

This Sham Is The Real Thing

By Tim Wilton

"Uno, dos...one, two, tres, quatro!"

Very few songs in American pop culture can boast a more recognizable opening salvo than the Tex-Mex inspired countdown that begins one of the all time classic rave-ups, *Wooly Bully*, by **Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs**.

And although the group went through many personnel changes throughout their successful albeit short run on the national music charts, the one constant that remained was, and still is, its charismatic leader, Texas native **Domingo Samudio**, aka Sam the Sham.

Born west of Dallas in 1937 to Santiago Samudio and Aurora Sanchez, whom had earlier fled the Mexican Revolution and had then settled down to eke out a living working the fields that were part of an area called Trinity Farms near Irving, Domingo made his singing debut in the second grade, representing his school in a live radio broadcast.

As a teenager, Domingo took up the guitar and then assembled a band while in high school. Incidentally, one of his band mates, **Trini Lopez**, would later go on to achieve fame on his own as a folk/lounge singer and Hollywood actor.

After serving a hitch in the Navy, Domingo returned to Dallas and formed **The Pharaohs** in 1961. The original Pharaohs were: Samudio, **Carl Medke**, **Russell Fowler**, **Omar "Big Man" Lopez**, and **Vincent Lopez** (no relation to Big Man).

According to Samudio's still unfinished and untitled autobiography that is partly available online, Vincent was only sixteen years old when he joined the band and was also on probation. In order to take to the road and perform, Samudio and Big Man had to meet with Vincent's probation officer to vouch for his safety and behavior.

However, by the end of 1962 and after having endured countless "five dollars per man per night" gigs and one unsuccessful record, Samudio disbanded The Pharaohs.

In the spring of 1963, ex-Pharaoh Vincent moved to Leesville, Louisiana and filled the vacant drummer's seat for **Andy and the Nightriders**, a blues outfit and band-in-residence at **The Congo Club**. Needing a bass player, the Nightriders also brought in David A. Martin who, just like his friend Samudio, hailed from the west Dallas area.

Meanwhile back in Dallas, Samudio kept pursuing his music, despite his older brother's offer to put him through college. Wanting to make himself a more valuable asset to any prospective bands that might be hiring, Samudio saved up enough money to buy a Farfisa organ. Two days later, his old friend David A. Martin called and offered him the newly vacant organist position with Andy and the Nightriders. There was only one problem: Samudio only knew how to play chords and some rhythm, but not much else. But Martin knew that Samudio was a charismatic stage performer and singer, and told him that he and Vincent were coming to Texas with a U-Haul to pick him and the organ up.

Samudio's showmanship proved to be a valuable and badly needed addition to the group. Word had quickly spread about the "new" Nightriders--the organist in particular--and people came from miles away and packed The Congo Club.

By this time, friends and fans were calling Samudio "Sam" and it stuck. And sensing his popularity being usurped by Sam, bandleader Andy Anderson began to introduce him to the Congo crowd as "Sam the Sham", a tongue-in-cheek reference to

Sam's lack of organ prowess. However, shamming was also slang for cutting up on stage, and/or jiving. Domingo Samudio had truly become "Sam the Sham."

Things were moving fast for the popular Nightriders and in June 1963, they moved to the mecca for blues bands, Memphis. Less than a week after hitting town, Andy and the Nightriders landed a permanent gig at **The Diplomat**, a popular blues joint on South Bellevue. And just like The Congo Club back in Leesville, the band filled The Diplomat every time they played.

Later on that summer, Anderson wanted to return to Louisiana and Vincent to Texas. Sensing their imminent big break, Sam and David stayed in Memphis and brought on two new players: **Jerry Patterson** on drums and **Ray Stinnett** on guitar. Then they began featuring sax player **Butch Gibson**, who would later be a regular member. Naturally, Sam became the leader of the band, and promptly renamed it Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, and then reclaimed their spot at The Diplomat.

Donning a feathered turban, a flowing robe, a gold earring and a sculpted beard, Sam the Sham reigned over Memphis. And for effect, Sam bought a 1952 Packard hearse to haul his organ and speakers. Nicknamed by Sam "Black Beauty" and by his fans "The Bela Lugosi Special," the interior of the long black hearse was draped in maroon velvet curtains and had a sliding window that separated the front compartment from the rear. Sam and Black Beauty was a match made in heaven.

