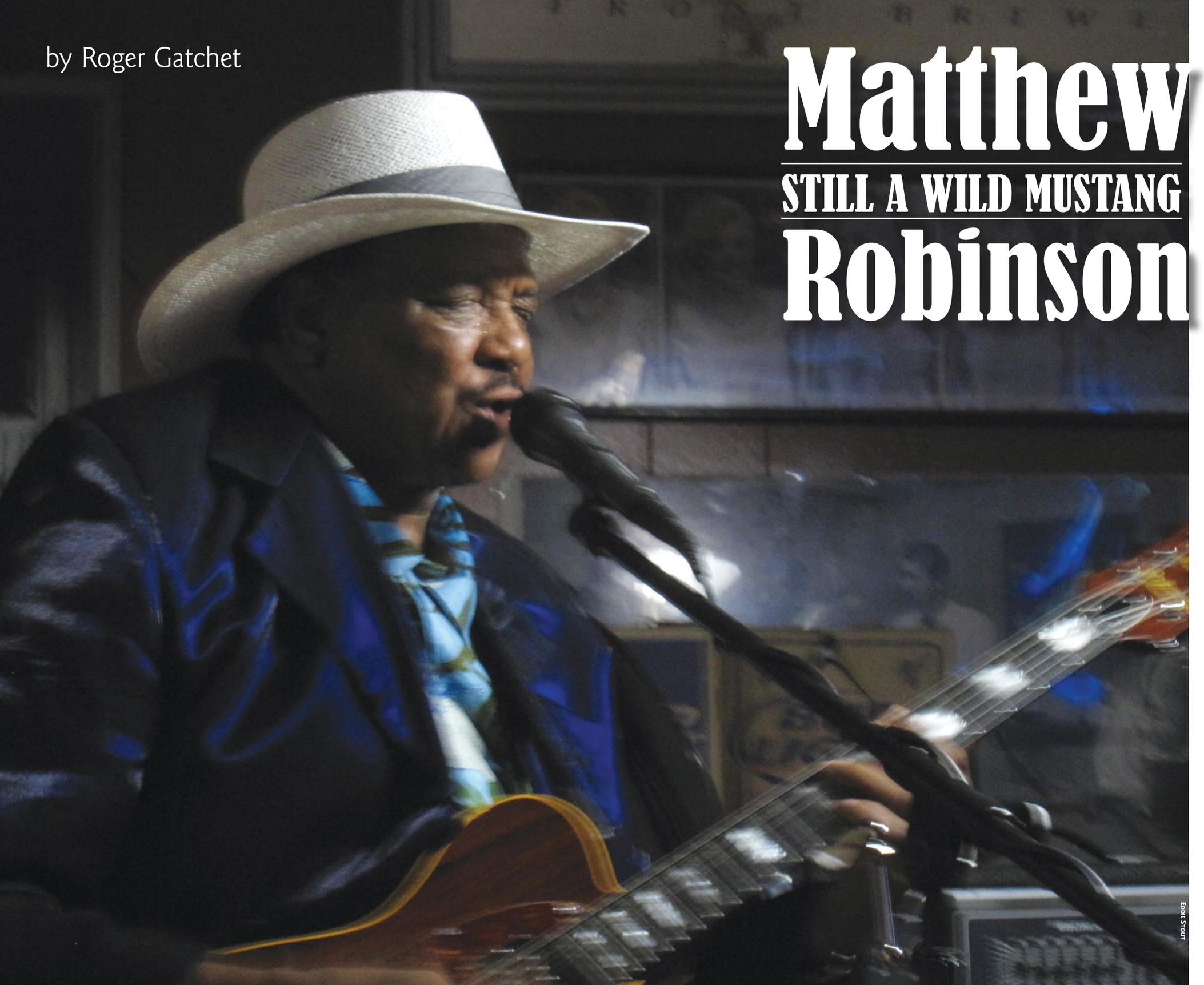
by Roger Gatchet

Matthew Robinson

STILL A WILD MUSTANG



Eddie Stout

Matthew Robinson leaned in close so I could better hear him over the raucous, stream-of-consciousness harmonica solo being played by Mike Milligan, the charismatic front man for local Austin workhorses the Altar Boyz. Although modest when discussing his own considerable talent, Robinson is not one to rein in the praise when he hears some good blues. After a hearty deep-bellied laugh, infectious although barely audible over Milligan's amplified harp, Robinson exclaimed: "Oh, man! He's really puttin' some juice in that thing now!"

