

# **Marshall, Texas – The Birthplace of Boogie Woogie**

**By Jack Canson**

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## **Part One: Why Marshall, Texas is the “Birthplace of Boogie Woogie”**

On May 13, 2010, when the city commission of Marshall, Texas officially declared Marshall to be the “birthplace” of Boogie Woogie music, many people were surprised to learn that this playful-but-revolutionary musical genre arose in our own back yard. Most people assume this jumping, percussive style of playing music was created in a noisy urban environment, a big city like Chicago, New Orleans, or Houston. Not so.

Since the late 1930s, music historians have recognized that Boogie Woogie originated in the piney woods of northeast Texas. But until recently, no one had undertaken the research to identify as closely as possible just where in northeast Texas this exciting musical style was first played. This is the first installment of a series that will try to tell the story of how it was determined that Marshall, Texas is that place, literally the epicenter for an explosion of a new form of popular music that spread rapidly throughout the world.

All the information in this series is drawn from the original research of Dr. John Tennison, a San Antonio psychiatrist who is also a respected musicologist and Boogie Woogie expert. Dr. Tennison maintains a noted website on the history of Boogie Woogie and is writing a comprehensive history on the genre. He has generously shared his information with city officials and this writer.

### **What is “Boogie Woogie?”**

Boogie Woogie originally referred exclusively to a musical form that suddenly arose in the Marshall area in the 1870s. By the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the term was also used to describe the new dance styles that were inspired by the music’s popularity.

Here’s how a musician might describe what makes Boogie Woogie different from other musical forms. According to the “Ten Elements of Boogie Woogie,” formulated by Dr. Tennison, the defining elements are:

1. **Ostinato** – a repeating musical element, usually occurring at least in the bass lines, which are usually composed of either broken-octave walking patterns or shuffled-chord patterns.
2. **Swing Pulse** – Although not an essential element, a swing pulse is associated with many examples of Boogie Woogie and creates a certain feel that allows for a greater degree of polyrhythmic interplay between the right and left hands of a skilled Boogie Woogie player.
3. **Syncopation** – in either or both hands, is the process of placing musical events in locations that are not suggested by a pre-existing musical pulse or rhythm.
4. **Polyrhythm** – an inter-play between right and left hand parts, creating a rhythm that is not present in the right or left hand alone, but instead results from the interaction between the right and left hands of the performer.
5. **Counterpoint** – the left-hand part is frequently melodic and contrapuntal to the right-hand part, which distinguishes left hand parts in Boogie Woogie from the “Oom-pah” left-hand parts of Ragtime. The independence of the left hand from the right hand is a direct consequence of the left hand not being overly-sensitive to "correctly" harmonizing with whatever the right hand might be improvising at any moment. This "independence of hands" between the right and left-hand parts of Boogie Woogie can give the effect that more than one person is playing at the same time.
6. **Percussiveness** – a highly percussive, and often melodic, right-hand part is often staccato, often ostinato, and often rhythmically complex in and of itself.
7. **Tonality** – (a sense of musical key) will usually be present, even if an explicit melody is not identifiable.
8. **Chord Usage** – Emphasis of I, IV, and V Chords is seen in many harmonic progressions used in Boogie Woogie. These are often in a 12-Bar, or so-called "12-Bar Blues" progression.
9. **Tempo** – as dance music, Boogie Woogie tends to use a certain range of tempos that are more sonically analogous with the mechanics of human bodily movement than other tempos, and thus more likely to make people want to dance.
10. **Use of Specific Intervallic Sequences** – certain intervallic sequences, especially bass figures, are identified so strongly with Boogie Woogie that, even when not played as ostinato, listeners immediately get the “idea” of the music. These sequences are universally recognized as “Boogie Woogie” throughout the world.

Because of its percussive characteristics, Boogie Woogie has been described as playing the piano like a drum. It has also been described as trying to make a piano sound like a train. Both these descriptions are apt. Emancipation of slaves did not reach northeast

Texas until June 19, 1865. Not long after that, the first Boogie Woogies were created in this area by these newly liberated African-Americans with a rich drum-based musical heritage – and who were working in close proximity to the railroads and the logging camps. In Boogie Woogie music you hear the sound of locomotives chuffing steam, steel wheels clicking across the iron tracks, and the clatter and hammering of the rail yards.

