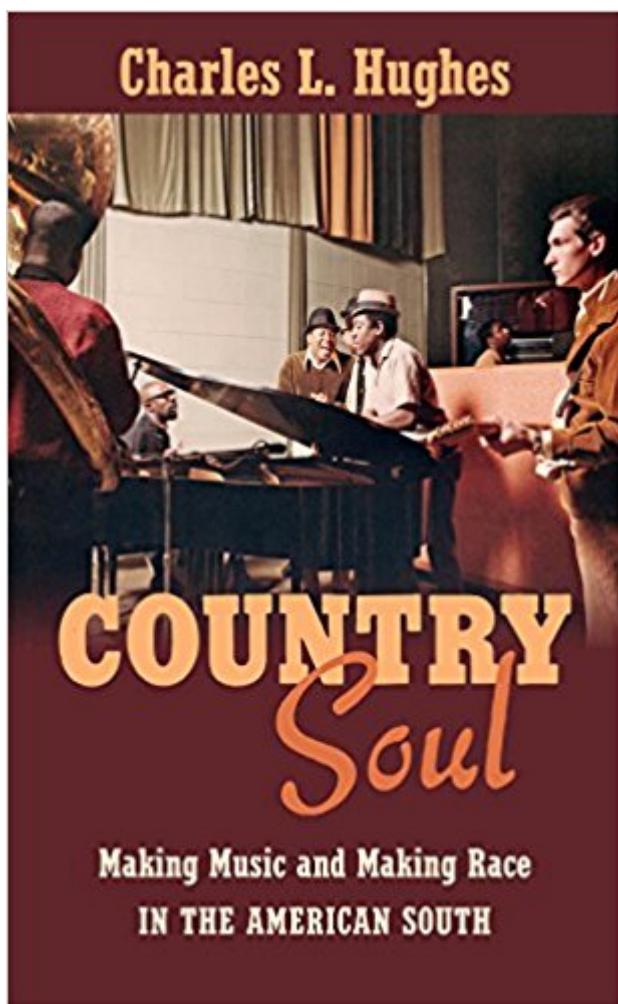


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# Country Soul: Making Music And Making Race In The American South



## **Synopsis**

In the sound of the 1960s and 1970s, nothing symbolized the rift between black and white America better than the seemingly divided genres of country and soul. Yet the music emerged from the same songwriters, musicians, and producers in the recording studios of Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee, and Muscle Shoals, Alabama--what Charles L. Hughes calls the "country-soul triangle." In legendary studios like Stax and FAME, integrated groups of musicians like Booker T. and the MGs and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section produced music that both challenged and reconfirmed racial divisions in the United States. Working with artists from Aretha Franklin to Willie Nelson, these musicians became crucial contributors to the era's popular music and internationally recognized symbols of American racial politics in the turbulent years of civil rights protests, Black Power, and white backlash. Hughes offers a provocative reinterpretation of this key moment in American popular music and challenges the conventional wisdom about the racial politics of southern studios and the music that emerged from them. Drawing on interviews and rarely used archives, Hughes brings to life the daily world of session musicians, producers, and songwriters at the heart of the country and soul scenes. In doing so, he shows how the country-soul triangle gave birth to new ways of thinking about music, race, labor, and the South in this pivotal period.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A valuable corrective to the misleading renderings so often encountered in the literature about the period and in the popular imagination." --Memphis MagazineA fascinating behind-the-scenes look at

the apparent spaces of racial harmony in the country-soul triangle.--Journal of Southern History An essential piece of Southern musical history.--Kirkus Reviews Successfully directs our attention to a number of significant historical realities that too often are omitted from the record: soul musicians recorded country songs.--Science & Society A powerful work.--Library Journal An eye-opening corrective to notions of racial harmony in the recording studio or on the bandstand." --Memphis Flyer With its courageous, thoroughly researched, and deeply considered take on the racial politics of the southern music industry in a pivotal period for not just the music but the South and the nation at large, *Country Soul* claims its own essential place in the telling of that messy history.--Paste This carefully researched study...presents interesting insights into the music and racial politics of a turbulent era.--CHOICE *Country Soul* is an excellent place to begin a more honest accounting of this golden era.--Pitchfork Review A fascinating read on many levels.--Stillwater News Press *Country Soul* is a valuable addition to the literature on southern music, black and white.--American Historical Review "A deep, fresh examination of various power relations involved in the making of soul music, country music, and the sonic space between them.--The Wall Street Journal Exploring th[e] contradiction between universalism and racial particularism [in musical genres] gives . . . *Country Soul*, its power and insight.--Journal of American History

