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*Capricorn Records: Support Southern Music.* Mercer Music at Capricorn, Mercer University, Macon, GA. Jared Wright, Curator. December 2, 2019 – Ongoing. <https://capricorn.mercer.edu/museum>.

Modern rock is often defined by its geographic origin. As four “lads from Liverpool,” the Beatles opened the door for the global popularity of the British Invasion. In the United States, Detroit, Memphis, SoCal, and Atlanta are just a few of the locations associated with distinctive American sounds that have been exported to fans all over the world. A new exhibition at the former Capricorn Records studio, run by Mercer University as a historic site and museum, seeks to position Macon, Georgia, as the birthplace of southern rock, despite Capricorn’s relatively short-lived impact on rock music.

*Capricorn Records: Support Southern Music* is housed within Mercer Music at Capricorn, the result of a successful historic preservation project that is equal parts adaptive reuse and restoration. The circa-1880 building complex first took on new life in the 1960s thanks to Phil Walden, a Macon booking agent who found early success managing R&B acts, most notably Otis Redding. Walden and Redding partnered in 1967 to purchase a downtown property with the dream of opening a high-quality recording studio, but Redding's untimely death put the project on hold. Two years later, Walden and Frank Fenter, an executive at Atlantic Records, founded Capricorn Records as a subsidiary of Atlantic, simultaneously launching a record label and a recording studio that engaged Macon's existing music scene while attracting musicians from across the country.<sup>1</sup> After a decade of defining a new genre of southern rock with iconic artists such as the Allman Brothers Band and the Marshall Tucker Band, Capricorn filed for bankruptcy and closed its doors in 1979. The studio building languished, earning a spot on the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation's Places in Peril list in 2010 before its purchase by a charitable foundation. A combination of historic tax credits, grants, and private donations enabled Mercer University to restore and reopen the space in December 2019 as part recording studios, part museum, and part music incubator (along with a small bar).<sup>2</sup> Weekend visitors have the chance to tour Studio A, the historic studio that looks and sounds almost exactly as it did in the 1970s, and musicians can book the space or its contemporary counterpart for recording sessions.

The museum exhibition focuses on the history of Capricorn through several short thematic sections. Though the museum owns a few artifacts, most objects and images are on loan from individuals and institutions, including the nearby Big House Museum. Walden and Fenter's partnership is presented alongside a striking three-dimensional tableau of their office space, giving the feeling of peeking at a desk they've just stepped away from. Booking contracts, correspondence, and photographs tell the stories of the creation of the studio's house band and how Duane Allman recruited several talented musicians to move to Middle Georgia and record landmark albums. Recording studio documents specifically connect the Capricorn story to Macon, exploring how soul, blues, rockabilly, and country blended to create a new genre of southern rock that redefined how many outsiders saw the South. In its most compelling section, the exhibition defines "the Macon sound," putting Capricorn Sound Studios on equal footing with Motown Studios in Detroit, Sun Studio and Stax in Memphis, and FAME in Muscle Shoals as having created a uniquely place-based genre. Two sections featuring souvenir buttons,

<sup>1</sup> Jared Wright, "A Brief History of Capricorn," Mercer Music at Capricorn, <https://capricorn.mercer.edu/history/>.

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Ruggieri, "Capricorn Studios Rising as Mercer Music at Capricorn," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.ajc.com/blog/music/capricorn-studios-rising-mercercapricorn-music-capricorn>. For more about the Capricorn building's near-demise and its connection to other Macon musical artists, see Adam Ragusea, "Capricorn in Retrograde: Macon's Endangered Musical History," National Public Radio, October 16, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/16/356645162/capricorn-in-retrograde-macons-endangered-musical-history>.



A tableau explores the partnership of Capricorn Records' founders. (Courtesy of the author)

t-shirts, and event programs illustrate the label's role in bringing the world to Macon, as celebrities such as Andy Warhol and Bette Midler frequented the annual Capricorn BBQ and longtime fan Jimmy Carter enlisted Capricorn performers' help in his 1976 presidential campaign. The Carter section in particular makes a strong case for Capricorn's political involvement as a forerunner of modern initiatives such as Rock the Vote.<sup>3</sup> In the background, colorful wall murals of album art accent large reproductions of notable photographs.

Fittingly, the star of the exhibition is the music. Interactive kiosks, designed to mimic record store bins, offer visitors headphones to listen to the complete Capricorn catalog, allowing them to browse by artist and album. A digital rendering of

<sup>3</sup> Carter's lifelong connection to music and his embrace of rock and roll, including his friendships with Capricorn artists, is explored further in the 2020 documentary *Jimmy Carter: Rock & Roll President* (CNN).



Reproductions of psychedelic album art surround installations of original artifacts and photographs. (Courtesy of the author)

a turntable encourages guests to drop the needle on their favorite song, with the option to upload it to a public playlist in the exhibition gallery. While listening, visitors can browse a staggering array of Capricorn ephemera, ranging from historic photographs both seen and unseen in the exhibition to recording session track sheets and promotional booklets. Even Fenter's local Le Bistro restaurant is represented, capping a delightful literal menu of everything Capricorn. It is easy to imagine spending hours grooving here for both Capricorn devotees and newcomers, exploring the label's musical evolution. These kiosks bring the exhibition's displays to life in a dynamic and fun style, and the addition of a curated aural experience enhances visitors' understanding of concepts explored in the text. Thankfully, hand sanitizer, mask guidelines, and a maximum gallery capacity made the experience of visiting the museum and utilizing touchscreens during a pandemic significantly safer.

The social landscape of the South in the '70s was tumultuous, and deeper examination of those issues is sporadic within the exhibition. Most successful is discussion of Redding's leadership in Macon's soul music community and his key role in Capricorn's origin story. His widow and son continued to be involved with the label, and Capricorn helped establish the Otis Redding Scholarship Fund to assist minority students attending Mercer's law school. The exhibition also briefly mentions the racial rift that emerged between Black and white musicians and producers in the South after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., just a few months after Redding's death, in acknowledging the label's roster of predominantly white artists. Similar reflection on the nearly total lack of women's faces and voices in the space, or recognition of Capricorn's several female engineers, would be a worthy addition and an avenue to explore the fraught gender dynamics of the music industry. One image label thoughtfully addresses the presence of the



Visitors enjoy listening to music using the exhibit's interactive kiosks at the opening night party in December 2019. (Courtesy of Jared Wright and Mercer University)

Confederate battle flag on some Capricorn material, situating it within the context of European marketing efforts while acknowledging its problematic legacy. But a passing reference to Capricorn's "otherwise progressive" nature, as one label puts it, suggests there is much more to consider here. The intersection of the cultures and worldviews of Macon residents with those of musical transplants remains ripe for further exploration, as do decisions to package a uniquely southern style of music with alternately psychedelic or so-called southern heritage motifs such as the Confederate flag.

The exhibition functions well as an introduction to Capricorn and its role in Macon's history, and the clearly extensive nature of the project's research, distilled into easily accessible text, suggests that future updates or temporary installations could easily add even more detail and nuance. As one visually and sonically pleasing whole, *Capricorn Records: Support Southern Music* offers an opportunity to engage with musical trailblazers whose legacy still reverberates around the world today.

Rebecca Bush, Columbus Museum

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