I first met Matthew Robinson here, at the semi-final round of the Austin Blues Society's cleverly titled HOT ("Heart O' Texas") Blues Challenge in late 2008, the competition that would decide which Central Texas blues act would go on to represent the Lone Star State at the International Blues Challenge the following year. The final round was scheduled to take place a month later at Antone's, but on this night we found ourselves at the lesser-known Hanover's Draught Haus, a funky saloon housed in a historic building in the neighboring town of Pflugerville.

Robinson was not one of the performers scheduled to compete that evening; rather, he and I were asked by the Society to join a small panel of judges presiding over the evening's festivities. Robinson's name may have been absent from the bill, but he certainly came dressed to perform—decked out in all black, with matching slacks, dress shirt, polished cowboy boots and a wide-brimmed black hat—and he told me, as he casually rolled a cigarette on the back patio before the show, that he had his axe waiting out in the car. You know, just in case. It's a good thing he did, as many of the evening's contestants—including winner Milligan and his band—were more than eager to share the stage with him when he took the spotlight later that evening.

Born "back in the hood," as he describes it, on February 27, 1948, Matthew Robinson grew up in the blues and gospel-rich environs of East Austin. The city's East Side residents had been nurturing a burgeoning music community there since at least 1928, when a city plan called for the establishment of a "Negro district" east of the dirt avenue that would later become Interstate Highway 35. This official act of institutionalized racism led to the development of East Austin's storied blues scene, once part of the chitlin' circuit back when high profile acts like Ike & Tina Turner, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and B.B. King would tour through Central Texas.

"I got a lot of my talent from my father who sang and played guitar the old folk way. He was a guitar player–singer, and he was a barrelhouse pianist. Sometime they would call him in to play in the church occasionally, and he would do that. But basically he was just a real bluesman. And mother was quite the singer in her own right. I was being trained from about the age of three and didn't know that I was being trained. Going to church, doing all these things, it just kind of grows through you and in you. [laughs] At the same time."

Robinson was reared in the St. John Baptist Church, a still-active congregation in East Austin, and it's no surprise that one of his first musical memories is of his baptism, which took place in a small creek running off the Colorado River that snakes its way through Austin. "I was saved and born again there," Robinson recalls. "And I laugh sometimes because it seems like he [the reverend] held me under there just a little bit longer than the rest. [laughs] I must have needed it bad! And they got that in some movies, where they see all of the black people in white robes, and getting baptized and stuff, and that's really the way it was. It was exactly like that.


Courtesy Matthew Robinson

Matthew Robinson, c. 1949.

"There was everybody singing. You didn't have guitar, the pianos and all that, but you could hear every note you wanted to hear. All those people singing a cappella like that, it's just so beautiful. You wouldn't miss it. And just stomping the ground, clapping your hands, was the whole rhythm. You can't get away from it. If you get 30 people stomping lightly, it sounds pretty loud on the ground. More than just one, you wouldn't hear one, but you put 30 of them together, and you're, 'Wow!' You're going to hear that. So yes, it was real magical."

Although Robinson's parents separated when he was very young, and he didn't begin playing guitar seriously until after high school, Matthew Sr. sparked his son's early interest in the instrument before he and his wife split paths. "I played with him a bunch of times," Robinson says. "The first time that I remember was when we were small. And he had made a guitar out of a cigar box, and he split a broom handle, and he had some rubber bands, and he unwound some of the clothesline wire and put it on there and made the guitar. It was almost like you could hear it amplified, and we was in there playing it and hollering, and stuff like that. So that was the earliest, but later on we started playing, we'd jam quite a bit together."

One of those jam sessions took place years later at Ernie's Chicken Shack, an after-hours club operated by East Side blues entrepreneur Charlie Earnest Gilden, who also owned the popular Charlie's Playhouse. The house band at the Playhouse up until it closed in 1970 was Henry "Bluesboy" Hubbard and the Jets, who often took the stage at the Shack after the Playhouse shut down for the evening. Robinson was well known by the patrons at both clubs—when he was young he'd sneak into them under the pretense that he was there to shine shoes, all the while soaking in the music and late night rough-and-tumble culture of the East Side's jukes.

"I'll tell you one time we went out, we had a gig, I think we sat in with the Jets out to Ernie's Chicken Shack. And we played, and Daddy came, and my sister Glenda was there. And I think everybody saw him and thought maybe Glenda was his girlfriend. They didn't know it was his daughter, because they was out there dancing and swinging and all of this here stuff. And then after it was over, everybody was leaving, Dad went over there to the piano and started playing. And he got to playing and stomping up in there, and the people came back. And I never will forget it. Hubbard said, 'Matthew, who's that?' I said, 'That's my daddy Matthew right there.' It was really something. He really turned it out. Fact, they were stomping and dust flying so hard and the horn players, people in there couldn't breathe. [Someone said], 'Y'all are going to have to cut it down now!'"

