

Introductory Comments for Ezra Charles Benefit Concert for Omar's Headstone

by John Tennison, October 11, 2015

Thank you, Jack and Nancy Canson.

And thank you, Ezra Charles and Jakob Helpinstill, for bringing your musical talents to Marshall, Texas. Your presence here today is evidence that Boogie Woogie is alive and well in Marshall.

Also, Thank you, Melinda Gauden; the Meadowbrook Funeral Home; and to everyone here today for their support for a headstone that will properly memorialize Omar Sharriff and his music.

So how did I get here?

I was born in 1968 in Texarkana, Texas. I grew up playing Boogie Woogie, but not until the fall of 1985, during my senior year of high school, did I begin researching the history of Boogie Woogie.

Before going off to college at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, MD, I began to interview Texarkanians about the history of Boogie Woogie. One of these interviews was with Lee Ree Sullivan during the summer of 1986. Prior to my interview of Lee Ree Sullivan in the summer of 1986, I had relied on Lee Ree solely as a teacher of Boogie Woogie, rather than as a source of knowledge about the history of Boogie Woogie.

Although I did not fully appreciate its significance at the time, the first time I heard the word "Marshall" in relationship to Boogie Woogie was during my interview of Lee Ree Sullivan in the summer of 1986.

Lee Ree cited the names of 12 specific Boogie Woogie bass figures that he had been taught by local Texarkana Boogie Woogie players. Lee Ree said that he had been told that all 12 of these bass figures came into use in the context of Boogie Woogie at locations for which they were named.

One of these 12 Boogie Woogie bass figures is the "Marshall." This fact and other attributes of Marshall, Texas in the early 1870s resulted in my starting to call Marshall **"The Birthplace of Boogie Woogie."**

Upon hearing about my research on Boogie Woogie, city leaders in Marshall arranged for me to present my research on January 18, 2010 in Marshall.

On that same day, I pointed out to people in Marshall that there was a musician living in California who had grown up in Marshall; and who was highly regarded as a Boogie Woogie and Blues musician. This person was Omar Sharriff, who was born March 10, 1938, and who grew up in Marshall as David Alexander Elam.

Indeed, in the first-ever Readers' Poll results, published on page 25 of the January, 1977 issue of Contemporary Keyboard magazine (later known as Keyboard Magazine), Omar Sharriff (then

known as Dave Alexander) was ranked 2nd only to Ray Charles as the greatest living blues pianist. It is noteworthy to point out that Dave Alexander was ranked above other great living blues pianists at the time, including Professor Longhair (3rd place), Memphis Slim (4th place), Champion Jack Dupree (tied for 5th place), and Piano Red (tied for 5th place).

Despite Omar's musical fame, when I first presented my Boogie Woogie research to the people of Marshall in January of 2010, I was surprised to learn that there was limited awareness of Omar Sharriff. Indeed, I even encountered a mistaken belief among some in the Arklatex that the Dave Alexander who recorded "The Rattler" album was dead and was not the same man as the musician named Omar Sharriff who lived in California. Naturally, I clarified matters by pointing out that Omar Sharriff was the same man as Dave Alexander, and was still alive and living in California. I told the people of Marshall that Omar Sharriff was the most important living link of which I knew to Marshall's Boogie Woogie heritage.

The people of Marshall expressed interest in possibly inviting Mr. Sharriff to Marshall for a homecoming Boogie Woogie concert. I told the people of Marshall that I was planning a trip to California to meet and interview Omar Sharriff. I also told the people of Marshall that I would share my impressions of Omar Sharriff with them after I interviewed him in California. When I first met Omar on March 25, 2010 in Sacramento, California, I found Omar teetering on the edge of homelessness. His only regular music gig had dried up only a few weeks before my arrival. He could not pay his bills. He suffered from multiple medical problems. He was at risk of being evicted from his apartment. He looked frightened. Despite these challenges, Omar gave a private performance for me in his apartment on the only keyboard he had available, a dilapidated Kurzweil digital piano with broken keys. Despite the condition of the keyboard, it was obvious to me that Omar's immense talents and capacity to perform were still intact.

Given what I already knew about Omar's musical legacy at the time we met, I was deeply troubled by his degree of obscurity and the conditions in which I discovered him to be living in Sacramento.

Subsequently, I was thrilled when Omar returned to Marshall for a homecoming concert on Friday, June 11, 2010. The concert was produced by Jack and Nancy Canson, and was an overwhelming success, with Omar performing to a standing-room-only audience. After the concert, the editing talents of Barney Canson yielded a beautiful 30-minute video. The "Boogie Woogie Homecoming" video is available for viewing on BoogiewoogieMarshall.com and also on the City of Marshall websites.

