

# Robin Sylar Biography - Page 1

- written by Ken Shimamoto

Describing a December 1998

Robin Sylar performance at Fort Worth's Keys Lounge -- wherein Robin took the stage with an open-tuned, capo'ed Telecaster a la Albert Collins, his guitar strap adorned with Christmas lights -- for Buddy magazine, Dallas-based

blues scribe Tim Schuller had this to say: "Mark me, few of the renowned guitarists on this planet are a tenth as good as Syler. A master of finesse and tone, he's a fine blues player who also excels at guitar instrumentals of the sort that fall under that fall under the 'surf guitar' mantle." Indeed, the 2000 edition of Rick Koster's Texas Music characterizes Sylar as "the state's finest purveyor of the sort of surf music made famous by Dick Dale and the Ventures." The author continues, "Syler, though, being from Texas, has his own rocking twists on the genre, creating a form he calls 'surfabilly.'"

Listening to Robin play, you

could clearly discern the thread connecting the most distinctively expressionistic modern bluesmen like Alberts King and Collins; '50s rockabilly madmen like Paul Burlison and Link Wray; highly individuated '60s axe-slingers like surf kingpin Dick Dale and Jeff Beck in his proto-psychedelic Yardbirds daze; and decadent-but-stylish '70s rockers like the English band Free and Robin's friends the Werewolves (Dallas' answer to the Exile on Main St. Stones, whose almost-hit "Hollywood Millionaire" -- from their Andrew Loog Oldham-produced 1978 album for RCA -- he covered on his second CD).

It's ironic that someone who

was so resolutely his own man gets mentioned most often in the literature as a onetime band mate of Stevie Ray Vaughan's (and folks who know will tell you that back in those days, Stevie was learning from Robin). Maybe it was because he recorded late (although not that late; after all, Robert Jr. Lockwood was 55 when his first session as a leader was released): While Robin had been pounding the boards since the late '60s, his debut CD, Bust Out, wasn't released until 2002. That record sounded the way Electric Ladyland might have if it was recorded in Fort Worth, a swirling redneck apocalypse of gritty Jimmy Reed slow-grind, space-age surf-o-rama, sound bites from old movies, a Scottish pipe band marching through the middle of a wild guitar instrumental, a snippet of the "William Tell Overture" leading into a spoken-word piece by Robin's friend and "cryptic advisor," poet-blues maven Wes Race. Its follow-up, 2004's Tricked Out, was part roots record and part audio document of a representative Sylar club gig. For better or worse, those records are Robin's head-spinning legacy; if you haven't heard 'em, you owe it to yourself.

Robin might have looked

fragile in his later years, but he was still larger than life, a big persona with the flamboyance of a Jerry Lee Lewis or a Screamin' Jay Hawkins. He dressed the part in cowboy shirts of his own design that combined eye-catching

swatches of color with retro/ghetto-fabulous leopard or tiger patterns. He decorated guitars and amplifiers and cycles in the same manner, as if he were trying to create an entire world fantastical enough for himself to inhabit.

Robert Harold Siler, Jr., was born in Dallas

on March 12, 1951, to Robert Harold Siler, Sr., and Virginia Smith Siler. (He had the his name legally changed to Robin Syler in the '70s and went by "Robin Sylar" professionally from the late '90s.) After World War II, the elder Robert Siler worked as a purchasing agent and sales manager for companies dealing in road construction and farm equipment. Virginia Siler worked part time at a high-end clothing store. Robin and his older sister Virginia Lee Siler grew up in the Preston Hollow neighborhood in North Dallas, a block north of Preston and Royal.

Virginia recalls, "Our maternal grandmother played piano all her life and [Robin] spent hours on piano working out songs. I think he took guitar lessons but was self-taught on piano. Daddy had an organ but never did much with it. I took piano lessons but was hopeless. We all loved music of all kinds." Music was in the very air of late-'50s/early '60s Dallas. Robin's latter-day collaborator Phil Bennison recalls Sylar regaling him with stories of playing miniature golf at a place next door to Lou Ann's on Greenville Avenue while Jimmy Reed was performing on the club's patio, and buying a new record by Dallas rockabilly cat Scotty McKay (ex-Gene Vincent's Blue Caps) after seeing him perform at a shopping center near the Siler family home.