After separating from Matthew Sr., Robinson's mother went on to marry Namon Brown, a guitarist and singer best known as one of the original members of the Bells of Joy, a Texas gospel group that recorded the hit *Let's Talk About Jesus* for Duke/Peacock in 1951 (Dialtone Records, an independent blues and gospel label based in Austin, has since released two albums by the Bells of Joy). Although Robinson speaks highly of Brown's musical talent—"he could do it all," Robinson says—he never had a chance to establish a father-son relationship with the man.

"I was kicked out. I had to go because I looked like my father. And I don't know how it intimidated him or whatever, but I had to go. I didn't want to go. You know what I'm saying? It was awful. But you got to go on.

"I was just really scared because [he] pulled the gun out. And I knew I had to get out, and that's all I had to do. I didn't know where I was going to go, I just started walking. That's all there was, you're going to have to get away. Because I didn't want to get shot. So, main thing I can do is see that .32. I'm about like 13 or something, I'm not sure. But it wasn't pleasant at all. If anybody has ever had a gun pulled on them they know what I'm talking about. It makes you so angry you, God forbid, you might want to kill somebody from that. But what can you do? So I had got out of there, let that go.

"I just left. I think one of the times I did come back to get something, I remember it was cold outside, and I mean really cold and raining, and I was shivering. I just kind of laid back there by the swing on the ground, shaking. And I think my sisters and them heard me and they came in, warmed me up, warmed my socks, let them dry and all that, and then got me back. Froze for real. It wasn't a pleasant thing at all. Some people have worse experiences than that, but for me that was really traumatic. I mean that was pretty tough."

Robinson didn't stay homeless for long. "I was really lucky. I had a lot of relatives that helped me out, and when I was really lost and didn't know, and I'm talking about from an early age. I stayed in trouble quite a bit. But they loved me and would take turns helping me out, so here I am." He became close friends with the son of Volma Overton, president of the local chapter of the NAACP. Together they participated in civil rights marches in Austin, including a protest on the University of Texas campus that erupted into police violence. "That was chaos," he remembers. "They sicced the dogs and mace and everything else on all the people. And breaking, running, all just protesting and all of that. To see them dogs coming and that mace, you get a whiff of that, boy, you can believe you can run real fast if you think you can."

Now in his teens, Robinson was more interested in singing than playing guitar. His voice, already trained from his experiences performing spirituals in various gospel choirs growing up, had become an untapped reserve of soulful ferocity. It was not long before he was asked to take over as lead vocalist in his first professional band, a high school powerhouse soul group known as the Mustangs that formed in the mid-1960s.

"We were going to Johnson High School, is where we first met. And when I moved up there, I made friends with a lot of neat guys. From where I was coming from, you had to fight to solve your problems. To these guys it wasn't like that, they was thinkers to solve problems. And just kind of clicked in with it. Finally one day, I heard this music and I would go down there, and I was just listening to them, and listening to them, and every time they would work I would work. I think I was like the last one in the group, actually. [Robinson joined the Mustangs in 1964] And the reason why I got in, is the guy that was singing wasn't really singing that well. One time something happened, and he couldn't do it, or didn't show up, or couldn't do the song or something. And I said, 'I think I could do that.' And that's when it started. Then I was in.

"And we used to practice down at our keyboard player's house, his name was Charles Martin. At his mom's place. And we had to sneak in Aaron [Cash], who played saxophone, because his mom was one of our teachers at school. And she was looking at us like, 'You all are a little thuggish.' And she didn't want her boy influenced, so we would have to sneak him out of his bedroom window just to go practice. So we practiced late at night. And Larry Townsend was the trombone player. Malone Allen was the trumpet player. Charles Shaw was the drummer, and Oswell Mercer was playing bass. And we had Sara Scott, who was singing, and myself. [The band's guitarist was Samuel Priestly.]

