

Paint It Blue - FW Weekly Online

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Ft. Worth Weekly - Wednesday April 7, 2004

Robin Sylar filters musical sources through a pentatonic prism and arrives at originality.

By Ken Shimamoto

Robin Sylar is a madman. Or at least he plays like one.

The Texas axe-man's blues cred is impeccable: As a youth, he filled his bucket from the same deep well of Delta water as Stevie Ray Vaughan and even went toe-to-toe with SRV when both played together in the rock outfit Krackerjack. After a spell on the West Coast and roadwork with archetypal hippie blues-rockers Canned Heat, Sylar logged time in the Millionaires with Doyle Bramhall in the late '70s, and, in '94, he appeared on Bramhall's epochal Bird Nest on the Ground c.d. Sylar's incendiary performances at the Keys Lounge on Westcreek have made believers out of many blues skeptics. More to the point, he's just released a new full-length, *Tricked Out* (on Dallas-based Topcat Records), on which his left-of-center ideas and delivery clearly set him apart from the pack of local bluesicians.

See, blues guitarists tend to come in two flavors: respectfully folkloric or flashy and showy. At the end of the day, though, it's impossible for these musicians to play either their egos or their huge and tasteful record collections for audiences. Approaches that are overly concerned with idiomatic correctness, like folkloric stylings, even beg the question: "Why do I, as a blues fan, need to listen to, say, Eric Clapton while Buddy Guy is still drawing breath?" Conversely, an axe-slinger who -- on stage or in the studio -- always feels compelled to play every lick he knows (and it's always a he, Sue Foley and Susan Tedeschi notwithstanding) winds up coming across like so much sound and fury, signifying nothing.

As a player, Sylar is something Entirely Other. His style is purely informed by a few muses: the wilder side of blues tradition, as personified by the likes of Guitar Slim and Johnny "Guitar" Watson, players who, when playing, sounded as if they were really mad at someone (to use Frank Zappa's words); virtuosos like surf daddy Dick Dale and Memphis wunderkind Travis Wammack, grandstanding exhibitionists of the early '60s instrumental variety; and the seat-of-the-pants, psychedelic-era Jeff Beck during his fuzztone-blaring, feedback-belching Yardbirds daze. Sylar uses a wide,

almost out-of-control vibrato, Highly idiosyncratic note choices, and unusual arrangement and production touches to create an atmosphere of disorientation. The key changes in between verses on Tricked Out's cover of the Dixie Cups' venerable "Iko Iko" are sinisterly crafty. The bagpipe band that appears out of nowhere to march, Charles Ives-like, through a cover of Wammack's "Scratchy" on Sylar's debut c.d., Bust Out, is equally inventive. Overall, his fretboard fireworks are the auditory equivalent of the quiet guy at the end of the bar with the crazed look in his eye who very well might do anything. There's a sense of unpredictability and an undertone of danger in nearly everything Sylar does, always offset by his off-kilter humor.

Sylar's got a voice, too. His vocals have neither the bellowing bluster nor the sense of cool repose that mark most blues singers' delivery. Instead, his voice is thin and reedy, and you get the impression that he couldn't care less. He's also a great lyricist, capable of penning lines like the so-cheesy-it's-cool double entendre "My love is like dynamite / Don't you play with my fuse / If you play with my fuse / I'll explode all over you" (on Bust Out's "Dynamite Nitro") or "I like sleepy Fort Worth / I like leaving this Earth / I like life without pain / And a woman that's sane" (from that debut disc's "Dux," a song that features a duck call solo).

On Tricked Out, the only two songs that Sylar actually penned are instrumental, but they're just as emblematic of his individuality -- maybe even more so. "Shot Time" is a Hendrixian funk groove over which local spoken word poet Wes Race intones a blues hound's manifesto in his midwestern hipster style: "I ain't no bigot / Can you dig it? / I love my life / Just the way I live it / If you can't get next to that / Oh well, fuck you." "Surf Puppy" is a full-blown surf instrumental, with Sylar handling keyboards as well as guitar. The piece occupies a space somewhere between the Tornados' "Telstar" and the theme from The Munsters.

Sylar's choice of tunes to cover reveals an artist fascinated by myriad inspirations. The proceedings open with the 13th Floor Elevators' "You're Gonna Miss Me," and, through this hauntingly psycho interpretation, Sylar can certainly claim kinship with vaunted Texas weirdos like the Elevators' Roky Erickson and the Legendary Stardust Cowboy. Sylar's blistering take on "Shakin' All Over," from early-'60s Brit rocker Johnny Kidd, makes mincemeat of the Who's version from Live At Leeds. And he even tips his hat to '70s-era Dallasites the Werewolves -- Rolling Stones acolytes who were briefly managed by Stones svengali Andrew Loog Oldham and had a record deal with RCA -- with a Sylar-ized treatment of their 1978 near-hit "Hollywood Millionaire."

Of course, the inevitable guest musicians make appearances. Ex-Werewolves drummer Bobby Baranowski kicks the traps on a couple of tracks, but most of the stickwork is by the solid journeyman Kevin Schermerhorn. Sylar himself plays bass on most of the selections, with fellow eccentric Homer Henderson providing the solid one-note thump on two songs. Jovial zydeco daddy Johnny Mack actually sounds pissed off

on Don Nix's "Back to luka" and, with Sylar's regular trio of himself, bassist Eric Matthew, and drummer Mark Wilson, adds just the right touch to the hot six-song set, recorded live at the Keys, that closes the disc; he even plays rub-board and sings his signature song "Sugar Bee."

These days, Robin Sylar makes his living teaching guitar and bass at Brooks Mays Music in Cityview. He advertises his services with lurid pink flyers that would be more appropriate for a punk show than a guitar tutor. But anyone searching for a lesson in how to remain resolutely Your Own Guy while playing classic forms, and aficionados of twisted kicks in general, need look no further than Tricked Out.