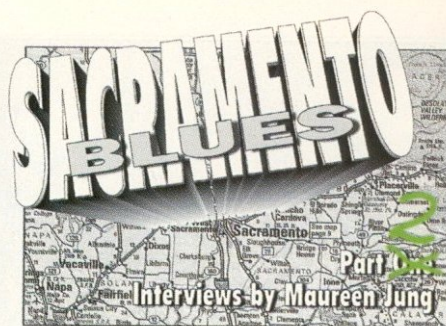


Omar Sharriff



I'd Like To Send a Message of Love and Hope

*Editor's note: Omar Sharriff's two 1970s albums for Arhoolie were released under the name Dave Alexander. His 1992 Arhoolie release, **The Raven**, combined material from 1972 sessions with more recent recordings. Sharriff has recently released an album of all new material, **Black Widow Spider**, on Sacramento's Have Mercy label [Have Mercy HMCD-08].*

I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on March 10, 1938. I was still a babe in the cradle when my family moved to Marshall, Texas, about 50 miles to the west. Marshall was one of those Deep South towns—a statue of a Confederate soldier in front of town hall, signs all over that said “white” or “colored,” and they all called you “colored boy,” “nigger,” or “coon.”

My father was a mule skinner. He worked the river bottom lumber camps in Mississippi and east Texas. After the logs were cut, he drove the mules, hauling logs out to where the trucks were waiting. From the time I was four or five years old, I'd sit and listen to my father and uncles play music. All the men on my father's side of the family were singers or musicians, playing just for their own entertainment or at house parties.

I started playing music at an early age. Coming out of the Deep South, the only way I could play music—in my mother's eyes—was in the church. It was that way back then and that's still the prevailing attitude in black churches, that if you're not playing church music, you're doomed to burn. But you can never become an accomplished musician, you cannot explore your instrument, you cannot learn Thelonious Monk playing church music. It's three basic chords, simple melodies, the same three chord changes over and over again. It's a dead end. But when I was a kid, I played every chance I got, in church and outside.

When I got to high school, Floyd Dixon and his band came to the school to play for us. He was from Marshall; the school principal was his uncle. Then Amos Milburn came to play there. Hearing them was an awakening experience for me. I decided I had to

branch out with my music. By then I was also listening to the pros on the radio too—Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, Fats Domino, Sarah Vaughan. Music, for me, was like a siren's call, I thought it was heaven, a sanctuary. I had no choice in the matter, *really*, it was like witchcraft. I was hooked.

It wasn't until much later that I started calling myself a piano player, though. You have to spend 15 or 20 years on your instrument before you can really evaluate your ability. You have to compare yourself to the greats who have gone before. And when I did that, I decided I could be a great one given more time. I came to Oakland because I had relatives there. I even played for a while in my cousin's church.

What I *really* wanted was to learn to play jazz. And San Francisco was *the* place to do that. All the greats were there—Oscar Peterson, Earl Hines, Count Basie, Tony



Above: (left to right): Lloyd Glenn, Mose Allison, Omar Sharriff, John Heartsman, Sacramento Blues Festival, 1982. Right: (left to right): Omar Sharriff, Rufus Thomas, Robert Cray, Old Town Sacramento, 1985.

Bennett, Louie Bellson, Max Roach, Hampton Hawes. And clubs like Basin Street West, Keystone Corner, and the hungry i. When I first got to the Bay Area, I put in my time as a sideman, played with just about everybody. I was in training. I'd play blues in Oakland and Hayward in the East Bay. But after nine o'clock, Oakland would shut down, just as San Francisco was coming to life. I'd play the blues early, then go over to the San Francisco clubs and play jazz. Places like Jimbo's Bop City or the gangster-owned clubs down at the piers—after hours places that kept musicians working. Supposed to be just coffee houses, but the guy would come around with a bottle of whatever you wanted, and spike your coffee.

So I went back and forth between San Francisco and the East Bay and between jazz and blues. Blues musicians, they couldn't figure out why I was going and playing all those weird sounds. That's what they called it, "weird." They thought Monk and them were weird, too. And the jazz musicians, they thought the blues players were just a bunch of drunkards, called them "grog drinkers." Thought they were illiterate, that they could only play simple changes and too dumb to play anything but the blues. Some jazz musicians told me I'd ruin my ear playing that kind of stuff.

Well, to me, blues and jazz are just two ways of looking at the same thing. And if professional musicians couldn't figure that out, there's no reason to expect that lay people would understand it. Both jazz and blues have the same roots, in church music, till some



musicians wanted to talk about their experiences in a different way. It's like the English language. It sounds different, depending on what part of the country you're in. Different dialects, different accents.

