

A LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR MODERN OUTDOORSMEN

# & HOOK BARREL

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**CLAYTON ANDERSON'S**  
Hit Song "Show Me  
Your Fish"

PG. 26

**HOOKING MILLIONS**  
Bass Pro's U.S. Open

PG. 64

**MUSCLE SHOALS**  
There's Something  
in the Water

PG. 70

**+**  
**THE  
LUNKER LIST**

PG. 8

**SHOOT™  
UNITED**

**Aims to Get New  
Shooters on the Range**

PG. 56

**GUY  
FIERI**

**DISHES ON HIS LOVE  
FOR THE OUTDOORS**



# THERE MUST BE SOMETHING IN THE WATER

THE MAGIC OF  
MUSCLE SHOALS, ALABAMA.

STORY BY JIM HANNAFORD







Visitors to the historic studios can feel the vibes and listen to classic tracks that were recorded in the very same spaces.

You know you're in a musical area when you see statues like this one that stands tall in downtown Sheffield.



### ON THE RIVER

The construction of Wilson Dam almost a century ago tamed the Tennessee River into separate reservoirs, and this particular section, known as Pickwick Lake, stretches for 42 miles into Mississippi and Tennessee. Horton, who turned pro in the year 2000, is a four-time Bassmaster Champion who has been fishing these waters for several kinds of bass and other game fish since he was a teenager. He knows better than most the glorious attributes and challenging peculiarities of every stretch of the lake, from the dam's powerful tailwaters to the calmer depths along the south bank's imposing limestone bluff and the shallower cypress swamps and hydrilla flats farther downstream.

"The river is really the heart of the entire Shoals area," says Horton. "As far as Pickwick Lake in particular goes, it's very diverse. It's one of the few places in the country where you can catch all three of the black bass species—small-mouth bass, largemouth bass, and spotted bass.

And it has excellent crappie fishing and catfishing, and a lot of the catfish caught here are in the 100-pound class, so it's just an amazing resource that cuts through the heart of the Tennessee Valley here in North Alabama."

While the largemouth bass generally get a larger share of attention in the freshwater fishing community, Horton says it's the smallmouths, which he describes as "sportier," that are the bigger draw on these particular waters. "The largemouth is king in the state of Alabama, but more anglers come to Pickwick for smallmouth bass because they grow bigger here than they do anywhere else." How big are they? "The typical size is three to four pounds, but trophies over six pounds are quite common," he says. And with a fairly mild climate for the Deep South, you can try your luck here most months of the year. "What we have is a really special place," Horton says. "And anglers know that. They come for tournaments and stay for a whole week. It's as family friendly as any place we go."

## THE ALABAMA BASS TRAIL

Pickwick Lake, which winds through the hilly terrain of northwestern Alabama, is by no means the only productive fishing spot in the state. Of course, there are the salty coastal waters along the Gulf Coast, and there are also a dozen more freshwater lakes to explore along what's called the Alabama Bass Trail.

Fishermen from all over the state compete in buddy-style tournaments held on the various lakes. Depending on the outcome, they'll get some bragging rights or maybe a bit of shame. Maybe more importantly, they get to experience the different conditions that are unique to each waterway.

"The Bass Trail really does show off the diversity of the state," says champion bass fisherman Timmy Horton, who lives near Pickwick Lake. "It covers the entire state, so you have guys from Mobile come up here to fish, and it's kind of different to them, but the anglers from up here go down there and compete, so it kind of evens out."

Pickwick is famous for its big smallmouth bass, but the state record (10 lbs., 8 oz.) came out of Wilson Lake just across the dam. Farther upstream is Lake Guntersville, a 75-mile stretch of the Tennessee River, where the smallmouths are scarcer (or at least don't get caught as often). "And farther south, you've got the Tenn-Tom Waterway, which dumps into the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta. So you've got brackish-water fishing, you've got upland highland reservoir fishing like Smith Lake, and then you've got river systems like the Coosa River."

A program of the Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association, the Bass Trail promotes the state as a year-round fishing destination and also seeks to educate and involve younger generations to be good stewards of the state's natural resources. Besides those lakes mentioned, it includes Wheeler Lake, Lewis Smith Lake, Neely Henry Lake, Weiss Lake, Lake Martin, Lay Lake, Logan Martin Lake, Lake Jordan, Alabama River, and Lake Eufaula. For more information, [alabamabasstrail.org/](http://alabamabasstrail.org/)



Pro fisherman Timmy Horton, a lifelong resident of the area, knows the local waters as well as anyone.



