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Rhythms of life at Muscle Shoals , Alabama

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by Graham McKenzie

Situated in the Northeast corner of Alabama, tucked close to the Mississippi and Tennessee borders, Muscle Shoals Sound Studios stands out as one of the centres of American musical history.

Forming a triumvirate of musical hot spots with Memphis and Nashville, the culture, the people and the surrounds are responsible for many of the sounds that have created the soundtrack of the South. Who hasn't tried to emulate Mick Jagger cavorting around the front room to Brown Sugar? Danced and swayed to Sailing by Rod Stewart? Had a contemplative moment or two listening to Percy Sledge, Aretha or the Staple Singers?

Probably nobody under the age of 45 but for everybody else, the answer is almost certainly yes. Here in Muscle Shoals, you can visit the revered studios which were and still are responsible for making the town the hit recording capital of the world.

A visit to 'the Shoals', as it is known locally, is not complete without a tour of the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio and the FAME studios. Here musical history was created and the list of famous groups and singers utilising the unique local talent pool of musicians is far too long to list here.

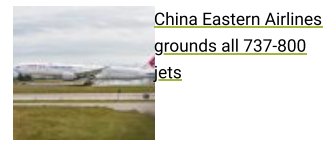
An example was at 3614 Jackson Highway (Muscle Shoals Sound Studio) on one day in 1969 a local singer RB Greaves recorded '*There is always something there to remind me*' but later that afternoon the Rolling Stones turned up unannounced and over the course of the next few days cut three tracks for the forthcoming Sticky Fingers album.

One of these songs '*Wild Horses*' was allegedly written by Keith Richard whilst sitting on the toilet. Another was the aforementioned Brown Sugar. The studios themselves are no bigger than the average public bar but it definitely captures you and enthrals you.

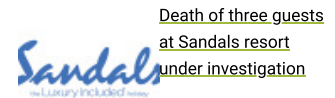
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Needless to say, music pervades almost every aspect of life outside the studios as well. Live performances are easily found and can be combined with excellent Southern Soul food and hospitality. I enjoyed the famous fried chicken at Champys on the deck with live country music. Excellent!

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Almost supplementary to the music Muscle Shoals has an array of other fascinating attractions. It is, for example, one of the few places in the US that has a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. If ever there was an occasion to quote 'fashion is temporary, but style is permanent this is it. Although almost 100 years old, it could easily have been built yesterday.

A museum dedicated to WC Handy, the composer of St Louis Blues (music again) is worth a morning visit as is the ancient Indian mound that is over 2,000 years old. Another venue for lunch or dinner is the Rattlesnake saloon which is a cave created from natural water erosion of the sandstone. Helen Keller's house is in the Shoals and the famous drystone wall created by Tom in honour of his Great Great Grandmother is truly outstanding.

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Music however is the reason to go to the Muscle Shoals Sound Studios. Rick Hall, who masterminded many of the hits at FAME studios once said, 'Them that don't know, don't know they don't know'. One visit and you *will* know.

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