

A Lesson from Sam the Sham

It was sometime in the 1970s, and I was playing with my group, Smoke, at a big nightclub in Ocean City, Maryland; the kind of place that was almost the size of an auditorium. On the bill that night was Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs. Sam was the singer who'd made himself a household name a decade earlier with two words and a fuzz-toned guitar riff: "Wooly Bully."

Ocean City in those years was its own kind of music circuit. Every summer the boardwalk clubs and the big rooms just off the strip filled up with bands working the resort towns up and down the East Coast. It was a whole seasonal migration of musicians chasing the tourist dollar from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Soul and R&B carried a lot of that scene. Bands built their sets around what people wanted to dance to: Motown, Stax, Philly soul, horn-driven grooves that could fill a dance floor without anybody having to think too hard about it. A lot of it traced back to what folks up and down the coast called beach music, which was a whole subculture built around smooth, mid-tempo R&B, records meant for slow, easy partner dancing on a hot summer night with the windows open and the ocean a block away.

Groups like mine worked those same rooms, mixing soul covers in with our own material, because that's what kept a crowd on the floor. By the back half of the decade, disco was creeping in too, but in the mid-'70s, when I crossed paths with Sam, soul and R&B still ruled those clubs, and a band that could deliver it right could work the whole summer without ever leaving Ocean City.

The weather had other plans for us. Rain came down hard, and the crowd that should have filled that huge room never showed. Only a few fans, ticket holders who'd braved the storm, scattered themselves through a space built for hundreds. For the rest of the band and me, it was a deflating way to spend a night; all that set up, all that rehearsal, playing to a room that felt empty.

Sam noticed. Before the set, he pulled me aside. "Let me talk to you," he said, and I listened. Don't feel bad about how many people are out there, he told me. Think of it this way: the one and only God, Jesus, is out there, and you're going to play for Him. So you'd better be good.



By the time I met him, Sam the Sham was already a legend, though he wore it lightly. He was born Domingo Samudio in Dallas in 1937, and he'd taken a winding road to stardom; a stint in the Navy that took him to Panama for six years, then college back in Texas, where he studied classical voice by day and sang in dive bars by night. The stage name itself was a joke turned into a brand: "Sam the Sham," a nod to his own mock humility about his voice, worn the way only a confident performer could wear it.

What made him unforgettable wasn't just the hit record. It was the whole package. He performed in a turban and a flowing robe, backed by a band called the Pharaohs, and hauled his gear around in a 1952 Packard hearse fitted out with maroon velvet curtains. It was showmanship built entirely on his own terms, campy and theatrical in a way nobody else in rock and roll was doing at the time, and it worked precisely because he never seemed to be performing anyone else's idea of what a star should look like. He simply was who he was, turban, hearse, and all, and let the crowd catch up to him.

The success behind the costume was real. "Wooly Bully," a song he wrote himself, sold roughly three million copies, climbed to number two on the Billboard Hot 100, and spent eighteen weeks on the chart in 1965, long enough that Billboard later crowned it

the top record of the year even though it never technically reached number one. It broke through at the height of the British Invasion, when American acts were struggling to get a word in edgewise, and by his own account, Sam liked to say he and the Pharaohs kicked The Beatles' butt that year. The follow-up, "Li'l Red Riding Hood," did nearly as well, climbing to number two in its own right. Later, after he'd stepped away from the Pharaohs and gone solo, he even picked up a Grammy for the liner notes on one of his own solo albums, a strange and fitting honor for a man who'd built a career on turning a joke into something people took seriously.

By the 1970s, when he and I crossed paths in that rain-soaked Ocean City club, Sam had already lived several careers inside one: Navy veteran, classically trained singer, novelty-act frontman, chart-topping hitmaker, actor. Looking back, it makes sense that a man with that kind of range would tell a struggling young musician not to worry about an empty room. He'd built his whole career out of being exactly himself in rooms that didn't always know what to make of him, and it had worked out for him.

It was a simple thing for him to say, but it reframed the whole night for me. A half-empty room stopped being a disappointment and became something closer to an act of devotion. I played my best not because of who was counting the house, but because the music itself deserved it. I've carried that idea with me for fifty years.

We talked more that night. Sam mentioned he had an offer on the table, real money, to score the music for a cartoon show, and that he was heading back to Hollywood to chase it down. Before we parted, he gave me his number and told me to keep in touch. I called, more than once, hoping to catch up. I never heard back. He'd moved on into that next chapter of his career, and to this day I don't know whether that cartoon deal ever came together, just that he was chasing it hard the last time we spoke.

What stayed with me wasn't the missed phone calls or the small disappointment of losing touch. What stayed was the lesson: play as it matters, no matter who's watching. Even now, talking about the old days, it comes back to me all at once: a rainy night in Ocean City, an almost-empty club, and a fellow musician who reminded me why you show up anyway.