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-by Judy Zoch

Robin Sylar rarely steps outside of his obscurity, but when he does, he is noticed. Robin has been playing music for a long time and puts on a fun show. He takes his blues roots and plants them with his unique mixture of styles. He brings in audience participation by allowing them on stage to play instruments with him, and takes them in a line as he walks through the club and into the parking lot. The audience has a blast!

Robin and I sat together over tea and coffee to talk about his career. Our conversation opened with a discussion about a mutual friend.

So, how long have you known Wes Race?

I met Wes, probably sometime in the '70s. He was living in Wichita [Kansas]. We kept in touch over the years. He would come here and visit every once in a while because he liked DFW and Austin, the whole Texas thing. He had worked with Alligator Records.

Wes got out of that and I guess he wanted to free lance on his own. He's always been drawn to the people that are off the main highway. Maybe because of

that, he and I always got along well. He helped me get something off the ground.

One day he decided we'd make a record. He would be the Race Records label. That's how that first CD was made. He attempted to shop it to larger labels. Richard Chalk over in Dallas decided he would take it, and he changed the label from Race Records to his label, TopCat. It got, surprisingly, pretty favorable reception. Nothing changed in my life.

Let's talk about you. Where are you from?

I grew up in Dallas. I got out of high school. Well, for most people, the next step up is, you're going to college. Which, I attempted to do. I went through all the motions. Standing in line a lot. I was already involved in the music thing and I knew that's what I wanted to be doing.

Were you involved in school or just outside of school?

High School? Oh yeah. I did what any local band at that time in the Dallas area was; playing at school dances and private parties. At that time they had these things called teen clubs. Teen club meant that there was no alcohol. You could get in if you were under whatever the drinking age was. These were like copy bands.

Where you playing guitar?

Yeah. I occasionally played bass, but most of the time it was guitar. I could do either one. A lot of times I was playing in more than one band. It wasn't all that hard because none of them worked consistently.

But anyway, one day while standing in line registering for some college courses, I walked out of line and got in the car and moved to Austin.

How long were you in Austin?

First time around, about two years; '69-'71 or '72. By the end of the '60s there was a whole lot going on in Austin musically. There were Texas bands that were sort of achieving new ground, in a new world that wanted new bands to come along and be creative. Austin seemed to be the place that was thriving with a lot of that, and this was drawing a lot of people from everywhere. The big migration was from Dallas. A lot of them, well known now, were originally from Dallas. That's where all of us probably got more involved in the blues. In '72, I ended up moving to Los Angeles.

Did you have your own band at that time?

Some of the time. And then I would play with other people. Again, you had this freedom to work with a lot of bands. There was a notorious bar there at the time called the Vulcan Gas Company. It was very notorious in the psychedelic era of music of the '60s, It was like a psychedelic hippie nightclub. A lot of people played there. Johnny Winter, Janis Joplin, Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, Freddie King. Like I said, people from Dallas had moved to Austin. I knew these guys from Dallas already. Now they were living in Austin playing. Jimmie Vaughan, Paul Ray, Doyle Bramhall.

Krackerjack - Austin, TX 1972

Then, one day I met Uncle John Turner and Tommy Shannon. They had just come back from New York. They had been playing with Johnny Winter and came back to Austin. They came to my apartment the next day, and we talked about, 'Let's play music or something'.

So, we drove up to Dallas and we got this band together called Krackerjack. That was Uncle John, Tommy Shannon and Bruce Bowland. Of course all of us were blues oriented, but we were more of a blues/rock kind of a band. We played all over the state; we didn't go very far. Slowly, but surely, people moved on and went their separate ways.

I went out to Los Angeles and began playing with James Harman. That was a full blown, all out blues band. He's a harmonica player, front man. I was living in Hermosa Beach. Up and down all along the coast were all these beach towns that were real small. There were all these bars. We were playing the beach clubs. Long Beach, Newport Beach, Redondo Beach, Hermosa, Manhattan, Venice, Balboa. I did that for a couple of years.

Something was drawing me back to Texas. I came back to Austin one night and showed up at a place that I knew my friends were playing. They were calling themselves Blackbird. In walks Uncle John. He had just come from Houston and I'd just come from Los Angeles. We looked at the stage, we looked at each other. After the gig was over we all met up over at Tommy Shannon's house and we had a new band. This was now the 2nd or 3rd version of Krackerjack. This was the version that had Stevie Vaughan. We proceeded to play again in Austin. Maybe six months, Stevie left to play with Paul Ray & The Cobras.

At some point in the mid '70s things just kind of went down hill. A lot of the places we were playing closed or changed their format.

I went back to Los Angeles. This time I got hooked up with these guys called Canned Heat. They had their big success back a while ago; but they were still able to play pretty good bookings and tours. Anyway, I got hooked up with them and did that for a year, a year and a half. We

mostly went on two-week tours that would take us out. Eventually that kind of ran its course.

