

# JON LANGFORD'S FOUR LOST SOULS

RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 22, 2017

## Welsh punk rocker dives deep into the soul of Muscle Shoals.

(Annotations found on the back of this page)



Carted to Alabama under the cloud of dark politics, a band drew a glistening straight line from punk to country to soul to grand theater. On November 8th, the day after the 2016 election, Welsh-bred, Chicago-based musician and visual artist **Jon Langford**<sup>1</sup> and a crew of merry-makers and alchemists filed into the NuttHouse studio, a one-story former bank building in Sheffield, Ala. (population 9,039). The musicians from Chicago, Nashville, Los Angeles, and just over the Tennessee River bridge made the pilgrimage to a place of legend and myth, where music runs as deep as the river's current, to see what might come of it all. *Four Lost Souls*, recorded over four days, originated in 2015, 100 miles north in Nashville where Langford produced artwork for *Dylan, Cash, and the Nashville Cats: A New Music City*, the long-running exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame. Fate had it that one of those Nashville Cats, bassist and producer **Norbert Putnam**<sup>2</sup>, was so enamored with Langford's paintings and piratey singing, he invited the stranger to come record in **the Shoals**<sup>3</sup>.

A year later Langford is in that studio with many of the musicians who put the region, as well as renowned **FAME Studios**<sup>4</sup> and **Muscle Shoals Sound Studios**<sup>5</sup>, on the musical map. Among them, members of the Swampers, **David Hood**<sup>6</sup> and **Randy McCormick**<sup>7</sup>—world famous players who have performed on all the songs you ever loved—and next-generation, in-the-right-pocket local drummer Justin Holder. Along for the ride were Nashville's in-demand pedal steel guitarist **Pete Finney**<sup>8</sup> and guitarist Grant Johnson. Together they dutifully crafted a project brimming with images of killing and hope, Faulkner, the Natchez Trace, and the sea.

As word got out around town, the musicians of the Shoals stopped by to see what Putnam was up to with these Chicagoans — Jon, guitarist **John Szymanski**<sup>9</sup>, and the electrifying singers **Bethany Thomas**<sup>10</sup> and now-LA-based **Tawny Newsome**<sup>11</sup>. **Tomi Lunsford**<sup>12</sup>, a mountain soprano from Nashville, slipped into the vocal booth to duet with Langford. The morning after his gig at Champy's, a local watering hole, **Will McFarlane**<sup>13</sup> parked his Harley at the front door to say hello. Five minutes later he was behind studio glass with his guitar. And five minutes after that, he was back on his bike turning the corner in a cloud of dust and exhaust.

Thus was the strange weather in the Shoals during that week in American history. Crammed between arrival and departure at the NuttHouse was a fever heat of creativity that crossed musical generations, racial lines, and the invisible barrier separating the flatlands of the upper Midwest and rolling hills of the deepest South. Even the ocean between the Delta and the dingy port city of Newport, South Wales, Jon's hometown, evaporated out of sight.

The South is full of ghosts and they all ask unresolved questions. Nothing is settled and the music won't sleep. Muscle Shoals itself personifies a place where America's great cultural explosion transcends the murderous politics of race and class that stain this country from slavery and civil war to today. To tomorrow. The music speaks to the best in us, while reflecting, at times, the worst of us.

*Four Lost Souls* is pure Americana, not just because of where it was recorded or who played on what track, but because it is beyond the news of the day. It is a travelogue of sorts; it goes to a place where the differences between country, soul, blues, and rock-and-roll are blown aside by the warm languid breezes. The music had no time for such petty details, because in the moment, in that place, was the sound of sweet agreement.

(Annotations found on the back of this page)

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## Annotations

<sup>1</sup>**Jon Langford:** Founding member of punk icons the Mekons (celebrating their 40th anniversary this year), as well as alt-country pioneers/rabble-rousers the Waco Brothers. Other projects include the Pine Valley Cosmonauts, Skull Orchard, Bad Luck Jonathan, and collaborations with Australian Aboriginal singer Roger Knox, the Rockabilly Filly Rosie Flores, and The Sadies. His paintings and prints of the storied figures of rock, blues, and country have been exhibited all over the world, including the Country Music Hall of Fame, where he was also an artist in residence at the famed Hatch Show Print.

