

## Another Grammy weekend for 'Sam the Sham'

Bob Mehr, Scripps Howard News Service

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Domingo "Sam the Sham" Samudio is holding court at a Grammy pre-awards party in Los Angeles. His voice rising above the celebratory din, Samudio keeps an audience of friends and fans rapt with a litany of stories and jokes, all delivered with his dry, laconic Texas wit.

He even cites a few lines of poetry -- maybe something by Dylan Thomas or Rudyard Kipling, or perhaps a bit of original verse. For Sam the Sham is many things besides a rock 'n' roll legend: he's a poet and philosopher, a preacher and a philanthropist.

That was 2007. Samudio, as it turns out, is returning to L.A. for another Grammy weekend.

Although he's already been given a Grammy trophy once -- for writing the liner notes to a solo album in 1971 -- this year Samudio's most famous creation, "Wooly Bully," will be among the songs inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. The 51st annual Grammy Award presentations will air live on CBS Sunday beginning at 8 p.m. EST.

It's a great honor, a kind of immortality. But as he sits in a Cordova, Tenn., coffee shop near his home -- recounting the long and sometimes dark journey of his life -- it seems like the farthest thing from his mind.

At 72, Samudio is an exception in the music business. In an industry filled with self-mythologizers and braggarts, he's the genuine article. He'll tell you over and over that the world is divided into two kinds of people: "bluffers and sho'nuffers," and Samudio is definitely the latter.

Born of Spanish Basque extraction, Samudio began his life in the barrio of East Dallas. Samudio's mother died when he was just a child, and loss and violence marked his early years.

Unlike so many of his friends and running buddies, Samudio was lucky; he managed to escape the streets and enlisted in the Navy. "I joined the service to get away from combat," jokes Samudio, of his rough upbringing.

Samudio's music career began in the late '50s, as a member of the Nightcrawlers, a brawling R&B outfit that raged in the roadhouses of Louisiana. It was then that he took on the "Sam the Sham" persona. The nickname came from the way he faked his ability on the organ, but also for the flash and flair, the shucking and jiving, he'd come to master as a showman and frontman.

The Nightcrawlers would eventually fall apart, and Samudio returned to Texas and formed the Pharaohs. The turban-wearing, hearse-driving Samudio would bring the group to Memphis in 1964, and they soon became the hot house band at The Diplomat club.

It was during this period that Samudio would find rock 'n' roll fame, cutting the organ-fueled romp "Wooly Bully" at Sam Phillips' studio. The tune's signature Tex-Mex count-off ("Uno, dos ... one, two, tres, quatro...") was a bit of spontaneous studio magic by the Sham, and the song would sell millions of copies in 1965, and become Billboard's record of the year. Over the decades it's been covered countless times by everyone from Alvin and the Chipmunks to Bruce Springsteen, and continues to crop up in film and TV soundtracks.

Although the Pharaohs' lineup would change, they would score a couple more, albeit smaller, hits (including the brilliantly leering "Li'l Red Riding Hood") and cut a series of tough R&B records. But, by the end of the '60s, the band's fortunes had waned. Samudio went solo with a now classic cult album, "Sam: Hard and Heavy," in 1971, but it too failed to chart.

The '70s were Samudio's missing years. The pain and the hurt of his childhood would catch up to him. There were brushes with the law, an escape into drugs. All the while, Samudio says he was spared repeatedly -- from harm, from prison, from the morgue -- by a sheltering hand.

Eventually, he fell out of the music business and public sight. He became a deck hand and later boat captain, working the byways of the Gulf Coast. He didn't tell anyone who he was, or what he'd been. His co-workers were shocked one day when a crew from NBC's "Today" turned up to do a "Where Are They Now?" feature on him. On the water, there were more close calls, more narrow escapes, and Samudio says it was then that he turned to God.

In the mid-'80s, Samudio came back to Memphis, worked as a street preacher, played gospel music in prisons, and tried to get his life back. He'd lost it all over the years: his money, his possessions, for a time, even his family. Slowly, Samudio recovered it all, bit by bit.

Although he made a couple of high-profile appearances at the annual South by Southwest music festival in 2007, where he earned another lifetime achievement award, Samudio is basically retired from performing. These days his focus is not on music, but on ministering and counseling convicts and ex-convicts throughout the world.

He's recently returned from some outreach efforts in Puerto Rico. He talks glowingly about the men, the once-lost souls like him, who have turned their lives around. "Those guys are my heroes," he says.