

Golden Isles

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M A G A Z I N E

MODEL CITIZENS

Foreign-born residents enrich the
coast with world-class talents

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BEACH HAPPY

Sun, sand and song

GOLDEN MUSE

The Isles inspire



Courtesy of GREG HAYNES

Shawn McElrath, son of Swingin' Medallions co-founder John McElrath, entertains a crowd at Jekyll Island's Beach Music Festival in the 1980s.

Beach happy

The magic of summer
and the mysteries of
love live on in song
for Southern Baby
Boomers.

By **AMY H. CARTER**

Every generation has its soundtrack, the musical score that sets the mood, furthers the action, and provides accompaniment for that tumultuous transition from adolescence to adulthood. It's the music that stays with us through all the days of our lives. We outgrow the cars, the parties and the passions of youth, but never the songs.

"Old friends from high school come here to visit and low and behold, with one song, we'll hear it and we'll all remember where we were when it came out," says R.B. Gentry of St. Simons Island.

"Music is the thread that weaves the seams of our lives."

Beach music was the genre that carried Gentry and his pals through their teens in the late 1950s and the 1960s, up to and including tours in Vietnam. Gentry went with the U.S. Marine Corps, and took along the beach music he discovered as a young teen in Fayetteville, N.C.

He also brought it with him when he settled in the Golden Isles, and found

a way to share it with others by co-founding Jekyll Island's Beach Music Festival in 1984. One of the longest running of all local celebrations of the arts and popular culture, the festival drew crowds of upwards of 30,000 at its peak, when legendary beach music bands like The Temptations and The Drifters took the stage.

Those were the groups Gentry and his friends emulated when they formed their own bands in the 1960s and again during a revival of beach music's popularity in the 1980s. That was when Gentry and friend George Skarpalezos played together in an eight-piece band they christened "The Fabulous 60-Minute Men." The old Emmeline and Hessian Seafood Restaurant and Bar at Golden Isles Marina was a frequent venue, although Gentry was fond of opening every show with a line about the band's recent European tour – a fun bit of fabrication.

No matter where the band played, a good time was had by all, and most especially by the musicians themselves.

"Music makes us all happy and it makes the people you play for happy," Skarpalezos says.

As with everything the Baby Boomer generation has done so far in life, that happiness wasn't solely a self-involved endeavor. Even when engaged in youthful leisure, they were changing the world.

Southern beach music was distinctly different from the surf songs made popular by West Coast groups like the Beach Boys or Jan and Dean. Southern beach

music had its roots in the rhythm and blues and soul music of the 1950s. The kids who listened to and later performed beach music helped revive the careers of black musicians who'd first made it big in the 1950s.

"We were blue-eyed soul bands," says Ed Peede, a trumpet player in the Jesup-based band King David and the Slaves



THE BRUNSWICK NEWS

In its heyday some 20 years ago, the Jekyll Island Beach Music Festival, above, drew fans by the many thousands who danced to the sounds of bands like King David and the Slaves, shown top in a promotional photo from the 1960s. Brunswick resident Ed Peede, seated bottom right, played trumpet in the band. Seated to the left of Peede is Randall Bramblett, the band's lead singer, who works today as a professional singer and songwriter.

between 1965 and 1969. “We wanted to play their music. We wanted to sound like them.”

King David and the Slaves and hundreds of other bands like them that played throughout the South provided the soundtrack for Baby Boomers’ coming-of-age.

“These party bands ... played beaches, fraternities, colleges – they were kind of a unique group of bands,” says Greg Haynes, a former music promoter from Waycross who wrote the definitive history of beach music in his hefty tome, “The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music.”

They played dance music, the stuff that really got the party going, whether it was a party of two or 200. While beach music is most commonly associated with the shag, a fast dance perfected on the beaches of South Carolina, the wider genre rocks to a slower beat, as well.

“Most of (the bands) really focused on R&B and soul music as opposed to general Top 40,” Haynes says. “A lot tell me they certainly played The Beatles and covered those songs as well, but that’s not what their penchant was. Their real strong desire was R&B. More appropriately they wanted to sound like R&B artists. The best compliment you could give these white R&B bands was to tell them they



MICHAEL HALL

Ed Peede played trumpet for the Jesup-based beach music band, King David and the Slaves, while majoring in music at the University of Georgia in Athens.

sounded black.”

Like Elvis Presley and the Righteous Brothers, the beach music bands that performed throughout the South in the 1960s were bewitched by black rhythms, and their admiration for the artists who wrote and performed the music wrought

tremendous social change.

These Southern beach music bands were rebels with applause, trumpeting the opening notes in the war over Civil Rights with blaring brass sections and smoldering serenades to love and longing, boldly sharing stages with people

they couldn't legally sit beside on the bus.

Anastatia Sims, professor of history at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, says music caused the first subtle blurring of the color lines that for so long divided the South.