The sweet sounds of Soul make it easy to imagine an American South that, perhaps, never existed, where the music had folk dancing across color lines. Those lines remain intact in this exhaustively researched and provocative book. In it, Charles L. Hughes celebrates the most American of American music and the genius of musicians who may not have changed the world, but certainly made the world a better-sounding place.--Mark Anthony Neal, author *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* With *Country Soul*, Charles L. Hughes offers a much-needed revisionist history of southern soul and country music, one that takes the music and musicians seriously while remaining critical of both the contemporary racial politics of the music business and the accumulated romanticism of the surrounding scholarship. It's a massive achievement and a gentle ode to the legacy of musicians who built American culture before being tossed out of the history books.--Karl Hagstrom Miller, University of Virginia

This is an extremely interesting book on how soul music was produced by whites and blacks in the South in the '60s. The author has some ideas that vary from those of other similar histories. The only drawback is the sometimes "I'm smarter than those other writers" tone of the book and his occasionally dense academic style. But it's worth the trouble, especially in small doses.

Really insightful book - a probably more realistic way of looking at soul music and race. Not as jolly as Peter Guralnick's vision, or Robert Johnson's, but fascinating and likely way closer to the truth. Smart, well-written and eye-opening.

Some reviews have called it preachy but I would say its "teachy". Your impression will probably depend on where your head and heart are at regarding racial and civil rights issues.

A fabulous book! A must-read for anyone interested in music produced in the "country-soul" triangle (Memphis, Nashville, and Muscle Shoals). Very-well written and thoroughly researched and documented. I couldn't put it down!

I thought this Charles Hughes book was really amazing. Partly that's because it consistently taught me things about music - country music, soul music, and of course country-soul - that I already thought I knew all about. Just for instance, I knew country music had been incorporating black-associated styles into its sound for as long as there's been country music, but the chapter on how country music did that once again in the late 70s and early 80s with DISCO was revelatory. That sort of interplay between white and black music, and too white and black musicians and audiences, in what Hughes terms the Country Soul Triangle - Memphis, Muscle Shoals and Nashville - is what this book is about. Often, these interactions manifest in ways that aren't obvious or that took place behind the scenes - integrated session lineups that migrated from working with white-associated country acts to black musicians and then back again. The cliché is that as the civil rights struggle and racial tensions raged outside of the studios in the 60s and 70s, the black and white musicians inside were experiencing a kind of color blind utopia where the only thing that mattered, man, was the music. Hughes complicates that tremendously, showing 1) how this idyllic session scenario was always a mythic environment where racial conflict, tension, prejudice, exploitation and misunderstanding happened just as intensely as they did and do everywhere else in America and yet STILL Hughes also stresses 2) how the Memphis, Nashville and Muscle Shoals musicians and labels managed to create amazing music that still matters and that still helped alter the world to boot. Hughes tells an uglier, more compromised and painful version of this history, but the closer-to-the-real truth results are more amazing, because more human, than the fantasy. I figure I'll be checking back into Country Soul for a long

time.

