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Doyle Bramhall also lauds

Robin's songwriting. "Robin could paint such a clear picture with words," he said, recalling unreleased songs like "I'm In Love with My Color TV," the C&W-ish "I'm Hugging My Pillow Pretending It's You," and a blues song containing the line, "And nine months from now / She'll be round as a cow / And I'll be changing my name to Daddy." "Robin once told me that since he couldn't get anything happening playing rock or blues, he might as well try writing country songs," said Nevitt.

Robin was featured on Doyle's

1994 Bird Nest On the Ground CD and

was a member of the touring band that went on the road to support the record's release. "Robin was so helpful on that record," said Bramhall. "We worked on it for almost 10 years! We'd just keep going back in and cutting songs until one day I realized, 'I've got enough now to make a record and tour.'" Robin's contributions in the studio included the crazed, Hound Dog Taylor-like slide on "She's Gone," recorded in just one take; the Berry/Stones-styled approach to Johnny Nash's reggae hit "I Can See Clearly Now;" and the homage to Werewolves guitarist Seab Meador in Robin's solo on the Elvis Presley hit "(Marie's the Name) His Latest Flame."

There were several different

editions of the Bramhall touring band. One included guitarist Zonder Kennedy (a New Jersey native who'd progressed, in the manner of Anson Funderburgh, from playing in an early-'80s pop-rock band called the Elevators to backing slide guitarist John Campbell), with Robin on baritone guitar and ex-Juke Jumper Jim Milan on bass. Chuck Nevitt remembers hearing Robin's baritone guitar work with Doyle, one night at Antone's "when even the most jaded musicians' jaws dropped and they just stood there, transfixed."

This lineup once had the

misfortune to be making its way through the mountain passes to a gig in Durango, Colorado, in a new Ford van that had a propensity for stalling out at high altitude. Sure enough, about five hours from the band's destination, the van died. Bramhall and Milan

struck out hitching a ride back to town to bring back help. When they returned, the van was miraculously running. "I asked Robin and Zonder what had happened," said Doyle. "They'd walked across the highway when Robin noticed a panther on a rock 30 feet from them, so they had to finesse their way back across the road. Zonder had an Indian drum, which Robin took and sat on the side of the road, drumming and asking the spirits to help get the van started." The band arrived in Durango, an hour late but still in time to make the gig.

Robin's chronic back pain

made touring problematic for him. "His mom and dad would kind of freak out if he was going out of town, but we went to Colorado and California

and he had a good time," Doyle said. "We played four or five dates in Norway, took the train everywhere, and Robin was really happy." Chris Papageorge recalls Robin played sitting down "like B.B. King" on some of the dates.

"Robin was in a great deal of pain," Doyle said. "He always battled with moods, but then the physical part got worse. He really tried to be happy, and he worked hard at recovery, but he couldn't get past his demons, as much as he wanted to. He held out as long as he could."

In July 1998, Robin got a call from his friend Wes Race, offering to finance the recording of a CD. Race, a poet and native of Wichita, Kansas, had moved to Chicago in the '70s to roadie for house-rockin' slide guitarist Hound Dog Taylor and write for Living Blues magazine, then relocated to Fort Worth in the early '90s. They'd previously collaborated when Robin and Phil Bennison provided musical backing while Wes read his poetry at the Dog Star on Berry Street. The 17 tracks they cut at Eagle Audio with engineer Jeff Ward were released in 2002 under Race's own Race Records imprint as *Bust Out*. Incredibly, it was Robin's first recording released under his own name (with the exception of a couple of tracks on blues samplers).

"Robin was all business in the studio," said Race. "You could tell he'd been there before. My favorite moment was his solo on 'Dux.' At a certain point, I almost had to prod him to do it. He just walked in and played like [it was] an afterthought. It sounded like molten lava coming out!" Also on board for the sessions were bassist Jim Milan, drummer Kevin Schermerhorn, keyboardist Rex Mauney, and Phil Bennison, who played a variety of instruments and sang lead on two songs. *Bust Out*'s title track was a cover of the sole hit, from 1963, by an instrumental band from western Massachusetts called the Busters. That record's flipside, "Astronauts," inspired Robin to cut "Flashback," the CD's surreal finale, a sort of Apocalypse Now meets Cool Hand Luke for the ears. "There was lots of [material] on there we'd worked on through the years," said Phil. "Robin was using lots of sound effects and doing stuff like singing through my old Ampeg Superjet amp."

Bust Out also included covers of obscurities by Louisiana swamp popper Leroy Washington, pop icon Bobby Darin, guitar madmen Travis Wammack and Link Wray, and Brit blues-rockers Savoy Brown. The selection of covers on Robin's follow-up CD, *Tricked Out* – released in 2004 on Richard Chalk's Topcat Records – was more mainstream, but not without surprises. (Chalk had recorded a couple of tracks with Robin in 1992 on drummer Dirk Cordes' recommendation, and his label subsequently handled distribution of *Bust Out*.) Besides essaying a selection of surf ("Misirlou" and "Pipeline") and R&B ("Can't Judge a Book," "Hand Jive," and "Wine Spo-Dee-Odee") standards, Robin also tipped his hat to inspirations and kindred spirits like Roky Erickson and the 13th Floor Elevators ("You're Gonna Miss Me"), the Werewolves ("Hollywood Millionaire"), and the Rolling Stones ("Heart of Stone").

