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"The Millionaires started in Dallas on New Year's Eve, 1979, and finished in Lubbock a year later," said Doyle. The band quickly built a following, playing Thursday through Saturday nights at the Cave on Greenville Avenue. They occasionally ventured out of town for gigs in Lubbock, Waco, and one disappointing run in Austin.

"We were booked at this club on the east side of Austin," Bramhall remembers, "and when we got there, there was a sign on the door that somebody had made with a Marks-A-Lot and a piece of cardboard. It said '\$2 cover – Millionaires, friends of the Fabulous Thunderbirds.' We had about 12 people there both nights. We used to pack them in at the Cave, though, and we got to open for Muddy Waters."

"Robin had an amazing feel," Bramhall added. "He was always pushing the envelope on guitar. He could play just like Albert King, Albert Collins, or Hound Dog Taylor, but he didn't want to sound like anyone else, just like he didn't want to look like anybody else. He never got what he was looking for, but he was always looking for something. At the same time, as a singer, I could appreciate the way he wouldn't play over the vocals the way a lot of guitarists do. He just instinctively knew what holes to fill."

The trio cut a single, Little Milton's "Grits Ain't Groceries" (augmented by Johnny Reno on sax and Doyle's brother Ronnie on organ) with Howlin' Wolf's "Where'd You Get Your Sugar From" (a tune Bramhall re-recorded for his 2003 Fitchburg Street CD) on the flipside. "Jimmie Vaughan heard that record and said it was better than anything on the Fabulous Thunderbirds album," said Doyle. That praise from a highly respected peer didn't prevent Robin and Alex from using a number of copies of the record as Frisbees, hurling them off the balcony outside Alex's apartment.

While Doyle recalls Robin was the first to leave the Millionaires, Alex Napier remembers it differently. "I got a call one day," Alex said. "Doyle was starting to write some songs, and they were trying to make a name for themselves. They wanted to change the name of the band to the Syler-Bramhall Band, so I quit. They got another bass player and kept playing for maybe a year after that." Robin helped Doyle demo some of his songs that Stevie Ray Vaughan later recorded, including "Change It" and "Looking Out the Window." "When Stevie was in the studio cutting 'Change It' for Soul To Soul," Doyle remembered, "he picked up his slide and tried to play what Robin had played on the demo. He wound up throwing that slide across the room!"

Phil Bennison, a musical eccentric better known as his alter ego Homer Henderson, first heard Robin playing with the Millionaires at the Cave "after I figured how to get to upper Greenville." At the time, Phil was playing in Teddy & the Talltops, a rockabilly outfit fronted by

Ted Roddy, with Fort Worthians Jas Stephens on drums and Jim Heath (soon to reinvent himself as the Reverend Horton Heat) on guitar. "Robin subbed for Jim one night at the Horny Toad Saloon on 8th Street in Fort Worth," Phil recalls.

Robin and Phil's paths

crossed again on a gig with 3 Balls of Fire – "Robin was playing bass and I was playing guitar; that wasn't right" – before they were formally introduced by KNON deejay Robert Wisdom and former Krackerjack roadie Billy Knight. Knight was a singing drummer from Oak Cliff who'd played with Stevie Ray Vaughan before the guitarist decamped for Austin.

In the '80s, Billy and Robin played together in bands that also included Bruce Bowland, guitarist Jack Morgan, bassists Darrell "Stringbean" Straley and Dennis "Snake" Brigati. "There were a bunch of people that used to get together and play at Billy's every Sunday night," said Phil, "and since he lived around the corner from me, that's where I went. Then sometimes I'd play drums with [jazz organist] Lou Lazar and Robin in South Dallas."

The two kindred spirits wound

up playing together in "lots of different situations," with a Spinal Tap-like rotation of drummers that included Knight, Jas Stephens, Doyle Bramhall, Kevin Schermerhorn, and Ty Grimes. "Robin didn't just want to play blues, although he was great at it," said Phil. "He thought it was too clichéd. He was a record guy, the kind that listens to the radio all the time. He knew all the hit songs that were 45s. He loved Jimmy Reed and all those old instrumentals."

