huntsville, Alabama. It's the new home of both Muscle Shoals Sound Studios (MSSS) and Chess Records, and its owner Noel Webster.

[See previous post here for more about the history of MSSS and the unique, historic, recording equipment still in use there today.](#)

Artists who come here to record say they achieve a unique tone; a sound they have not been able to find anywhere else. Noel will tell you that comes from the equipment that he rescued and restored back to its peak performance. Consoles, microphones, amps, speakers and control boards from the Hit Factory, Abbey Road, Capitol Records and Motown.

But much of that unique tone must be due to the man at the controls, Noel Webster. A musician himself, he put in twelve years on the road as the 'sound man' for acts like the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd at major venues from arenas to stadiums. He developed the skill of making an act sound great at live gigs. He fleshed out that



Noel Webster with Bobby Whitlock's Hammond organ. Check out the lush woodland through the window! Photo: Preshias Harris

### 'It changed their lives'

Thinking back to those days, Noel said, "It started to develop where people would come in and record, but it changed their lives in the way they made records because we didn't edit everybody in. Such as put a drum and bass down then have everybody build on top of it. We wanted everybody, at the same time, playing together, a core. Then you build on that."

As we walked through Noel's studio in Huntsville, his passion for the music and the craft of recording was evident in his voice.

"When we record these [artists], we like to record them 'live' on the floor," he said.

skill with his next venture when he bought and renovated the iconic Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

**"The music is always going to change, but it all still comes down to the song and the singer. If we can capture them in the most realistic way, the results are astounding." – Noel Webster**



The refurbished processing effects rack, now up and running in Noel Webster's Huntsville studio

“We get as much as we can on those passes. The techniques that we use are based on history. We’ve got our twists and our tools, what we call tradecraft. The little things we like to do.



Microphone, formerly at Abbey Road Studios

“At the end of the day, I’m not out to replicate what was done in the past. I just like to keep it alive. The techniques, the way that people record. The music is always going to change, but it all still comes down to the song and the singer. If we can capture them in the most realistic way, the results are astounding.”

Artists who come to this studio will find a refreshing change from many producers they have previously worked with who might have wanted to retain a financial interest in the recordings.

### ‘We want artists to secure their rights’

“One of the primary ways I wanted to set this up, we don’t want ‘points’ on the record, we don’t want publishing from them, we don’t want anything to do with their copyrights,” he said. “We want artists to secure their rights. We actually teach them how to secure their rights and they own their rights. When they come to us, they pay us for our services, but from there on, they own everything.”

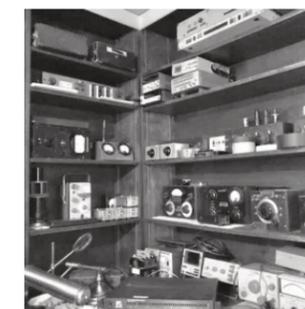
Artists usually expect to record their tracks in one place and maybe find somewhere else to mix the tracks and somewhere else to master them. With Noel, everything is done in house from recording to mastering. I asked him to explain the process.

“We set up everybody in the room in the traditional recording sense,” he said. “A lot of the time, we don’t use booths, although sometimes we’ll put somebody in a

different room if they want to use the effect of that room. But for the most part, everything is tracked, mixed and overdubbed live here on the floor; mixed in the studio. All the effects, reverbs, tape delays, things like that. We mix them down.

### Straight to the mastering lab

“Once we get our two-track mixes, we’re the only studio around that doesn’t have to use an A/D conversion to get in to mastering. We literally take that format and it appears in our mastering lab. They can mix it there and listen to a mastering dial-up of what they want, trim their tails, get the kind of level they want. And then we A/B them back in the studio so they can listen in the control room and the main room and mastering to get what they want.



Les Paul’s original test equipment at Webster’s studio

“And when they all decide this is the mix we want for our release, then we just package it and literally just hand it to them on a USB stick and they can then burn it to CDs, play it in the car, put it on iTunes right now. So at least they have control of the complete content of their package. They know what they’re getting, they know what they’re sending out.”



