

From the executive director

Charles W. (Chuck) Holmes

"If you look at the recording studios, they were humble shells. But what they contained was an empire that crossed race and creed and ethnicity. It was revolutionary."

— U2's Bono on the legacy of Muscle Shoals, Alabama

Let's consider the story of a revolution.

This year, we are celebrating America's 250th and the freedoms we cherish. Boston's elegant colonial buildings come to mind. Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The monuments in D.C., of course.

Pondering this, I am also thinking about an unremarkable two-story commercial building just off U.S. Highway 43 in Muscle Shoals. Unkempt blossoming crepe myrtles, fed by heavy summer rains, nearly obscure the building's entrance.

Yet music lovers worldwide know it as a pilgrimage site. In the 1960s and '70s, FAME Recording Studios became an unlikely magnet for local talent, and for artists from around the globe, looking to bathe in the undeniable spirit of the Shoals.

Percy Sledge, Wilson Pickett, Clarence Carter, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan. Cher, Paul Simon, the Rolling Stones, and dozens of other names you know were (and are still) drawn to FAME and the nearby Muscle Shoals Sound Studio for their signature R&B vibes.

On a recent work trip, I checked this item off my bucket list, along with a side trip to the 19th century Florence birthplace of W.C. Handy, a founding father of the blues. In truth, my reflections in this column about the Shoals have less to do with the American Revolution or even the mid-20th century revolution in American music. They have more to do with the essence of America, found in Alabama. Muscle Shoals is a story of unity and creativity and, well, the magic that happens when human beings appreciate each other as human beings.

The music of the Shoals — bluesy, funky, soulful — emerged at a time when the nation was roiled by deep divisions, racial tensions, and civil unrest. FAME was started by a white entrepreneur born into a family of sharecroppers. In Alabama during the civil rights struggles, the place he founded propelled the careers of musicians black and white, many of whom likewise grew up poor.



Photo: Beau Gustafson

The studios were inclusive; the sound transcended race. Early on, before word got out, artists traveling to Alabama to seek that soul groove were surprised to find that the house band, later dubbed The Swampers, were, in fact, an all-white rhythm section.

The Shoals story is one of opportunity and audacity and innovation and prosperity. Let freedom ring.

In these pages of *Mosaic*, you'll find more stories of Alabama and America, in all their glory and complexity. We've asked Alabama writers to consider the Declaration of Independence, the lives of veterans long forgotten, and the meaning of patriotism, then and now. We also take a closer look at who was living in Alabama 250 years ago. Spoiler alert: Nations thrived here long before the United States was formed.

This issue also includes profiles on our 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellows. And, yes, along with scholars of history, poetry, and law, you'll also find musicians — the iconic Emmylou Harris, country legend Randy Owen, jazz great Fred Wesley, and the exceptional singer/songwriter Will Kimbrough. Their Alabama roots and their storytelling are part of the mosaic of America, and help define us as a place and a people.

After FAME founder Rick Hall died in 2018, *The New York Times* observed: "Whatever Hall conjured there — whatever he dreamt, and made real — is essential to any recounting of American ingenuity. It is a testament to a certain kind of hope."

Risks taken. Coming together despite differences. Ingenuity. And hope.

Sure sounds like America to me.

Chuck Holmes