Marshall was at the center of all the elements that contributed to this new way of making music. Harrison County had the highest population of African-Americans in Texas and Marshall was the headquarters of the Texas & Pacific Railroad, which is deeply intertwined with Boogie Woogie. In the next several installments, we will explain how Marshall came to be recognized as the “Birthplace of Boogie Woogie.”

And if you are wondering where the words “Boogie Woogie” come from, there are a number of interesting candidates. Among them is the West African word “Bogi”, which means to dance, and the Congolese term “Mbuki Mvuki” which means shucking off one’s clothes to gain freedom of movement. A French word, “Bouger,” meaning “to move” has also been proposed.

Where ever the term comes from, just about everyone on earth who has ever heard it knows what Boogie Woogie is. In addition to being the father of Rock and Roll, Boogie Woogie has had a profound impact on the way popular music sounds and is played. And it all started right here in Marshall.

## **Part 2: How Boogie Woogie Originated in the Marshall Area**

The first attempts to define a geographical point of origin for Boogie Woogie music began in the late 1930s when music historians conducted extensive interviews and compiled oral histories of the oldest living African-Americans and European-Americans likely to have some knowledge or remembrance of where and when they first heard about Boogie Woogie.

These oral histories produced a broad consensus: Boogie Woogie piano was first played by African-Americans in Texas in the early 1870s.

Additional investigations reached the conclusion that the music emerged in the Piney Woods of northeast Texas in close proximity to railroad building and the logging camps affiliated with the railroad. In the logging camps, work crews composed of former slaves felled the trees, sawed logs, and made crossties for the rail beds. Often, spur lines were run to the camps so that logs could be hauled out of the woods by steam engine. In or nearby every logging camp was a barrel house.

The earliest and most simplistic form of Boogie Woogie playing was originally called “fast western” or more loosely “barrelhouse piano.” As the music grew more sophisticated and took the name Boogie Woogie, the word “barrelhouse” came to mean

the places where Boogie Woogie was most likely to be played, a wide variety of disreputable bars, dives, and bawdyhouses. But in the 1870s, a barrel house was just that, a shack where barrels were assembled or stored. Often, the camp overseers would keep a piano in the barrel house to keep the laborers from drifting away at night in search of diversion elsewhere. It was in these barrel houses that the African-American piano players first began to play the piano “like a drum” and make a piano “sound like a train.”

Prior to the June 19<sup>th</sup> 1865 Emancipation Order freeing all slaves in Texas, few Negroes in northeast Texas or anywhere in the South had more than limited access to a piano. Even if permitted access to one on rare occasions, perhaps for church services, there likely were considerable inhibitions that limited the types of musical expression undertaken. But in the early 1870s, a musician with some rudimentary piano skills trying to entertain former slaves now working around the railroad and in the logging camps was free to experiment and invent. In fact, he was under considerable pressure to experiment with new styles of playing. After long, hard days logging and building rail lines, workers wanted and no doubt demanded exciting, energetic music.

This was a unique confluence of factors to occur anywhere in the world, and uniquely they occurred in northeast Texas. At the same time that Negro musicians obtained the freedom to express African musical sensibilities on their instruments, the tranquility and silence of the rural Piney Woods was being broken by the chuffing, rattling, hammering, and syncopated rhythms of the construction and operation of the railroad. These were new sounds that characterized dramatic changes in the world in which these men were working and playing. Naturally, these were the sounds and rhythms the piano players began to incorporate into their music. For example, the 8-Beats-to-the-bar of classic Boogie Woogie is associated with 2 rotations of a steam engine driver wheel. Suddenly, an entirely new way of playing the piano was established in order to emulate the sounds of the railroad. And any piano player working the barrelhouses around the logging camps and railroads had to be able to play it.

The evidence that this pounding new style of playing first occurred in the Marshall area is overwhelming.

