

Marshall is proclaimed 'birthplace' of boogie woogie

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Marshall is now known as the birthplace of boogie woogie, a unique style of piano music that sprung out of the black logging and railroad camps of the 1870s with area's Texas & Pacific Railroad a significant influence.

"Boogie woogie music has been called the true father of rock-and-roll and is rightly recognized as one of the most vital and revolutionary developments in the entire history of popular music, and the true story of its emergence is of factual and cultural importance worldwide," reads the resolution passed unanimously by the Marshall City Commission on May 13.

Commissioners, city officials and a well attended

audience heard from Jack Canson, who has been working with musicologist and boogie woogie expert, Dr. John Tennison.

"We owe a debt to Dr. John Tennison," said Canson.

Tennison's research was key in defining Marshall as the genre's origination.

"The boogie woogie background is also of Marshall's history and heritage ... We are indeed the birthplace of boogie woogie," said Canson. "It's right that we claim this exciting part of Marshall as it is established as a place for live entertainment."

Boogie woogie spread along the T&P railroad from Marshall to Houston, Dallas, Texarkana, Chicago, Shreveport and New Orleans. From there, boogie woogie traveled throughout

the world, according to Tennison's research.

"I'm just proud to be a part of the beginning presentation," said Commissioner Gloria Moon, who called the motion as the commission set to vote on this landmark resolution.

She recalled catchy "boogie" phrases like how they'd "boogie down the street" when they were on their way somewhere. She also remembers the name of foremost boogie woogie performer Dave Alexander Elam, reared in Marshall and a living link to boogie woogie's roots in the city's vicinity.

"As a young girl, I was familiar with boogie woogie, this was a very big part of my enthusiasm," said Ms. Moon.

Alexander is now known

as Omar Shariff of Sacramento, Calif., and he will be returning to Marshall for the first time since 1957 to play a concert June 11, at the Marshall Regional Arts Council. Admission will be free, said Canson.

"He is a living link through his father to this," said Canson, who described boogie woogie as the "most popular music to spring from America."

Oral histories established that prior to 1900, the words "boogie woogie" were used to describe both piano and guitar music played in the barrel houses of Texas logging camps, and to the style of dancing that often accompanied the music, according to Tennison's research.

Tennison's findings also

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reflect on Marshall as being relatively isolated as a railroad hub from 1857 to 1880, which allowed for African musical sensibilities to be expressed in ways that were stylistically distinct from the way they were expressed through jazz and ragtime.

Boogie woogie's style was the expression of black musical sensibilities, performed on piano and was inspired by the sounds of steam locomotives and other train sounds like the "clickity-clack" rhythm of train wheels over rail seams. Repetitive and "polyrhythmic"

sounds from train yards were also fundamental to boogie woogie's creation, sounds that would have only been in abundance at the T&P Railroad. And Harrison County also had the largest population of blacks in the state, according to Tennison's research.

"Our city embraces this with the same sense of wonder and satisfaction as if we had discovered gold in our back yard," reads the resolution. "A valuable jewel that has been hidden in our past is now recovered, and we will invite the world to come share it with us."