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Pianist helps Marshall, Texas, validate claim as boogie's birthplace

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MARSHALL, Texas – Omar Sharriff thought boogie-woogie piano was his one-way ticket out of town. When he left Marshall in 1955, he never looked back, even as his life narrowed from big shows to a dingy [Sacramento](#), Calif., apartment, meals-on-wheels and gigs that barely covered cab fare.

Then came a phone call from a Texas music historian, who said he'd prove that Sharriff's hometown gave birth to boogie-woogie piano. The historian knew that Sharriff's father played boogie in East Texas and might have learned it from the genre's originators. That made 72-year-old Sharriff Marshall's last, best living link.

Sharriff thought someone was playing a joke, even after the part-time historian, a [San Antonio](#) psychiatrist named John Tennison, asked to visit him in California. Sharriff had hated Marshall ever since he saw another black teenager get beaten up by rednecks on the courthouse lawn while white cops stood by. Sharriff left as soon as he could, certain that staying meant prison or an early grave.

Tennison came in March with a proposal: To stake its claim as birthplace of boogie, Marshall needed Sharriff's help. Would he bring the music back home?

"I couldn't believe it," said Sharriff. "It's like one of them movies, like a space-time continuum. It's weird, man. Feels like I'm being transported back through time. Feels like being abducted by alien spaceships, or somebody put me in a time machine."

It began last January, when city leaders learned that Tennison had spotlighted Marshall as boogie's birthplace on his website, www.bowofo.org. Tennison was invited to speak to the mayor, commissioners and the convention and visitors bureau.

Though boogie's origins were hazy, Tennison told them, the pine forests of East Texas were its cradle. Piano players caught trains from logging camp to logging camp. They entertained black workers with dance music that blended sounds of African drumming with the driving syncopation of locomotives. Marshall was in the middle of those forests. When the first boogie riffs rang out in the 1870s, Marshall was home to the headquarters of the Piney Woods' only railroad, the Texas & Pacific.

After the Civil War, the region had Texas' largest black population, and some of the state's most iconic musicians: Blues guitarist Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter was from the nearby Louisiana border. Ragtime pioneer Scott Joplin and guitar great "T-Bone" Walker came from Linden. Boogie piano maestro [Floyd Dixon](#) was a Marshall native who inspired Sharriff.

Marshall leaders were giddy. They'd spent years and nearly a million dollars trying to develop a tourism plan for a place best known as an overnight interstate stop between [Shreveport](#), La., and Dallas and as a national venue for patent lawsuits. Yet their new tourism brand – "Marshall, Texas: Center Stage" – was still on drawing boards. Local wags said it appeared to be a stimulus program for out-of-town consultants.

Then Tennison "comes to town and hands you your future," said Marshall resident Jack Canson, a screenwriter and public-relations man who agreed to help Marshall figure out how to capitalize on Tennison's research. "And this isn't some guy with a skin problem who lives in his parents' basement. This is ... [a] Stanford medical school graduate."

The convention and visitors bureau agreed to bankroll a concert. A Shreveport company donated use of a Steinway grand piano. The city commission passed an ordinance declaring it birthplace of boogie-woogie. The *Marshall News Messenger* ran a six-part series on Tennison's research and Sharriff's fame.

Sharriff got calls from friends he hadn't heard from since he left as 17-year-old David Alexander Elam. Few knew he'd changed his name, first to [Dave Alexander](#) and later to Omar Sharriff. Fewer homefolk realized the self-taught musician got good enough to play with legends like Ray Charles, [Muddy Waters](#) and [Bob Dylan](#). None knew how Sharriff's life traced the arc of a blues song: He'd burned through two marriages. He survived being gut-shot by an angry woman. He fathered and lost touch with two sons. He found his brother beaten to death in an Oakland tenement.

Sharriff cut a half dozen raw albums. *Playboy*, [Rolling Stone](#) and *Living Blues* called him a boogie master. Then his backer, rock impresario [Bill Graham](#), died in 1991, and Sharriff's career faded.

After a 2007 heart bypass, the ailing musician was alone and broke. He said he drank too much gin and dodged bill collectors. Sometimes, it was hard not to believe that his mother, a "damn-it-to-hell Christian" who whipped him for playing anything but hymns, might have been right in warning that playing the devil's music would lead to ruin.

Sharriff put his school annual by his telephone to visualize callers he last saw more than a half-century ago. The reconnections were a strange relief. "It tells me," he said, "that I'm still alive."

Hands on piano keys

The morning before his concert last week, Sharriff doddered into Marshall's Visual Arts Center to rehearse. His print shirt and ball cap festooned with musical notes had seen cleaner days. A dog chain draped over his shoulder like a bandolier held his keys, he explained, "so I don't lose 'em again."

Sharriff seemed unsteady as workmen set up the gleaming Steinway. He climbed onstage and arranged belongings around the instrument: first the CVS sack he carried everywhere for his Maalox and muscle salve, then a folder jammed with yellowed clippings and a photograph of him with Muddy Waters.

Then he laid hands on the piano keys. He cruised through ballads and boogie, [Chicago](#) blues and West

Coast jazz. His left hand banged out a rhythm to set a watch by, while his right hand did a high-wire act. He paused, plunked a middle C and explained he learned to find that note in his single piano lesson, at age 10. The lady who showed him said he'd rule the keyboard if he could master that and seven other notes in an octave scale.

"From there, it's all up in your head," Sharriff said, "and what you do with those eight notes in your left hand."

That evening, Tennison and Canson escorted Sharriff to City Hall. "This ain't the town I'm from," Sharriff muttered after the mayor gave him a hug. "I'da never guessed this in a million years."

A commissioner read a proclamation that the concert day, June 11, was Omar Sharriff Day. Sharriff struggled for words. "Come tomorrow night and hear me play," he finally said. "You've honored me. Find out whether I'm worth it."

Standing ovation

To a standing ovation, Sharriff walked onstage that night in a sequined cap and vest. City leaders filled the front row of the capacity audience of 450. A dozen of Sharriff's classmates came dressed for a party, some from as far away as Dallas. A crew recorded everything for a TV show, CD and possible boogie museum.

Sharriff ripped through solo boogie numbers and then led a trio of local kids, all awed to be backing him.

Afterward, well-wishers mobbed Sharriff. Schoolmates took his phone number. A 90-year-old woman who knew his mother fussed at him for staying gone. Two sisters got his autograph and talked about their mother, Sharriff's piano teacher.

"It's a poor frog who won't croak for his own pond," declared Mayor William "Buddy" Power. He hugged Sharriff, and the mayor's voice thickened as he said it was the most integrated local event in memory.

"This gives us a bridge to where we need to go," the mayor said. "When all this talk first started about Marshall, Texas, as an entertainment center, as center stage, I was thinking, 'Naah. Never happen.' I'm not sure it ever would've happened if this hadn't happened.

"It's so good Mr. Sharriff came home."