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BEN WINDHAM: *Giant Book On Southern Soul Music A Big Hit*

There are three things you ought to know about "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music," the new book on Southern blue-eyed soul bands from the 1960s:

It's the best book ever published on the subject (and it has a big section on Tuscaloosa).

Then, it's expensive, retailing for \$59.95 -- but big, beautiful and lavishly illustrated. To sweeten the deal, it comes with two CDs of vintage recordings and a third disc that is a computerized directory of bands active in the era and their members.

The third thing you need to know about the book is that it can be a challenge to read -- not because of the quality of the writing or the organization but because of its sheer physical size.

The book weighs a good 10 pounds. It has 552 tabloid pages and fully opened, spread-eagle, it measures a little short of a yard across (and a almost a foot tall).

In other words, it's not the kind of book you take to the beach, regardless of the title. I'm a big guy and I had to struggle to read it.

You could prop it on a coffee table, I suppose, and flip through the pages. If that's all you do, you'll get an eyeful of the vintage photos of bands that defined the '60s in the Deep South -- The Swingin' Medallions, Pieces of Eight, Allman Joys, K-Otics, Rockin' Giblartars.

There are even two photos of 14 Feet of Soul, a band that a group of my friends from Selma started. One shows them in their collarless Nehru suits, looking somewhat ill at ease in blue-collar Alabama.

There's also a hilarious picture of Chuck Leavell's first band from Tuscaloosa, The Misfitz. Some of its sawed-off, baby-faced members appear to be pre-teens. Looking at it, you'd never guess that cherubic-/slooking Leavell would go to play with The Rolling Stones.

But if all you do is look at the pictures, you miss the meat of the book.

Fully half of it is devoted to Haynes' reminiscences of his days as a party hound and youthful band promoter from south Georgia. His story is something of a soap opera, in which a femme fatale named Charlena -- yes, the one with "big brown eyes, long blonde hair" who was the namesake of the song performed by a zillion Deep South bands -- figures prominently.

The other half of the book is given over to bands that rocked the Southern crescent from Louisiana and Mississippi to Alabama, Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas and up to Virginia.

Most prominently featured are The Swingin' Medallions, a group Haynes calls "The Party Band of the South."

I don't think anyone who was there would argue with that description. From the Old Hickory in Panama City to the Oporto Armory in Birmingham to the Grand Strand at Myrtle Beach, the Medallions ruled.

Their 1966 recording, "Double Shot of My Baby's Love," was a nationwide smash. Bruce Springsteen was one of many musicians who ate his heart out, wishing he had made that record.

Lewis Grizzard wanted to do a book on the band. It's a shame he died before he ever got around to it.

In a 1993 newspaper column, Grizzard wrote, "Even today when I hear the Swingin' Medallions sing Double Shot of My Baby's Love, it makes me want to stand outside in the hot sun with a milkshake cup full of beer in one hand and a slightly drenched coed in the other."

There's something beautiful about that.

But Haynes doesn't overlook groups like King David and the Slaves, The Bleus, or Tuscaloosa's own The Rubber Band.

He even sorts out the shifting personnel of The Webs, Wilbur Walton Jr. and The James Gang, the Candymen and The Atlanta Rhythm Section -- all of which grew out of the same patch of ground around Dothan and cross-pollinated.

Haynes took a Tom Sawyer-like approach to writing the book, whose title derives from Bruce Channel's 1962 summer smash.

He knew that trying to get information on all the '60s bands in the region was a Herculean task for one person; so he put up an invitation on his Web site for band members, roadies and followers to share information, stories and photos.

It proved as irresistible as Tom's bucket of whitewash on his board fence. Before long, Haynes' in-box was overflowing.

Other informants took some tracking down. Locally, Haynes contacted Gene Poole, the Tuscaloosa jeweler and '60s band drummer. But it was in a couple of '60s Alabama deejays that Haynes found his real gems -- Birmingham's Dave "Rockin'" Roddy from WSGN and Tuscaloosa's own Tiger Jack Garrett, WTBC's resident rock'n'roller.

Garrett's tales of shows he promoted at the old Fort Brandon Armory, beginning with guitar-slinger Travis Wammack and continuing with bands like The Preachers (whose single "Inspiration" ranks in Alabama's All-Time Top 10), Suzy Storm and the Laymen, The Distortions and Big Ben Atkins and the Nomads catch the spirit of the era.

The biggest show he ever did in Tuscaloosa, Tiger Jack writes, was one that features the legendary black Atlanta soul band, The Tams.

The group, which performed in tam-o-shanters, not only had a dynamite stage act but it also recorded a bevy of songs that were part of the required repertoire for any white-boy Southern band of the '60s: "It's All Right (You're Just in Love)"; "Untie Me"; "You Lied to Your Daddy"; "What Kind of Fool (Do You Think I Am?)"; "Laugh It Off"; and "I've Been Hurt."

