

Special Beachhead Edition

Commemorating

King Solomon



September
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#450

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KING SOLOMON - VENICE SNAKE MAN WILLIE LEE TURNER 1961-2019

Venice Lost One of its Greatests

By Greta Cobar

King Solomon, the Venice Snake Man, quickly departed from this world on Saturday, August 17. His passing brought shock and sorrow to so very many in Venice and beyond.

On the morning of August 17 Solomon played basketball in Venice, and then performed the Snake Show at his usual spot, on Ocean Front Walk and Windward. After that he went to Burton Chace Park for the Leela James concert. Before the concert started he collapsed out of the blue, the paramedics were called, and he was transported to UCLA Medical Center in the Marina, where he was pronounced dead on arrival at 6:47pm. The results of the autopsy are deferred for three months because of downtown testing back-log, and an official cause of death has not been released.

The Venice plaza between the flagpoles will never be the same without the Snake Show that he performed there for the past eighteen years. The tourists took pictures, and those millions of pictures are now all over the world and on the internet. All locals knew him, and most faces would sketch a smile at the sight of him. After a quick verbal exchange, the passer-by would leave feeling uplifted by Solomon's trademark words of encouragement and the compliments that he was so generous with.

He was born on March 29, 1961, on Hope Street, in downtown Los Angeles, and his real name was Willie Lee Turner. His parents had come from Oklahoma, and his ancestry was African-American, Native American and French Creole. The memorable parts of his childhood were the times he rode his bicycle (on some occasions, a horse!) from Watts, where he grew up, to the bike trail in Manhattan, Hermosa and King Harbor. Back then he was one of the very few Black kids to ride in that area, and the white kids would try to harass him. He and his parents also spent time around bon fires on the sand of Santa Monica beach.

Two tragic events happened to him while he was in his 20s, which made him question the righteousness of this world and whether he wanted to be part of it in a traditional sense. The first one was the death of his mother, Arnita Turner, when she was in her early 40s, which he blamed on the pills that the doctors were giving her for high blood pressure. It was common for experimental drugs to be tested on Black people without their knowledge. The second was his first daughter's, whom he named after his mother, contamination with meningitis in the hospital when she was an infant, which made her severely mentally and physically disabled. He blamed that on the hospital using dirty needles.

He tried working regular jobs, but had a hard time being controlled by the system. He even enrolled in the Coast Guard, from which he got an honorary discharge because he didn't want them to pull out his wisdom teeth. That was a wise decision!

Venice didn't come onto his radar until the late 1980s. And after that he was never the same, much like Venice will never be the same without him. He started calling himself Solomon and became The King, King Solomon. Back in those days Venice allowed and encouraged people to break out of the mold and express their authentic selves, and he truly was The King.



Above: Solomon the Snake Man
Photo art by: Ned Sloane

At first he sold T-shirts with socially conscious messages on the Boardwalk, such as Love Sees No Color. In the 1990s he spent years being a full-time dad for his baby daughter Jasmine, as well as his oldest son David. At this time he also spent more time concentrating on making art and music, two hobbies that he enjoyed and practiced throughout his life. He took photographs and created beautiful collages with his own photographs, cut-outs from newspapers and magazines, and found objects. His artwork carried strong political/social messages of justice, freedom and equality. Creating music was a constant part of his life, and he loved singing and playing the flute, guitar, drums, ukulele, banjo and any other instrument he could get his hands on.

In 2001 he was jogging along the ocean in Venice, and in alignment with the flagpoles at the end of Windward, on the wet sand, he found a rubber snake that had washed ashore. He picked it up, and was playing with it on Ocean Front Walk, by the flagpoles. A Haitian historian visiting Venice walked by and said: "Hey, I have a snake just like that, I got it at a garage sale." Solomon thought, "Ya, right." A few days later the guy came back and gave him the second snake. They both had "Made in China 1989" written on them. He started playing with both snakes, with his eyes closed, and when he opened his eyes, there were a bunch of people watching him, mesmerized by his presence. And that is when the idea of doing the Snake Show came to him. Betty White, of the famous Elton and Betty White Show that was taking place on the Boardwalk at that time, told him: "Take off your clothes, you'll make more dough!" He found a wooden ladder abandoned on Venice and Lincoln, and started performing between the flagpoles, on Windward and Ocean Front Walk, in alignment with where the snakes came to him. And that is the story of how the famous Snake Show got started.