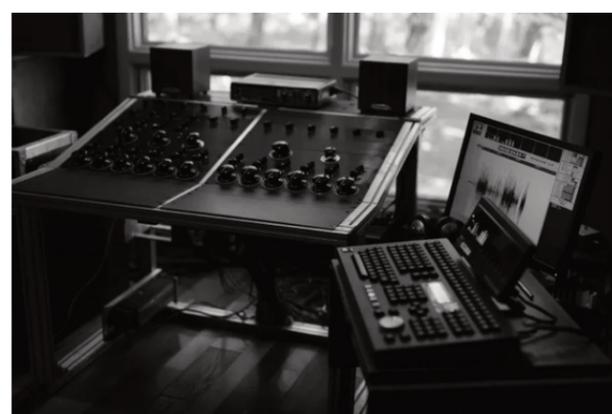
Noel now owns the name, trademark and logo of iconic ChessRecords, the legendary label from his home town of Chicago. He is now president of Chess Records LLC. We talked more about Noel and Chess Records in the previous post.

I said to Noel that we think of a record label releasing songs. Is that what he intends to do?

### Not running a record label

“No. I have no intention of running a record label in the traditional sense,” he stipulated. “It’s where everything we can use to keep the label brand alive. As long as we’re making product that the artist is happy with, then we’re going to let them use that as a facility to promote themselves. That would be a very simple arrangement for them to get the licensing agreement to use the name and if they want to put our [Chess] logo on their product they can do that as well.”

Sitting at the lovingly-restored console from Capitol Records that is now working again in his studio, Noel talked about how artists can benefit from this connection. “The point of Chess and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios is to have the ability to use those famous names to help them promote their careers, not the other way around. We don’t want to sign and shelve people. We don’t want to put



The restored console, back in action, better than ever

people in stables and say ‘these are our artists.’ We want to lease them these names [of Chess and Muscle Shoals Sound Studios] so they can use these famous marques to their advantage.”

### ‘Soup to nuts’ recording experience

I was expecting to hear about some hefty fees for all of this, but was pleasantly surprised at the remarkably reasonable daily fees, particularly as this is an ‘all-in-one’ service. Noel even pointed out bedrooms where artists can ‘crash’ if sessions go late into the night!

It is rare to find a studio where everything can be done – expertly – under one roof, from recording the first note to mastering the final product. To have it done on historically important equipment, produced by Noel Webster of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios is truly unique.

To find out more about the opportunity of recording at Noel Webster’s unique Huntsville studio, contact him at [muscleshoalssound@mac.com](mailto:muscleshoalssound@mac.com).

**“We don’t want ‘points’ on the record, we don’t want publishing from them, we don’t want anything to do with their copyrights. We want artists to secure their rights.” – Noel Webster**

Preshias Harris is a music journalist and music career development consultant with the emphasis on new and aspiring artists and songwriters. Her book, ‘The College of Songology 101: The Singer/Songwriter’s Need to Know Reference Handbook’ is available at [www.collegeofsongology.com](http://www.collegeofsongology.com) Follow her blog at [www.nashvillemusicline.com](http://www.nashvillemusicline.com)

# Iconic record label finds new life

August 12, 2018

## Combines with history of Muscle Shoals Sound



Noel Webster. Photo: Preshias Harris

Noel Webster knows what it takes to upkick a recording from just sounding good to sounding great. He did it for thirteen years as owner and producer of Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. Today, he continues to do that with the reincarnation of another iconic musical brand that today's artists can be a part of.

Chess Records – along with Motown and Stax – has a special place in the history of popular music. These were studios where dedicated people found a way to bring the sound of R&B to the ears of America and the world. Noel has saved the iconic Chess name from oblivion and is set to create recordings again under the Chess logo.