The historical record is clear that three important elements influenced the first Boogie Woogie style of playing when it emerged in the 1870s. Research by Dr. John Tension has established that these necessary elements were only present in the Marshall, Texas area during this period. Those essential elements are (1) the Piney Woods of northeast Texas; (2) African Americans working in logging camps and railroad construction; and (3) the close proximity of a railroad “hub.”

It was the railroad hub that produced the cacophony of sounds the music mimics and made it possible for people who learned the new style to interact with each other, refine and nurture the styles, and transport it in all directions via the trains.

Marshall was by far the most influential and successful city in the Piney Woods and Harrison County had the largest population of African Americans in the state of Texas for

most of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Marshall was also the only railroad hub in northeast Texas during this period.

The railroad did not “arrive” in Marshall, it “began” here. That is, the railroad did not reach Marshall as an extension of earlier lines from the east. The first train and rails to reach Marshall were brought up the Red River by steamboat and barges to Swanson’s Landing on Caddo Lake. Originally chartered as the Texas Western Railroad in 1852, this line, which was one of the earliest in the state of Texas, connected Swanson’s Landing to Jonesville to Marshall by 1858. During the Civil War, the rails between Swanson’s Landing and Jonesville were removed and used to help connect Marshall to Shreveport, which was then the eastern terminus of the line. The first railroad bridge crossing the Red River at Shreveport was not built until the early 1880s.

Railroad building in northeast Texas began in earnest after the Civil War. In 1872, Marshall became the headquarters of the Texas and Pacific Railroad, and the location of its machine shops and rail yards, as this federally chartered company began building lines from Marshall to San Diego, California.

Given the fact that oral histories had consistently established that Boogie Woogie music arose in the 1870s in association with railroad construction in the Piney Woods, Dr. John Tennison determined that the only railroad hub in the Piney Woods in this period was Marshall, Texas. The only other railroad hub in Texas at that time was in Houston, which was outside of the Piney Woods and whose African American population was dwarfed by that of Harrison County.

Oral histories also indicated that the earliest Boogie Woogie musicians used the trains to travel between various logging camps within the Piney Woods. The only rail system in existence in the Piney Woods during the 1870s that could have served this role was the T&P, with its numerous tap lines and spurs connecting the logging camps. And Marshall was the hub of the T&P.

Because the Marshall railroad hub was relatively isolated from the rest of the country, instead of being an extension of existing railways, the conditions were in place for African American musical sensibilities to be expressed in ways that were stylistically different from Ragtime and Jazz.

Boogie Woogie was not a refinement of existing styles of music. It was instead a gradual development of an entirely new way of applying African musical sensibilities, including percussive techniques, to the piano and other instruments. The elements that caused this evolution were only present in the Marshall, Texas, area at the time the music emerged. That is why Dr. Tennison, and others, now proclaim that Marshall, Texas is indeed the “Birthplace of Boogie Woogie.”

### **Part 3: Boogie Woogie Rides the Rails**

In his comprehensive study “The History of Boogie Woogie,” Dr. John Tennison points out that prior to the Emancipation Order of June 19, 1865, African Americans enslaved in the Piney Woods of northeast Texas would not have been free to travel or engage in musical expression or experimentation, nor would they have had access to pianos. Thus, even though would-be musicians might have been exposed to the railroad sounds and related influences prior to Emancipation, they would not have been able to express those sounds on a piano, nor would they have been able to communicate musical ideas to each other.

This situation began to change in the 1870s, but not overnight. The political and cultural environment in the ArkLaTex area did not encourage independence and freedom of action for former slaves. By the mid 1870s, Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation had been enacted throughout the South. Any African American who stepped far from the de facto servitude that was expected of former slaves faced a hostile and potentially dangerous environment.

The first Boogie Woogies undoubtedly were played by blacks for blacks around the logging camp barrelhouses and rail yards in the Marshall area in the 1870s. The African Americans who first played in the Boogie Woogie style in all likelihood were not fulltime, professional musicians. During this era, the barrelhouse piano player might also have been a fulltime logger or track layer or roustabout, picking up a few extra nickels and dimes in exchange for entertaining his fellow workers at night.

