

The Boogie Woogie Man

Omar Sharriff Brings Musical Legacy Back Home

David Alexander Elam's momma didn't want the devil's music in her house. But when she wasn't there, Elam's father would raise a little hell with his friends, some instruments, and plenty of corn liquor. As a young boy in Marshall, Elam was mesmerized by the music they played, which didn't seem to be the work of the devil at all. It was inspirational. And it stuck with him.

"My dad threw some wild parties, man—he and his friends would create their own fun," says Elam, who now goes by the name Omar Sharriff. "They'd play boogie woogie and old blues music like Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. I'd go to school the next day and try to play it on the piano."

Decades later, Sharriff would share the stage with Waters himself, among other legendary musicians

like Ray Charles, Albert Collins, and Buddy Guy. He toured in Europe and earned a living as a respected pianist in California before an unexpected invitation in 2010 brought him back home to East Texas, where he now serves as Marshall's cultural ambassador.

"When I first heard about Marshall wanting me to come back, I thought it was a joke," he says. Instead, Sharriff found a welcoming community that has benefitted from a newfound musical legacy and decades of racial tolerance.

Life was considerably different for Sharriff while growing up in Marshall. Born in 1938, he brawled with white kids in the street, attended a segregated school, and entered buildings through a separate doorway. His home life was relatively stable thanks to his father, who worked for a logging company as a mule skinner (the man who handled a mule team), and his church-minded mother, who he describes as Christ-like.

Sharriff recalls his elementary school music teacher Ella Mae Willis providing his first piano lesson, which was inspiring yet frustrating, since he was unable to practice without a piano in his home. "When I wanted to play, I'd have to climb

into an open window at the school and play the piano in there," he says.

As a student at Pemberton High School, Sharriff attended a show by nationally renowned piano player Floyd Dixon, a Marshall native. He refers to the concert as a significant turning point in his life. "I decided right then and there—That's it, I want to do that," he says. Dixon helped Sharriff get started in the music business by suggesting influential albums by Art Tatum and Thelonious Monk and introducing him to club owners in nearby Shreveport, Texarkana, and Tyler.

By 1955, however, racism had become an inescapable threat. After witnessing a black man get beaten in downtown Marshall while policemen sat by idly smoking cigarettes, he and his family fled to California. Sharriff served in the Navy for two years and moved to Oakland, where he began his journey as a professional musician.

Sharriff recalls a seminal experience while playing a gig at San Francisco's Minny's Can-Do Club, where a bar patron was observing him with keen interest. After the show, he approached Sharriff, expressed his admiration, and asked him to call if he wanted to play at the city's highest-profile venues. Though suspicious of the man's intentions, Sharriff ultimately made contact and was humbled to discover he was speaking with famous concert promoter Bill Graham.

"He booked me as an opener for Bob Dylan and got me into the Winterland ballroom—that was the greatest thing that ever happened to me." Sharriff says. "San Francisco was great, man. That city was like a beautiful woman—I just loved that whole scene."

Omar Sharriff plays boogie woogie piano music in his hometown of Marshall, where he recently returned to be the city's cultural ambassador.



Omar Sharriff (at left) and Muddy Waters shared the stage and an enduring friendship in the early 1970s.

For most of the 1960s and '70s, Sharriff toured regularly along the West Coast, and, most memorably across Europe where he was mobbed by autograph-seeking fans who “made (him) feel like the president of the United States.” He also released several albums during this time under

Sacramento, though the proliferation of club DJs and a decline in appreciation for blues-based piano left him disillusioned.

When Sharriff received a phone call from Texas musicologist John Tennison in January 2010, he was struggling to make ends meet.

his given name (Dave Alexander) before converting to Islam, when he took the name Omar Sharriff. By the 1980s and '90s, he was playing primarily in the San Francisco Bay area and eventually in

Tennison convinced Sharriff his intentions were legitimate, and Sharriff was welcomed home on June 10, 2010 for a celebratory concert as part of Omar Sharriff Day. In February 2011, he permanently moved back to Marshall, where he receives a small stipend and an apartment from the city while serving as an artist in residence.

“I don’t have to worry about any of the bad stuff here anymore—time has taken care of it. God bless time,” Sharriff says. “Everybody’s been so nice to me. I wouldn’t have believed it if someone told me in 1955 that one day there’d be an Omar Sharriff Day in Marshall. It’s a different world, man.”★

This article was written by Andy Rhodes, managing editor of The Medallion.

Tracking Marshall’s Musical Origins

So, just how did Marshall become known as the birthplace of boogie woogie? It all started with Texarkana native John Tennison, a San Antonio psychiatrist and boogie woogie expert who extensively researched the genre’s beginnings and arrived at what he refers to as “the most probable conclusion” of Marshall being its city of origin.

A compelling convergence of forces in Marshall—primarily involving the state’s largest population of freedmen and the headquarters of the Texas and Pacific Railway—led Tennison to theorize boogie woogie likely originated in the barrelhouses associated with the logging camps on the railroad line. The steady rhythm of the steam wheels (the repetitive sound of four chuffs per turn that translates to an eight-to-the-bar meter) created an ostinato tempo that was simulated with the left-handed bass part of boogie woogie piano music.

“We imitate our environment, so when something gets in our head with a pattern like that, we tend to replicate it in a physical manifestation—in this case, the piano,” Tennison says.

He adds that his “meta-analysis” is based on reconcilable sources, including oral histories, interviews, and documentation by music historians he is compiling for a book. His thorough research has impressed many entities, resulting in official proclamations and promotion by Texas’ State Historian Light Cummins, the City of Marshall, and National Public Radio.

Jack and Nancy Canson, co-directors of the city-sponsored initiative Marshall, Texas, the Birthplace of Boogie Woogie, are enthusiastic about Tennison’s work and have already witnessed its impact on their community.

“People in town are hearing about it, reading about it, and talking about it,” Nancy says. “When you mention Omar Sharriff’s name, they say ‘Oh yeah—the boogie woogie man!’ ”

The Cansons have organized Boogie Woogie Wednesdays—weekly concerts in the historic downtown district—and other performances to help promote Marshall’s newfound cultural legacy (visit www.boogiewoogiemarshall.com for more information). For details about Tennison’s extensive research, visit www.bowof.org.