

## Embracing the dark:

Robin Sylar's last stand

By Tim Schuller

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Brilliance and the dark are sometimes accompanists. Everyone who attended Robin Sylar's funeral in December knew of his brilliance. On a good night, everything of merit in the American electric guitar experience could be heard from him. If you let your eyes pan over his mourners, you saw more than a few who knew the dark well themselves.

Sunny types were rare in Sylar's orbit. He was a walking battle flag against conformity and people like that don't run with Pollyanna. He would've been that way if he had a choice, but he didn't. He was off center to the marrow and for years his life was a celebration of that. Exactly when the celebration stopped is hard to pinpoint. His mental state, long precarious, had been stressed by recent physical woes including a stroke that diminished his playing ability, and back problems that gave him constant pain. In December, he put a firearm to his chest and that was that.

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Sylar and I were brothers in melancholy. It wasn't like we'd chosen to be on that path but there we were, and we recognized it about each other. There were times we might have talked about it but then the drinks arrived or a song came on the jukebox that warranted our deep discussion. Or he'd just plain clam up.

Sylar was famous for joining you at your table on break at a gig, and then going silent. When jazz pianist Bud Powell did this, he was said to be "in a state of grace." Sylar was often referred to as a "guitar player's guitar player." That's the sort of appraisal given artists who elude mainstream approval but awe initiates.

Bassist/composer Homer Henderson (an initiate if there ever was one) believes he first saw Sylar playing with the Millionaires at the Cave on Greenville Avenue. He would become a staunch Sylar ally. "He played with a lot of class," stated Henderson. "He made all the other guitar players seem like they were struggling. He really knew how to construct a solo without all the long-winded Stevie Ray Vaughan bullshit and you can quote me on that! Blues, jazz country, Link Wray—he didn't really have to sit there and figure it out, he just listened to it and he could play it.

By the 1980's, Sylar and Henderson were playing together regularly. Or, as regularly as a twosome could whose repertoire was (to say the least) eclectic. In those days, most club owners didn't know there was such a word.

Dallas Blues Society founder Chuck Nevitt recognized Sylar's uniqueness and recorded him but the sessions stayed in the can at Sylar's request. He thought their emergence would be inopportune in light of his collaboration with Doyle Bramhall on the latter's *Bird Nest On The Ground*, cut slightly after the Nevitt production. The journalist Ken Shimamoto also perceived Sylar with clarity. He appreciatively and accurately profiled Sylar in the *Fort Worth Weekly* (4/7/04), writing, "His left of center ideas and delivery clearly set him apart from the pack of bluesicians." Not that Shimamoto viewed Sylar as wholly in the blues niche. He called him "Something Entirely Other," an appraisal Sylar would've probably liked. For years, Sylar was in an excellent trio with Bramhall drumming and singing (usually with Mike Judge on bass). I remember them holding forth in some long-gone dive in the West End. It was one of those nights when Sylar came to my table on break and sat there in silence. The threesome also played the Lakewood bar *Schooner's* and they'd get that place rocking like an adrenalized zoo. They played blues far more excitingly than many bands that played nothing but, and often spiced the mix with "Penetration," "Pipeline" and other pre-Beatle guitar instrumentals. Sylar had the jump on a million bands that would soon cram the "surf guitar" bandwagon. He had been a *Pulp Fiction* star years before the movie was made. Sylar was raised in Dallas but moved to Fort Worth. Homer Henderson says Sylar later came to rue that.

"In the end he hated it. (He said) 'I'm dyin' over here, I hate it.' Heard that shit for years," asserted Henderson.

A good thing about the move was that it put him close to poet/security guard Wes Race. At bookstores or hole in the wall bars Race would recite his sage, street-wise poems flanked by Sylar on guitar and Henderson on bongos. It was beatnik-y but lacking in parody, witty without being dumb. Thoroughly recommendable is Sylar's CD *Bust Out on Wes'* indie imprint, called (what else?) *Race Records*. After releasing a couple of CDs by artists who screwed him, Topcat Record's Richard Chalk could have hardly been blamed for targeting some sane, safe, commercially viable artist for a session. Instead, he chose Sylar.

The result, *Tricked Out*, weird even by Sylar standards, is essential to any fan of musical Texana and sonic trespass. Several people eulogized Sylar at his funeral, none more movingly than Sonnie Collie, a bassist who knew Sylar for decades. His recollections were profound, compelling, and well spoken. I hope I don't severely skew a certain thing Collie

said about Sylar's having made a choice, and deserving respect for that. He sure gets my respect for it.

Sylar made a stand against conformity. He knew the dark. Many people fear the dark, cower before it, or in simpering voices deny that it's there. Not our Sylar. In the end, he didn't merely face it—he embraced it.

We'll all see him soon.

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