Waller "Sonny" Collie -- who

grew up to play bass with singer-songwriters B.W. Stevenson and Willis Alan Ramsey, as well as punk rockers the Explosives and legendary psychedelic-punk pioneer Roky Erickson -- was the same age as Robin and lived across the street. "At that time, 1950, 1951, 1952, it was the northernmost extent of [the city]," said Collie. "Beyond that, there were fields." He and Robin would sit in the listening booths at a nearby record store, spinning the Tornados' "Telstar" and other guitar instrumentals of the day. They started playing music together in 1960; their first public performance was at a Dealey Elementary School carnival in May 1962, where they played four Jimmy Reed songs on a flatbed trailer to an audience of screaming 10-year-old girls. Robin had a Fender guitar -- "probably a Duosonic" -- while Sonny beat on pots and pans until he was able to prevail on his parents to outfit him with first a snare drum, then (gradually) a full kit.

"As a child," Sonny recalls,

"Robin was kind of wild, a bad boy -- an errant little bundle of energy with nowhere to go. He was shockingly disrespectful to his parents. We were living in a confusing and nerve wracking time -- the space program, the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination -- while growing up in this bland suburban tract neighborhood. I think he sensed that the electric guitar as played by Dick Dale or Jeff Beck was a tool that could describe that American insanity."

Young Robin was also a gifted athlete. Playing football as a wide receiver, said Collie, Sylar was

"astonishingly fast – he could really get down there and catch the ball." Collie believes a hard hit in a YMCA game against a team from rival Kramer Elementary could have contributed to the chronic back pain Robin experienced later in life. "We always hated playing Kramer," said Sonny. "Their team was made up of ham-like Paul Bunyans. They were brutally vicious."

Collie's family moved away to the Park Cities in 1964. Nine years later, Sonny encountered Robin performing at Mother Earth on Lamar in Austin, billed as "Robin Syler, the Deep Sea Diver," wearing "no shirt, a tiny fringed vest, low-cut bellbottoms with scarves tied to his upper arms, and playing like Hendrix. I didn't get to speak to him because I was with some people who hustled me out before the set was over." They wouldn't see each other again until the '90s.

Robin attended Franklin and Hillcrest High Schools, but dropped out of Hillcrest in 1968 when school officials wanted to make him cut his hair. Sandra Sarns (now Garonzik), who was his girlfriend at the time, remembers, "He went to Mother Merrill's to get tutored for his GED test. She was a lady who'd been teaching kids like that for years." Robin's early bands, with his friend Mark Kessel on drums, rehearsed at Sandra's house. "We'd set up in her living room and play for hours," said Mark. They performed at house parties and dances at Hillcrest and Green Hill High Schools. They'd also go down to Waco to play at the Abraxis club there. It was a time when a young local band like the Chessmen, who included guitarist Jimmie Vaughan and drummer-singer Doyle Bramhall, could open a show for Jimi Hendrix (as they did when he played Dallas in 1968).

"I remember sewing sequins on shirts for Robin," said Sandra, "and once he sewed lights into his jacket and lit it up while he was onstage. The other guys in the band weren't expecting that. We'd gone to see the Who, at a show when the other band [Herman's Hermits] got run off the stage. He loved the craziness of that band." The young Sylar's sartorial flair made an impression on Bramhall when Doyle's band (now known as Texas, retaining Jimmie Vaughan on guitar) was playing at Dallas' Cellar club in 1969, even though they wouldn't actually meet for another couple of years. "Robin had real long hair," Doyle remembered, "and he used to wear leather wristbands and a leather choker. He used to stand in the back every night, just listening, but if he didn't show up, we'd wonder where that guy was." When they finally met, Bramhall said, "If you didn't know Robin, you might think he was stuck up, but he was really shy."

Sandra recalls Robin as "funny, always playing practical jokes. He was quiet, though, unless he knew you; he'd sit and observe everybody in a room. He never drank or took drugs back then – he'd drive us around while we'd smoke joints. He was very talented and could play the piano, harmonica, or guitar. He loved Clint Eastwood movies like A Fistful of Dollars. He'd dress like Clint, smoke little cigars and dip Skoal. He and Mark Kessel even tried to make their own 8mm western movie."

In those days, bass was

Robin's primary instrument. He owned a Fender Precision and Kustom bass amp with the distinctive tuck-and-roll finish. In later years, musicians who played with him noted his ability, rare among guitarists, to play bass "like a bass player, the way a guitar player would want." Jim Mc Lellan, who played with Sylar in the mid-'70s, recalls that Robin played with Dallas band the Briks "just long enough to earn a thousand dollars to buy a Marshall stack; he quit the same day they were supposed to open for Iron Butterfly and they had to make the gig with a keyboard player they'd just called that day, who was on acid."

continued...