His mastery of making the snakes look real (they weren't!) combined with his incredible balancing and yogi poses on the ladder, his physical beauty, his kind and wise words, made the show a hit. It was original, different, out of the blue, unexpected and unique. It was what Venice was all about, what people came to Venice for.

The sight of systemic police injustice transformed Solomon's calm, composed and thoughtful demeanor into outrage, and he was not afraid to speak out against it. That resulted in constant police harassment and numerous arrests on bogus charges. A Black man speaking truth to power in the most crowded part of Venice did not fit in with the restrictions of the system that we live under. If his family and friends would not have intervened with private attorneys and tens of thousands in bail money, the cops' efforts to keep him locked up would have been successful. This is the real story of being a Black non-conformist man in America.

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King Solomon Memorial

Sunday, September 1, 5-8pm

Beyond Baroque, 681 Venice Blvd.

Beloved, beloved Solomon has not left the building. He has not even left Venice Beach. He has not left. He is, and always will be...here. He personified Venice at its very best. He was a thriving work of art, a most beautiful man who walked in grace and had a speaking voice that had true clarity. He was a living love letter to Venice. I propose that we have a gigantic (or life size) mural of Solomon painted right away ... for he represents the altruistic attitude of our town in such a larger-than-life way. I only wish I'd thought of it before. Rip Cronk, get busy!!

Love,
Suzy Williams

Utopia with Solomon

By Gerry Fialka

Solomon Turner, known as "The Venice Snake Man," moved his Venice Boardwalk show up to heaven last week. His gorgeous mind and body will always touch deep in the heart and soul of Venice. MX Farina and me helped Solomon make a nine-minute film in 2007, entitled *Solomon Turner in Utopia*. View it on Youtube by searching for "Solomon Utopia PXL."

It captures this memorable performer rapping transcendental righteousness. It was screened for the PXL THIS 17 Film Festival at the Sponto Gallery. Greta Cobar served champagne. Clips also appear in the feature *The Brother Side of the Wake*.

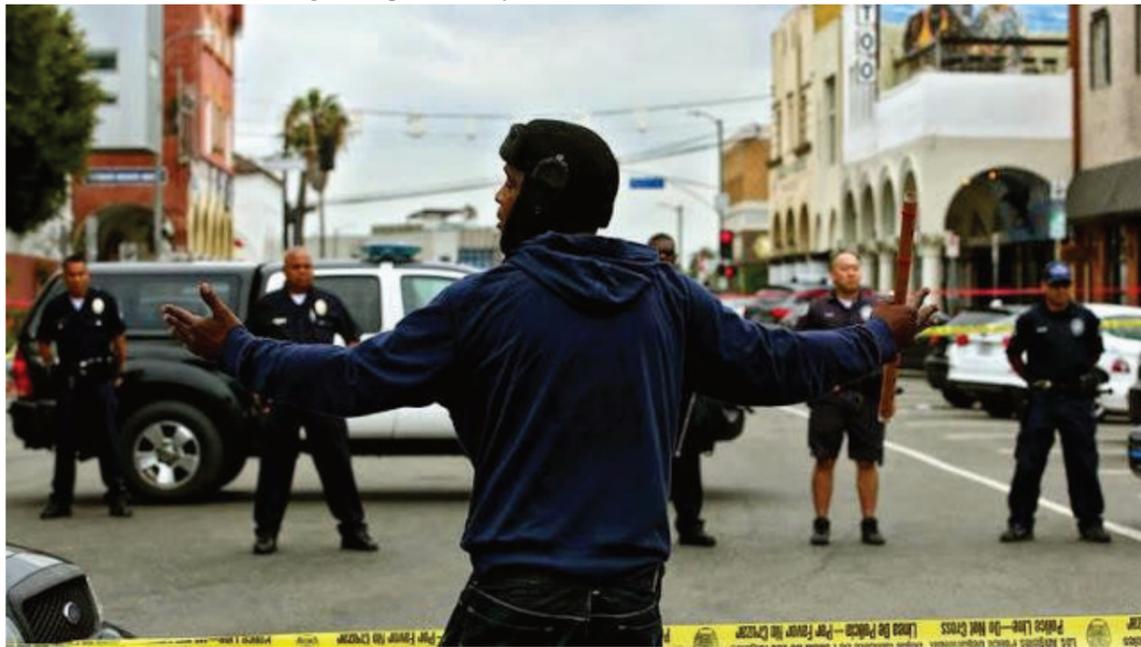
Celebrate a few wise thoughts from Solomon's narration:

"These are the famous Venice snakes. This is like a miracle show. These snakes bring miracles to me and other people. I wish y'all blessings."

"They say this world is magic, that we transcend death, we have life, we have appreciation, we have good food, we have love, we have beauty, we have togetherness, harmony, we have everything . . . clean water, clean underwear, or no underwear at all. Everyone can be naked."

"Imagination is the future. Things that we dream of - things that we imagine to be - to enhance life. And to give us liberty, and to give us more life, and joy. The secrets of life are heaven on Earth. Here, where you have all the basics - a skateboard, a boogie-board, a run on the sand, greeting people, having lunch with people from all over the world - sharing, sleeping and loving and joy! Dolphins! We can live in the world in peace, without war, without violence, where we can be Love and have natural energy."

Below: Solomon confronting the cops after they shot and killed Brendon Glenn in front of the Townhouse



Solomon Said - Quotes from Beachhead

"If a humanitarian world organization was to see the treatment of inmates or the racial make-up, they would say that this is a form of genocide based on race and economic status." – June 2012

"Thanks to my family, friends and supporters. I wish a Happy 2013 Year of the Snake to you all. The crown of my hope was the fact that I knew I didn't do it. I didn't even worry about proving my innocence, I just let them worry about how they would prove me guilty." – September 2012

"I want to thank the Devine force for always bringing truth to the light." – September 2012

"They want to keep me in the box. When I asked the policeman where to sign the ticket, he said 'In the box.' But I am one of those that thinks outside of the box, and I think that self-expression should not be limited to the spaces currently marked on the boardwalk." – September 2012

"The snakes are symbols of miracles and justice. Healing. Cobras are especially sacred to the Hindu Lord Shiva. I like the powerful surrealism of statues as triggering a hieroglyphic response in the human psyche." – December 2006

"Since the Lottery went into effect nearly two years ago, the suppression of local artists and vendors has become epidemic. The general idea is to keep us mired in fines and court appearances to the extent that we are incapacitated to work or even feed ourselves. It has been my Destiny to overcome limiting social and poverty issues all my Life. My family descended from Oklahoma and Louisiana plantations, Baptists who believed God is Love. My mother and aunts died from heart and kidney failures, my own daughter contacted spinal meningitis at one month old. I am dedicated to finding the healing solutions we all need to become one people." – December 2006

"Here is a folder containing ten incidents where I've been ticketed or received warrants. I am particularly singled out by Officers Putnam and Curtis. They are attempting to traumatize me and break my Life Spirit. They stake me out, constantly citing me tickets for riding my unicycle, stop me in mid-show in front of big crowds to do so. They follow me to my van, which I've been parking in the same spot for 13 years, wait til I go inside, then proceed to arrest me on the charge of sleeping in my van. I've paid over \$1,000 in impound fees in the past year. Putnam once even deliberately pushed my van over into the red line just to get it impounded. They show up with no warning, trump up a charge, and send me to jail. The other day I am riding bicycles on the bike path with my girlfriend Greta when we pulled off to chat with Ibrahim. Within minutes Putnam and Curtis ticket me for riding on the boardwalk, which i didn't do, (and tons of people do all the time). Greta asked why she didn't receive a ticket and they promptly wrote her one. Then in the process of handing over my license, Putnam threatens me with a charge of assault for supposedly cutting his finger with my license. Putnam is ex-military desert storm. I'm convinced he's racially and sexually harassing me. The other day him and Curtis followed me three times around Windward Circle. The other night I passed the Coffee Bean, Officers Putnam and Curtis were there with two others. Putnam called out that he can ticket me for riding my unicycle. I decided to walk to La Fiesta for a bite. Out of the corner of my eye I saw three cop cars circling like sharks around me. As I passed the post office, they convened, cars lights flashing, shouting to put my hands up, citing outstanding warrants – misdemeanor junk I can't currently afford to pay. They pointed a laser scope beam at my heart, cuffed me hissing Don't Resist. As they twisted my arms, I was stumbling. It took everything I had to remain calm, another trauma, another bogus charge, my freedom and my night taken away." – December 2006