Moreover, I was deeply moved by the immense compassion shown by the people of Marshall, Texas when they invited Omar to move back to Marshall to become Marshall's Boogie Woogie ambassador and artist-in-residence.

Having personally witnessed Omar's living conditions in Sacramento, California, I know he had a much better life during what was almost a full year back in Marshall before his tragic death on January 8, 2012.

Although I first became aware of Omar because of his reputation as a Boogie Woogie player, what I came to admire most about Omar was his desire to truly be creative, to be innovative, to make new music, rather than merely copy what had come before him.

In 1994, Omar was quoted in Living Blues Magazine. He said

"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."

But even if Omar did not focus on other people when wandering through the hallways of his mind to create his unique way of playing music, his music was nevertheless very much related to other people, as he also said: *"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."*

The close of that Living Blues article from 1994 also quoted these words by Omar:

"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."

Having listened to all of the commercial recordings that Omar released over the years, I have no doubt that anyone who examines this full body of work will come to similar conclusions that I and others have reached. As noted by Contemporary Keyboard Magazine in 1975, Omar Sharriff (then known as Dave Alexander) was a "living legend."

The placement of the headstone at Omar's gravesite in Marshall, Texas will assure the honorable memory that Omar deserves; and will assure continuing appreciation of the immortal music he created.

Interestingly, there are some insights about Omar's gravesite that can come from considering the gravesite of another great American musician – Huddie Ledbetter (also known as Lead Belly). Lead Belly was not nearly as famous when he died in 1949 as he is now; and Lead Belly's gravesite was not always as appreciated by the public as it is today. However, at this time, just down the road, at the Shiloh Baptist Church Cemetery, people make pilgrimages from all over the world to visit the gravesite of Lead Belly.

One reason that so many cultural tourists come to seek out Lead Belly's gravesite as a destination is that the public has realized how influential Lead Belly was with regard to all sorts of popular music, including folk, blues, and Rock and Roll. With proper education and memorialization of a gravesite, public awareness and appreciation of a great musical legacy almost always increases over time.

Many people don't know that Lead Belly himself claimed to have been born in Harrison, County, Texas. Partly because of this claim by Lead Belly himself, Max S. Lale of the Harrison County Historical Commission made unsuccessful attempts to have Lead Belly's body moved from its current gravesite and reinterred in Harrison County, Texas.

Prior to Lale's attempts to reestablish Lead Belly's gravesite in Harrison County, Texas, there had not been as much attention given to Lead Belly's gravesite as would later be the case. The Orlando Sentinel noted on April 5, 1993:

"For four decades, a plain granite stone marked the grave of Huddie 'Leadbelly' Ledbetter, whose 'The Midnight Special' shone an ever-lovin' light on generations of folk and blues singers. It bore only the name and the dates of birth and death of a man who sang his way out of prison and performed for royalty. 'It was a shabby looking little thing and we wanted a better stone up there,' said his niece, Tiny Robinson of Brentwood, Tenn. Nothing indicated that this was the composer of 'Goodnight, Irene,' 'Take This Hammer' and 'The Midnight Special.' Now, thanks to more than \$9,000 from fans, the grave behind little Shiloh Church bears a long black marble slab engraved with a guitar and a headstone listing Ledbetter's honors and awards."

These enhancements to Lead Belly's gravesite deterred further efforts to move Lead Belly's gravesite; and had the effect of motivating cultural tourists from all over the world to visit Lead Belly's gravesite.

Although I don't have specific knowledge of anyone trying to get Omar Sharriff's body moved to his birthplace of Shreveport or to California, where Omar recorded most of his musical legacy, it would not surprise me at all if someone made such attempts. Therefore, besides properly memorializing Omar, the placement of his headstone at his gravesite in the Algoma Cemetery has the added benefit of preemptively discouraging attempts by anyone who might try to argue that Omar's body should be moved and reinterred in Louisiana or in California.

The same process of increasing public appreciation of Lead Belly's gravesite will almost certainly happen with Omar's gravesite as a result of the placement of Omar's headstone.

With the placement of the headstone at Omar's gravesite, I am confident that there will be ongoing cultural pilgrims from all over the world who will come to Marshall ---- the Birthplace of Boogie Woogie ----- with Omar's gravesite in mind as a specific destination. The headstone will assist these pilgrims in identifying Omar's gravesite and in paying their respects to a great American musician.

Thank you all for being here today. Rest in Peace, Brother Omar Sharriff.