Robin played lap steel on

"Hawaiian Ungawa," the flipside of Homer Henderson's 1985 "Lee Harvey Was a Friend of Mine" single (that's Robin saying, "Mmmm, that tastes good!" at the end), and co-wrote Homer's 1987 follow-up, "Hillbilly Pecker," probably the only ditty in C&W history ever to deal with the topic of circumcision. (In 1997, Homer recorded Robin's "How Many More Times," an alcoholic's lament in honky-tonk shuffle form, to fill out his Greatest Flops and Golden Filler CD.)

Through the end of the '80s,

Robin gigged under the rubric Robin Syler & the Skulls, an aggregation with no fixed lineup. "Robin would play free 'gigs' just to play – parties on the lake shore in Grapevine that lasted 10 or 11 hours, people's houses in Oak Cliff," said Billy Knight. "He'd play some of the damnedest guitars: a Flying V, a Firebird, old Japanese models that gave this nice old weird-ass distortion without a pedal." Bruce Bowland recalls, "Once, Robin called me out of the blue to play a gig at the Hard Rock in Dallas.

He opened with a set of surf music – I had no idea he liked that stuff – and then I got up and sang a few songs, just easy stuff we knew that we could play without rehearsing. Afterward I asked him, 'Are we in the same keys? That didn't feel the way it used to.' He said, 'Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, I tune down a half-step now.'"

Robin quit drinking in 1989, started going to A.A. meetings, and moved to Fort Worth, where he'd been playing gigs with Doyle Bramhall. Initially staying at Doyle's Arlington Heights home, he then moved to the duplex where he'd spend the rest of his life. Because of herniated disc problems resulting from years of moving equipment, Robin had back surgery that led to a series of further health problems. His sister Virginia recalls, "He had two failed back operations in the early 1990s, followed by a partially debilitating stroke from which he never fully recovered. A series of mini strokes followed and became more frequent until he was afraid to drive. His attempts to stay thin to relieve pressure on his back were another unhealthy condition that plagued him."

While living in Fort Worth, Robin reconnected with Chris Papageorge, brother of Werewolves singer Brian and a friend of Robin's since the early '70s, who'd recently quit playing music and moved back to Dallas to open a restaurant. "Robin was always in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Chris. "He had an impatient streak; he hated playing the same clubs over and over for little money. Things were starting to happen in the '90s with the Vaughan brothers and Doyle, but then Robin hurt his back." Chris also recalls Robin's enthusiasm for firearms. "I think it was a John Wayne Texan thing with him," he said. "He loved Clint Eastwood movies; he had guns and liked 'em...a dangerous thing for someone with depression."

Robin started exploring other creative outlets in addition to playing during this period. He had a company that manufactured "really wild punk-country shirts" that he designed. "They were gorgeous country western shirts," said Robin's sister Virginia, "each one custom designed by Robin using western material, animal prints, velvet yokes and cuffs, pearl buttons. He and his business partner showed the shirts at the Dallas Apparel Mart."

Robin's childhood pal Sonny Collie had also moved back to Dallas following a lengthy sojourn in Austin. After nearly 30 years, they resumed performing together. "We played mainly nothing, thrown-together, crap gigs at places like the Captain's Den and the Keys Lounge in Fort Worth," said Collie. "Robin picked and chose the people he played with carefully, but like too many great musicians, he was no team builder or organizer. He had no business sensibility. Still, he remained a great friend, very loving and respectful. He always made sure I got paid; a few times, I'm sure he paid me out of his own pocket."

In 1991, Robin joined Doyle at Sumet-Burnet Studios in Dallas to record some tracks for Chuck Nevitt's Dallas Blues Society Records that

remain tantalizingly unreleased. Nevitt recalls that Robin sang "I'm a Hog for You" and three or four songs that he later re-recorded for his released CDs. "Texas guitarists tend to be really eclectic and incorporate a lot of different styles and influences," said Nevitt, "but Robin was even more eclectic than most – a player's player, obsessed with never playing the same thing twice or sounding like anyone else. He was a tortured genius who was always hearing something and going after it, at any and all costs. That made it exciting to go hear him, because you never knew when it was going to be that night, when he was going to take off into outer space, and you didn't want to miss it. Once, after hearing Robin play a set, [Dallas guitarist] Mike Morgan walked up to me and asked, 'Did I just hear what I think I heard?' That was a typical reaction – Robin got a lot of cocked eyebrows."

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