I came back to Dallas about '78. I went to a club on Greenville Avenue, St. Christopher's. I saw Stevie Vaughan and LouAnn [Barton], this guy playing drums, Freddie Pharaoh, Jackie Newhouse and WC Clark. At that time they were called Triple Threat. Stevie had just left Paul Ray. They did a kind of a thing where a third of the time LouAnn would be up. A third of the time, WC would be up and a third of the time Stevie would be up.

Anyway, in walks Doyle Bramhall. Then Alex Napier walks in. Bass player that had played with Paul Ray. Here again, there were three of us, guitar player, drummer and bass player. We have a band. Let's go. So that was called The Millionaire's. We played around DFW. We lived here, in Dallas, for a year, a year and a half. We traveled and things were going pretty well. We played in Lubbock and on Greenville Avenue. Greenville Avenue had shifted from being like a street of dives crummy places to a sort of musical gold mine. Whereas Lemmon Avenue had been the popular place. Lemmon Avenue or Cedar Springs in clubs like Mother Blues and Gerdies.

After the '80s, I didn't do a whole lot. I'd quit. Can't count on it. It's inconsistent. I'd quit every other month then something would come up and I'd get back in it again.

Later, in about '88, Doyle decided he wanted to pursue the Doyle Bramhall project rather than playing in other bands. He was living in Fort Worth, I was living in Dallas, so we got that going. There again it was a time that there happened to be work available. There was Doyle and myself. It started out with Jim Milan playing bass. He left and we got with this guy named Mike Judge who went off and created the cartoon called Beavis & Butthead. Then he went on to do King of the Hill.

We continued on and Doyle got a record deal with Antone's and made Bird Nest On The Ground. I think that was Antone's biggest selling record that they had, at least up until that point.

How long have you had your Robin Sylar Band?

Well, I had always done that, in between all of these other things. In those little spaces when we had time off, I would go out and do deals here and there. Fill in the blanks. My other thing was guitar lessons. I started doing that because people would see me playing

somewhere and come up and, ask me if I taught lessons. At first my thought was, I don't want to. But it kept happening so I eventually started giving these guitar lessons. Of course, I didn't know what I was doing at first. Later on as it got more involved, it came to where was teaching anywhere from ten year olds, kids that don't know how to tune their guitars, to anybody. Like musicians already playing in bands.

Doyle pretty much decided that he needed to take some time off. He stopped playing.

I had some health problems at that time that just came out of nowhere. Without making a big deal out of it, I had a stroke in '97. The kind that splits you in half and one side of your body works fine and the other side shuts down. It took me about three years before I got back the use of the right side of my body. literally lost the use of the arm, the hand, the whole deal, the right side of the brain, the eyesight. My speech was affected. Anyway, there is really no treating a stroke, I was lucky when I recovered. So, I got back, not 100% of my agility or dexterity, I cam back 80-85%.

One day I thought, "Well, I wonder if I can do this music thing?" I had already written that off. So, I started kind of slow and I got to going around with people and trying to do it again. In some cases I had to learn a different way. I started playing around with whoever, where ever. At that point I was just overjoyed that I could function again.

Then at some point I got back and had some things I wanted to do, so I slowly tried to develop that. Of course the idea was to do a CD and I couldn't get anyone interested. Like I said earlier, Wes [Race] came along. Even though that got pretty well received, nothing really much changed as far as my activity. I still couldn't get a job anywhere. I mostly got back into the guitar-teaching thing. That became my job. My paycheck. Then it came time to do a second CD. So, we did that and that is where we are now. Still, nothing has changed.

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Robin said that one thing he has always wanted to say in an interview is that the credits his influences to the local neighborhood guys that he played with during his high school days, like Jimmie Vaughan and (the late) Seab Meador.

"Back then, we didn't have VCRs and CDs. You had a guitar and a record and that's it. You did the best you could"

Robin's appreciation of the local talent is evident on his most recent CD, Tricked Out. He asked some of the locals that he respects to record

live with him. Artists he recorded with on Tricked Out are: Bobby Baronawski, Kevin Shermerhorn, Marc Wilson, Homer Henderson, Jonny Mack, James Hinkle, Wes Race, Eric Matthew and Beer Belly Slim. Robin plays a lot of the instruments himself on the studio cots.

He said that this release has moved much quicker than the first one and that he believes for the most part, it's due to the internet making it possible as well as the distributors. He said that after a period of about 10 days after the release, it had already reached more places than he had imagined.

Robin is an insightful, creative person, like most of us, surviving this rat race. He would much rather be enjoying his life appreciating what's really important; the clean country life "with the trees, raccoons, deer..." I truly hope that something his dream of living that simple life comes true.