

August 18th, 1996

MACON, Ga. Any ramblin' man who spends a Saturday night at the Allman Brothers Bed & Breakfast certainly doesn't expect to wake up to the sound of church bells on a Sunday morning.

The fierce blues-tinged riffs of the Allman Brothers speaks to renegades from every walk of life; brakemen to bikers, suits to boots. The legacy was secured in 1995 when they were inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. During the Summer Olympics, I was the first "official" (paying \$50 a night) guest at what fans call the Big House, the band's home in 1970-73.

Macon, pop. 125,000, is 90 miles south of Atlanta, a straight shot down I-75.

The 96-year-old, three-story Grand Tudor house is owned and operated by Kirk and Kirsten West. It is across the street from the First Christian (Disciples of Christ) Church of Macon. On a daily basis - and twice on Sunday - the church tower sings out.

Kirk is a former Chicago photographer who is now the Allman Brothers road manager. He also was associate producer of "Dreams," the Allman Brothers box set released in 1989. Kirsten is a former Chicago insurance executive. In 1991 they met through a Chicago Reader personal ad. By 1993 they were married and living in the warm confines of the Big House.

Friends and fans such as country star Leroy Parnell and blues guitarist Tinsely Ellis have been guests, but it wasn't until this summer that the Wests realized a three-year-old dream of an Allman Brothers Bed & Breakfast.

It was rise and shine in the early 1970s for the Allman Brothers. Their most artistically fertile period began in 1971 when the band released "At Fillmore East," one of the cornerstone live albums in rock 'n' roll history. Then, 1972's "Eat a Peach" was Duane Allman's swan song, noted by the tender two-minute instrumental "Little Martha," the only song he ever wrote. He died Oct. 29, 1971 after a motorcycle accident in Macon. He was 24.

The Big House takes on an unforgettable spirit after listening to Dickey Betts' "Blue Sky" from "Eat a Peach." With beautiful harmonics based on twin 1930s Western Swing guitars, Betts wrote "Good ol' Sunday morning/bells are ringing in the air . . ." after spending time at the house. When the band visits the Big House, Betts still remains in the bus.

"There's a lot of drama and Gothic romance you don't really pick up on if you just kind of read the Allman Brothers history," Kirsten said over breakfast. Kirk was in Detroit with the band. "This house was the focal point for the band," Kirsten said. "And Macon became a mecca for young bands trying to get discovered, because there were plenty of bands signed to Capricorn Records after the Allmans. Phil Walden (Capricorn founder), Otis Redding (Macon native) and the Allman Brothers put Macon on the map."

The Allman Brothers recorded for Capricorn, who also signed Southern Rock acts such as the Marshall Tucker Band, Wet Willie and Elvin Bishop. Even Dr. John migrated from New Orleans to live in Macon. Now in Nashville, Capricorn's old studios still stand at 535 Cotton Ave. in downtown Macon. (GABBA, the Georgia Allman Brothers Band Association, includes the Capricorn studios in a map of 21 Allman Brothers landmarks, available through GABBA, Box 6354, Macon, Ga. 31208).

With 77 windows and a dozen French doors, the Big House is architecturally compelling. The top level is framed by sloping dormers and a vaulted ceiling. When built in 1900, the top level was used as a ballroom. The band moved into the Big House as renters in 1970.

This was the lineup: Gregg Allman; Duane Allman, his wife, Donna, and their daughter Galladrielle; late bassist Berry Oakley (a Chicago native), his wife, Linda, their daughter Brittany, and Candy Oakley (Berry's sister, who was dating Gregg). "The women picked the house out in December, 1969, and rented it while the guys were out in California doing their first West Coast tour," Kirsten said. "They paid \$220 a month."

Kirsten interviewed Linda Oakley about the house for

the AllmanBrothers quarterly newsletter Hittin' the Note, published in the old ballroom. Down the ballroom floor from the newsletter office is Kirk's library of more than 4,000 Allman Brotherstapes, 1,000 videos, vinyl from five continents and several thousand photos.

The Big House is at 2321 Vineville, in Macon's historic district.

Macon is unique in the South in that it is one of the areas that Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman did not destroy during the Civil War. The Big House was pretty wide open as a party house. "Linda said she very rarely cooked dinner for less than 20 people when the guys were home," Kirsten said. When the Allman Brothers contingent was home, they rehearsed in a big first floor sun room that is now the Archive Room. Duane removed all the furniture and nailed padding on the walls. With Berry Oakley as ringleader, the band practiced nightly, and deep into the night. It was in this room that Oakley coined the phrase "hittin' the note," that the house residents expanded to a way of being.

Today, the Archive Room is full of rare posters, photographs, a tie-dyed T-shirt Eric Clapton gave to Duane Allman and even Gregg Allman's vintage Hammond B-3 organ. When Kirk left Chicago, it took 200 boxes just to move his memorabilia.

During my visit, a house guest was staying in what once was Duane's upstairs bedroom. The back rooms once used by Berry and Linda are now used by Kirk and Kirsten. I slept - or in Allmanspeak crashed - in a small bedroom that was used as Galladrielle's nursery, nestled between Duane and Gregg's bedrooms.

During the first three months in the house, Kirk and Kirsten spent \$110,000 restoring the exterior. "This is the hardest I've ever worked," Kirsten said. "I try not to have too great an expectation about anything, but I had a big expectation this house would be done in a year. I had to take a big step back. Sometimes it isn't the end result, it's the process that's important."

Duane Allman broke up with Donna in 1971 and moved out. On the day Duane died, he visited the Big House, where everyone was carving pumpkins as part of a surprise party for Linda Oakley. "Duane

came over on his motorcycle with a big bouquet of flowers for Linda, which kind of gave it away," Kirsten said. "He left and was on his way back to his house when he had the accident. He died very quickly after they brought him to the hospital. Berry was completely wiggled out over this. The next year he became real self-destructive. People didn't think he would last very long. They thought he had a death wish and he did."

Oakley died in a motorcycle accident on Nov. 11, 1972. Oakley hit a bus a block from where Duane went down. Oakley was 23. Oakley actually walked away from the accident and went to the Big House to lie down. He lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital, where he died.

Oakley is buried next to Duane in the pre-Civil War Rose Hill Cemetery, 1091 Riverside Dr. (912-751-9119), the site of Allman Brother inspirations such as "Little Martha's" grave and that of Elizabeth Reed, which inspired "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed." Gregg Allman returned after Duane died and stayed in his brother's room.

The Allmanclan remained in the house until January, 1973, when they moved to a farm in Juliette, outside of Macon. Their landlord thought the band was gaining too much notoriety. An eviction notice was slapped on the front door in Berry's name - three months after his death.

Kirsten glanced out her patio window. A hummingbird fluttered between some purple salvia. A native of Minneapolis, she also has lived in Hollywood and in west suburban Hinsdale. "I was living in my townhouse in Dearborn Park and walking to work," she said. "I was doing the corporate thing, but I hung out at (Buddy Guy's) Legends. I know had I not had these cool moments at the club seeing people like Buddy Guy and Willie Dixon, I probably wouldn't even have answered that ad, because his ad asked, 'How would you like to go out and see live blues?' " "Kirk captured my heart," Kirsten said, still watching the elusive hummingbird.

Meanwhile, the blue Georgia sky embraced The Big House as it has always done and as it always will.

Specifically For Big House information write the Wests, 2321 Vineville Ave., Macon, Ga. 31204, or call (912) 742-5005.