

Robin Sylar Biography - Page 2

In 1969, Mark Kessel moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas. He soon called Robin, encouraging him to come down. "There was no place to play original music in Dallas, and there scarcely was in Austin," said Mark. "But the Vulcan Gas Company was like magic. You could play blues there, original music, whatever you wanted. We'd go hang out there every weekend." With Mark on drums and Fred Holmes, a bassist he'd met in a Dallas music store, Robin formed a trio called Birth that shared bills with Texas psychedelic pioneers Shiva's Headband at storied venues like the Vulcan and Armadillo World Headquarters. At the time, Robin was styling himself after Johnny Winter, the albino blues guitarist from Beaumont who'd scored a contract with Columbia Records and performed at Woodstock. "We were really influenced by that first Johnny Winter album," said Mark, "and at the time, that's the way I thought it was going to go."

Krackerjack, a legendary Texas band that had a convoluted odyssey, brought Sylar together with his inspiration's old rhythm section. Singer Bruce Bowland met Robin while playing with a band in Dallas' Lee Park. "Robin was with Uncle John Turner and Tommy Shannon [the drummer and bass player who'd just been ousted from Winter's band in favor of musicians who'd been in the McCoys of "Hang On Sloopy" fame]. I kind of groupied those guys out, gave them my phone number in case they were looking for a singer. Unk and Tommy were looking to form a band, and they already had a guitar player in mind -- Robin."

The four musicians, along with guitarist Steve Miller's brother Jimmy, sat in at the Dallas Cellar club, where Bowland had been holding down a regular gig with the Mystics. "It sucked, but it was Jimmy Miller's fault," said Bowland. Undeterred, Krackerjack – at this point consisting of Bowland, Sylar, Shannon, Turner, and pianist-organist Mike Kindred – left Texas for San Francisco on the 4th of July 1970. They landed in Haight-Ashbury, storied cradle of hippiedom, where the accommodations ("sleeping on floors") didn't meet Robin's expectations ("hotels and women"), according to Bowland. A disappointed Sylar returned to Dallas after a few days, leaving the guitar duties in Krackerjack to Jesse Taylor, a Lubbock native the band met through another transplanted Texan, future Fabulous Thunderbirds bassist Keith Ferguson.

Back in Austin, Robin played gigs billed as "Robin Siler featuring Krowbar and His Orangutang Gang" or "Robin Siler and the Thrown-together Band." This was a pattern that would continue throughout Robin's career: playing pickup gigs with a revolving cast of musicians. He made another foray out to California in 1971, staying at Sandra Sarns' apartment in Hermosa Beach for a few months and frequenting the Flying Jib, a club in Redondo Beach where blues singer-harmonica player James Harman, a friend of Uncle John Turner's, had a gig. Robin tried to talk his way into an audition for a slot in Harman's Icehouse Blues Band. Initially, Harman was put off by Robin's appearance, figuring he'd be "just a young rock player," but he was impressed by the interest the younger musician showed in his stories about Texas bluesmen like Lightnin' Hopkins and Freddie King.

Robin was finally able to secure an onstage trial with Harman through the back door: he befriended Harman's roadies, one of whom convinced Harman to let Robin sit in during a show in Manhattan Beach where the Icehouse Blues Band was backing blues greats Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson and Big Joe Turner. "I agreed to let him sit in during my segment of the show, not behind those old guys, who would have freaked out," said Harman. "He played enough cool stuff backing the harp, and when I finally did let him out a bit, he stayed in control and played great old Buddy Guy, Freddie and Albert King type things. He seemed to understand what to play backing a harmonica and his solos were good blues with just a bit of teenage edge, so I did hire him and after a while dumped the guy I had been using.

"As a performer, [Robin] was quite confident and had no problem holding his own on stage. He used to scare some local wannabe guitar players who were watching him too close. He'd turn his back on them so they couldn't watch his hands, but when they wouldn't go away, he'd occasionally just turn toward them, stare them down as he blew off one of those crazy, nut-to-bridge, Johnny Winteresque, lightning bolt arpeggios on that damn Gibson Firebird. Most of those guys just gave up and left shaking their heads, but I'm pretty sure a few went straight home to saw up that Japanese Les Paul or Strat copy too. The boy was mighty bad."

At the same time, Harman noted, "As a player, [Robin] did lack confidence when it came to certain things, like finding the correct voicing of certain chords. As a person, he was a nice guy on the surface, but totally absorbed in being a star before he was 25; that seemed to be his main concern. I believe he was suffering with some sort of self-loathing, denial problem even then. He was obviously depressed to not be the star he thought he deserved to be already."

