

Michael's Rock and Roll Posse—Holy Ground: "Now Muscle Shoals Has Got the Swampers"

Now Muscle Shoals has got the Swampers
And they've been known to pick a song or two
Lord they get me off so much
They pick me up when I'm feeling blue
Now how about you?
"Sweet Home Alabama" (1974)

I have been methodically making the rounds to various holy places, or places where rock and roll was produced, performed, or memorialized, and so far have been to about half my list: Stax, Motown, Brill Building, Sun Studio, EMP Museum f/k/a Experience Music Project and Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame (EMP/SFM)—which has the extraordinary Jimi Hendrix Collection, Norman Petty Studio, and several others. Increasingly, these places have been memorialized in movies—some fictionalized (Cadillac Records, standing in for Chess Records) and some documentaries, such as my friend Steve Palmisano's PBS "New Mexico Music Legends: The Norman Petty Studios" (Buddy Holly/Roy Orbison/LeAnn Rhimes/Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs), "Sound City" (Neil Young/Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers/Nirvana/Fleetwood Mac), "The Wrecking Crew" (Beach Boys/Sinatra/The Association), and "Standing in the Shadows of Motown," about the Motown house musicians, the Funk Brothers. Of course, there are more, many more, about the production and distribution of music, including "Searching for Sugar Man," about Rodriguez (and which won the Academy Award last year for Best Documentary) and labor economics and issues, such as "20 Feet from Stardom," about backup singers, which I recently reviewed. (The PBS show about Norman Petty was covered by the NM press:<http://www.abqjournal.com/news/metro/01237222829newsmetro06-01-09.htm>.)

Now comes "Muscle Shoals," another movie to run, not walk to see, for it will not be playing long in your neighborhood theater, more's the pity. We saw it last night at the Museum of Fine Art-Houston, among the great utilitarian, non-nonsense tiered movie theaters, and one of few Mies van der Rohe-designed

theaters still in use today. Of course, Muscle Shoals, made famous in the 1974 Lynyrd Skynyrd song, “Sweet Home Alabama,” is the studio (FAME Music) owned and operated by Rick Hall in the Northern Alabama town, which recorded the music of so many musicians that it is hard to believe or to track: Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, Otis Redding, Dylan, Paul Simon, the Stones, Linda Ronstadt, the Staple Singers, the Allmans, Rod Stewart, Clarence Carter, Etta James, and dozens of others. Unbelievably, there is footage of Percy Sledge, Wilson Pickett, and, extraordinarily, Aretha, recording with the nearly all-White studio band, the Muscle Shoals Sound Rhythm Section. There are very funny and revealing interviews with many of the artists who recorded there (although it privileges U2’s Bono a bit much, for my taste). While there were several versions of the house band (the “Swampers”), the core has been Spooner Oldham (piano/organ), Pete Carr (guitar), Barry Beckett (keyboards), Jimmy Johnson (guitar), Roger Hawkins (drums), and David Hood (bass). (Note to Rock and Roll Hall of Fame: it was great that Spooner Oldham, one of the most wicked piano/organ players anywhere was selected in 2009, but the others, as well as Rick Hall, are long overdue.) For much of the movie, there is interplay among the evocative isolation and lushness of the Tennessee River geography, the artists and musicians, and the glorious music.

Muscle Shoals was originally the home of FAME Studio, and there was a schism prompted by Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records having a falling out with Rick Hall, which led to a defection of the musicians to Muscle Shoals Sound, which became a competitor. Although I loved the movie and thought it nailed most of the historical fine points, both for accuracy and for nuance, it was unclear on why the break occurred and which groups played where. The movie shows how Hall had to replace the Swampers with other excellent musicians and the emotional *rapprochement* between some of the defector musicians and him many years (and albums) later, but it does not depict the virtual civil war that occurred. My take has always been that Jerry Wexler—who provided talent out of his Atlantic Records stable—felt he was not in full charge with the talented and successful Rick Hall producing his singers so far away from New York City. This movie comes close, but I do not think it nails this matter. Luckily, both studios thrived, and in its prime, FAME was making one album a week of high octane R&B, soul, and rock and roll.

In one gem that I had forgotten, Aretha had been fired from her Columbia Records contract, and Wexler signed her in 1967. (Letting her go was Columbia’s foolishness, at least as bad as Decca’s not signing the Beatles, with EMI

Parlophone doing so in 1962.) She and her father, the Rev. C.L. Franklin, had recorded several of her early gospel songs under contract with JVB Records, and Columbia had her singing soft ballads and the like (such as the 1962 album "The Tender, the Moving, the Swinging Aretha Franklin") before the time at Muscle Shoals produced her first hits, "I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)" and "Respect." Most people do not know that "Respect" was a cover of Otis Redding's song that he had actually written for Speedo Sims, another early Muscle Shoals singer, so the song was rattling around the studio when Wexler insisted that she sing it, because Redding had done so, but Sims never did record it. When he first heard her version, Otis Redding is said to have responded, "That little girl stole it away." One can only imagine how much money that cover made for the Redding estate, as he died soon after recording "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay." This movie literally captures her first recording sessions at Muscle Shoals, where she walked out after her then-husband had a fight with one of the musicians. She thought better of her brief walkout, returned from the airport, and then stayed and triumphed with the unparalleled music we all know and love. Columbia Records, which had her covering Dinah Washington songs (?) would never have furloughed her to Sweet Home Alabama. Moving this gem to Muscle Shoals proved to be the key to unlocking her incredible talent.

This triumphant movie is directed by Greg 'Freddy' Camalier, in his directing debut. May he live long and prosper, and mine so many of the other great rock and roll stories out there. He could next move to the many stories buried in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Immaculate Funk Archives Collection, named after "Immaculate Funk: The Jerry Wexler Story." That important 2002 documentary just scratched the surface of the Wexler archives and materials. Now that a decent period of time has passed since Wexler died, Camalier could go to those Archives in Cleveland, scrounge around, and find out exactly why he bolted when he did, in the Muscle Shoals coup. Go see this, as soon as you can.