Chalk produced the Elevators, Werewolves, and Stones tunes at Millennium Sound Lab in Dallas (with Robin playing all the instruments except drums, which were handled by ex-Werewolves skinsman Bobby Baranowski), although he insists, "Robin really produced that record himself. He had it all planned out in his head, exactly what he wanted and the steps in the process." The results were impressive. Robin's cover of early '60s Brit rockers Johnny Kidd & the Pirates' "Shaking All Over" was strong enough to eclipse the memory of previous versions by both the Guess Who and the Who, while the Sylarized version of the Dixie Cups' "Iko Iko" featured a break with a key change in between verses that created a perceptible sense of dislocation.

Six of the disc's 15 tracks were recorded live at the Keys in Fort Worth. Guest vocalist Johnny Mack did yeoman service on Don Nix's "Back to luka" and his signature tune, zydeco daddy Cleveland Crochet's "Sugar Bee." With Wes Race and Homer Henderson's audible participation limited to a couple of tracks (including one of the set's best: the funky-groove-with-spoken-word "Shot Time"), the disc lacked some of its predecessor's swampy psychedelic vibe, but it also bore what might just be Robin's magnum opus: "Surf Puppy," an over-the-top, kitchen-sink-plus instrumental demented enough to have originated in the mind of "Telstar" creator Joe Meek, bringing Robin's musical odyssey back full circle to the sounds that he and Sonny Collie were digging back in their Preston Hollow days. Label boss Chalk tried to get Robin out on the road to support Tricked Out, but he said "[Robin's] health wouldn't support it; his depression worked against it, too."

In his last years, Robin would deliberately get fired from gigs for playing what he wanted to play, rather than what audiences or bar owners demanded. Overall, Chris Papageorge said, "Robin was discouraged, and rightly so. What do you do if you're one of the best at what you do, and nobody comes to your gigs? You make records and nobody listens to them except for people in some other country? He'd wonder, 'What am I doing this for?' At the same time, there was no subject that would light up his eyes the way music did. It was so dear to him."

As live performance opportunities dwindled, Robin took up designing and building guitars, amplifiers, motorcycles, and bicycles. The kitchen in his Fort Worth duplex became his workshop. "Robin's amps were the coolest things," said Chris Papageorge. "He'd buy old Fenders and trick 'em out, cover them in these really wild fabrics that he'd find at Little Mexico [an open-air market on Fort Worth's north side], durable plastics in leopard or zebra prints, real wild colors. He'd use dice for all the knobs, and he had a logo that looked like something from a '50s appliance." Robin would drive out to Papageorge's restaurant to show off bags of guitar parts he'd bought on eBay, then return a few days later, displaying finished instruments with "blue metallic flake paintjobs and crazy pick guards."

On September 28, 2001, at

Cutter's Wild West Bar and Cantina -- a joint opened by SRV's former road manager Cutter Brandenberger in Harker Heights, near Killeen -- Robin shared the stage once again with Bruce Bowland, Uncle John Turner, and Tommy Shannon in the first Krackerjack reunion. "We've done a few of those, but that was one of the very best," said Turner. "It was just the three [instruments], but Robin had learned all the keyboard parts." Sylar and Bowland had practiced with a tape of the material for weeks before the show, which turned out to be fortuitous when both Mike Kindred and John Stahely were unable to make the gig. "Robin was the star of the show," Bowland said.

During one of those rehearsal visits, Bowland was surprised to see a handicapped sticker on Robin's car. "I asked if he was driving his mother's car and he said no, he'd had a stroke," said Bowland. Robin's health continued to deteriorate. In 2004, not long after his mother's death (his father had passed in 1999), he had a seizure while driving. He sat out the Krackerjack reunion that year. He told Sonny Collie he was afraid to go outside for fear of passing out. The walls were closing in.

On December 9, 2005, Robin Sylar sat on the floor of his living room, picked up a handgun, shot himself in the chest and slumped forward. In his suicide note, addressed to his sister, Robin specified the music he wanted played at his funeral: Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross" and Free's "All Right Now."

These words, originally intended for inclusion in the Tricked Out liner notes, could serve as Robin's epitaph: "I've never made any money...I'm 54 years old. I still enjoy the art. Today people don't care about substance, creativity, or originality. I rarely perform live anymore. I'm not a clone, I'm myself. By society's values, I'm a failure. That's OK. Still to this day, I can put on an old Albert King record and before that song is over, I'm smiling. That's all that matters."

Listen to Robin's requested funeral music:

Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross":
{mp3}manyrivers{/mp3}

Free's "All Right Now":
{mp3}allrightnow{/mp3}

