



Photo: Alyssa Cash/Jacksonville State University

Randy Owen | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

AND FROM FORT PAYNE, ALABAMA...

By Caity Bell

“Where are you from?” A question I’d become quite familiar with in my first semester away, and one I initially answered expecting very little in response. I had entered college thinking that Fort Payne was a small town of, seemingly, very little note.

“Wait, Fort Payne, *Alabama*? Where the band is from?”

That was the first time someone I’d met had recognized my hometown but, as I’d come to learn over the years, it wouldn’t be the last. (Most recently, while on a trip, I had answered that same question only to have a random passerby begin to sing the last lines of “Christmas in

Dixie.”) Fort Payne, though a small city, is far from being one of very little note.

As an archivist, I can tell you there have been several things that have put our town on the map throughout its history. But there is no doubt that our present place on the map of memory is due to the band ALABAMA and, especially, its lead vocalist and songwriter, Randy Owen. You can easily spot the bronze statues at City Park or spy the band’s handprints framed outside the DeKalb Theatre, but the true impressions, those that extend from a person’s actions like dominoes falling into the lives of others, aren’t as easily seen.

“Folks know, if they’re fallin’ on hard times, they can fall back on, those of us raised up down home...”

-“Down Home,” ALABAMA, Pass It On Down

As the face of one of the most well-known groups in country music history, Randy Owen could have easily left Fort Payne for greener pastures once the band finally took off in 1980 (after a slow start in 1973 as Wild Country before finding their footing as ALABAMA). While that would have been a predictable road to take, Owen instead chose a different route. This path, tied to his roots, found a “little dot on the state road map” sharing its stories with a wider world.

Growing up here, I always felt that the music of the mountains was really just stories. Conversations, accompanied by instruments, that spanned generations, bearing within them an invitation to share in another’s life. Perhaps the popularity of Owen’s music comes from this sense of invitation that his songwriting offers to his audience. Owen’s lyrics invite you into the slice of life that a small rural town has to offer — a life woven by an elder’s wisdom, a neighbor’s helping hand, hard work and long days, and the inescapable connection to the earth beneath your feet. Yet you do not have to be from Fort Payne, Alabama, to connect with this music. This music, I believe, is a conversation, and it is one that invites us to reflect on the sense of community that these lyrics stir within us, wherever our homes may be found, and the ways in which we may contribute to them.

As Owen stated in an interview with *The Boot*, in 2012, “as long as God lets me live, I want to do things that make a difference in the world besides play music.” Looking back, there can be little doubt that he’s done just that. His other contributions to his home state are, arguably, as extensive as his musical one. Back home, he has served on the board of trustees for Landmarks of DeKalb County, helping to preserve the history of the area he calls home. And those famed June Jams could have happened anywhere, but Owen and the band chose to hold them in Fort Payne, where the community could benefit from their success (and, when Fort Payne was no longer the “Sock Capital of the World,” it would be *this* that kept us on the map).

He’s also given back to his alma mater, (where he earned an English degree that would encourage the writer within him to venture into short stories and poetry), by serving on the board of trustees for Jacksonville State University and playing a key role in completing JSU’s Little River Canyon Center (housing the field school and the National Park Service). Most recently, his legacy in the arts and humanities has been honored through the

“Owen’s lyrics invite you into what small rural town has to offer — a life woven by an elder’s wisdom, a neighbor’s helping hand, hard work and long days, and the inescapable connection to the earth beneath your feet.”

Randy Owen Center for the Performing Arts. The Center is intended to serve as an investment in the arts for JSU; it is also an investment for us all, as the next Randy Owen could pass through its doors. Beyond honoring Owen’s contributions to JSU, it will carry on the collaborative nature of the humanities by which Owen has lived his life, investing always in another.

In another song, “Pass It On Down,” Owen calls us to care for our home at an environmental level, yet it always reminds me of the sentiment he (and others from our shared local history) has chosen to live his life by. Fort Payne, to me, is a place that is saved from obscurity by its people, who, time and again, upon finding unexpected success, choose to give back to their community. People recognize my home on the map because of the impact Randy Owen has made promoting our region’s history, traditions, and culture to the world. I am hopeful that, whoever places us on the map next, will follow the example Owen has set out in his songs — and held true in his life.

“It’s only ours to borrow, let’s leave some for tomorrow. Let’s leave some and pass it on down.”

-“Pass It On Down,” ALABAMA, Pass It On Down

Caity Bell is an archivist and exhibit curator who works with Landmarks of DeKalb County in the hometown she shares with Randy Owen. She also serves on the board of directors of the Alabama Historical Association, the alumni board for the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, and on the education committee for the Scottsboro Boys Museum.