

in 1974, she hopped from label to label, including Warner Bros. (with producer Jerry Wexler), T-Electric (with Allen Toussaint), Fantasy (on which she teamed up with Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson for two live albums), Island (with former Muscle Shoals keyboardist Barry Beckett), Elektra (again with Wexler), Private Music (at which she won her first Grammy Award, for "Best Jazz Vocal Performance," for 1994's John Snydee-produced *Mystery Lady: The Songs of Billie Holiday*), RCA Victor, and finally, Verve Forecast.

The eclecticism of James's recorded output, especially during the last four decades of her career, made it difficult for radio programmers and record stores to categorize her. "I wanna show that gospel, country, blues, rhythm and blues, jazz, and rock 'n' roll are all really one thing," she stated. "Those are the American music and that is American culture."

As James' income greatly increased during the final 15 years of her life—due to bookings at major jazz and blues festivals and at weddings for which she was paid as much as \$100,000 to sing *At Last*—so did her weight. She had ballooned to 400 pounds but dropped more than 200 following gastric bypass surgery in 2003. Health problems continued to plague her, however. She gave her final performance in June 2009 in Philadelphia.

Several hundred family members, friends, and fans attended the

singer's private funeral service on January 28 at City of Refuge Church in Glendale, California. President Obama sent his condolences. Rev. Al Sharpton delivered the eulogy, and Stevie Wonder and Christina Aguilera performed. James had once refused to record *Merry Christmas Baby* in duet with Aguilera—feeling slighted because singer's manager, not Aguilera herself, had made the telephone request—but Aguilera didn't hold it against her idol and sang *At Last* at the service.

—LEE HILDEBRAND

OMAR SHARIFF

East Texas boogie-woogie pianist **Omar Shariff** died January 8, 2012, at his home in Marshall, Texas. Having spent most of his career in California, Shariff had very recently returned to his hometown, where he was honored as the last living link to the original Texas boogie-woogie pianists.

Born David Alexander Elam in Shreveport, Louisiana, Shariff grew up playing piano in church and was encouraged by his father to learn boogie-woogie. He joined the U.S. Navy in 1957 and moved to Oakland, California. In 1957 Shariff relocated to San Francisco, and, as Dave Alexander, backed Big Mama Thornton, Jimmy Witherspoon, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, and Albert Collins.

Shariff performed at the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in 1970 and regularly appeared at the San Francisco Blues Festival throughout the decade. He also toured Europe several times and recorded two albums for Arhoolie as Dave Alexander: *The Rattler* in 1972 and *The Dirt on the Ground* in 1973. In 1976, he changed his name to Omar Khayam and began performing as Omar the Magnificent.

Shariff shied away from the spotlight and didn't record again until 1991. That year he released *The Raven*, which included ten new songs and seven recordings from 1972. It is considered by many to be the equivalent of a textbook on boogie-woogie blues.

In 1993 he was nominated for a W.C. Handy Award and released *Badass* and *Black Widow Spider* for Have Mercy Records in 1996 and 2000, respectively. Until recently, he was playing regularly in Sacramento. Shariff contributed several articles to *LB* and was featured in *LB* #115. He was 73.

—KATIE LAMBERT



Luna Vartanov/FourFourPhotos

Omar Shariff

J. BLACKFOOT

On Wednesday, November 30, 2011, one of the toughest hard-soul voices of all time was silenced when J. Blackfoot, best known for his early-'80s masterpiece *Taxi*, died at Methodist Hospital in the Memphis suburb of Germantown, following a long battle with pancreatic cancer. He had given his final performance in West Memphis the previous Friday.

Blackfoot was born John Colbert Jr. in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1946. He moved to Memphis with his grandmother and her husband when he was about four years old. As a former country boy, he liked to walk around without shoes; after seeing his dirty, tar-caked feet, the other kids began to call him "Blackfoot." He never shed the moniker.

As a youth, Blackfoot sang doo-wop, and he learned gospel harmony from Ollie Hoskins and others who congregated in a store below the apartment where he lived. But he also fell into street life, and he ended up serving time at Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville. There he met Johnny Bragg, leader of the famous inmates' singing