That's why you'll find certain styles of musicians in different parts of the country. From the Delta come some of the best blues guitarists in the world, while some of the best piano players come from Texas. Not all, but most of the best, are from Texas. Think about it—Amos Milburn, Little Willie Littlefield, Floyd Dixon, Lloyd Glenn. Lloyd Glenn was the greatest of them all. I can remember listening to his 78s when I was a young shoe shine boy in Texas. Nobody is equal to him playing blues piano and he was a good jazz player, too. I was also influenced by some good boogie woogie players too. I'd say the top three were Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade Lux Lewis.

So there I was during the late '50s, early

'60s. San Francisco was a great place. But once you got back to Oakland, once you crossed that [Oakland Bay] bridge, it was a different world. I left the South to get away from racial violence. What I didn't know then was that Oakland was just as bad. If those Oakland cops saw you walking down the street with a white woman, they would jump right out of their cars and whip your ass. Those vicious cops could have given Southern cops a lesson. *Believe it.* That's why the Black Panther Party came out of Oakland. People had had it.

So from the late '50s I was engrossed in music and the black situation. Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, the Prison Reform Board. I did gigs in the prisons, too. I was deep into the black move-

ment. I was with the real heavy-weights. I mean you could be at a meeting and the cops might shoot you just for being there.

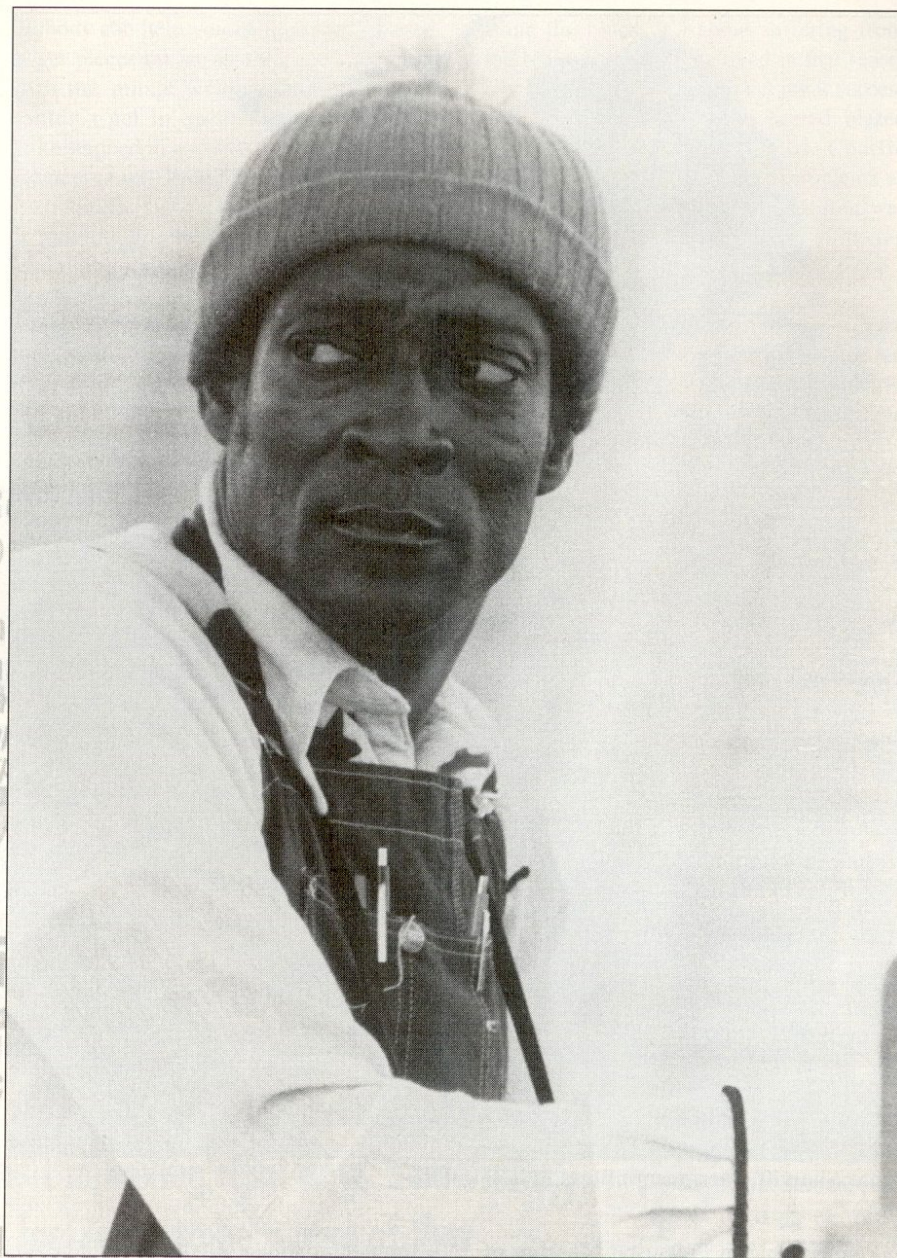
During the late '60s, I played with L. C. "Good Rockin'" Robinson's band. L. C. was a good showman, but he could be hard to get along with. His brother, A. C., played in the band too, harmonica. Sometimes A. C.'d do something, maybe hit a wrong note and set L. C. off. Everybody knew L. C. always carried a pistol. He'd threaten to pull it out and they'd start to fight, clear out the club. Pretty soon, they'd make up and go back to playing like nothing had happened. And maybe the next set, they'd be at it again. Teddy Winston played drums in that band and during a drum solo, he'd take his sticks and beat on the wall, go all around the room, beat on the bar, on the chairs, tables, glasses. People loved that. Dr. Wild Willie Moore was the sax player in that band, and a good one. He always wore two six-guns, like the Midnight Cowboy.