<sup>2</sup>**Norbert Putnam:** A member of the original Muscle Shoals rhythm section and a successful Nashville producer responsible for working with artists who blended country, folk, R&B, and pop, including Joan Baez, Dan Fogelberg, Eric Anderson, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Henry Mancini, Michael Nesmith, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and John Hiatt among many others. He also served as Elvis Presley's studio bassist for the final seven years of Presley's career. In 1970, he opened Quadrafonic Studio in Nashville which became a go-to recording destination for stars like Neil Young and Michael Jackson.

<sup>3</sup>**The Shoals:** The region of southern Alabama consisting of three cities: Sheffield, Florence, and Muscle Shoals. This nexus nestled alongside the Tennessee River is the unlikely home of a rich musical heritage focused on two studios: FAME Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. There, a generation of studio musicians and producers helped shape a uniquely Southern sonic stew out of rock, soul, R&B, and country.

<sup>4</sup>**FAME Studios:** Located in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, it was founded in 1959 by producer Rich Hall. The studio churned out hits through the 1960s and 1970s by artists ranging from the Allman Brothers Band, Wilson Pickett, and Bobbie Gentry to Aretha Franklin, Etta James, Otis Redding, and Joe Tex. Nearly 60 years after its first hit, FAME remains a working studio.

<sup>5</sup>**Muscle Shoals Sound Studios:** Located in Sheffield, Alabama it was founded in 1969 by the rhythm section known as The Swampers. Collectively, the studio became home for artists like Paul Simon, the Rolling Stones, Bob Seger, Wilson Pickett, the Staple Singers, Cher, Rod Stewart, Traffic, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and others seeking "the Muscle Shoals Sound." The studio reopened in March 2017 as a museum.

<sup>6</sup>**David Hood:** Along with keyboardist Barry Beckett, drummer Roger Hawkins, and guitarist Jimmy Johnson, the bassist is an original member of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, also known as The Swampers. Hood supplied his sound on seminal recordings by Paul Simon, Bob Seger, the Staple Singers, Etta James, Percy Sledge, among others, and he became a touring member of Traffic and The Waterboys. His son is the Drive-By Truckers' Patterson Hood.

<sup>7</sup>**Randy McCormick:** A member of the Muscle Shoals rhythm section The Swampers, the keyboardist's playing appears on songs by Dolly Parton, Swamp Dogg, JD Souther, Willie Nelson, and Levon Helm, among many others, including, most memorably, the introduction to "Old Time Rock and Roll" by Bob Seger. Tim McGraw, Dolly Parton, and Conway Twitty have recorded his songs.

<sup>8</sup>**Pete Finney:** The pedal steel guitarist is one of the most sought-after musicians in Nashville, playing on sessions by everyone from Carl Perkins and Bobby Bare to the Dixie Chicks and Bonnie "Prince" Billy.

<sup>9</sup>**John Szymanski:** A Chicago-based musician and composer who is a frequent collaborator of Bethany Thomas. He also writes music for acclaimed theater companies the Neo-Futurists and Theatre Oobleck.

<sup>10</sup>**Bethany Thomas:** A Chicago-based singer and actress who has sung and recorded with Robbie Fulks, Syl Johnson, JC Brooks, among others. Chicago audiences have seen her perform on the stages of The Second City, Chicago Shakespeare, Court Theatre, and Paramount Theatre.

<sup>11</sup>**Tawny Newsome:** A Chicago singer and actress who previously worked with Jon Langford on his solo records *Old Devils* and *Here Be Monsters*, and with Aboriginal Australian country star Roger Knox on the album *Stranger In My Land*. Originally a Second City Chicago cast member, she can currently be seen on television shows including *Bajillion Dollar Propertie\$* (Seeso), *TV Land's Nobodies*, and *The Comedy Get Down* (BET). She recently re-located to Los Angeles.

<sup>12</sup>**Tomi Lunsford:** A singer from Nashville who has performed or recorded with Porter Wagoner, Delbert McClinton, Champ Hood, among others. She comes from a deep musical lineage: her great-uncle is Bascom Lunsford, the legendary folklorist and songwriter from Asheville, N.C.

<sup>13</sup>**Will McFarlane:** Bonnie Raitt's guitarist for six years until moving to the Shoals in 1980 where he became part of the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section and played on records by R&B greats Bobby Blue Bland, Little Milton, Etta James, and Johnnie Taylor.

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