Naturally, the idea of being a fulltime musician and escaping the brutally hard work of the logging camps and rail crews would be an attractive idea, indeed.

But a people so recently freed from slavery were not immediately able to support an artist and entertainer class, especially in rural, agricultural areas. For an African American to support himself as a fulltime musician in the Piney Woods at that time, he would have had to travel from location to location, and there would have to be a market demand for his services. Being able to play the new style of playing that was heard in the barrelhouses would have given a part-time musician enough of an edge. And a desire to hear the barrelhouse music helped create a market. The Boogie Woogie style of piano-playing almost certainly helped to establish a professional musician class within the African American culture.

The originating generation of musicians experimented with sounds and rhythms and traded ideas as they began to circulate among the barrelhouses. It is easy to imagine how one musician after another would learn the basics and add refinements and improvisations and carry that down another tap line to a different logging camp. It is also easy to imagine how the captive audiences of working men would have responded with enthusiasm to these explosive new sounds. Then as now, the entertainment axiom “give the public what it wants” applied. Aspiring musicians in the Piney Woods had to play in the Boogie Woogie style to make audiences happy. And when they wanted to find new and bigger audiences, the T&P railroad was their only means of expanding their territory.

In a 1986 television broadcast of Britain's "South Bank Show" about Boogie Woogie, music historian Paul Oliver noted:

“The conductors were used to the logging camp pianists clamoring aboard, telling them a few stories, jumping off the train, getting into another logging camp, and playing again for eight hours, barrelhouse. In this way the music got around—all through Texas—and eventually, of course, out of Texas.”

No one will ever know who the first musician was to take Boogie Woogie out of the Marshall area, or exactly when that was. Getting on the T&P in Marshall, a musician could have headed west to Longview, north to Texarkana, or east to Shreveport, Louisiana. Between 1880 and 1890, the music had almost certainly become established in these areas.

By 1900, Boogie Woogie had probably reached Houston and Dallas, too.

Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, the master of the 12 string guitar and legendary musical powerhouse, was born on the shores of Caddo Lake near Mooringsport, Louisiana, and enthralled audiences world wide with such songs as “Goodnight Irene”, “The Midnight Special,” and literally hundreds others. There are several accounts in the historical record in which Leadbelly says he first heard Boogie Woogie being played “in Caddo County” and, in another account, on Fannin Street in Shreveport, both sometime after 1900. The Texas and Pacific Railroad’s Shreveport Depot was on Fannin Street, close by the city’s notorious red light district.

Leadbelly was among the first to adopt the walking bass of Boogie Woogie piano playing to the guitar, and may have been the person who taught it to Blind Lemon Jefferson, who played in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas, also near a T&P Depot. Jefferson called his walking bass line “booga-rooga.”

The Texas and Pacific Railroad was so integrally involved in the emergence and expansion of the Boogie Woogie style that the names of the towns where T&P trains stopped were used to identify different left-hand bass line styles employed by piano players.

After initially spreading throughout the ArkLaTex, and on to Dallas and Houston, the Boogie Woogie style continued to ride the rails as musicians sought greener pastures. As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century arrived, Boogie Woogie music was no longer confined to a single geographic area. By 1920, it was no longer tethered to its point of origin around Marshall, Texas. Boogie Woogie was now prominently associated with the clubs and bars and sporting districts of Houston, Dallas, New Orleans, Kansas City, and St. Louis. Boogie Woogie music became so strongly identified with each of these bustling and musically sophisticated urban centers that some people would come to think it had been created there. But in fact, the birthplace of Boogie Woogie was the place it got on a train that took it to all those cities.

The Birthplace of Boogie Woogie was Marshall, Texas

#### **Part 4: Ragtime Smooth and Suave; Boogie Woogie Rough and Tumble**

By the late 1880s, Boogie Woogie climbed aboard the Texas & Pacific Railroad and found its way out of Marshall to Shreveport, Texarkana, Longview, and Jefferson. It was still the soundtrack of the logging camps throughout the Arklatex, to be sure, but it was gradually working its way toward the backstreet dives and red light districts of the cities. As it migrated along the T & P lines, a growing coterie of black musicians embraced Boogie Woogie and continued to experiment and develop the form. It had not yet made its way to Main Street. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Boogie Woogie was still a long way from attaining respectability.