About that time, my reputation took a new turn at the Jazz Workshop. If you wanted to get into the big time, you had to play that place. One night I walked in and Muddy Waters saw me and introduced me as an up-and-coming piano player. He asked me to sit in. I didn't think I could do that! Then his piano player, Otis Spann, jumped up and went out the back, I know he was hitting the bottle heavy at the time, so I knew I had to go up there. I was scared, but I just got into it, and when I was done, people knew that I was a real bad young man.

In 1968, I did my first recording on an album called *Oakland Blues* [World Pacific 21893]. L. C. "Good Rockin'" Robinson and Lowell Fulson [sic: actually Lafayette "Thing" Thomas] also did cuts on that album. Jimmy McCracklin arranged [the] World Pacific session. Some way three tracks on that album didn't come out so the producer, Steve LaVere, called and asked me, "Look, can you write?" I said, "Yeah, I can write." But I had never really written anything at the time. He flew me down to L.A. and got me a place to stay while I was there. Well, I started writing on the plane on my way down there to do the recording. LaVere told me the album was destined to become a collectors' item and I asked him what that meant. He said that over time it would increase in value. I didn't know that meant that I wouldn't get any money off it. But I didn't. That's an old story.

I lived in L.A. for a while during the late '60s. There was a great blues circuit on Central Avenue, great rhythm and blues too, people like Bobby Bland played the Five-Four Ballroom, so did Albert Collins, Lowell Fulson, and James Cotton. Albert and I were close friends at one time. I was in L.A. during the hard days. I wrote *The Sky is Crying* about the Watts riots, right down the street from where Sam Cooke was killed. Not much later, Bobby Kennedy got blown away. Boom. That song's about the L.A. situation when the blues was beginning to die there.

I moved down there to be with the mother of my oldest son. During that time, things were dangerous. I carried a gun on the street and I left one with her, to protect her and the boy. She was one jealous woman. It was in '68, right after the World Pacific session, that she shot me. She found a letter another woman had wrote me. I woke up with that gun pointed in my face, and I was glad I had the presence of mind to push her hand aside. She blasted me four times in the stomach. One bullet went through my liver. At first I couldn't feel anything, then all hell broke loose. They didn't expect me to survive, but I did, and I moved right back to San Francisco too,



Omar Sharriff, Sacramento Blues Festival, 1982.

after I got out of the hospital. Moved back in with the mother of my second boy. That shooting laid me up for six months, and it was a year before I really recovered. But it wasn't long before I was beating the bushes for gigs, and I got some. During the 1970s the ball really started rolling.

Things started to happen with the 1970 Ann Arbor Blues Festival. They sent me a letter about coming out to play, but they said they couldn't guarantee me any money at first. They finally agreed to pay me something, \$350 I think it was. I took the train part of the way, till my money ran out, then I hitchhiked the rest of the way. I became house piano player for the festival. All the great blues musicians were there. I played with Big Mama Thornton, knew her from Oakland and L.A., and people like Lowell Fulson, Albert King, Charlie Musselwhite, Mississippi Fred

McDowell, Furry Lewis, Little Joe Blue. And after the festival, we played house parties, played around the clock. I got a lot of attention in Ann Arbor and the first big writeups I ever got. *Billboard*, *Downbeat*, *Living Blues*, they all loved me.