Harman recalls Robin's resignation from the Icehouse Blues Band: "I asked what he was doing and he said going back to Texas to see if he could learn to sing and lead his own band. He came back later [with] a Fender Strat and said he was trying to switch to the Fender and get away from the Gibson Firebird. We went out and jammed with some friends of mine. We walked around talking about how he was settling into the idea that he was not going to make it to that star position, but at least he could play the blues, so he was just like me. We laughed a lot those few nights, then I never saw him again."

Meanwhile, Jesse Taylor had injured his hand and ceded Krackerjack's guitar slot to John Stahely, who soon departed in turn to join the California band, Spirit. Krackerjack then briefly disbanded, with Bowland and Turner forming another unit, Rattlesnake, in Houston with guitarist Denny Valerio and bassist Roy Cox. After three months there, Bowland and Turner returned to Austin to form Blackbird with Jimmie Vaughan's younger brother, Stevie (not yet Ray) on guitar. "Then we

decided we could make more money as Krackerjack," said Bowland, so the band reformed with the lineup of Bowland, Sylar, Shannon, Turner, and Vaughan -- teenage Stevie playing rhythm to Robin's lead. This Krackerjack lineup came close to signing with London Records in a deal brokered by George Maxey, a former business partner of ZZ Top manager Bill Ham, but Turner rejected the contract. "We were all real inexperienced, except for Unk and Tommy [Shannon]," said Bowland, "and at the time, Tommy was a real wallflower."

Robin met Carol Galt when Krackerjack was playing a gig at Mother Earth in Austin in 1973. "He was wearing satin pants, a sequined vest, no shirt, really long hair, blue-painted fingernails, and stacked heels with layers of different colored snakeskin," Carol said. "He looked really exotic onstage." They had a drink together. "We were wild rebel children," she said. "With Robin, anything worth doing was worth overdoing. He was always looking for 'a life;' he was never comfortable in his own skin." Robin and Carol were together for the next seven years -- "dating, married, separated, and divorced" -- and they remained friends for many years.

By the fall of 1973, Krackerjack had evolved into Uncle John Turner's Rockin' Sweetnasties, fronted by Robin's friend from Dallas, Jim Mc Lellan, with Cisco native Billy Alford on bass. The Sweetnasties attempted to align themselves with the glam-and-glitter crowd and actually opened three nights of shows for the New York Dolls in Houston. While they continued drawing on the Krackerjack songbook for material, they had a gimmick: frontman Mc Lellan, who'd grown up in Phoenix with Vince Furnier (a.k.a. Alice Cooper) and previously fronted a proto-glam Dallas outfit called Big Punks, told his bandmates that he could spit fire (and this before Kiss had their mega-success).

When the Sweetnasties finally folded the tent, Robin, Uncle John, and Billy Alford made an attempt to regroup with Bruce Bowland under the name Dancer, but it was short-lived. Uncle John and Robin (on bass) also traveled to New York with guitarist Rocky Hill -- who'd played in the American Blues before his bassist brother Dusty and drummer Frank Beard left to form ZZ Top -- to open a single show for Johnny Winter at Madison Square Garden. Robin returned to L.A. in the mid-'70s, sharing an apartment on Santa Monica Boulevard with Jim Mc Lellan (who was there fronting a prog-rock outfit called Axcraft) and touring with boogie kings Canned Heat. Carol Galt joined Robin in L.A. in 1977, and they were married in the City of Angels in May that year. Not long afterward, the couple headed back to Texas.

In Dallas, Robin formed a stripped-down trio called the Millionaires with Doyle Bramhall and bassist Alex Napier. Following the dissolution of Krackerjack, Doyle had played with Stevie Vaughan and Bruce Bowland in the Austin-based Nightcrawlers. Napier had played in Southern Feeling, an Austin band that included singer Angela Strehli and guitarists W.C. Clark and Denny Freeman, before forming the Cobras with singer Paul Ray, Freeman, and SRV. Blues was starting to break progressive country's stranglehold on the Texas music scene.

Napier had originally met Robin in 1973, when the guitarist was still in Krackerjack. "I had a club down in Austin, which was called the Rolling Hills Country Club before I sold it to George Majewski and it became the Soap Creek Saloon," said Napier. Returning to Dallas in 1977, Napier was reduced to working a day job before he had the idea of forming a band with Robin and Doyle. Bramhall was also back in the Metroplex and gigging with musicians including Anson Funderburgh in Dallas (testing the blues waters after a stint with the pop-rock band the Bees' Knees) and Freddie Cisneros in Fort Worth (when Freddie wasn't backing Cowtown blues godfather Robert Ealey).

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