



**W**alk in the small office Ben Shaw has in his home and the evidence of his musical career surrounds you — plastic-encased CDs of songs he's written hang on a wall; on the opposite side sits a piano; and a guitar crowned by a hat sits in a corner.

Shaw has worked in many facets of the music industry as a musician, band member, band leader and songwriter with a few hit songs and commercials under his belt.

"My mother put a guitar in my hand when I was about 6 years old," he said. "I played it and played it and liked it.

"I really liked what I was doing, so I just sat there and taught myself to play. She showed me the few chords."

It was that early experience, Shaw said, "Where I kind of got the itch for it and they realized

that it was something that I could do. I had a strong desire for it and I had some talent.

"Both sides of my family had talent. My father's mother was a great pianist," he said. "She taught public school and piano in Grenada for years, probably over 35 years."

At one point, he said, his family wanted him to learn the piano from his grandmother, "but I had no interest whatsoever; I wouldn't practice. I started in the second grade and I wouldn't do anything. So I just finally quit, you know, after a couple of years."

His parents, Shaw said, never pushed him toward a musical career but made opportunities available to him to play and perform. Shaw said his older brother Ken was also musically talented and played the drums.

"It ended up that we played for years and after I learned to play,

"Then I got kind of tired of school and bailed out my junior year. Didn't know what I was going to do, you know, 21 years old; no job, just not knowing where you're going or what you going to do, but knowing I had a guitar in my hand. I just went wherever that took me."

- Ben Shaw





my mother put us in all the local talent shows," he said.

"I had a younger brother who sang and played a little bit, and we ended in three places. And we'd usually win first, second and third."

Shaw and his brother, Ken, performed at the Gore Springs Town Show and the Grenada County Fair, and won the talent contest there.

They competed in the Mid-South Fair in Memphis, Tenn., where the prize was a chance to appear on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour, a nationally broadcast talent program.

Shaw and his brother failed to be one of the top three finishers to qualify for a shot at the Amateur Hour.

"But the experience that we had ... the audience just really went crazy, you know, I mean, they applauded for us tremen-

dously. The tent was full back then. It was a big tent and so we got a great round of applause."

Their performance led to an invitation to perform on Saturday mornings on Memphis TV station WREG.

"And so we did that," he said. "My mother would haul the drums and in the station wagon, and here we'd go."

When he entered high school, Shaw joined a rock band.

"There were some guys in the ninth or 10th grade that had a little band in Grenada and they knew that I was in the music a little bit, so they asked me to play," he said. "We did the old Beatles music, you know, dressed like the Beatles. The music always had a hold on me. It was something that I was so hungry for that I could sit down and listen to a record and I could sit down a few minutes and play it," he said.

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Shaw kept forming and playing in bands. When he graduated high school and went to the University of Mississippi he played in the school's jazz band before joining a 10-piece show band.

"Then I got kind of tired of school and bailed out my junior year. Quit," Shaw said. "Didn't know what I was going to do, you know: 21 years old; no job, just not knowing where you're going or what you going to do, but knowing I had a guitar in my hand. I just went wherever that took me."

Shaw stayed with his brother in Memphis before returning home, where he worked at several jobs.

He joined a band in Greenville that turned into a bit of irony. The group had a keyboard player but asked Shaw if he could play the piano.

"I said, 'Yeah.' So they bought me a piano."

The band later bought Shaw an electric piano, so he could play with the keyboardist.

"Here was the guy who didn't like playing piano," he said. "I ended up playing piano, kind of just out of necessity for the job."

While he was in Greenville, Shaw joined the rock and blues band Candy Shoestring.

"They were real popular in the Delta and we ended up opening up for Lynyrd Skynyrd at the Cleveland Expo Center in 1974," he said.

Later, Shaw joined the band Sassy Jones.

"It was Mississippi's most popular rock and roll band. They heard me play and they offered me a job in Jackson. I immediately took it because I was starving to death and sleeping on somebody's floor."

The band, Shaw said, "was a phenomenon and we played four nights a week out at the reservoir out there in Main Harbor and some of the clubs. We packed the house Thursday through Sunday. We played out there for seven years."

During his time with Sassy Jones, Shaw began writing songs.

"I had a talent for that," he said. "I was the youngest guy in the group, but I was writing all the songs because it's just something I could do and I wanted to do."

He wrote several songs for a demo tape for

a possible record contract, but the deal fell through.

By now, Shaw was married and had a daughter. He left the group after eight years.

"I just kind of felt led to do something on my own so I went solo and I started playing piano in the restaurants and smaller places as a solo artist and kept writing songs, doing a lot of commercials."

"I have a knack for writing commercials," he said, pointing out he has written commercials for then-Atwood Chevrolet, the Gumbo Pot and United Cleaners in Vicksburg.

Shaw later left Mississippi for Nashville, where he worked at Opryland amusement park as a rover.

"We'd walk and play songs outside," he said. "If you were in a ticket line and (it's) hot and you're waiting on a long line, it was my job to come up and sing you a song and stroll around a little bit and try to keep you satisfied until you get on the ride."

The job in Nashville led to a request from another performer to write him some songs to sing on "Star Search," a nationally televised



talent show.

"It turned out they did a song on Star Search. That was my first. I thought, 'OK. I'm in the business now.' And so somebody said, 'Well, how you gonna get paid?' And I said, 'I don't know.' They said, 'you need to join ASCAP or BMI (songwriters agencies), one or the other, and go down there to the office and talk to 'em, and they'll tell you what to do.'"

"I did. And we got all the legal formalities and signed the papers and got registered and licensed and all that stuff."

Shaw returned to Memphis to be closer to his daughter when he got a call from Rick Hall, owner of the well-known Muscle Shoals Studio in Muscle Shoals, Ala., about a song Shaw wrote called "Too Many Honky Tonks on My Way Home." Hall said Dukes of Hazzard actor Tom Wopat wanted to include it in a country

album.

Shaw went to Alabama to help with producing the record and "Too Many Honky Tonks" was the start of several songs he wrote for several artists. They included a song called "Don't Give Me No Lip" for former St. Aloysius band director Vickie Baker, which resulted in her receiving a record contract.

Shaw said he's no longer writing but still performs about three times a month.

"That's what sets me free. That's what really gets me where I'm supposed to be because I'm out of myself then. I'm still working, using my talent, playing, singing my songs. 'Cause that's what makes me tick, right? Keeps me balanced."

"You know, I'm very grateful and thankful for being able to do all this — something that you love and have this long career and have your health and being able to still perform."



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