

The African American fife and drum tradition in north Mississippi, because the genre emphasis on rhythm and percussion it essentially falls within the 'Hill Country Blues style. Its history can be traced back into the mid 1800s and possibly, due to its basic structure beyond. It is noted for its similarities to African music, and strangely it has been suggested to a marching band influence. Probably, although certainly there are others its best known exponent was the late, Otha (or Othar) Turner.

Othar was born on June 2, 1908, in Canton, Mississippi, east of Jackson. Except for a nine-month period laying and repairing railroad track as far north as Indiana, he had lived his entire life in and around Gravel Springs, which straddles the Tate-Panola county line. Othar: 'I been out on the farm a good while and raised six kids, and I don't know how many other people' done that as a small farmer.

Othar made his first fife when he was 13 from river canes. He had already learned a good deal about drumming from players in the area and wanted to move on to the fife. He picked his cane from a ditch / River bank and cut it to the right size: a little over a foot long, with several joints in the right places. He bored six holes in it with a red-hot rod, five finger holes and one for the mouthpiece. He experimented until he got the right intonation. Since then, he has made countless fifes for others.



His band, the *Rising Star Fife and Drum Band*, consists of the fife and three drums: two kettles (snare drums) and a bass. The high-pitched kettle

drum is the lead instrument. All the musicians play standing up, often while walking or marching, with the fife leading the way. The repertoire is a mix of blues, old popular tunes, spirituals, and instrumentals all collectively known as *Shimmy she wobble* the title, apparently, comes from the liberating effect the music has on dancers.

Many writers consider the fife and drum music of Northern Mississippi the most deeply rooted African style of music still being played in the United States. It certainly is among the rarest. Fife and drum ensembles are still to be found in many parts of Africa and in the English-speaking Caribbean. As late as the mid-twentieth century, it was found alive and well in Harris County, Georgia, and in western Tennessee, as well as, predictable in Mississippi.



The most common performance settings are picnics, large community gatherings at which there is lots of food, camaraderie, and dancing to the music of the fife and drums. These picnics have been going on in the communities as long as anyone can remember. They are family affairs that attract both local people and those who drive down for the weekend from St. Louis, Memphis, and Chicago, testimony to their popularity is people arriving from Europe to take part in one of Othar's picnics. Othar organised picnics mainly around the Fourth of July and Labour Day, starting them off at first light on Saturday and playing no later than midnight, out of respect for the Sabbath. Quote from Othar: *Way I introduce a picnic, I walk right out on the hill out there and play them drums ... and man, folks be coming from up yonder all the way on down to where my truck was, just laughing and talking, man, and the drums be playing music, they just enjoy*."

Since the mid-1970s, however, Othar's music has been more in demand outside the region. He has made numerous recordings and appeared at the Mid-South Folk life Festival in Memphis and in concerts and festivals around the county

Othar Turner died aged 95, on February 27, 2003. His daughter, Bernice Turner Pratcher, who had been living in a nursing home with terminal breast cancer, died the same day, aged 48. A joint funeral service was held on March 4, 2003, in Como, Mississippi. A procession leading to the cemetery was led by the *Rising Star Fife and Drum Band*, with his granddaughter Shardé Thomas, then 13 years old, at its head playing the fife.

