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## Come blow your horn

JOHN WOOLEY World Entertainment Writer

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Entertainment



**Johnny Williams grew up playing with the likes of Leon Russell, J.J. Cale and Chunk Blackwell.**

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### **Johnny Williams' music lies at core of classic Tulsa Sound**

As a seventh grader at Cleveland Junior High School, Johnny Williams picked up the saxophone. Half a century later, he's still got a grip on it.

Tulsa native Williams will be 62 years old in a week or so. For 50 of those years he's been playing the sax, and for well over 40 years, he's been a professional musician.

The roster of people he's played with is a virtual A-list of the creators of the classic Tulsa Sound, beginning with Leon Russell, who played piano during Williams' first public performance at a junior high dance.

A couple of years later, Williams and Russell were playing together for money. That was while they were both students at Will Rogers High School.

"Me and Leon Russell go back to the ninth grade," recalled Williams recently. "We started out doing school dances and things, and when we got a little older we went out and started playing clubs. Johnny (J.J.) Cale lived down the street from me, and I joined his band, Johnny Cale & the Valentines, for awhile. Then I started a group called Johnny Williams and the Starlighters -- it was Cale and Russell and Chuck Blackwell and me.

"There was an ol' place then we played a lot called Homer's Danceland, out on 51st and Sheridan," he added. "It was an outdoors type of deal, and a club called the Sheridan Club was right across the street.

"We showed up at Homer's one night without Johnny Cale, who couldn't make it for some reason. We were in there all set up, and Homer said, 'I'm not gonna pay you guys \$15 a night if Johnny Cale isn't here.' So we just left and took the whole crowd across the street to the Sheridan Club." Williams laughed. "Homer was mad at me for years after that."

At various times, the Starlighters also featured such well-known Tulsa musicians as Leo Feathers and Lucky Clark. They toured with Jerry Lee Lewis for several months and, on their own, recorded two songs, "Creepin' " and "Hot Licks," which became the A and B sides of a regionally successful single. "Creepin' " was a Top 10 record on Tulsa radio, Williams recalled, "at the same time I was romancing my wife."

He married Ruth soon after that, and the two have been together for 42 years. That marriage,

however, spelled an end to Johnny Williams and the Starlighters.

"I got married and the group kind of fell apart," he explained. "I didn't care about going on the road after that, and everybody else migrated to California."

Although Williams later gave California a shot himself, he didn't stay out there for years like Cale and Russell and Blackwell, all of whom became successful figures in the '60s West Coast music scene.

Then, in the early '70s, Williams' younger brother was killed in a car wreck. The experience kindled a spiritual conversion that proved to be as lasting as his marriage.

"It scared the dog out of me," he remembered. "I thought I was the black sheep, and I should've been the one that got it. I'd been raised in the church, but at about 17, I'd gotten out of it, when I got to playing the clubs and the joints. I was 33 years old when I got saved."

Around that same time he was playing a regular gig at a local club when Russell, now a major player in the rock world who'd re-established a base in Tulsa, came in to see him one night.

"He asked if we could come over after we were finished," said Williams. "The little girl who was singing with me said, 'He's gonna make us stars.' And I said, 'No, I think he wants to hear about how I got saved.'

"So we went over there, and he was showing us around, and after about 15 minutes he turned to me and said, 'OK, John David -- I want to know about how you got saved and started serving Lord Jesus.'"

Williams has stayed in touch with Russell, usually seeing Russell whenever he comes to town for his annual birthday bashes (like the one at the Brady Theater Saturday).

And while Williams' main gig these days is as a keyboardist for the band at both the Beams of Light Family Tabernacle and Grace Fellowship -- going from Grace's 9 a.m. service to Beams of Light's 10:30 one -- he also continues to play secular jobs, appearing with the likes of the Mike Bennett Orchestra and guitarists Tommy Crook and Buddy Bruce.

A lot of Williams' old musical buddies still perform with him on a for-fun basis as well, showing up for twice-monthly jam sessions at his house. And a good number of old rockers can also be found on Sunday mornings at the Beams of Light Tabernacle.

"We fill up about three pews down there," he said with a chuckle. "We call it the rock 'n' roll church. The pastor is Jimmy Ray, an old rock 'n' roll blues guitar player who was with Tweed for a long time. That church has probably got as good a band as there is in town."

Clearly, when it comes to both living his faith and playing his music, Williams comes across as a man who's never made much distinction between sacred and secular venues.

"I was playing the Tiki Nook club back in the '70s, and there were 22 people working there," he noted. "Thirteen of those 22 people got saved and really fired up for Lord Jesus."

"I'd go out and talk to the people, minister to the people, out there in the audience. One time the manager said, 'You know, I don't know about all this table hoppin' you're doing, talking about all this stuff. You're liable to run the business off.' And I said, 'Don't worry about it. If we get one drunk saved, God'll send us three or four more to work on.' "

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