

Soul and Sand

A new book shows how 'beach bands' blurred the South's musical color lines

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Greg Haynes set out to talk about his personal experiences with bands in South Georgia. The onetime promoter, who threw parties featuring beach bands such as Pieces of Eight, Bob Collins & The Fabulous Five and the Swingin' Medallions, wanted to memorialize the sounds of the '60s.

In his new coffee-table book, "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music," an exhaustive and heavy (12 pounds) beach-music tome, Haynes captures more than just his experiences. He gives readers a glimpse into soul music, a sound that blurred color lines, especially in the segregated South.

The mostly white Southern beach bands covered songs by R&B and soul pioneers such as Jerry Butler, the Tams and Jackie Wilson. Their renditions became known as blue-eyed soul.

"It pretty much sums up the book," Haynes says. "There was great admiration from the young white musicians. They really wanted to emulate them and sound like them."

And back the R&B performers.

Marion Carter, co-owner of Ripete Records, which organized the two CDs that accompany the book (12 more discs are available), says that many of the white bands were session musicians for the black performers.

"There was a great interplay and fermentation of two distinct cultures that became beach music," Carter says. "It was way ahead of its time for the country."

Many Southern beach bands, like the Swingin' Medallions, were based in South Carolina. The Greenwood-born Medallions, who perform at tonight's Vista After 5 concert, will be joined by Haynes, who will sign copies of "The Heeey Baby Days."

If you ask Haynes who his favorite beach-music band is, he'll say the Medallions, which might explain how the band appears in more than 130 of the book's 553 pages.

"They had a certain charismatic dealing with the audience," he says. "I'd never seen a crowd react to a band the way they reacted to them."

"Anytime those guys came down, the party really got going."

Saxophonist Fred Pugh joined the Medallions in 1963. He played on the band's 1966 recording, "Double Shot of My Baby's Love," which, Pugh says, sold more than 1 million copies.

Not bad for a band that got its groove from Wilson Pickett and Otis Redding.

"That's where we picked up all of our will and soul, was hearing some of the black bands play in Columbia at the Township," Pugh says. "It was their enthusiasm that got us white bands to put on the suits and do the choreography."

Musicians like Pugh get to share their stories. Of the book's more than 200 contributors, many played in the bands Haynes sought to memorialize.

"It was a runaway ship that had a lot of captains," Haynes says. "They (musicians) really are the ones that made it happen."

One of those musicians is Richard Peterson, who drummed in the Mod VI, which played the parties in Augusta and Aiken.

"We were kind of the first group to change the beach sound and branch out and play stuff (like) the Stax and Memphis sound with a rock 'n' roll edge," Peterson says.

"A lot of bigger bands liked to book us because we wouldn't play the same songs as them."

"Heeey Baby Days" remembers a time when music wasn't made on a computer screen; when bands — not DJs — played junior and senior proms; and when "the dance" was about the only weekend hot spot.

It wasn't a trip down memory lane for Haynes.

"I think it's a trip down memory interstate," he says. "Those musicians from that era are special."

Greg Haynes, author of "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music," thought he had "a fairly good knowledge of my subject matter."

Well, he was wrong.

"The deeper I got, I realized I had just the tip of the iceberg," Haynes says.

There were more bands performing beach music during the '60s than he imagined. "I'm surprised their buses didn't run into each other, there were so many," he says.

There's plenty for readers to learn, too. Here are three interesting facts from the book.

- Chuck Leavell, who plays in one of the most famous rock 'n' roll bands, the Rolling Stones, first played in The Misfitz, an Alabama beach band.
- Beach music spawned Southern rock. What? Well, Wet Willie, the Allman Brothers, Marshall Tucker and Lynyrd Skynyrd began as soul cover bands.
- South Carolina was as good as any other state at producing popular bands. The Counts, Soul Inc., The Sensational Epics and Maurice Williams — to name a few — had big names regionally.