San Francisco of the 1970s was a great city, full of respect for artists, the only city in America where there was no disadvantage in being black—in fact, it was a plus. They recognized that there were great black artists and they *expected* quality. I could get into any club I wanted... women... drink... anything. It was about this time that John Wasserman, head of the *San Francisco Chronicle* entertainment section, put me on the map. He'd heard about me and came down to Minnie's Can Do Club. He said, "I'm going to tell everybody about you." And he did. It got me into gigs at the



Omar Sharriff, Sacramento Blues Festival, 1982.

Fairmont, the San Francisco Museum of Art, Fillmore West, Top of the Mark, Winterland, Great American Music Hall, the David Allen Boarding House, Africa USA. One of my gigs was opening for the Band, at the Last Waltz concert.

The '70s also brought disaster into my life. My brother Donald was killed in Oakland in 1973. He was beaten to death. That was a devastating blow to me. He was one of those people who believed if you were black, you were good, and if you were white, you were evil. He'd let any black man in, no matter how low, and give them anything. I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. He believed black people would unite, lift themselves up. He never did live to see it. And neither will we. One of those people killed him. To the police, it was just another nigger dead. They never did find out who did it.

It was Donald's death that brought me to writing the title cut to my last Arhoolie

album, *The Raven* [Arhoolie 365]. The raven is the bird of death, and maybe that sounds morbid. People say the blues never changes, but this song is revolutionary, like he was, it's a new kind of blues. Oh, it's got the basics—accent on two and four, classic three-chord structure in A minor, with D minor, and E minor. But I've interwoven the theme from Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* into that song. And gave it a kind of church-feeling by speaking, rather than singing the words, like a preacher's delivery. It was nearly 20 years before I had the chance to record that song. I wasn't sure I ever would.

I did record two albums on Arhoolie in the early '70s—*The Rattler* [Arhoolie 1067] and *Dirt on the Ground* [Arhoolie 1071], recorded in '72 and '73. But the '70s went to hell for me. Not just because of my brother's death. Wasserman died too. Drunk driving. And the Fillmore also died. My last year in San Francisco was 1978.

After that I lived in the South Bay for a while. Played some clubs, had a radio show. Still the racists kept dogging me.

I went back to Oakland in the early '80s and things were bad. Musicians were playing for peanuts, literally for drinks sometimes, or for what they call "exposure." That means no pay. That hurt everybody. None of the musicians could make a decent living when people played for free. I got tired of that and tried to get musicians to stop kissing club owners' asses. Of course, that pissed the club owners off. I had death threats, was blackballed from the clubs. The musicians turned on me, too. They were ignorant, plain and simple. They wanted to sit and "suffer peacefully," as Malcolm put it. I told them build your own club, turn out for one another's gigs. Musicians said I was too political, "We don't need that shit around here." I'd say, "Look man, the issue here is jobs and pay for musicians. Where is the politics when your baby needs food?"

They didn't listen, though. And I kept getting these threatening phone calls. So when I was invited to go to Fresno and play a steady jazz gig, I left. I didn't see I had much to lose. However, I speak of my time in Fresno on my new album, *Black Widow Spider*, on the Have Mercy label. My song, *Seven Years of Torture*, says it all: "It's been seven years of torture, in this town of fruit-pickers and rednecks/the women's so cold and chilly, they got souls made of stone/they'll laugh at your heartbreak, and then they'll take everything you own."

Sounds like the story of my life. Some people think I have bad feelings toward women. That is not true. Lately, I have had my problems with certain women. That is true. Women talk about men being heartless, that they beat them and don't treat women right. Well, that is not me. You ask me what do I want or where would I be happy or could more money make me happy. Sure money could make me more comfortable. At age 56, I could use a steady income to ease my troubles. But I feel like a good man who just wants the love of one good woman. That is where I would find my happiness. *That's* what I need. And all the money in the world can't *make* someone love you. Most of my peers, they don't give a shit about women. You know what they want. But I'm not like that. I want something that lasts. I'm dedicated to that.

I thought I was moving into the light when I came to Sacramento in '92. But I was wrong. Gigs got canceled. Jobs never materialized. Crowds didn't flock to hear me play. Then Sam's Hof Brau closed last year. I thought that was the end. Sacramento is one cold and hardass town. It's *worse* than Fresno!

Sometimes I feel like I might die in this town. I feel loneliness like a shroud somebody draped over me. Death don't really bother me. What bothers me is that I do not want to die before I live. And I have not yet lived. I have existed. After my brother's death, I drank like crazy. Then I stopped for 18 years. Now I've started again. Somebody asked me why, and the answer is: I drink to ease my pain. This shit is so painful, I want to be numb. Now I know that's no excuse, but there it is.