Another new style of African-influenced music, however, was rapidly becoming popular with main stream America. The music was called Ragtime, and, ironically, the musician and composer whose work propelled Ragtime to the forefront of American popular music was also born and raised in the Piney Woods of northeast Texas.

Scott Joplin was among the very first African American musicians to gain prominence who was born after the abolition of slavery in the United States. Although his exact date of birth is unknown, it is believed he was born near Linden, Texas, in 1867. Within a few years, the Joplin family was living in Texarkana, where Scott's father worked for the T&P Railroad. Demonstrating an early talent for music, he was encouraged by his mother, with whom he stayed after his parents divorced. In Texarkana, he received piano instruction from several teachers, most notably from Professor Julius Weiss, a German immigrant who introduced his eager pupil to European music and also helped Joplin's mother acquire a used piano for Scott to play at home. Joplin's earnest determination to succeed as a musician impressed all who knew him.

When the young Joplin left his job as a laborer for the T&P and sought success as a traveling piano player, few opportunities existed for black musicians beyond the church or its polar opposite, the mean streets and red light districts where anything went. Joplin found work, however, in Chicago, playing for thrill-hungry visitors to the 1893 World's Fair who prowled the city's seedier districts seeking entertainment. But it was in Sedalia, Missouri, where he moved in 1894 to work as a pianist for two prominent black social clubs, that he began composing the songs that would make him famous.

Ragtime was already becoming a national passion in 1900 when Joplin's composition "The Maple Leaf Rag" scored an instant success. It was the first instrumental composition in the history of American popular music to become a hit. By the time he died at the age of 49 in 1917, having completed 44 original ragtime pieces, one ragtime ballet, and two operas, Joplin's was the most significant of all influences on the development of Ragtime. His music helped elevate Ragtime to a level of sophistication that made it acceptable to such a wide audience that in subsequent years and even today



the sound of Ragtime evokes American life as it was in the earliest decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Ragtime and Boogie Woogie were distant cousins. Ragtime was smooth and suave; Boogie Woogie was rough and tumble. What Ragtime and Boogie Woogie had in common was that both forms used African sensibilities and syncopated rhythms to express musical ideas. In Ragtime's case, these approaches were applied to established European forms, including polkas. Ragtime was not intended for improvisation, but was tightly structured and methodical. In Ragtime the left hand's primary role is to keep time and harmonize with the right hand. In Boogie Woogie the left hand is an equal competitor for the ear and the mind.

As Ragtime became refined and obtained a wide audience, Boogie Woogie remained the wild child of music; an untamed, wild, raucous way of playing that broke rules and ignored tradition. During Ragtime's heyday, Boogie Woogie was still an obscure and developing form. In 1900, when publishers sold 75,000 copies of Joplin's Maple Leaf Rag in less than six months, not a single Boogie Woogie song had been transcribed to sheet music for commercial release.

Things were happening, though, that would nurture Boogie Woogie into a full grown and commanding musical movement that would in time surpass Ragtime in popularity and, indeed, spawn its own wild child, Rock and Roll.

Individualistic and unique performers such as Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson were incorporating Boogie Woogie bass lines into their blues guitar playing and riding the T&P in search of new audiences. Their paths almost certainly would have crossed that of George and Hersal Thomas as the Thomas family made its way down the Arklatex from Little Rock to Houston. By 1911, George Thomas was playing Boogie Woogie in Houston. In 1916 Thomas became the first to publish a Boogie Woogie bass figure with his "New Orleans Hop Scop Blues." Thomas later stated the song was based on music he had heard in East Texas on his way to Houston.