Country Soul is a book with a clear agenda exclusively focused on the premise that previous authors who have written extensively on southern soul - like Rob Bowmanâ€ Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records, Peter Guralnickâ€ Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedomâ€ and Barney Hoskynsâ€ Say it One Time for the Broken Hearted: Country Side of Southern Soulâ€ - have created and perpetuated a myth contrived by white musicians and studio owners about the positive impact of this musical genre on race relations in the 1960s and 1970s. It is unclear how well qualified Mr. Hughes is to have taken on this task given both the sensitivity of the subject matter in the second decade of the 21st century and the absence of any mention of many of the key players in country soul like Solomon Burke, O.C. Smith, James Carr, Brook Benton and Esther Phillips. How can you take seriously a book on this topic that ignores James Carr ??? In supporting his worldview, Mr. Hughes cites as unimpeachable evidence - i) the inability of Jerry "Swamp Dogg" Williams to break into the world of C & W (a brilliant and iconoclastic southern soul legend still active in 2014, whose country album "The Mercury Record" is a long way from his best work); ii) his clear disdain for the circumstances of Charley Pride's breakthrough as a country superstar; iii) Buddy Killen's apparent exploitation of Joe Tex (there are many sides to that particular story); and iv) instances of overt/insidious racism from the likes of Rick Hall, Dan Penn, Spooner Oldham, Duck Dunn and Steve Cropper. And to put the cherry on the cake he drags out the oft documented altercation between Ted White, Aretha Franklin's one time husband, and white session player, Ken Laxton that led to Ms. Franklin's Muscle Shoals session for her first recordings on Atlantic being aborted followed by the cessation of relations between Rick Hall and Jerry Wexler. While there is no doubt that racism was present in the music industry of the 60s as it was throughout society at that time, Mr Hughes comes across as the proverbial workman with a hammer who only recognizes a nail. Every encounter between whites and blacks in the context of the legendary soul studios Stax, Hi, FAME. AGP, MSS, etc., is interpreted by him as contributing to the main theme of his book, namely that ".....Southern musical spaces - both literal and figurative - have become a kind of ahistorical interracial dreamland. This is a fallacy. Nothing mattered more to these musicians than race. Nothing structured their work more than racial divisions and disparities... And African Americans did not share equally in the benefits...." (p.191). Thus every success story for a black artist associating with white musicians in Muscle Shoals, Memphis and Nashville is viewed as a denied opportunity to a cadre of unknown black musicians even though Isaac Hayes, Charles Hodges, Lester Snell, Marvell Thomas and Carson Whitsett all appear to have had gainful

employment and varying degrees of fame after Booker T. and his B3 left Memphis for California. Mr Hughes' viewpoint is ultimately myopic, exceptionally dreary and negative, and dismissive of the wonderful music that came from these Southern soul studios. Another major shortcoming of this narrative is that Mr. Hughes provides minimal primary data but instead works almost exclusively from historical records both published and from museum archives with his only contributions being a meager 8 phone calls with relatively minor figures the most recent of which was 2011. Thus he takes many individuals at their word in an industry that is notorious for insincerity and avoiding conflict. One can only wonder why the important topic of this book failed to warrant fresh interviews with Rick Hall, Jim Stewart, Al Bell and Billy Sherrill although one can well imagine, given his negative perspective, that he would get the same cold shoulder that Gamble and Huff gave to John Jackson when writing his book on the Sound of Philadelphia— A House on Fire: The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul. And when a statement emerges that fails to support his premise - as when an African American praises a white - Mr. Hughes arrogantly dismisses and denigrates the events with epithets like "flowery" and "weepy". Why for instance is Charlie Rich's music any more "synthetic" than Millie Jackson's or Joe Tex's? And what happened to Stanley Booth's— Rythm Oil: A Journey Through The Music Of The American South? Mr. Hughes attempts to shine light on an important topic yet singularly fails to appreciate throughout the book that the music business was not and is not a welfare program but rather depends on the meritocracy of its proponents and its products - what used to be vinyl 45s. Minor points of irritation - Hughes: i) lays claim to the rather obvious term "country-soul triangle" to describe the geographical relationship between Muscle Shoals, Memphis and Nashville p. 2 and then proceeds to use it and the title of Latimore's "There's a Red-Neck in the Soul Band" (Glades 1729) ad nauseam; ii) highlights Al Bell's deliberate use of the white Muscle Shoals musicians for many of the successful Staple Singers sides he produced in the 70s yet fails to adequately reconcile this with the Stax mantra at that time of Black Power and; iii) in describing a session with the Sweet Inspirations that had to be scrapped "over fears of racial violence" (p84) directs the reader (#12 p.217) to Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham's— Moments From This Theatre for a "recorded example' that does not exist on that CD. This book could also have done with tighter editing as Mr. Hughes is very sloppy in retelling the same story in different chapters. For those interested in Country Soul Barney Hoskyns— Say it One Time for the Broken Hearted: Country Side of Southern Soul— will suffice until the topic of racism in southern soul produces an author who can treat the subject with empathy and objectivity and has passion for this wonderful, timeless music.

A fantastic book and critical contribution to our understanding of music and race in America.

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