
Robin Sylar has Bust Out with TopCat

Insiders know he's tops and
the outside's getting word

By Tim Schuller

(from Buddy Magazine September 2002)

The Dallas label TopCat is receiving the most enthusiastic industry response of its existence for Bust Out by Robin Sylar. Until TopCat got hold of it, this CD by one of Texas' best and strangest guitarists was a rumor.

You can use a lot of words to describe Sylar's playing and still feel you haven't pegged him. You can say that he plays straightup electric blues better most of those who specialize in it. These days everyone and your Uncle Moe does a Hound Dog Taylor spot, few a tenth as well as Sylar who was doing Hound Dog over a decade ago. Same with surf guitar. Since Pulp Fiction scads of bands dug up Dick Dale, the Chantays, the Ventures. Sylar's been doing that forever.

His talent has not translated into wealth and renown

But that still doesn't tell the story. Sylar is an extremely good play, but there's something else to his sound, something a tad skewed, that exceptionalizes it. Other guitarists elaborate on the old surf tunes and it only gums up the works. Sylar does so, tweaking the time-honored riffs and putting in fills, and it sounds fine. Other blues guitarists emulate a certain oldster's style and you damn them for copyism. Sylar takes on the blues idiom, and the faithfulness of his interpretation amazes you. Add to the mix his ability to play low-down, honkytonk C&W, add his flair for covering material by oddball artists (Travis Wommack, the Busters). You hear this guy and know, he drinks from the same brook as Link Wray, Johnny Burnette, Hubert Sumlin, Lenny breau, and the other great off-kilter guitarists of our time.

You might say he's an outsider. Out of the box. Sylar himself might agree, but just perhaps wishes it were otherwise. His talent has not translated into wealth and renown. When he plays, the great electric guitar styles of our time speed by you in their hot rod glory. When he is spoken of by guitar peers, it's in awed tones. But Bust Out is his first CD, and he still has to hustle gigs.

Seems bad hoodoo to say he's

too good for mainstream approval. After all, some pretty great guitarists have struck it rich. But a lot of them are guitar dweeb. They mince out onstage with high dollar effects devices so subtle and tricky, absolutely no one but guitarists can hear that they do. They have vintage this, high-tech that. Sylar scorns their ilk and consistently gets great sounds out of equipment of a more mundane nature. This present axe is a Flying V, not a pricey original but a modern copy, and his amp is a small Laney unit from the UK.

He does own a couple vintage instruments but they weren't vintage when he bought them.

He says there's a difference between something that really deserves to be called vintage, and something that's just a "worn-out piece of junk". Not for him are original Danelectros, up till recently regarded as crummy cheapos but presently ever so pricey on the dweeb circuit.

"I have a new Danelectro," he says. "Much cheaper! Plus, when you buy something you want it to work and a lot of those old (instruments) don't even work right."

But it's not all practicality.

"I bought the most wildly colored Danelectro in the store." Must guys wouldn't get near this thing. It's medium blue metalflake but it's BIG metalflake, like you'd see on a fishing boat."

Quirky choices, shady acquaintances, involvement with uncommercial recordings – all this and more comprises the walking culture canvas that is Sylar.

I first saw him in the late '70s (or thereabouts) by which time he's already played with Stevie Ray Vaughan, James Harman (with whose band he backed George Smith and Eddie Vinson), and a depleted version of Canned Heat. I might have seen him with Doyle Bramhall in a band called the Millionaires, who played both Austin and Dallas at the time. I know that Dallas Blues Society found Chuck Nevitt and I used to go hear him in an organ combo with Lou Lazer on keyboards. A few years later, organ jazz got "discovered" and everyone and Uncle Moe was having at the style of guitar that was associated with it. Again, Sylar was years ahead of the trend.

He co-wrote "Thibodeaux, Louisiana" that was on Marcia Ball's recent Presumed Innocent (Alligator), did a short stint with Mike Morgan, and played beat-style guitar (with Homer Henderson on

bongos) behind Wes Race at poetry readings.

Race enjoyed hearing Sylar at such Fort Worth spots as the Keys Lounge and decided to bankroll a CD. Result: *Bust Out*. The sidemen were bassist Jim Milam and drummer Kevin Schermerhorn, excellent musicians oft-heard with various metroplex entertainers. Also on board was Rex Mauney (keyboards) and Sylar's old bud Homer Henderson, who played bass on a couple cuts. Henderson also sang on "Bertha Lee", one of the CD's strongest most sardonic selections. Other highlights included "Steel Trap," a lurid, skanky instrumental, and "Wild Angels", which interprets the theme song to the film of that name (and betters the original considerably).

He plays straightup electric blues better than most of those who specialize in it

Recording a CD is one thing, getting a distributor is another. You pretty much have to be in that sort of business to really move units. As a result, *Bust Out* languished in boxes on Sylar's living room floor.

Enter Richard Chalk. "(Bassist) Tony Dukes told me about this CD produced by Wes Race and how great it was," said Chalk. "I really like Robin's shows, and when Tony sent me a copy of *Bust Out*, I loved it too. Wes did a great job on it and deserves accolades, but didn't really have access to distribution networks or press, so I knew it had all the sizzle still on the steak and was still unknown. I did a distribution deal with Robin, reprinted the tray card so it'd be more readable, and got it into nationwide distribution on TopCat label."

Another aspect of Sylar's endeavors is teaching guitar, which he's done intermittently for much of his career. There's a new Brook Mays store in Forth Worth where Sylar is giving lessons.

"It's like, I go in to work just like a regular guy," he said.

Sylar becoming "regular" seems highly unlikely. But it does seem the future holds increased access to, and renown for, his rather vast musical talent.