It's not a recording artist, songwriter, or producer, but Timmy Horton is a pretty recognizable figure in and around Muscle Shoals, Alabama, especially when he's driving the truck with his name on the side and towing his custom boat with its Bass Pro logo. He

gets a few friendly smiles and waves as he makes his way through a thickly shaded neighborhood toward McFarland Park and its popular boat launch. As he arrives, a couple of city firefighters who are helping to set up for a music festival saunter up for a few minutes of relaxed, friendly chit-chat. They offer to help him ease his Nitro Z21 into position, but they don't ask him how the fish have been biting. Like Horton, they've been around these waters long enough to know that the success rate is pretty darn good for an average angler, much less a championship-level professional.

The picturesque Florence is across the Tennessee River from the municipality named Muscle Shoals, but these two small cities—and two more neighboring ones, Sheffield and Tuscumbia—are part of a larger community often referred to collectively as Muscle Shoals, or sometimes just "the Shoals." These four separate communities are so tightly interwoven that actual boundary

lines can blur easily. You might even say that they are all bound by the river that separates them.

Besides being a prime fishing spot, the area known generally as Muscle Shoals is the epicenter of a distinctive musical sound that cranked up in the early 1960s and reverberates more loudly than ever. No doubt you've heard Lynyrd Skynyrd sing the praises of "the Swampers" down in Muscle Shoals. The legacy of those home-grown behind-the-scenes studio musicians probably goes much deeper than you've imagined, well beyond that famous name check in the last verse of "Sweet Home Alabama." And it continues to grow. Tourists come from near and far to feel the magic, maybe even breathe the same air as the hit-making musicians who laid down the monumental grooves behind many of the musical giants of our era. Maybe the most-asked question in Muscle Shoals is, "Who all recorded here?" We can start to answer with Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Percy Sledge, the Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, Paul Simon, and Bob Seger, but that's barely scratching the surface. It's almost impossible to recall or compile them all, and you can squeeze only the best of the best onto the back of one of those souvenir t-shirts that sell by the dozens during the daily recording studio tours.



## EXPLORING 'THE SHOALS'

For dinner and quiet conversation and a full-circle view of the Tennessee River and its surrounding area, head to the top of the Marriott Shoals Hotel & Spa. The 360 Grille, on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor, is aptly named because the dining room revolves slowly so you can see out its windows in all directions, taking in every twist and turn of the Tennessee River. Down on the ground floor, Swampers Bar & Grille has frequent live music, and you easily spend an hour looking at photographs and memorabilia from legendary recording sessions that took place just a few miles away.

It's not all about music or fishing here, though. Many visitors love whiling away some time in the quaint downtown areas of Florence and Tuscumbia. Others are drawn to "the Shoals" by the inspiring Helen Keller. In fact, the area's most visited landmark is her birthplace, Ivy Green. This historic home near downtown Tuscumbia was built in 1820, just one year after Alabama became a state. The house and grounds remain much the same as when Helen grew up there, learning to overcome her loss of sight and hearing. An outdoor theater on the premises stages *The Miracle Worker* each June and July.

Lovers of the outdoors may also enjoy making the scenic drive to the Rattlesnake Saloon (20 minutes from Tuscumbia) for burgers and brews in an unusual setting—under a limestone ledge. The overhang is a natural ceiling for al fresco dining in what was once a hog pen. The Foster family opened the business 12 years ago to augment a bustling lodge and RV park that attracts horse and mule riders from around the country.

In downtown Florence, a stately brick office building has been lovingly transformed into the boutique Stricklin Hotel. Guests can stroll along the town's sidewalks to browse shops, galleries, and eateries. If you're looking for stylish, comfortable clothing, fashion designer Billy Reid's flagship store is just two blocks toward the river from the hotel. And just down the street from the store, visit Odette for local flavors and a bar stocked with bourbon.

### THE MUSIC LEGACY

You won't have to listen to a "classic hits" or "oldies" station on the radio very long for a sound of the Shoals. Better yet, go to your favorite streaming service and tap in "Muscle Shoals." You'll likely be amazed at the depth of what happened here. The groundbreaking rock 'n' roll producer Sam Phillips is from Florence, and so is blues pioneer W.C. Handy, but it was music producer Rick Hall who is chiefly responsible for the area's notoriety in the world of music. His first studio was above a drug store in Florence, but he opened FAME Studios across the river in 1966. Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman" was one of the first smash hits to emerge, and it was soon followed by Aretha Franklin's "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man," Wilson Pickett's "Mustang Sally," and a continuous stream of countless other classics like Clarence Carter's

"Patches," Bobbie Gentry's "Fancy," Mac Davis' "Baby Don't Get Hooked on Me," and even The Osmonds' "One Bad Apple."

