

4-1-2014

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*Midwest Archives Conference*

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## Recommended Citation

Seidler, Justin (2014) "Sweet Soul Music and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 41 : No. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol41/iss4/8>

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## **Sweet Soul Music and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame**

*By Justin Seidler*

In January of 2012, the Library and Archives of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, opened its doors to the public. To commemorate the second anniversary of the event, the archives opened the FAME Studios Records collection to its researchers and unveiled an exhibit supporting and promoting access to its resources. Both the processed collection and exhibit were the result of a long-term project, completed in multiple stages by the staff, interns, and volunteers at the Library and Archives, of which I was one. The FAME Studios Records project was far greater than the sum of its parts and provided a vehicle for the development of my professional skills, exceeding basic arrangement, description, and preservation, to digitizing the collection, the curation of its exhibit, and the promotion of both.

### **FAME Studios**

Florence Alabama Music Enterprises, also known as FAME Studios, is the foundation for what has come to be known as the “Muscle Shoals Sound.” The iconic recording studio, a major player in the southern music scene since it was established in 1959 by Rick Hall, Billy Sherrill, and Tom Stafford, is now responsible for some of the most influential sounds in American popular music.

The invaluable contributions for which FAME Studios is renowned stemmed from the signature sound heard in their artist recordings. With a presence as distinct as that of rival recording studios such as Detroit’s Motown or Memphis’s STAX Records, FAME Studios represented the confluence of country, gospel, and rhythm and blues music with a subtle emphasis on bass guitar and kick drum sounds. Early works by Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett were recorded using a practice often referred to as a “head session,” characterized by the rhythm section’s improvisatory performances, responding to and supporting the melody or most prominent sections of each song. This recording style encouraged true musical collaboration and resulted in an undeniably unique sound that put Muscle Shoals, Alabama, on the musical map.

Under the ownership and guidance of Rick Hall, FAME Studios nurtured many of the most popular and beloved artists in the history of American music, including Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees Etta James, Aretha

Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Little Richard, Otis Redding, and Duane Allman, as well as country and pop stars like Mac Davis, Paul Anka, and the Osmonds.

### **FAME Studios Records Project**

The FAME Studios Records, a collection of more than 35 linear feet spanning the years 1959 to 2005, were donated to the Rock Hall in 2010 by FAME Enterprises, Inc. The bulk of the collection consists of recording contracts, financial records, and artist files that include correspondence, artist biographies, photographs, and other documents related to FAME musicians. Additionally, the collection includes administrative files, appointment books, notes, and phone message logs maintained by owner Rick Hall’s administrative assistants. The materials provide rare insight into a wide range of topics, including the inner workings of the recording studio at Muscle Shoals and interactions of both staff and contributors; into the recording industry at large, with regard to the often tumultuous relationships shared by different studios and record producers; and further, into the sociocultural statement embodied by soul and rhythm and blues music, especially with regard to the civil rights movement and American popular culture of the time.

After the first stage of archival processing was completed, the Library and Archives moved forward with projects aimed at making the collection more widely available for research and exhibit. In addition to basic document preservation and revisions to the finding aid necessary before it could be published in the Library and Archives catalog, the collection required extensive digital preservation. For the digitization portion of the project, the Library and Archives contracted with an outside vendor to provide the necessary equipment for the work, and the vendor then hired and trained me to complete the project on-site.

Digitization of over 32,000 items selected from the collection required over three months of work with an overhead scanner capable of capturing high resolution (600dpi or greater) uncompressed images of each object. The images were examined for quality control and stored in the Library and Archives’ digital backlog for the purposes of staff access and to ensure appropriate backup of the files. It currently stands as the largest collection of digital images

in the archives, requiring more than three terabytes of storage space. The images are awaiting the next stage in the development of the Library and Archives' online catalog, which will allow for the presentation of EAD finding aids alongside corresponding digital content using Hydra as a digital asset manager and Blacklight as a unified presentation and discovery interface. Until that time, however, the physical collection of FAME Studios Records is available for research by archives users at [catalog.rockhall.com/catalog/ARC-0028](http://catalog.rockhall.com/catalog/ARC-0028).

