

FESTIVAL NEWS

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**RHYTHM-AND-BLUES SINGER BONNIE BRAMLETT, NEW ORLEANS PIANIST  
HENRY BUTLER TO HEADLINE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL W.C. HANDY MUSIC FESTIVAL**

**By Terry Pace**

*W.C. Handy Music Festival*

FLORENCE, Alabama – One of the most distinctive voices in Southern soul, rock and rhythm-and-blues will join forces with a dynamic blues-and-jazz pianist from the Crescent City to headline the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary W.C. Handy Music Festival.

Alabama's world-renowned Muscle Shoals music community will honor the memory of the "Father of the Blues" – Florence native W.C. Handy – with a 10-day music festival that begins Friday, July 21 (with the official opening ceremonies set for Sunday, July 23), and continues through Sunday, July 30. The Shoals area's Music Preservation Society sponsors the annual summer salute to Handy – composer of *St. Louis Blues* and *Beale Street Blues* – whose musical legacy lives on through the area's legendary studio-recording, songwriting and music-publishing industry.

This year's festival includes more than 200 events across the Northwest Alabama area, with a wide variety of blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, soul and country acts and artists booked to perform live in local restaurants, nightclubs, theatres, parks, libraries, art galleries, churches, malls, museums and street corners throughout the three-county region.

Handy's dual headliner events for 2006 will include concerts by rock and R&B singer Bonnie Bramlett, backed by the all-star Capricorn Rhythm Section, and New Orleans-based jazz-and-blues pianist Henry Butler. Both concerts will take place at Norton Auditorium, on the University of North Alabama campus, with Butler opening the headliner lineup at 5 p.m. and Bramlett set to perform at 8 p.m.

Blending simmering rhythm-and-blues with smoldering rock 'n' roll, Bramlett's rich, rootsy, heart-stirring vocals helped establish the Southern-soul meccas of Memphis, Muscle Shoals and Macon in the 1960s and '70s. She was an early apprentice of blues legends Albert King and Little Milton and later became the first white member of Ike and Tina Turner's legendary backup group, The Ikettes.

"I've witnessed a lot of history in the making, and I've worked with a lot of my heroes," the singer says today. "I just feel so blessed to be a part of it."

In 1967, Bonnie and her husband at the time – singer, songwriter and guitarist Delaney Bramlett – formed Delaney and Bonnie and Friends. The husband-and-wife duo toured and released five influential albums as well as the hit singles *Never Ending Song of Love* and *Only You Know and I Know*. Before their personal and professional breakup in 1972, Delaney and Bonnie's superstar "Friends" included John Lennon, Eric Clapton, Leon Russell, George Harrison, Dave Mason, Rita Coolidge and Gram Parsons.

In 1973, Bonnie joined forces with the Average White Band to launch her solo career with the album *Sweet Bonnie Bramlett*. She then signed with Phil Walden's Macon-based Southern-rock label, Capricorn Records, and cut three more solo projects between 1975 and 1978. Bonnie later toured with Stephen Stills and the Allman Brothers. She also sang backup on recordings by Joe Cocker, Gregg Allman, Jimmy Buffett, Little Feat, Jimmy Hall, Dwight Yoakam and Delbert McClinton (including his smash Muscle Shoals single, *Givin' It Up for Your Love*).

"If I wasn't already married," Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards raved after listening to one of Bonnie's most recent recordings, "I would marry your voice. ... It is just beautiful." Legendary Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler called her vocals "stunning in every respect ... burning with the feeling that we have come to recognize as deep soul."

Bonnie's songwriting credits include two classic collaborations with Leon Russell, the Grammy-nominated *Super Star* and the anti-war anthem *Give Peace a Chance*. As an actress (under the name Bonnie Sheridan), she guest-starred on the TV series *Fame* and played the recurring role of waitress Bonnie Watkins on the hit sitcom *Roseanne*. She has also been featured in the films *The Doors* and the upcoming *The Guardian*, co-starring Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher.

Bonnie returned to the recording studio in 2002, releasing the critically acclaimed *I'm Still the Same*. Her latest album, *Roots, Blues & Jazz*, was released in March by Zoho Records. For her Handy festival performance, the "Queen of Hazel-Eyed Soul" will be backed by the Capricorn Records Rhythm Section, an all-star band that features Muscle Shoals' own Scott Boyer, plus Tommy Talton, Bill Stewart, Paul Hornsby and Johnny Sandlin.

"I'm blessed – I can still sing my head off," Bonnie says today. "Through the years, people didn't know where to put me. I sound very black. ... I can sing rock, Southern rock, blues, gospel. That seemed to be a problem – until now."

Unlike his fellow headliner, Henry Butler may not be a well-known name with hit records to his credit, but the multi-talented blues and jazz musician has spent more than a decade establishing himself as one of the premier piano-playing singers in the musical heart of New Orleans, Louisiana. Music critics and fellow artists agree that it's only a matter of time before the rest of the world discovers his unique and eclectic talents.

"Truly a musicians' musician, Henry Butler blends old and new," reviewer Raoul Hernandez declared after a Henry Butler performance in Austin, Texas, "and preserves New Orleans' reputation as the birthplace of musical masters." New Orleans blues, jazz and rock piano legend Dr. John called Henry "the pride of New Orleans, a visionistical downhome cat and a hellified piano plunker to boot ...."

Blinded by glaucoma since birth, the 56-year-old Butler combines the classical and jazz music he absorbed at the Louisiana School for the Blind and Southern University with the gospel, blues and rhythm-and-blues music he listened to during his youth in New Orleans. His concert sets are living lessons in variety and spontaneity.

"I do whatever I feel like doing," the six-time W.C. Handy Awards nominee maintains. "That's pretty much the way I approach most performances."

Henry's vast and versatile concert and club repertoire ranges from Handy's signature tune, *St. Louis Blues*, and Scott Joplin's equally essential ragtime anthem, *The Entertainer*, to Allen Toussaint's pop/R&B standard, *Working in a Coal Mine*, and Professor Longhair's bouncy jazz favorite, *Baby, Let*

*Me Hold Your Hand.*

“Seamlessly mixing funk and filigree, Butler is a master at making it up as he goes along,” *Pioneer Press* music critic Dan Emerson wrote after one of Henry’s jazz-club gigs in St. Paul, Minnesota. “If he ever plays a piece the same way twice, those occasions must be few and far between. ... He totes a seemingly bottomless bag of devices, mixing and matching rhythms and melodies with abandon.”

Henry’s latest studio album, *Homeland*, was released on the Basin Street Records label in 2004. The project marks a musical departure from his previous recording ventures.

“The album is a real turning point,” Henry insists. “It was the first time that I’ve brought a blues and R&B band into the studio with me. On this record, I’m feeling closer to my roots.”

Most Handy festival activities are free, but tickets are required for the Bonnie Bramlett and Henry Butler concerts and a limited number of other special events. A special discount ticket priced at \$25 (available in advance, or at the door) includes admission to both concerts. Individual admission to each of the concerts is \$15 in advance and \$20 at the door.

Tickets for the headliner concerts – along with 2006 Handy schedules, posters, T-shirts, buttons, mugs, blankets, chairs and other festival merchandise – will be available beginning Monday, July 17, at the Handy Festival Headquarters, located in the annex of the Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts, 217 E. Tuscaloosa St., downtown Florence. For details, call (256) 766-7642 or visit the festival’s Web site at [www.wchandymusicfestival.org](http://www.wchandymusicfestival.org).