Venice Lost One of its Greatests

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When the lottery system of allocating freshly painted boxed spots on the Boardwalk to the performers and artists was instituted in 2005, he was one of a few, if not the only one, who refused to be part of it. Through all his struggles, Solomon refused to compromise his conviction that freedom of speech is a right, not a lottery prize. In 2015, when the cops succeeded in banning him from the Boardwalk for a year as a plea deal on a totally bogus charge, he moved to Santa Monica and started performing there, at the top of the pier. In January of this year he came back to Venice and continued doing his show in the original spot, to the delight of locals and tourists alike.

Aside from his show and with his clothes on, he was a big part of the Venice community, ever-present at rallies, community meetings, gatherings, local hang-out spots and the basketball courts. He had more friends than anyone else I know. People loved his perseverance, strength, beauty and optimism. He often said that he lived by miracles, and encouraged the rest of us to believe in miracles as well.

I personally met Solomon on my first day after moving to Venice in October of 2004. Dr. John introduced me to him at a table outside of Cafe Collage, which at the time was the local hang-out spot. We started dating just a few weeks later, and continued, on and off, until now. The time I spent with him was by far the highlight of my life so far, and he inspired me to be the person that I am today. From riding bikes to decorating bikes, to buying and restoring my own VW bus, to my local activism and the work I did for the Beachhead, to making my own collages and paintings, to the way I carry myself and deal with others, my philosophy of life and my expanded horizons, all that and more has his mark on it. He's had the biggest influence on my life, was my best friend, my passion, my source of strength and happiness.

On August 17 I drove to Malibu and parked in a ranch, on the grass, under a big tree. I was supposed to get out and listen to live music, but I was overwhelmed by sorrow and spent hours in the car sobbing. I longed to be connected with him and repeatedly tried calling, but his phone was off. A deep, unprecedented and overwhelming need to hold his hand took over me. The urge was so strong that I held my two hands together and pretended that one of them was his. I held them really tight for

quite a while, while tears were uncontrollably streaming down my face. It was at this exact time that he was going through his transition into the next form of energy. I didn't know it at that time. The following day I scolded myself for being so needy, but when I found out about his passing I realized that he needed me to hold his hand during his transition just as much as I did, and I am honored to have been connected with him like that.

Venice lost one of its greatests, and it will never be the same without him. We can find solace in our fortune to have known him, to have enjoyed his presence, to have been blessed by him. He truly was larger than life.

Solomon is survived by his five children Arnita Turner, David Turner, Joshua Turner, Elisha Turner, and Jasmine Turner; his step-daughter Crystal Spradley; his sister Cassie Turner; his former long-term partner Jill Horowitz-Groeschel, Jasmynes's mother; and Eva Marie Svensson, Joshua's and Elisha's mother.

A memorial for Solomon will be held on Sunday, September 1, 5-8pm, at Beyond Baroque, 681 Venice Blvd.

May he rest in power, love and peace. May he know that he was deeply loved and is now just as deeply missed.

Solomon oh Solomon

By Della Franco

Solomon oh Solomon
 King of the snakes
 half naked on a ladder
 you balanced your body with such grace
 poised perfectly still and so at ease
 what a beautiful sight for all to see.

To me your life was a mystery-
 your love for Greta sublime
 your death has left an empty space
 on Windward Ave between two flags
 there is a void where you used to stand
 There is no longer King Solomon with his hats and sticks
 no more Snake Man performing his tricks
 only emptiness where the ocean meets sand.

oh Solomon King Solomon
 with your half smile, and your sultry gaze
 the last time we spoke you were so patient and kind
 I bombarded you with the dilemmas in my mind
 and when i was done you took your time
 and quietly shared advise to help my demise
 I knew you had said something important and true
 but I could not remember your words
 I had forgotten everything that you had said.