Having built up a repertoire of songs that allowed them to play for more than six hours without having to repeat a number, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs were more than just robes and turbans; they were legitimate players in what many considered the blues capital of the world. Naturally, a record deal was the next logical step.

The group pooled enough money to buy studio time and recorded two songs: a cover version of **Chuck Willis'** *Betty and Dupree* and an original by Sam, *Manchild*.

Released by Tupelo Records with a first run of 500 copies, it did not make the play lists. This is most likely due to the fact that a drummer from another Memphis band had been given the lyrics to the Willis song by Sam himself, and then recorded it for Sun Records. Sun's distribution network and radio contacts made this rival version a hit record.

They then recorded another cover--this time a novelty tune--*Haunted House* by **Johnny Fuller**, for Dingo Records in 1964. Once again, their version was overshadowed by a competing version. **Jumpin' Gene Simmons'** version was a national hit. Dejected, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs left Dingo Records and signed with the smaller Pen label, which had a distribution deal with MGM Records.

Later on that summer, the band went into the studio with a song that used the words "Hully Gully." Told by the record label that they couldn't use that phrase, Sam improvised and built a song around the name of his cat, Wooly Bully. According to legend, the song was done in only three takes, each different than the other two, and the first take was what was released to the public.

Wooly Bully was a worldwide sensation in 1965, and sold millions of copies while peaking at No. 2 during an 18-week stay on the national Top 40 charts and was named "Record of the Year" by Billboard Magazine. To this day, it is still a siren call to the dance floor where ever there is a jukebox or cover band, and has been known to cause even the most vocally challenged barfly to sing along to the infectious chorus while simultaneously mangling what is quite possibly the most unintelligible lyrics to have ever been laid down on vinyl.

The group toured the world on the strength of *Wooly Bully* and a couple of other minor hits, *Ju Ju Hand* and *Ring Dang Doo*. However, all four of the Pharaohs--Martin, Patterson, Stinnett and Gibson--quit the band in a financial dispute with Sam in late 1965, nearly eleven months after the release of *Wooly Bully*.

Undaunted, Sam reloaded by enlisting a band from New York City called Tony Gee & The Gypsies, renamed them The Pharaohs, and recorded their second million selling record, *Lil' Red Riding Hood*, in 1966. The song would go on to peak at No. 1 that August, according to Cash Box Magazine.

Personnel changes continued, and by 1967 the group would be renamed The Sam the Sham Revue. Soon afterwards, a trio of female back up singers would join the Revue, and were billed The Shamettes. And although Sam the Sham remained a highly respected blues man, he was constantly pressured by MGM to keep the novelty songs coming. Songs such as *The Hair On My Chinny Chin Chin*, *How Do You Catch A Girl*, and *Oh, That's Good, No, That's Bad* kept Sam on the charts and in the public eye throughout the rest of 1967.

No longer a big draw by 1968, Sam went back to the studio to do solo work. His 1970 album **Sam, Hard and Heavy** was a departure for Sam, at least for those who only knew him for his novelty songs. Sam went back to his roots and produced a critically received blues/R&B album that featured **Duane Allman** on guitar, as well as **The Dixie Flyers** and **The Memphis Horns** backing him up. The album would earn a Grammy in 1971 for Sam's liner notes.

Attempts were made at reincarnating Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, the last being in 1974. Sam would go on to contribute two songs he wrote for the soundtrack to the Jack Nicholson film, *The Border*. The soundtrack's producer, Ry Cooder, was a huge fan of Sam's.

Domingo "Sam the Sham" Samudio still lives in Memphis today and is a motivational speaker and part-time preacher. He still writes songs and poetry, performs the occasional *Wooly Bully* at oldies shows (but only if he can also sing a gospel song),

and is still working with a writer on his autobiography. He was recently in Austin at the South by Southwest Music Conference and played a short gig at the Redeye.

Along with other great Texas garage rock bands of the mid- to late-'60s like ? **And the Mysterians, The Sir Douglas Quintet** and **The Midnighters**, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs ushered in a sound that was fresh, easy to dance to, and accessible to all cultures. Ultimately, Texas would not see another music renaissance like this until the early to mid-seventies when outlaw music turned country music on its ears.

For more information about Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, be sure to check out the official website, www.samthesham.com.