



Muscle Shoals Discussion Guide

Director: Greg “Freddy” Camalier

Year: 2013

Time: 111 min

MUSCLE SHOALS is Greg Camalier’s first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

MUSCLE SHOALS takes viewers into the small but legendary music studios of Muscle Shoals, Alabama—a small town hugging the south bank of the Tennessee River where some of the greatest music of the 1960s and ‘70s was produced. Rick Hall founded FAME Studios in 1960 and drew artists like Etta James, Aretha Franklin, Percy Sledge, Wilson Pickett, the Rolling Stones, and the Avett Brothers. It’s where Percy Sledge recorded “When a Man Loves a Woman,” and where Aretha Franklin found her voice in “I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Love You).” It’s where southern rock was birthed, and where British rockers went looking for the “magic” of Muscle Shoals. The film includes meditative shots of the surrounding landscape, intimate studio archival footage, an amazing soundtrack, and revealing interviews with music legends.

The film also addresses the racial politics of that time and place. Though the Civil Rights movement was in effect, Alabama was severely segregated, with Governor Wallace standing in the entrance of the University of Alabama in 1963 to defy the desegregation of schools. On his way to the studio, Wilson Pickett recoiled at the sight of active cotton fields nearby. And the producers cautiously navigated local restaurants where they went to eat with their black colleagues. But inside of the walls of the recording studio, skin color meant nothing. All that mattered were the voices and the instruments, harmonizing together to capture that inimitable, magical “Muscle Shoals sound.”

FILM THEMES

No one can fully explain why so much great music was made in Muscle Shoals. Was it the area, the spiritual richness of the river and the soil? The history and culture of the times? Was there something special about the people involved? What was the “magic” everyone referred to?

MUSIC AS HEALING

At the film’s heart is Rick Hall, founder of FAME Studios. His early life was marked by tragedies, including several deaths in his family. Rick says he was rejected by his mother, schoolmates, Atlantic Records, Jerry Wexler, and later on the Swampers rhythm section, who went on to found their own Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. But Rick persevered, determined to be a great producer. He worked on “every record as if [his] life depended on it.” Musicians describe him as meticulous and “always such a joy and pain to work with.” When Rick eventually finds peace, he credits the passage of time, but it’s evident that his work in helping to create amazing music provided a powerful, healing outlet.

RACE AND HISTORY

The film doesn’t delve deeply into racial politics, but a few details do percolate. Filmmaker Greg Camalier said in an interview, “I found out that the Klan was actually near there during that time period. Some of the guys talked about being afraid when they were traveling together with the artists around town, but as far as I know, nothing ever happened in the studio.” Though the film suggests that racial issues did not exist within the studio, the historical reality cannot be ignored and may provide subtext to the Muscle Shoals recordings, as an emotional and political undercurrent.

LAND AS INSPIRATION

The film highlights the surrounding nature of Muscle Shoals, particularly the Tennessee River, which the American Indians of that area, the Yuchi, called The Singing River. As the legend goes, a young woman lived in the river, singing and protecting the people. This poetic detail suggests that the Muscle Shoals sound was partly influenced by the history of the land, which includes genocide and slavery, that the soulful music was steeped in that brutal history, and in the consciousness that comes from dealing with a shared history.

ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

Perhaps the “magic” of Muscle Shoals was simply the energy created when artists came together in collaboration. Rick Hall was a demanding, hard-working producer. The Swampers were talented musicians whose rhythmic backing helped create the signature Muscle Shoals sound and attracted other talented artists from all over the world. The film reveals how many were involved behind the scenes, and how many people it takes to record a song that hits all the right notes.

“But the thing we had going for us was this great story which is like folklore amongst musicians. Musicians are usually willing to talk about those who came before them, who are these seminal figures in music, especially guys who have lived in anonymity and have never had their moment. That really is a big draw, plus the history that these Muscle Shoals guys contributed to.

Director Greg Camalier

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How many songs did you recognize in the film, and were you surprised by the number of popular songs that were recorded in Muscle Shoals?
2. Before watching this film, how much did you know about the inner-workings of a music studio? Did the film expand your understanding of what a music producer does?
3. How would you characterize Rick Hall? Which defines him more - his rejections and tragedies, or his determination and success? What parts of his story can you relate to?
4. Why is Rick Hall at the center of the film? Do you think he helps unify the story, and how so?
5. How would you describe the “Muscle Shoals sound”? Do you think the history of Alabama had any influence?
6. Why do you think people were so surprised that the Swampers were white men?
7. Rick Hall said that the racial politics of Alabama never seeped into the music studio. Do you believe him? Why or why not?
8. How did you feel about the Swampers leaving Rick Hall and FAME studios to establish their own recording studio?
9. Do you think songs like “Brown Sugar” and “Sweet Home Alabama” are more controversial today than when they first appeared? Why do you think they were so popular (or remain popular) despite certain lyrics, which many would deem politically incorrect or even highly offensive?
10. Why do you think Bono was featured in the film, even though he never recorded in Muscle Shoals? What do his opinions and his presence contribute to the film?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- No one knows for sure how the name Muscle Shoals came to be, but there are a few theories. One theory is that there were once piles of mussel shells along the shoals in the Tennessee River. Another theory is that the river's shape looks like an arm muscle. Another theory is stated in several booklets as follows: "Muscle Shoals, the Niagara of the South, derives its name from the Indians, who, attempting to navigate upstream, found the task almost impossible because of the strong current." The word "muscle" then is a symbol of the strength required to paddle up the rapids.
- The original Muscle Shoals Sound Studio is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. FAME Studios is included on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.
- Muscle Shoals attracted some of the biggest talents of the '60s and '70s, and yet the nicest hotel was a Holiday Inn. Sometimes, the studios would put their artists in mobile homes at the local trailer park.
- Wexler created the term "rhythm and blues" while working as an editor, reporter, and writer for Billboard Magazine.
- Singer/songwriter Leon Russell, who recorded with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, coined the nickname "The Swampers" for them. The Swampers have played on more than 75 gold and platinum hits.
- The Swampers are referenced in the Lynyrd Skynyrd song "Sweet Home Alabama." The lines are: "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."
- In 1969, the Swampers members — Beckett, Hawkins, Hood, and Johnson — left FAME to found the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio.
- In an interview, director Greg Camalier said he was fortunate to have so much great archival footage. Some of the footage came from a Swedish documentary, and some came from the Maysles brothers, who had filmed the Stones in Muscle Shoals for their film "Gimme Shelter."
- Director Greg Camalier helped a friend move from the U.S. east coast to New Mexico. In an interview, he said, "We decided to skip the highways and take the back roads through the south, to take the southern route and ended up in Muscle Shoals late one night." They actually passed the rural area but drove back 40 miles because, "so much of the music we loved was from there." They researched the town's history that night before bed, and the following day, Camalier said to his friend, "I can't believe no one has told this story. We should make a film about this place and this story."
- It took Camalier over three years to make the film. He shot hundreds of hours of footage.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to learn about the amazing music created in Muscle Shoals.
2. Support your local musicians. Attend shows and purchase albums directly from musicians when possible.
3. Incorporate more music into your life. Revisit an instrument you once played, join a local choir, form a band, write a song, dust off your record player, or host a listening party for your new favorite album.
4. Offer lessons to someone who is interested in learning to sing or play an instrument if you already know how to, especially children whose schools have suffered cuts in Arts funding.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.