The Tams were idolized, though I don't know of any blue-eyed Southern bands that took it to the point of wearing tam-o-shanters.

More than a few of those bands, however, included a tribute to James Brown in their show, draping cape after cape over the shoulders of their crewcut lead singer as he groveled on the floor screaming "Please! Please! Please!"

Others with Tuscaloosa ties who contributed to the book include John Wyker (who had a national hit with his band, Sailcat); Johnny Townsend (remember the Sanford-Townsend Band's thundering "Smoke from a Distant Fire"?); Fred Styles (of the seminal 5 Men-Its); and Leavell, who writes about a local television show called "Tuscaloosa Bandstand," a knockoff of Dick Clark's national musical showcase.

Like a big ol' dinner on the grounds, the book is best digested in small servings. I haven't begun to muster the time (or physical strength) to read everything it has to say.

I've gotten deep enough to see that Haynes' overriding theme is that the '60s in the Southern coastal states was one heck of a party.

Getting in was easy, if you fit the demographic profile. Admission fee to the WVOK "Shower of Stars" was \$2.50 and almost everybody knew someone in a fraternity who would call you a party guest and show you where to find the keg as the dance floor erupted in the Panama City Bop.

But the adventurous, sometimes dangerous love affair went beyond the party.

There's a brief forward in Haynes' book from Marion Cater, who founded Ripete Records, a company dedicated to "beach music." It's titled "What Have John Wrought?"

The reference is to John Richbourg, better known as WLAC's John R. "from way down south in Dixie."

The Nashville-based deejay had a tremendous audience of young white listeners in the 1960s. His late-night program, devoted exclusively to rhythm-and-blues, was a clandestine, under-the-covers experience for many teenagers, fiddling with their hand-size transistor radios and uncomfortable plastic earpieces.

"It is essential to note that listening to such music [the kind that John R regularly spun] was strictly taboo in most white households," Carter writes.

But the knowledge that many parents disapproved made the soul music all the sweeter. Young white Southerners drank it in, assimilated it and began incorporating it.

"Out came something that was not quite the same as the original versions of soul (think Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Arthur Alexander, James Brown)," Carter says, "but something quite alluring in its own right."

The infatuation of young white Southerners with soul music did more to knock down the walls of segregation and racial prejudice than the marches and demonstrations that focused the world's eyes on the region in the 1960s, I firmly believe.

I played bass in a band -- one that will never be included in an anthology, for good reasons -- that we called The Sound Barriers.

The line-up included a trumpeter/vocalist, a sax player, two guitarists and a drummer. We covered hits by British Invasion groups like The Beatles, The Dave Clark Five and The Searchers.

But we also played a lot of soul music. I had the throbbing, three-note bass introduction to "My Girl" by the Temptations down pat. Our singer, Fat Friday, did his best to imitate Major Lance on "Monkey Time." The sax man bought a metal mouthpiece so he could sound more like Junior Walker.

Our lead guitarist, who worked at a grocery store, introduced us to the music of Bobby "Blue" Bland, Jimmy Reed and Gary "U.S." Bonds. We worked up numbers by The Showmen, Rufus Thomas and Jessie Hill.

All of this had a profound effect on the way we looked at the world. It's hard to believe in apartheid when you idolize Otis Redding and James Brown.

One of our band members, whose father was a dyed-in-the-wool segregationist, had to hide his rhythm and blues records under the bed.

Memories of all of this came floating back to me the other day when I watched an MTV awards show. Some of the music on the television program was all right. But I don't think the music is as important to listeners now as it was to us in the 1960s.

Haynes' book, which debuts officially on Oct. 6 at a release party at the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, makes a strong literary beachhead (so to speak) into that era. But at least three follow-ups are needed.

First, the book begs for a sequel. Haynes may be thinking the same thing. Stories about '60s bands continue to pour into his Web site (www.heybabydays.com). He already has five postings worth of stories that were not included in the book.

I'd like to see more on bands like The Preachers, Larry and the Loafers, the Ramblers and Rooster and the Townsman, to say nothing of more obscure groups like The King Bees and The Dawnbreakers.

Too, the appearance of "The Heeey Baby Days" begs for a book dedicated to the black musicians whose influence helped to shape the white Southern soul sound: Johnny Jenkins and the Pinetoppers, the Red Tops, Poonanny and the Stormers -- and of course, Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts.

Finally, someone needs to do a definitive history of Heeey Baby fashions. Steve Purdy and the Studs wore sparkle jackets. Some of the Florida bands dressed in matching Pendleton or Gant shirts. 14 Feet of Soul had those Nehru jackets. Girls had beehives. Guys had buzz cuts.

Bleeding madras trousers, Caesars and penny loafers (sans socks), anybody?

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