Solomon Oh Solomon
 i believe your magic was our guide
 that lead Greta and I to go together to your shrine
 we lit candles at night watching the image of you shine
 and there Greta told me she knew exactly what we had said
 Solomon had told her I had been questioning many things
 about being a mother and the meaning of life,
 about what was real love and how come it ends
 the answers he gave me are as relevant now as they were that night
 He told me I need to take some time
 He told me to stop all my rushing around
 He told me to take time to be alone
 time away from everything
 and time apart from the people I love
 but not to worry because it will all be fine.

Solomon oh Solomon
 Snake Man of Venice beach
 i wish I could tell you I am trying to practice what you had preached
 spending time alone is exactly what I need
 So Solomon thank you so much
 because without a doubt you were totally and completely right.



It takes a real man to take care of a child who is not his own, and not only did you take care of me, you showed me the world, you instilled things in me that helped shape the woman I am today ... you taught me how to love nature, you taught me to love the beach, you taught me about art, you taught me about tolerance of others, you taught me how to adapt to diverse surroundings, and I just want to thank you for everything you did for me. I love you so much King Solomon AKA Junior AKA my stepdad #i'mhurtdeeply

- Crystal Spradley



Above: Solomon and his step-daughter Crystal Spradley and Crystal's baby Kevin, 2007

Love You, Dad

Cheers to a fearless warrior. Cheers to the man who brought out the light in people who had lost it. Cheers to the man who didn't take life too seriously, but made it his mission to give continuously to others.

Dad, you are my hero. You taught me to be unapologetically myself. To love radically and to be kind. To forgive others and to believe in the power of the Universe. To be grateful for this Earth and the beautiful people who reside. Thank you for being you.

I will miss your humor and your unconditional love for me. I will miss skating, running and eating pancakes

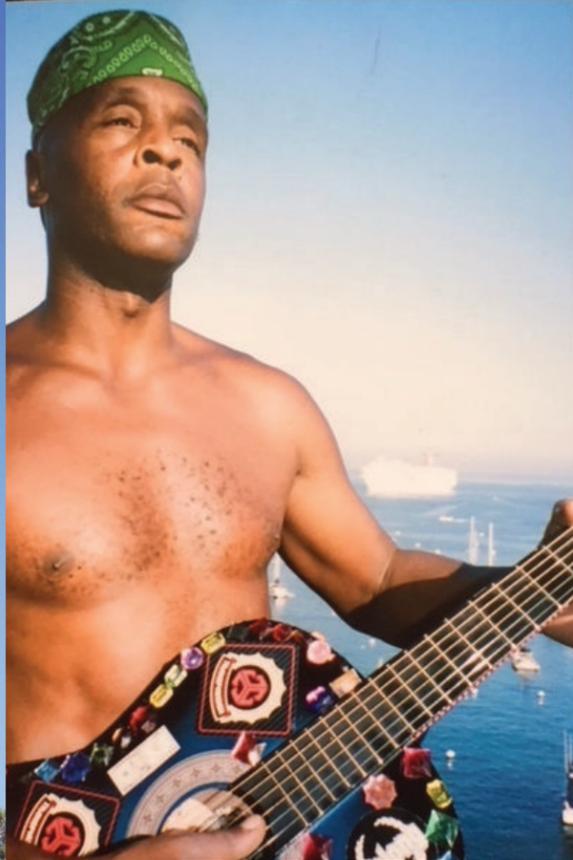
with you. I will miss your bandanas and your redundant advice. I will miss your reminders to drink water and eat garlic. I will miss your encouragement to try anything because I am capable of ruling the world, but if it ever got too much with my job as a teacher, I could get a Sprinter van and enjoy life on the beach with you.

I know you are in Heaven. I know you are in a greater place smiling over us. I love you dad, and I love how you loved me and showed me how to love myself. May your soul rest in peace and continue to guide us with your light so bright.

- Jasmine Turner



Above: Solomon with his daughter Jasmine and his son David



Above: Solomon's VW bus
Below: Solomon and Greta
Right: Collage on guitar by Solomon