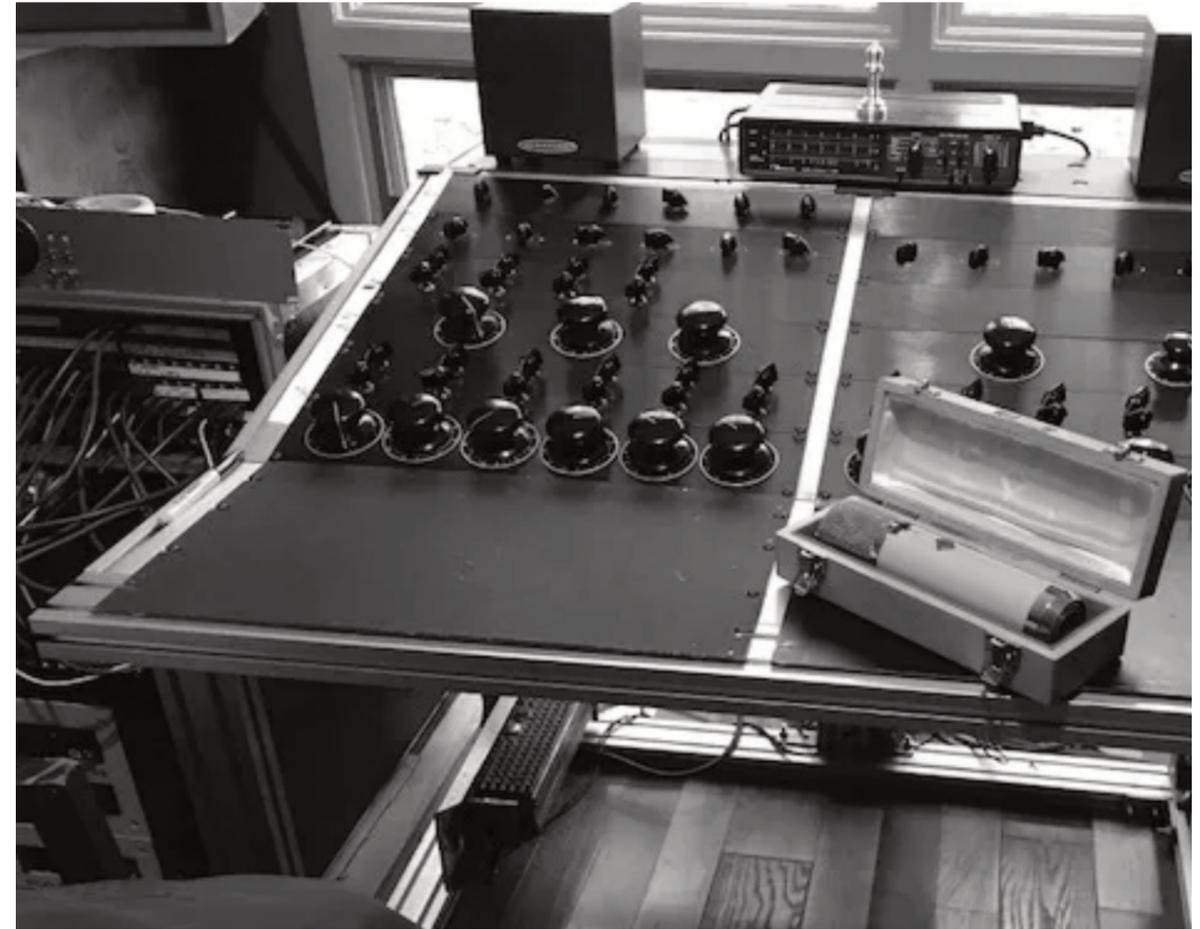
The original Chess Records logo

Noel found that all the copyrights relating to Chess Records, its name and its logos had been abandoned and allowed to lapse. He formed a corporation under the name Chess Records LLC and copyrighted the name and the original logo. Noel now provides artists with an all-in-one studio recording experience that combines tracking,

mixing and mastering in one place. (More about that later.)

