

forged effortlessly by this scholar. Who else would think to seat Jazz-Age *littérateur* Zora Neale Hurston at a table next to the likes of sixties counterculture maverick Lester Bangs? And it is surely modesty that prevents Weisbard from showing himself seated at even the table's lowliest place: It is, after all, his distinctive gift as speculative stenographer that enables us to listen in on the invigorating arguments between such disparate authors that he imagines for us in every essay of *Songbooks*.

Dane-Michael Harrison is a Ph.D. candidate in Historical Musicology at Case Western Reserve University. He is currently writing a dissertation, tentatively titled "Chic and low-down: Paradoxes of the American popular 'art' song," which concerns art music-allied composers who, for various reasons, invest themselves in popular songwriting during the interwar years. He is an editorial assistant for the journal *American Music*.

Music and Mystique in Muscle Shoals

By Christopher M. Reali. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022

Brian F. Wright

College of Music, University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA

Email: brian.wright@unt.edu

doi:10.1017/S175219632400018X

On March 1, 1971, *The National Observer* ran a front-page feature on the Muscle Shoals, Alabama, recording scene. According to its author:

In spite of its odd moniker and out-of-the-way location, Muscle Shoals has lately been attracting visitors from as far away as New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. People like Liza Minnelli, the Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin, Bobbie Gentry, Peggy Lee, and Joe Cocker. And why should such pop stars brave the smiles and snickers of their friends to go into seclusion for days at a time in a bone-dry backwater... "Why? To make hit records, that's why!"¹

This brief excerpt neatly spotlights what had, by then, become key tenets of Muscle Shoals's musical brand: Its remote location in the Southern United States, its ability to accommodate artists across a wide variety of musical styles, and, above all else, its reputation for producing hits. Such depictions mixed fantasy with reality, creating a powerful story that helped secure the Shoals's mythic position in popular music. In his authoritative new book, *Music and Mystique in Muscle Shoals*, Christopher M. Reali recounts the region's musical history while also deconstructing the mythology that has come to surround it. With this monograph, Reali not only provides the first serious survey of the Shoals music industry, but also offers a fascinating and richly detailed account built on extensive archival research and oral history interviews with key participants.

In the introduction, Reali explores the history of the Muscle Shoals region itself, highlighting the intersecting cultural, economic, and political factors that paved the way for a music industry to flourish there. In particular, he highlights its steady factory work, its strong emphasis on education, and its relative racial tolerance compared to other parts of Alabama. At the same time, he charts how a handful of local entrepreneurs came together in the late fifties to build a makeshift demo studio there with the intention of pitching songs to Nashville-based labels and publishers. In 1960, the company split into two operations, with Tom Stafford running SPAR (Stafford Publishing and Recording) and Rick Hall building and running a separate studio under the name FAME (Florence Alabama Music Enterprises).

¹Bruce Cook, "Muscle What?: Muscle Shoals, That's It; New Home for Hit Records," *The National Observer* (March 1, 1971): 1. Cook attributes the final part of the quote to Frank Daily, then Vice President of FAME Recording Studios.

As Reali argues, with these two studios in place, the region now “had every essential ingredient for a big music boom” (16).

The first two chapters, which focus on the Shoals’s well-known contributions to sixties R&B and soul, are its most compelling. Like Andrew Flory’s and Charles Hughes’s recent work, Reali revisits this era through a modern lens, revealing the complex, behind-the-scenes dynamics that ultimately produced some of its most successful and influential records.² Chapter 1 focuses on the teams of session musicians that transformed the Shoals into a “world-class recording center” (32). As Reali demonstrates, these musicians were amateurs who learned on the job. Because of the primitive equipment in Shoals studios, as well as Stafford’s and Hall’s own inexperience as producers and engineers, the musicians honed their craft by recording take after take, all for a small flat fee. This process led to some early hits, including Arthur Alexander’s “You Better Move On” (1962). More significantly, however, it established the precedent that the musicians would work long hours for below union wages—a precedent that continued throughout the sixties, even as they began to record even bigger hits for Atlantic, such as Wilson Pickett’s “Land of 1,000 Dances” (1966). Throughout this chapter, Reali’s oral history interviews shine as he presents the musicians’ stories from their own perspectives and in their own voices. This approach adds a valuable sense of complexity and nuance to the narrative, one that has been largely absent from previous portrayals of the Shoals recording scene. For example, reflecting on their work with Hall, the musicians repeatedly denounce him as overbearing and cruel while simultaneously expressing a “deep respect” and indebtedness to him (52). The other highlight of this chapter is Reali’s archival research. Drawing on surviving payroll records, session contracts, musicians’ personal logbooks, and more, he reconstructs how the scene operated financially, providing useful insights into the business side of R&B.