"White rock and roll musicians – most notably Elvis Presley, but others as well – tried hard to imitate the sound of rhythm and blues artists, and white teenagers loved the music, no matter who was singing it," Sims says.

Haynes' book – which chronicles the careers of bands from Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, the Carolinas and Virginia – is jammed full of photos of many of those bands. The second-most striking feature of each band, aside from the wholesome appearance of members who mostly dressed in suits and ties and even tuxedos, is the fact that many were integrated.

"Race relations in the segregated South were a lot more complicated than they seemed on the surface, so it doesn't surprise me that you are finding white and African-American musicians working together," Sims says.

A party band in its own right that played on the bill with Blood, Sweat and Tears and Jerry Butler, King David and the Slaves also played back-up for Jackie Wilson, The Platters, The (Original)



BOBBY HAVEN

Life's a beach for R.B. Gentry and George Skarpalezos, old friends and alumni of "The Fabulous Sixty Minute Men," a popular beach music band from the 1980s.

Drifters and The Tams. Peede, who was a music major at UGA then and is now the chief executive officer of Interior Products in Brunswick, says there was never any violent backlash in response to these duets between the races.

"There was no violence, no ostracism," Peede says. "We just didn't see that in the Southeast."

But the bands weren't overtly rebellious about those partnerships, either.

With so much violence erupting over race in other parts of the country, Sims says musicians in integrated bands would have a stake in appearing as innocuous and as low-key as possible.

"Chances are that no one wanted to draw attention to breaks in the walls of segregation that were supposed to separate whites from African-Americans," she theorizes. "Moreover, some people believed that rock and roll was 'the devil's music,' so adding an overt rebellion against the racial status quo to music that was already controversial because of its sexual innuendo would have just intensified opposition to it."

Back in the day, though, beach music was not about making pronouncements or changing the world. It wasn't even recog-

Best of the beach

The Top 10 beach music songs of all time, by Greg Haynes in "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music":

1. **"Double Shot of My Baby's Love"** by The Swingin' Medallions
2. **"39-21-46"** by The Showmen
3. **"6345789"** by Wilson Pickett
4. **"A Quiet Place"** by Garnett Mims, The Enchanters
5. **"Across the Street"** by Lenny O'Henry
6. **"Ain't No Big Thing"** by The Radiants
7. **"Anna"** by Arthur Alexander
8. **"Baby, I Need Your Lovin'"** by The Four Tops

9. **"Be Young, Be Foolish, Be Happy"** by The Tams, The Sensational Epics
10. **"But It's Alright"** by J.J. Jackson

And further down the list:

26. **"Hey, Baby"** by Bruce Channel
35. **"I Got You (I Feel Good)"** by James Brown
60. **"Mustang Sally"** by Wilson Pickett
61. **"My Girl"** by The Temptations
62. **"My Guy"** by Mary Wells
80. **"Stand By Me"** by Ben E. King
94. **"Under the Boardwalk"** by The Drifters

nized for the phenomenon it was until years later. It was simply the sound of one generation's moment in the sun.

Or, as Peede, the former trumpet player turned CEO, describes it: "It's the magic

of summer at the beach. It's the glow in the eyes of two young people from two different places who meet and find something very special."

Very special, indeed. ■

Inspiration music

Ripete Records in Bishopville, S.C., is the official chronicler of the official music of the Southeast, beach music. Founder Marion Carter, a contributor to Greg Haynes' book "**The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music,**" has compiled a companion CD set that numbers 14 volumes so far.

"There are 286 songs total," Carter says. "There are about 10 more volumes."

The set preserves the recordings of famous artists and obscure regional bands alike.

"Some is pulled from my personal collection," Carter says. "That tended to focus on the Carolinas and Virginia and parts of Georgia."

While working on "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music" with Haynes, Carter talked to groups in Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Southwestern Georgia and picked up "a ton" of recordings he did not have in his collection.

"Lots of groups formed in the '60s and made one or two records and they broke up and became doctors and lawyers and everything else under the sun," Carter says.

Volumes 1 and 2 of the Heeey Baby Days anthology of beach music can only be purchased with the book, which is for sale in select local book stores and online at www.heybabydays.com.

Volumes 3 through 14 of the music collection on CD can be ordered off the Ripete Records Web site at www.ripete.com.

Beach Music Fest

The Jekyll Island Beach Music Festival will be Aug. 10-11. The Swingin' Medallion will entertain pre- and post-festival at the Jekyll Island Convention Center at 8 p.m. on Aug. 10 and 11. Admission is \$15.

On Aug. 11, the bands hit the beach for the main event from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. This year's performers include the Swingin' Medallions, Sounds of Motown, Hack Bartley and Second Chance. Tickets are \$12.

The Kahuna Club

R.B. Gentry and fellow beach music aficionados are reorganizing **The Kahuna Club**, a private social club that hosts five or six concerts and dances a year featuring beach music bands.

The cost to join is \$500 per couple. For more information, contact Gentry at 638-7272.