## ‘Music history’ in every piece

Noel Webster and I have been friends for many years and we got together to catch up and talk about his latest ventures. We met at his studio in Huntsville, Alabama, that is unlike any studio I have ever seen. Set in a craggy hillside and surrounded by trees and vegetation, it is private without being remote. As Noel told me, artists can sit out on the wraparound porch to work out a few licks without worrying about annoying the neighbors. However, some curious deer sometimes stop by to listen as they drink from the water trickling over the rocks out back. Inside, it has an ultra-modern vibe with an open plan and hardwood floors. But then you see all the gear and realize this is ‘old school.’ As we walked through the studio, it seemed that every piece of equipment had its own story.



The refurbished and fully functioning console from 1960s Capitol Records; mic from Abbey Road studios. Photo: Preshias Harris “All the music stands and all the speakers in the main room and the control room came from Capitol Records, said Noel. “The console’s parts came from Capitol Records. Capitol had ‘mirrored’ consoles, identical consoles, in both Los Angeles and New York.” The Capitol console dates from the early 1960s and Noel devoted a lot of time to refurbishing and rewiring it. We also looked at some of the musical instruments in the studio.

## Hammond organ signed with a screwdriver



Bobby Whitlock's autograph on the Hammond organ's lid. Photo: Preshias Harris

"Bobby Whitlock from Derek and the Dominoes donated

his Hammond organ," said Noel. Whitlock had signed it and dedicated it to Noel, not with a pen but by scratching the scrawl into the organ's cover with a screwdriver!

"The drum set came from Mark Herndon [who played with the band Alabama]. I think that was his '85 tour kit. The Ampeg Fliptop amp over there came from Bob Babbitt of Motown. Different speakers and microphones have a lot of historical significance. The mastering room came from the Hit Factory in New York City. A lot of the processing pieces are from Bill Putnam of Universal Audio. There's Les Paul's test equipment. Everything here had done famous things prior to us getting them."

Back then, the labels gave [artists] the ability to make two, three, four, five albums. They let them develop on their own, to come into themselves, basically, instead of 'we're gonna chase what's on the radio now and try to do the Nashville thing.' Artists now need the same ability to develop. If we can get them on the right path and get them their sound and get them some cool stuff to make them original audio-wise, that's what I see. – Noel Webster

But these aren't simply museum pieces. Noel has no interest in just putting them behind silk ropes for people to look at. Every piece is fully working and is used as part of his recording process. Artists who come to Noel's studio discover a sound that is impossible to replicate using only modern, all-digital, equipment. Even when

played back over digital devices, the difference in audio quality is noticeable.

## Six semi-trailers of music history

Interestingly, most of the pieces were destined to become museum exhibits. The Museum of Sound Recording donated a huge collection to Noel when they were no longer able to secure funding to operate a suitable display space. They sent down six semi-trailers from their warehouses in New York and New Jersey. He found ‘working homes’ for the pieces he couldn’t use himself. “It’s like you have to use these essential tools, to not shelve them, but to let them live again to make records,” Noel emphasized. Bringing Chess Records back to life is just the latest piece of the impact that Noel has made – and continues to make – on music. In fact, he had also rescued Muscle Shoals Sound Studios (MSSS) from destruction many years ago. He had visited Muscle Shoals and found the building abandoned and almost derelict. Realizing the cultural importance of the place, and the number of huge hits that had been created there, he knew he had to do something. The building was condemned but the city gave him 90 days to repair it or it would be going under the wrecking ball. Noel got to work and saved the building, turning it back into a fully functioning recording studio.