In 1915, Artie Matthews published what is an undisputed Boogie Woogie broken-octave walking bass figure in his "The Weary Blues," which was the first to feature the instantly recognizable 12-bar form known as "the cows," a classic Boogie Woogie left hand motif that was also reported to have originated in Texas. It was also called "the Texas and Pacific Bass." Boogie Woogie was finding its way to piano rolls, too. Eubie Blake's 1917 "Charleston Rag" shows strong Boogie Woogie influence. The music that began in the logging camps and barrelhouses around Marshall was on its way to the outside world.

It will be in the Roaring Twenties, though, before Boogie Woogie finally reaches mainstream America and Europe. Boogie Woogie leaves the barrelhouses, saloons, and bordellos and steps onto the world stage when the first recordings of this revolutionary music are made and begin circulating.

## Part 5: Boogie Woogie Grows Up

The music that arose from the logging camps and railroad tap lines around Marshall, Texas in the 1870s had found its legs and was firmly entrenched in big cities from Los Angeles to New York by the mid 1920s.

Although limited in scale, Boogie Woogie now was beginning to appear on sheet music. A few recordings had been made using the Boogie Woogie left hand styles, or variations on them. And in April, 1924, what is considered to be the first recording that is completely Boogie Woogie, Jimmy Blythe's "Chicago Stomp," was released on the Paramount label out of Chicago.

But even though Boogie Woogie was no longer confined geographically, to a great extent it remained confined to one race. At so-called "rent parties," swank nightclubs, or back-alley bars, the Boogie Woogie scene was primarily black musicians entertaining black audiences. The gradual evolution of the musical form ran somewhat parallel to the gradual exposure and acceptance by wider and wider audiences.

In his "History of Boogie Woogie," Dr. John Tennison calls the 1920s decade "the Chicago Era." Although Boogie Woogie music was prominently represented in Kansas City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Dallas, and Houston, it was in Chicago that Boogie Woogie became so deeply engrained in the city's nightlife that from that period on, many people would think of the music that began in northeast Texas as "the Chicago sound."

One reason Chicago became the epicenter for Boogie Woogie in its maturing stage is that the city was a home base for so many gifted pianists, and the Thomas family, considered to be the "First Family of Boogie Woogie," had made their way to Chicago, bringing with them the music they had picked up in East Texas.

George and Hersal Thomas had moved to Chicago from Houston. The Thomas brothers had composed "The Fives" and Hersal Thomas probably composed "The Rocks," both of which any Boogie Woogie musician was expected to know and to play well. The Thomas brothers swayed considerable influence over Jimmy Yancey, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade "Lux," Lewis, who are still considered to be among the greatest Boogie Woogie players of all time. That the Thomases exerted so much influence over the emerging field of Chicago musicians is all the more remarkable because Hersal died tragically young, around the age of twenty, and George around the age of 45. Their sister, Beulah "Sippie" Wallace, who reached the age of 88, also achieved fame as a singer and songwriter and is ranked among the best female blues vocalists of her era. Chicago was where any aspiring Boogie Woogie player wanted to be, and in 1928, young Clarence Smith from Alabama moved there after working for a while as an all-around entertainer and accompanist on the Vaudeville circuit. As a child, Clarence had been given the nickname "Pine Top." At the age of 24 he settled in Chicago with a wife and son to record for Vocalion Records. On December 29 of that year, Pine Top recorded a number in which he talked over his playing, giving instructions to dancers, repeating phrases such as "see that girl with the red dress on" and "shake that thing." He called the

song “Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie” and it entered the history books as the first Boogie Woogie song ever to reach the top thirty chart. A half century or so had passed since the music arose in the Piney Woods near Marshall, Texas, and Boogie Woogie finally had a national hit.

The success of “Pine Top’s Boogie Woogie” firmly established the term “Boogie Woogie” to describe both the musical form and the dancing that accompanied it. It was a major turning point for the music, and Pine Top Smith, who had probably heard Boogie Woogie when he travelled through Texas on the Theatrical Owner’s Booking Agency vaudeville circuit, was positioned to become Boogie Woogie music’s first star, a performer who was known outside the area in which he played. But the day before he was scheduled to record a second session, Pine Top died of a gunshot wound in a dance hall fight. No photographs of him have ever been located.