The same core group of backup musicians played on many of the early hits. In 1969, those musicians (later dubbed "the Swampers" by Skynyrd) splintered off and opened their own Muscle Shoals Sound Studios less than three miles away in Sheffield. One of their first customers was the Rolling Stones, who recorded "Brown Sugar" and "Wild Horses" in the new space. The string of success in Sheffield continued with many more major hits, including Paul Simon's "Love Me Like a Rock" and "Kodachrome," the Staple Singers' "Respect Yourself" and "I'll Take You There," Stewart's "Tonight's the Night," and Seger's "Old Time Rock & Roll."

The artists and songs are diverse, but there's a common thread running through the music. "No

Many anglers on Pickwick Lake cast for the sporty smallmouth bass. The lake record is 10 lbs., 8 oz.



The iconic O'Neal Bridge spans the Tennessee River and connects all four of the cities that make up the Muscle Shoals area.



The Music Hall of Fame, which opened in 1990, shows off the breadth of Alabama's incredible musical heritage.



Country music pioneer Jimmie Rodgers is one of many legendary artists honored there.

matter what genre it is, there's always a certain soul element to it, or maybe it's gospel or blues," says musician and songwriter Mark Narmore. "It's hard to put a finger on what it is exactly, but there's always a tinge of it that's identifiable as the Muscle Shoals sound."

### INSIDE THE STUDIOS

The famous studios are still making music. Artists who have recorded here in recent years include Alicia Keys, the Black Keys, Chris Stapleton, and Jason Isbell. But because of such interest from tourists, there are certain times each day set aside for tours, not sessions.

At both FAME and Muscle Shoals Sound, a knowledgeable guide walks visitors through the studio's history with the accompaniment of a carefully curated playlist. As familiar funky rhythms fill the air, no one remains still. Heads bob, feet tap, and legs sway involuntarily to the sounds that were first generated in these spaces decades earlier.

Much of the vintage equipment and instruments, and even some of the comfortably worn old furniture, remains in place. Thankfully, there were often photographers on hand to capture the historic recording moments visually, as well. Visiting these rooms takes on an extra dimension when you realize those blown-up black-and-white photographs (Mick Jagger shaking maracas or the Staple Singers sipping coffee, for instance) were taken exactly where you're standing now.

A wider picture of Alabama's musical legacy is on display just down the road in Tuscumbia, just a few minutes' drive from the famous studios. Walk in to the Alabama Music Hall of Fame and look to your left to see framed portraits of all 66 inductees. You'll find guitars, stage wear, and all manner of artifacts from legendary artists like Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams, Little Richard, the Commodores, Tammy Wynette, and Emmylou Harris. You can even walk through an '80s-era tour bus that was home on the road for the blockbuster country group Alabama.





Tuscumbia's inviting downtown area offers a host of dining and shopping opportunities.

**“The history runs deep, and there are also some terrific restaurants in the downtown areas of Sheffield, Tuscumbia, and Florence. It’s just a really neat deal that families come and enjoy—good food and good music.” –TIMMY HORTON**



Webb Pierce's tricked-out car and Alabama's road-worn tour bus are big attractions at the museum.

**GONE HOLLYWOOD**

There were always exceedingly devoted music fanatics making a pilgrimage to Muscle Shoals, but it was a trickle compared to the deluge of interest since a full-length documentary hit screens in 2013. Titled *Muscle Shoals*, the film broadened awareness exponentially. Nearly every week a busload of visitors arrives to spend a few days seeing all the sights. Many of them are from foreign countries and rolling through on a regional tour that includes stops in other music meccas like Nashville, Memphis, and the Mississippi Delta. “The movie was pivotal,” says Narmore, who sometimes

performs a Shoals-centric showcase of music for the visiting groups. “Tourism had slowed, or at least wasn’t on a huge uptick. After the movie, everyone wanted to come, and they still are.”

**SMALL TOWN CHARMS**

Back on the river, Horton says top-notch fishing and the incredible musical heritage are two big parts of what makes the Muscle Shoals area such an attractive destination for fishermen and their families. Another is the relaxed pace he’s enjoyed all his life. Speaking from his experience as a professional fisherman who moves from hotspot to hotspot around the country for tournaments, his homeland has a special mix of winning traits. The fishing may be as good, or better, in other places, he says, but there just aren’t as many other fun and interesting things to do when you’re not on the water—or maybe it’s just not as easy to do them. “The history runs deep, and there are also some terrific restaurants in the downtown areas of Sheffield, Tuscumbia, and Florence (see Exploring ‘The Shoals’ sidebar p. 74). It’s just a really neat deal that families come and enjoy—good food and good music,” Horton says.

He continues: “You don’t have an interstate running through it, so it’s not so busy that traffic bogs you down. There’s also a feel of Southern hospitality here. When you’re launching a boat, someone’s going to nod and say, ‘Hey, how ya doing?’ That’s just how they are here. It’s a laid-back atmosphere that’s somewhat hopping with a good nightlife and some things to do. That’s a unique combination.”

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