## ‘World class’ analog studio built for UA



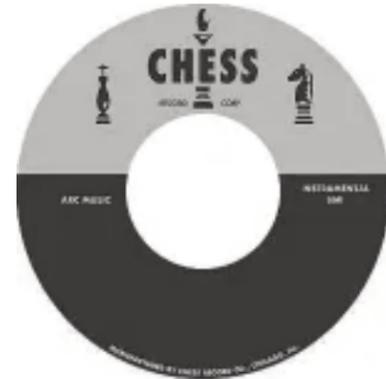
The recording studio, University of Alabama Huntsville

Noel’s expertise was called upon, too, by the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He became the first person in the state’s history to design and build a world-class analog recording studio on an Alabama college campus. It is now installed in the University’s recently renovated Roberts Recital Hall. You can see and hear a brief interview with Noel, recorded at MSSS, conducted by the Oxford American, [here](#). There is also [a one-hour audio interview with Noel](#), going into detail about the history of MSSS, and the acquisition of all that historic studio equipment, [here](#). Due to Noel’s efforts, the [building](#) is now registered as a national historic landmark. It felt a bit surreal to see the framed legal ownership documents for both Muscle Shoals Sound Studios and Chess Records, side by side on the wall in Noel’s Huntsville studio.

## Nothing ‘smashed and compressed’

We listened to some of the tracks that Noel had recorded (and also mixed and mastered) in his Huntsville studio. The sound is nothing short of amazing. As Noel points out, “Nothing is smashed and compressed with ProTools.”

Handbook’ is available at [www.collegeofsongology.com](http://www.collegeofsongology.com) Follow her blog at [www.nashvillemusicline.com](http://www.nashvillemusicline.com)



An old Chess 45 rpm record label

It is heartwarming to hear recordings made on equipment that had been destined to become silent museum exhibits, or – worse still – broken down for scrap. In the second part of this two-part post, we will continue talking to Noel and find out more about how today’s artists can record at his studio to capture the tone that only this priceless equipment can create.

Preshias Harris is a music journalist and music career development consultant with the emphasis on new and aspiring artists and songwriters. Her book, ‘The College of Songology 101: The Singer/Songwriter’s Need to Know Reference

# How To Here That Muscle Shoals Sound

Adventures  
in the Tennessee Valley January 3, 2008  
And a little beyond  
by: Tina Leach

Note: Tina has been vacationing in the sunny Caribbean for the last week and has had no local adventures, so she decided to write up an adventure that pre-dates the column by about a month. Enjoy!

It is quite bizarre to have a friend tell you and another person to come in the bathroom with him.

Before you ask, no, you don't have to cover the children's eyes. It's perfectly "Horses" there. Yeah, the Rolling Stones.

Seriously. "Wild Horses" was written in North Alabama...in a bathroom...and I've been there. We got to tour the place. So many people have recorded there it's ridiculous. The walls are full of signatures and graffiti made by said artists.

The building itself lay forgotten for a while but then was bought by Noel Webster and he's brought it back to working order,

complete with some vintage equipment. They're always recording in there, and innocent.

Keep , are now starting reading. Their own label with 3614 JACKSON HIGHWAY

Pop quiz time! aptly named Muscle Multiple choice. Shoals Sound Eyes on your own Records. There paper.

What is 3614

Jackson Highway?

a. an album by Cher

b. the location of a recording studio famous for its "Muscle Shoals sound"

c. the address of a museum

d. all of the above

Pencils down. What was your answer? If you guessed "all of the above," then you move to the head of the class. [note: This

was not an actual test. You are not being graded. \_ Please do not mail this in with your answer circled.. It will just confuse the editor.]

Muscle Shoals Sound Studio (located at 3614 Jackson Highway of course) is a recording studio/museum. Many big names have flocked to this little place in the Shoals just to capture what is known as the "Muscle Shoals sound"

Cher who actually named her album 3614 Jackson Highway and took a picture for the album cover right outside.

Part of the sound was due to the structure of the building itself, especially the floors. A fluke, but it made all the difference.

Little pieces of history right here. and wait, there's more. Back to the bathroom story. As soon as we arrived at the studio, one of my friends (this time I had two traveling companions) stepped in the bathroom and motioned for us to come in with him. Now, I don't - know about you, but I find that a little confusing, presumptuous, and just plain weird...but I went anyway.