In Chapter 2, Reali uses Aretha Franklin’s recorded work with FAME session musicians to explore the complicated racial dynamics of sixties soul music. Drawing on Jennifer Lynn Stoevers’s concept of the “sonic color line,” he shows how the white Shoals musicians were initially drawn to Black-coded musical styles as a form of generational defiance.³ He then documents how their original contributions to Franklin’s soul hits, including “Respect” (1967), were largely overlooked by critics who were understandably invested in portraying Franklin and her music as emblems of Black pride. As Reali argues, however, this rhetoric has ultimately served to further entrench racialized conceptions of musical style for both Black and white listeners. With its clear examples, accessible prose, and nuanced analyses, this chapter would serve well as a discussion piece for undergraduate or graduate seminars.

The book’s subsequent chapters follow the Shoals music industry from the late sixties through the present day. Chapter 3 interrogates the concept of a “Muscle Shoals Sound,” a catchphrase that began appearing in the music industry trades after a group of former FAME session musicians established Muscle Shoals Sound Studio in 1969. Although the phrase ostensibly described the unique characteristics of the music recorded in the Shoals, Reali argues that its murky definition allowed it to loosely function as both a sonic descriptor and a marketing tool. Detailing the recording techniques and equipment used in the Shoals, he ultimately concludes that the phrase most accurately refers to the “method of production” employed in Shoals studios, rather than any one specific sound (112).

In Chapter 4, Reali chronicles how music industry executives and rock critics came to fetishize Muscle Shoals as representing an exotic, imagined South. As evident within the *National Observer*’s aforementioned description of the Shoals recording scene, such depictions enhanced the Muscle Shoals mystique by playing upon stereotypical, romanticized notions of Southern authenticity. This increase in cultural capital, Reali contends, helped the region become a premier recording destination, with artists as varied as Jimmy Cliff, the Rolling Stones, Traffic, and Paul Simon recording music there, hoping “to own for themselves a piece of the Muscle Shoals Sound” (142).

²Andrew Flory, *I Hear A Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³Jennifer Lynn Stoevers, *The Sonic Color Line: Race the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

Chapter 5 explores how the Shoals music industry survived by pivoting to country music following its heyday in the early seventies. Building on the region's longstanding connections with Nashville, Rick Hall and others began to produce bestselling country records, while local songwriters generated publishing revenue by writing chart-topping country singles—such as Gary Baker and Frank Myers' "I Swear," which, in 1994, became both a #1 country hit for John Michael Montgomery and a #1 pop hit for the R&B group All-4-One. Although country music was integral to the Shoals music industry, especially in the eighties and nineties, Reali points out that this history is often underacknowledged, as it does not easily fit within the standard mythology of the Shoals as a center for R&B and soul.

Chapter 6 continues the Muscle Shoals story into the twenty-first century, exploring how the region developed a thriving cultural tourism industry. As Reali shows, the seeds of this industry were initially sown by local musicians and studio owners who lobbied for the creation of the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in nearby Tuscumbia, but ultimately, it was a popular 2013 documentary on the Shoals's musical history that transformed the region into a popular tourist destination. Visitors can now tour not only the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, but also FAME Studios and a newly restored version of Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. Reali notes that today the Muscle Shoals mystique continues to function as a lucrative cultural brand, one in which fact and myth have become inextricably intertwined (187).

Reali's meticulous research will make this book of great interest to popular music scholars, especially researchers concerned with soul and R&B history, the development of recording scenes, music and Southern identity, and industry business practices. In the end, *Music and Mystique in Muscle Shoals* provides a much-needed overview of one of the United States's most important regional music centers. In so doing, it convincingly demonstrates the benefits of analyzing local music industries, both for their larger impact on music history and for how they have evolved and endured over time.

Brian F. Wright is an Assistant Professor of Music History at the University of North Texas. He holds a Ph.D. in Historical Musicology from Case Western Reserve University and is a former research assistant for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archive. His book, *The Bastard Instrument: A Cultural History of the Electric Bass*, chronicles the history of the electric bass in jazz, rock, country, and rhythm and blues and explores issues such as authenticity, social stigma, amateur music-making, race, and popular music historiography.