It would be another ten years before a Boogie Woogie recording reached the top thirty charts. But when it happened, in 1938, it created a national sensation. For the first time, a mainstream white artist appeared on the scene. The recording was simply called “Boogie Woogie.” It is still considered by many to be the quintessential Boogie Woogie song and was so successful it was re-released three times. The musician was Tommy Dorsey.

Ahead, as World War 2 loomed, Boogie Woogie began to sweep the nation and would invade Europe with American GIs. In Marshall, Texas, a teenage Floyd Dixon listened to “the Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company C” on the radio and hung around the house parties where a brilliant musician known only as “Road Master” played Boogie Woogie piano like no one else on earth. About the same time, David Alexander Elam, who was born in Shreveport but whose family had moved to Marshall, was still a toddler.

Just as Boogie Woogie music reached its highest point, two youngsters who would one day be ranked among the best contemporary players of their time were growing up in Marshall, Texas -- the birthplace of Boogie Woogie.

## **Part 6: Boogie Woogie Goes to War – and Comes Back Home**

Beginning in 1940, Boogie Woogie took Main Street America by storm as some of popular music’s most admired performers, black and white, embraced the form and scored hit after hit.

First was Glenn Miller with “Boog It,” a song which hit the charts twice in the same year when Gene Krupa released his version. Next came the Andrews Sisters’ successful release of “Rhumboogie.” They quickly followed that smash hit with “Beat Me Daddy, Eight to the Bar,” which became the highest charting Boogie Woogie song of all time.

In 1941, another Andrews Sisters recording, and a movie starring Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck, helped propel Boogie Woogie music to the loftiest heights it would ever obtain with mainstream audiences.

“Ball of Fire” was written by Hollywood’s top screenwriters, Charles Brackett, Thomas Monroe, and Billy Wilder, and was based on Wilder’s short story. Skillfully directed by Howard Hawks, the movie’s plot is a zany re-mash of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The story is about a Burlesque performer named Sugarpuss (Stanwyck), on the lam from police who want to question her about her gangster boyfriend. She finds refuge with a group of oddball professors secluded in an old mansion as they try to complete an encyclopedia of human knowledge. One of them (Cooper) is compiling a dictionary of slang. Sugarpuss speaks only in slang, of course, so, notebook in hand, the professor accompanies her to the nightclub where she performs. He hears the term “boogie” for the first time as Sugarpuss sings the song “Drum Boogie” with Gene Krupa’s band. The professor stops a waiter and asks him “What does ‘boogie’ mean?” The waiter’s eyebrows shoot up with stunned disbelief, and he says “Are you kidding?”

The message to movie audiences is clear. Everybody knows about Boogie Woogie.

Krupa’s recording of “Drum Boogie” became an instant sensation and would remain a juke box favorite for decades. But it would be yet another of the Andrews Sisters recordings, also from a 1941 movie sound track, that would achieve even greater success and obtain the most widespread and durable recognition of all the popular music that emerged from the World War II era.

The movie was “Buck Privates,” starring the comedy team Abbot and Costello and the song was “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.”

Released before America’s entry into World War II, “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy’s” success was bolstered by the patriotic fervor aroused by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Throughout the War years and all of the 1940s, there would be Big Band Boogie Woogie hits such as Eddie Slack’s “Cow Cow Boogie,” Louis Jordan’s “Choo Choo Ch’ Boogie,” Lionel Hampton’s “Hamp’s Boogie,” Count Basie’s “Mad Boogie” and many others. But no other Boogie Woogie song would ever travel so widely or reach more people.

In 1953, the Boogie Woogie Craze ended. It would be another 20 years before Boogie Woogie hit the charts, and then it wasn’t a new song. It was Bette Midler’s faithful 1973 remake of “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.”

Born in Marshall in 1929, young Floyd Dixon loved all kinds of music and soaked up everything he could find, including gospel, jazz, blues, jitterbug, boogie woogie, and swing. Barely a teenager, Dixon fell under the spell of a Marshall piano player known as Roadmaster. In later years, Dixon would recall that “Road” played for house parties in Marshall, Longview and Shreveport. Sadly, he never recorded. “He was the best I ever heard,” Dixon told a Living Blues Magazine interviewer.