I got a history lesson. Turns out the bathroom has special significance: Mick Jagger and Keith Richards wrote "Wild Horses"

There are all kinds of stuff going on, with live broadcasts on Wednesdays (tune in to WLAY to hear it).

You can tour the place for 10 bucks, but you have to call ahead (it's a local Huntsville number 783-2641). It is a working studio after all, and you'll want to make sure that you don't just walk in and end up with your voice accidentally on record, creating some sort of urban legend some ees down the line. It was fascinating touring the place, seeing where Paul Simon, Art Garfunkel, Cher, Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Dr. Hook, the Staple Singers, the Rolling Stones, Bob Seger, Willie Nelson, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Rod Stewart and a bunch of

others recorded. There are even rumors that an old performer haunts the place from time to time.

It was really nifty walking around in that place hearing tale after tale about recording sessions. Webster knows a ton of them and is always willing to share little tidbits. So give it a go. Book a recording session

if you want. Capture that "Muscle Shoals sound Or you could just do what a bunch of folks do and get your picture taken out front in a Cher pose. Not that I would or anything...

# MITUS OF MUSIC



Huntsville's Home Music Producer

ARTICLE BY HANNAH KANFER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER TARKINGTON

Tucked away in South Huntsville, when you arrive at Noel Webster's home and recording studio, it'll become immediately clear, that they are one in the same. The living room, where you'd typically find a TV, held a full drum kit, and every corner of the house overflowed with speakers, instruments, music memorabilia, and, of course, microphones.



“There’s magic in authenticity—mistakes and all. Records are full of mistakes that give them their soul.”

As he gives you a tour, he casually drops the names of legendary musicians like he's talking about old friends. “This is from Richard Wright of Pink Floyd,” he said, pointing to a piece of memorabilia. “And here’s a photo of Rod Stewart in our studio back in the day.” There isn’t one central recording studio in the house. Instead, every room holds the potential to be a recording space, seamlessly integrated within the home.

Finally, when you sit down, you’ll see where the magic happens.

#### BACK TO BASICS

Noel has been in the music industry for a long time, as evidenced by his collection of vintage and older recording equipment. When pressed on why he keeps recording with older equipment, “Modern recording has gone downhill!” he replies. “Computers

introduce latency, buffering, and stair-step encoding that creates distortions you’d never get from tape or radar systems. It’s like using a cheap scanner versus a 20,000-ton Gutenberg press—the results lack the weight, depth, and richness that albums or tapes once had” he explains.

“Let me show you what I mean,” he says and directs me to stand in front of one of his speakers. Soon, the familiar swing of a full brass band and Frank Sinatra’s unmistakable voice pours through the speakers. The sound is so clear, every note, every nuance in his voice, comes alive with startling intimacy as if Sinatra himself had just stepped up to the mic. “You just met Frank Sinatra. That’s the power of recording [this way]. It allows people who weren’t in the room when this was recorded to feel like they are there, in that snippet of time,” he explains.

CONTINUED >



This becomes clear as Noel plays through his recordings—each track is smooth and rich, like decadent chocolate for the ears. Noel pushes for the most authentic version of a recording. Nowadays in mainstream music, there’s sometimes a disconnect between how an artist sounds on a recording versus how they sound live. Noel attributes this to the dangers of overproduction. “You don’t want somebody over there working a mixing console to make you sound like something you didn’t do to begin with,” he explains.

“You want to get it as close to the original take as possible,” he says. “You know, this is The Red Clay Strays album right there—I made it in 12 days, mixed and mastered included.” That album, *Moment of Truth* by The Red Clay Strays, was a massive success. It’s no understatement to say it performed exceptionally well as it’s currently the only platinum album to come out of Huntsville.

“There’s magic in authenticity—mistakes and all. Records are full of mistakes that give them their soul. Jerry Wexler famously kept the wrong version of *When a Man Loves a Woman*, where the horns were flat, because it sounded like they were pushing so hard it became part of the song’s color. That raw imperfection communicates intent—that’s what music is about. When you start cleaning, adjusting, and quantizing it, you ruin what made it real in the first place.”