Like Bird said, "I need people around me, good people." An artist *needs* an audience. The blues society here has several hundred members. They like to boast about that. Where are they? They never even hired me once last year. And they do not go out to see the blues. They sit home comfortable with their CD and tape collection, their tea and crumpets. I just don't understand it. There's only been a few people over the years who've always supported me. The name of my friend Jack Rhyne comes immediately to mind. Met him in Fresno seven or eight years ago. And he is a *real* humanitarian, spiritual. He relates to the music like a musician and his knowledge of the artists—blues and jazz—is outstanding. He'd come to see me in all these redneck places in Clovis and Fresno where I'd be playing country and western music and he'd request something like *Chicken Shack Boogie*, the 1956 version. He's been like a comrade at arms, like a brother, close to the music and the spirit too.

About the same time I met Jack, I also met Jeff Hallock. I ran a jam session the whole time I was in Fresno, and he was a friend of my bass player. Jeff came in sometimes and jammed with us. We got to be friends, and he told me if I ever needed help, to let him know. Well, I got into a real tight spot and needed a thousand dollars, and he gave it to me. He said, though, that there was one condition. I thought to myself, "Here it comes." And he said, "Don't ever stop playing your music." Things have been tight since I've been here in Sacramento. For six or eight months, the only steady gig I had was one night a week at the Press Club for \$40 a night. It was Jeff who paid my rent. Jack and Jeff are two friends who for years have helped me survive on a daily basis.

Since I've been in Sacramento, Big Mike Balma has really come through for me too. Jack told me before I moved up here, "If

anybody can help you, it'll be him." I tried to get pieces on me in the papers, connect with the music writers, and nothing. I couldn't get in on my own credentials. Mike stepped in and suddenly all the papers did interviews. Then there's the album, and gigs, too. He's got a lot of energy and a lot of pull. At first he didn't understand how hard it was for me. He's the new kid on the block, but he's done a lot already.

One thing that makes it hard for me is the state of music and entertainment. People always say, "The blues is dying." And in a sense it is already dead in terms of audiences deserting the artists who are then not able to make a living. It's dying before our

The blues is plain and simple and beautiful. You don't need a slide rule to understand the blues. It's about suffering from the black point of view. And in that sense, it's immortal. I'm a part of a great succession, fine musicians who pioneered, blazed trails, suffered, starved, died. Charlie Parker had some of the same problems as Bessie Smith, and Jelly Roll Morton was having many of the problems I'm having right now. Sometimes I feel lucky to be a part of that succession.

eyes as one club after another turns into a comedy shop or a boutique. The main audience for the blues is whites. Most black people reject the music. Middle class blacks don't want to be reminded of their history, their origins. And the spiritual support that was once there in the community is gone. The bands coming up, mostly white bands, some are okay, but what they do is a rock version, a show version of the blues. Everybody's trying to play as loud and as hard as they can, screwing their guitars. It's a maze of bullshit. That is not what the blues is about. They have the technique, but not the spirituality and the *feeling*.

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What I want is to *add* to the blues legacy. To leave a mark. To move the blues further. The blues is predictable. You know what I mean—same thing over and over, same songs, same back beat, same stories: jobs, money, women, hard times. With *The Raven*, I took my first strike at that, and on *Black Widow Spider* I go further. I take what went before and rearranged the parts.

When I play music now, I want to break out of the gravitational pull of what everybody is doing and has been doing for so long. I give all the great music a long, hard look and bring it into my blues. I am consistently experimenting to enlarge the way I play. I don't think of other people, I wander through the hallways of my mind. I ask myself: "What do I want to do with this?" And this album is the answer. Will it work? We will see.

I'd like for people to understand what I'm talking about with my music. It's about life, about real people, about feelings. I want, even if it's just for one moment or one beat, to reach them, to find that point of human contact. I'd like to open people up, to help them find compassion in their souls for their fellow human beings, and to offer help where they can. People say, "Who gives a fuck about the peasant in Lagos." I say: Everytime a choice comes around, you *have* to think. Today the suffering is far away, tomorrow, it might be you.

You know, Jesus said you should love the lord and love your neighbor as you love yourself. And Muhammed said mankind is one and God is one and we are all brothers. People today have forgotten these teachings. I want to cry out, "Stop hate! Stop violence!" I agree with what Jack Kennedy said, that if we don't live together in peace, we will perish together in flames. I'd like to send a message of love and hope. That's what my music is about. I hope people will hear. *LB*