After completion of the large-scale digitization project, I was also tasked with identifying and redacting documents containing the personal information of artists as dictated by the donor (i.e., Social Security numbers, tax identification codes, and personal addresses) and replacing the items in the physical collection with access copies.

The final stage of the project, the promotion of the collection to potential users, is a free exhibit that I helped to curate and mount entitled *Sweet Soul Music: FAME Studios and the Muscle Shoals Sound*, which will be open to the public through April 2014. The exhibit depicts the story of Rick Hall and the iconic recording studio's rise to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. The installation promotes access to the collection materials as well as its significance to other Library and Archives holdings. *Sweet Soul Music* utilizes a mix of materials to illustrate both the business and performance sides of the music business and to present a history of FAME.

Beginning with Arthur Alexander's "You Better Move On," the first 45rpm record cut at FAME, the exhibit displays a series of milestone moments integral to the success of the studio. Other artifacts include signed contracts and hand-scribbled negotiations that determined the future careers of Wilson Pickett and Duane Allman, as well as classic recordings by Aretha Franklin, Etta James, and Clarence Carter. Candid photographs provide contextual support for each document, depicting musicians engaged in rehearsal, lounging around the studio between sessions, and even signing the contracts displayed in the exhibit. The exhibit also includes an introductory list of suggested songs which serves as a quick reference for patrons interested in hearing the classic sounds of Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

The opening of the FAME collection was promoted as a part of the Library and Archives' two-year anniversary celebration and was rolled out through social media now being utilized by the institution, including Twitter ([twitter.com/RockHallLibrary](http://twitter.com/RockHallLibrary)), a Facebook group ([www.facebook.com/](http://www.facebook.com/)

[groups/rockhalllibrary](http://groups/rockhalllibrary)), tumblr ([rockhalllibrary.tumblr.com](http://rockhalllibrary.tumblr.com)), and paper.li ([paper.li/RockHallLibrary/1389812933](http://paper.li/RockHallLibrary/1389812933)). I also assisted in the creation of a research guide to FAME Studios to provide our patrons quick access to relevant library and archival materials available at the Rock Hall and online, using the LibGuides platform: [library.rockhall.com/FAME](http://library.rockhall.com/FAME). The guide includes a Spotify playlist that follows the suggested songs in the exhibit and more to give the user a more immersive FAME Studios experience.

### Final Thoughts

With an unfavorable economic climate, and a job market laughably characterized as "challenging," the future of an emerging generation of archives professionals is uncertain *at best*. In light of these ongoing issues affecting recent graduates and up-and-comers in all corners of information science and technology (a popular topic in professional literature and related media), multiple skill sets and diverse marketability are not optional—they are necessary. Venturing outside our comfort zone to include other disciplines relies on the ability to adapt to what is often completely unknown territory, as was the case with much of what I experienced during the FAME Studios project. While many of us are less than exuberant at the thought of pursuing one or more specializations outside our realm of familiarity, the reality for most is that a rigid approach and direct path into an archival "dream job" is simply not feasible.

My personal knowledge and skills prior to the digital preservation and curatorial aspects of the FAME Studios project were limited, not extending far beyond traditional physical processing and creating descriptive finding aids. Digitizing the collection required the use of completely unfamiliar technology and demanded technical training, endless trial and error, a close relationship with technical support (inconveniently located in Munich, Germany), and the patience of a glacier. Thankfully, the network of professionals at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum strives to nurture the understanding and abilities of a new generation of information science professionals, not only with standards and best practices in internship and volunteer programs, but with a genuine desire to see the growth of passionate, knowledgeable, and capable new professionals.

For more information regarding the FAME Studios Records or other resources pertaining to the history of rock and roll music, please visit the Library and Archives' website at [library.rockhall.com](http://library.rockhall.com).