“As a producer working with musicians, you have to pull things out of them they don’t even realize are there.”



#### THE WORK OF A PRODUCER

“You have to take something out of nothing and create something beautiful,” said Webster. Just as a director drives their actors or a choreographer pushes their dancers, a music producer is clearly an artist in their own right. There’s an undeniable level of craft in producing, a blend of both technical skill and musical intuition. “As a producer working with musicians, you have to pull things out of them they don’t even realize are there. Many musicians are used to singing in clubs, yelling over monitors, pool balls clinking, and people screaming. So, they’re often pushing a lot harder than they need to. But in here, it’s the exact opposite. The softer you are, the bigger the record sounds”.

#### ADVICE FOR MUSICIANS

So how can artists from the Tennessee Valley hold their own against the musical names coming out of Nashville or Atlanta? “Think about it—Huntsville might have 20 bands making music and releasing CDs at bar parties, but that’s usually where it stops. They struggle to sell their music or get anyone to truly listen. When bands with four or five albums realize they’re stuck, they come to me. I strip down everything they’ve learned, rebuild their approach from the ground up, and teach them to record in a completely new way. When they hear the playback, they’re floored—it’s the first time they’ve truly heard themselves” said Noel.

CONTINUED >



The takeaway is clear, sounding good live is important, but how you come across on a recording can define your reach and leave a lasting impression long after the show is over. For musicians feeling inspired, Noel is always open to collaborating with artists he believes in, helping them create records that showcase their unique voices and elevate their craft.

You can book recording sessions at [noelwebster.com](http://noelwebster.com).

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## On the Cover

Step inside this fairytale home on Monte Sano Mountain. Photographer Joe Davis captures an artistic view of the bold colors and statements that make this home one of a kind.

Photography:  
Joe Davis

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WHAT'S SPINNING?

# What's Spinning?: With Noel Webster

by: Cristina Byrne  
Posted: Oct 2, 2024 / 03:44 PM CDT  
Updated: Oct 11, 2024 / 10:38 AM CDT



SHARE    

*This is an archived article and the information in the article may be outdated. Please look at the time stamp on the story to see when it was last updated.*

(WHNT)—[Noel Webster](#) is a musician, producer, and sound engineer.

He spent twelve years on the road as the 'sound guy' for acts like the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. Then in 1999, he bought and renovated the iconic [Muscle Shoals Sound Studios](#) and in 2006 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Noel caught up with us about 'What's Spinning' for him – an album by the Red Clay Strays independently recorded at his studio!

Name of record/artist?

Noel: [The Red Clay Strays](#) / Moment of Truth

The Red Clay Strays is a county rock band from Mobile, AL.

What emotion does this record invoke for you?

Noel: Happy & lots of recording tricks

What is your favorite instrumental part of this album?

Noel: Guitars answering each other on the song, Do Me Wrong

[What's Spinning? Trash Pandas Catcher Tyler Payne](#) 

Does this record bring back any memories for you?

Noel: Not a lot of difficulty in the working with the artist & they loved the results

What are the highlight tracks?

Noel: Wondering Why and Do Me Wrong



Describe the album artwork

Noel: The old bus that was breaking down constantly

## RAPID WORDASSOCIATION–What is the FIRST word that comes to mind.

Noel: Brandon Coleman, calling Mea"er waiting a year to get out of the record deal in Nashville and he was so excited to finally be free and come let me produce them.



## Why should WE listen to this record?

Noel: It's the result of what can happen when a bar band who writes the there own songs can work with a Producer with lots of tricks up his sleeve and the right gear to turn it into the First Platinum album in Huntsville, Alabama music history.

Noel Webster's private studio is in Huntsville, Alabama

[Suggesta Correction](#)

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## BEST RE VIEWS

