

Legends and Legacy: Musical Tourism in Muscle Shoals

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg1znqJfwXk>

Abstract

A 1917 pamphlet, “The Legend of Muscle Shoals and the Story of Florence,” recounted a Cherokee myth that claimed a sweetly singing voice could be heard from beneath the waters of the Tennessee River. Within a few years, this story appeared in a source adopted as a textbook in Alabama public schools and used into the 1950s. This tale, now known as the “Singing River” legend, unleashed a powerful cultural force that has shaped the promotion and reception of the Muscle Shoals, Alabama music scene.

A nascent recording scene developed in Muscle Shoals during the mid-1950s. During the ensuing years, numerous performers recorded many hit tracks primarily at two local recording studios, FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound. Over the course of sixty years and the production of thousands of recordings, the Muscle Shoals music scene has itself become legendary.

The “Singing River” legend attained more popularity during the 1990s, but the term entered the vernacular after the 2013 release of the documentary, *Muscle Shoals*. County tourism boards foreground the “Singing River” as a part of their marketing strategies to attract tourists to the area. A host of local businesses now use the phrase in their names. What was once a Cherokee myth has become a brand.

This paper examines how the Muscle Shoals region exploits myth and memory to attract tourists seeking authentic cultural tourism experiences. Cultural tourism relies on a mixture of tangible elements such as historic sites as well as intangible elements including music and myths. Muscle Shoals Sound is now a museum, and the public can tour FAME. The “Singing River” myth promoted in conjunction with tours of these legendary studios ultimately serves to transform and reimagine the Shoals as a holy site.

Keywords: cultural tourism, music tourism, music cities, Muscle Shoals, Singing River, FAME, Muscle Shoals Sound

Christopher M. Reali is an Assistant Professor of Music (Music Industry) at Ramapo College of New Jersey. He holds a Ph.D. in musicology, and studies popular music by examining the relationships between local music scenes and the national music industry. He is currently working on a manuscript about the Muscle Shoals, Alabama recording industry.



This work situates the Muscle Shoals music scene within the larger narrative of popular music studies by assessing salient musical characteristics and interpreting the long-lasting cultural effects of this Alabama community. Reali has presented at numerous conferences including the American Musicological Society, the Society for American Music, the Society for Ethnomusicology, the U.S. conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, and the MEIEA Summit. His published work appears in *Rock Music Studies*, *MEIEA Journal*, *Southern Cultures*, *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, and *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Dr. Reali has also toured the United States, Canada, and Western Europe as a guitar technician and tour manager for Chris Whitley, and as a guitar, bass, and drum tech for David Gray.



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