

# A View Of Robin Syler's Early Years

By Sonny Collie

## The Beginning

Robin and I were born in 1951. He was born in the spring and I in late summer. We grew up across the street from one another on Lavendale Ave. in Dallas, northeast of Preston Road and Royal Lane.

We ran and played together from an early age, with an emphasis on toy guns and cowboy and Indian games. Robin had an American Flyer electric train and I had a Lionel, and each of us thought he had the better train. We rode our bicycles everywhere and explored creeks, lakes and train tracks all over our part of town. But this is all a kind of a blur in my mind, like a bunch of old Leave It To Beaver episodes stacked upon one another. I don't remember much more about our lives until grade school years. These began around 1958.

Robin and I were close and envious observers of teenagers as kids, following closely the hot rod, motorcycle, rock and roll and James Dean juvenile delinquent culture that was so dangerous and fascinating both in our neighborhood and in the movies and on TV. We were nothings, just shave-headed tykes, but we were watching. It was not Happy Days, either. There were some ominous, acne-riddled, knife wielding Fonzes in north Dallas, and there was some fatal teenaged drinking and fighting and wild driving going on in old '40 Fords and on dusty, grimy full dress black Harleys.

The juvenile delinquent business appealed to us, living on our secure, bland suburban block, but the best we could do to emulate it at that age was to be the kind of children who played with matches and firecrackers, made slingshots and tried to shoot birds and animals – the kind of first graders that other parents warned their kids about.

## Prying At Pandora's Box

You had to live it to know it, but Top 40 radio was a fantastic and stylistically open-ended thing in the late '50s and early '60s. There was great music on Top 40 and everyone listened to it. Robin and I wanted to have a band in the worst way and to play some rock and roll and blues, thinking it was an exotic thing to do and it would make us cool. Around third

grade, Robin's parents got him a Fender Duo-Sonic guitar with a small Fender amplifier and my grandfather gave me a Rogers snare drum for Christmas, to which I added pots and pans for cymbals.

We began haunting the listening booths at a nearby record store, where the racks were well-stocked with 45rpm singles from rock and roll, pop and blues artists. Blues was popular and selling well in those days, before R&B and soul music nearly killed the blues in the mid-'60s. Robin and I were drawn to Jimmy Reed's Vee-Jay singles because the songs had a great feel and we thought we could play them. We also listened to Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters and Freddie King and to instrumental hits like Telstar and numerous guitar numbers like Walk Don't Run and Scratchy, as well as novelty songs like Apache. We would play these records over and over in the store and then, neglecting to actually buy the records, we would race back to the house and try to play them from memory.

We named ourselves The Satellites, since Sputnik and Telstar were in the news.

We were able to get together a little Jimmy Reed set without much trouble, and it didn't sound bad for ten year old kids. We could feel Reed's shuffle beat and play it at that age. We made quite a bit of noise practicing, so word got around the neighborhood about it and kids would sometimes lurk around the yard in the afternoon listening to us. We could see them out there, little next-door kids sucking their thumbs and older kids loitering and slouching on their bicycles, listening and trying to look cool. But they were not cool. They were just ordinary kids. We were cool and that is why they were listening to us.

## Catching The Fever

In fourth grade we were invited to play an actual gig, at our grade school track and field day. This was a big deal to us, because for the last couple of years the school had hosted teenage rock and roll bands that wore leather jackets, black loafers with white socks, and ducktail haircuts, with their singers doing dances like the Shimmy. So the venue had credibility. We were nervous, but we sensed stardom.

In the past these local rock & roll acts had been coolly received with repression and downcast eyes at our Norman Rockwell-like suburban school carnival, where the other attractions were the track meet, a cake walk, three legged races, raffles and similar ho-hum things. This did not prepare us for what was about to happen.

Robin and I practiced seriously for the next couple of weeks, neglecting our schoolwork, and then went to play the show in black slacks, white dress shirts, black loafers and white socks with some Crisco on our short 4th graders' hair.

We did only Jimmy Reed material, maybe four or five songs. We rocked it. We played as loud as possible and jumped and shook and threw ourselves around as best we knew how.

As soon as we started, a crowd of girls beneath the flatbed trailer / stage began jumping up and down and screaming. Robin looked at me and I looked at Robin. We weren't believing this. We bashed harder and played louder. The girls were flocking in from all over the school ground. A big crowd of them ran up and they went nuts, acting out the kind of scene we had seen girls making in front of Elvis on TV. Parents, including our own, stood in the crowd, open-mouthed in dismay.

After thirty minutes of this, the PTA parents MC'ing the carnival pulled the plug and got us off there, with the kids yelling for more. But the damage had been done. We had caused an alarming disturbance. We were cool all right. All the girls at school, and most of the guys, regarded us with a new respect and status when we came to class the next day.

I am pretty sure this experience ruined both Robin and me for any life other than the ones we lived, whatever is to be said about it. Nothing like that had ever happened in our common little lives, and we were on fire to play wild music from then on, to get better at it, and to be stars some day.

Soon, neighborhood crony Joe Cree got a Fender Jazz bass and a Fender Bassman amplifier and joined the band, which we renamed The Chevelles because, well,... the Chevy Chevelle was a popular new car at the time and people in California were hot-rodding them. Joe Cree was a little short fellow, and he looked like one of the Beach Boys. The Chevelles practiced a lot and played a few backyard birthday parties and other neighborhood events. The bass added a terrific power to the sound. (I loved it, and by high school had switched from drums to bass myself, and have since made a career out of playing the instrument.) The Chevelles eventually broke up in the course of one of our pre-adolescent periods of shunning one another and having bad attitudes. The weight of our celebrity was finally unbearable...

I moved away from the neighborhood after 7th grade and did not have contact with Robin again until around 1990, when we found one another recovering from our wild youths and began working together again in bars around Dallas and Ft. Worth, still playing many of the songs we did as kids. We had a great time that second time around, though it was too short.

In The Afterglow

As I think back on Robin, I begin to see what made him such a unique musician. He had held onto the energy we discovered in our music as children. And that was the energy of wildness and screwing up in the isolation of suburbia, of sparking the welding torch of rebellion, against our lives in '50s and early '60s America, against all the uptightness and conservatism and forced orderliness that pressed in around us, against all the repressed fear and anxiety of the Cold War and the Duck and Cover drills, against the darkness and fright of the Kennedy assassination right in our home town, against the hardness, the madness, the shallowness of what was supposed to be an idyllic life in an idyllic country, but was nothing of the kind, because something was missing.

We wanted to erase the dull culture around us and replace it with any unknown thing that held some promise of more excitement and action. That's what we did at the school carnival at eleven years of age. We found ourselves able to disrupt the Norman Rockwell world and replace it with screaming and dancing and a good loud guitar groove. Well all right. We got in early on this, early at least for kids in our little world.

The same impulse soon swept the larger world in rock and roll hippie culture, and it got a lot more complicated and turbulent and unsure of its direction. Robin and I climbed on stages and participated in all of this creative mayhem, and rode it out. Our biggest dreams never came true, but we got our hands dirty and carried the dreams for decades. The world did indeed change as a result, like we had hoped it would.

But in the beginning playing with this unknown force was a pure and irresistible thing to Robin and to me. It was playing with matches, and we were the kind of kids who played with matches.

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