Others, including Dave Alexander/Omar Sharriff also recall a great and mysterious Boogie Woogie player in Marshall who they only knew by the name Roadmaster. Recent attempts to identify Roadmaster are thus far unsuccessful. The true identity of the man Floyd Dixon called the “best ever” remains a mystery.

Dixon’s family moved to Los Angeles in 1942, and for a while Floyd continued to live in Marshall. Finally settling in Los Angeles, he decided to pursue a musical career. The self-taught pianist was encouraged and influenced by the Texas-born Blues great Charles Brown. In 1949, Dixon began recording. Among his compositions, “Wine, Wine, Wine” and “Hey, Bartender” became juke box standards. It was Floyd Dixon’s Boogie Woogie style of Jump Blues that influenced Ray Charles to stop playing in the Nat King Cole style and adopt the rocking boogie style that made him a superstar.

Throughout the 1950s, Dixon’s career thrived, and he returned to his hometown of Marshall often to visit relatives and friends, always eager to oblige with a free performance at Pemberton High School. At Pemberton, David Alexander Elam was a member of the choir and a drummer in the high school band. His father, Tom, had died when David was 10. Tom Elam, who was born in 1893, had been a Boogie Woogie piano player who had learned the music while working as a muleskinner in logging camps around Marshall in the early 1900s. Thus, Tom Elam had heard and played Boogie Woogie among the generation of African-Americans who originated the music.

It was at one of Floyd Dixon’s Pemberton High School concerts that David Elam decided he wanted to play Boogie Woogie. Before graduating from Pemberton and moving to California, David had one piano lesson from Mrs. Ella Mae Willis, a well respected piano teacher in Marshall for many years. Working as a drummer while teaching himself the keyboard, he shortened his name to Dave Alexander and gradually became established as one of the best boogie and blues piano players on the West Coast, playing with Big Mama Thornton, Jimmy Witherspoon, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and Albert Collins. After being the star attraction at Minnie’s Can-Do Club on Fillmore Street in San Francisco, he recorded his first album, “The Rattler, “ in 1972. On the album cover, Dave credited Mrs. Ella Mae Willis of Marshall, Texas for inspiring and teaching him so much in a single lesson.

In 1976, Dave Alexander changed his name to Omar Sharriff. He has performed at the San Francisco Blues Festival, the Chicago Blues Fest, and various festivals and concerts in Europe. Music critics have called Omar “one of the great piano masters” and “an undiscovered genius.” After a brief absence from the scene, he now lives in Sacramento, California where he has begun performing and recording again.

With Floyd Dixon’s death in 2006, Dave Alexander/Omar Sharriff became the last living link to the African Americans who created Boogie Woogie music in the logging camps and rail yards around Marshall, Texas. Recognized today by aficionados of Boogie Woogie and Blues roots music as one of the all time greats, Omar Sharriff will return to his hometown of Marshall for the first time in 55 years to perform a “Boogie Woogie Homecoming” concert to help celebrate the city’s musical heritage.

Over a century ago, the Boogie Woogie style of music arose around Marshall and rode out of town on the Texas and Pacific Railroad. It slowly evolved and spread through the cities until it sparked a national craze. It found its way around the world before settling down to father Rock and Roll with the Boogie Woogie style music of Ray Charles, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, and many, many others.

On June 11, 2010, Boogie Woogie music comes back home to Marshall in the capable and loving hands of Omar Sharriff, who, as David Alexander Elam, grew up in the town where it all began.

*This concludes a six-part series on the Origins of Boogie Woogie, based on the original research of Dr. John Tennison. On Thursday, June 10, at 12:30 PM, Dr. Tennison will be on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor of the Weisman Center to present his research on Marshall's role in the development of Boogie Woogie and will demonstrate some of the music's unique characteristics. The public is invited to attend. More information about the history of boogie woogie is available at Dr. Tennison's website [www.bowof.org](http://www.bowof.org)*