"We started making a name for ourselves, just from practicing. People started going up, and everybody said, 'What's all those people doing over there?' And then once you fight your way in a little bit and say, 'Hey man!' And then it's just like, the word started spreading." Still in high school, the young group worried the increasing buzz surrounding their practice sessions would tip off their teacher (the sax player's mother). "The word done gone out," Robinson recalls. "And so then the press wanted us to give interviews and stuff, and of course we didn't want her to find out about us, so we would decline it. And the more we declined it, the more mysterious it got. And then they finally said, 'These guys are not going to cooperate at all.' Now we're up there pretty good, and then one day we looked up at the paper, and there was our picture on the front page. Somebody took a picture and put it up there. And we called a meeting right away. We said, 'She's going to see it any minute now.' [laughs]

"When we saw the picture that was shock enough. What are we going to do now? And so finally, she did. And we were all ready to get reprimanded and whatever, and he wasn't never going to get to play with us again. My mind was just racing wild. And she was our teacher. She's smarter than everybody, so she said, 'You know what? You all need someone to manage and show you all what you're all supposed to do.' She told us, 'You're going to have to act right, you're going to have to be gentlemen. You're going to have to dress, you're going to have to do all of these things.

"Because remember, way back then we was some little hoodlums over here. And me being the wildest person in the world, being kicked out of the house and not knowing what's what, you know I'm ready to go. And I'll be tagging this way, catch a ride going that way. So anyway, that's how that band happened. And it worked out really good. We traveled all over the United States."

The Mustangs, with Mrs. Salina Cash managing, landed their first gig in one of the unlikeliest of places. "Our first official gig, I never will forget it, because we had went and bought us some nice blue shirts, all the same. And we really thought we were something,


Roger Catchet

Matthew Robinson performing at Cappuchino's [sic], Austin, Texas, September, 2009.

man. In fact, looking at it, we really were. But we were just so happy that we were a group. And right across the street from Ernie's Chicken Shack, the [Black] Muslims had a church there. And on the top of it was, which was the roof, was a place where they had little parties and stuff like that. And that was our first gig. And when we would say, 'We're going to play up on the roof,' we named it. And that's what they named it, 'Up On the Roof.'"

The Mustangs performed a mix of soul and R&B covers, as well as the top hits that were charting at the time. One of their first major accomplishments was winning a citywide "Battle of the Bands" competition in Austin, which led to a studio session and their first (and only) 45 record in 1966. The A-side featured Robinson's recording debut on *Tender Loving Care*, a blistering soul original co-written by fellow Mustangs Townsend and Scott. Scott handled lead vocals on the B-side, *How Do You Quit*. Only a few hundred discs were ever pressed on the novelty Stangs imprint, and copies are so elusive that my inquiries into their whereabouts at Austin area record stores were met with amused shrugs. A lone copy was recently auctioned on eBay for over three hundred dollars.

The band had almost immediate success, going on to open for high profile acts like James Brown, Jimmy Reed, the Lovin' Spoonful, and Big Mama Thornton. Robinson fondly remembers his experience opening for Thornton. "We were just practicing. And warming up and a sound check and all that. I saw this person in overalls and a straw hat, and I just assumed it was a guy over there. And so we finished our rehearsal and went on, and walked past, and one of my rare times when I didn't think I had such a big head. And she, who I thought was a he, said, 'Young blood?' I said, 'Yes?' And it's a good thing I didn't say 'Yes, sir.' I just said, 'Yes?' She said, 'You know, you have something. Keep it up.' I said, 'Thank you very much.' I said, 'Thank you Lord for putting your hand on me,' because that was her, and I wanted to see her.

After the Mustangs played their opening set, Robinson recalls with a smile, "She came out and she got on the drums, and she busted them drums up for a long time. Nobody couldn't believe she was doing it, she whooped them good, too. And then, I think she pulled out her harmonica, just by herself. Oh, she whooped it some more! By this time everybody was just really going crazy. We didn't even realize when the band got on stage, and it was one of the most pleasant and wonderful inspiring live performances. Because she came out there and I mean she was playing! And I said, 'That's the way you're supposed to do.' You come right out, jack them on up right then, keep them going. And so that's the way I try

The Dynamic Duo, Henry "Blues Boy" Hubbard and Matthew Robinson, early 1990s.

COURTESY MATTHEW ROBINSON

to do my whole thing, like that. Even playing a little mere solo. So, I learned a lot from her and I'm so glad that I was so kind, and she was kind enough to give me that advice. And I took that to heart, too."

The Mustangs stayed together for six years, no small feat for a band of wild young guns fresh out of high school. Robinson doesn't shy away from discussing the vices that led to the band's breakup. "I got off into that drug scene pretty deep. And I think a mixture of something happened one time, and I just lost it. And so if it was other reasons, I don't know. But I think it was my fault because I didn't really know what reality was.

"I think a lot of kids in that age got hooked off into that drug scene because it was the time when you make love, not war, and you experiment. I just overdid everything to the max, and got caught bad. And it's regrettable, I'm not proud of it, but that's what happened. I learned that the hard way. And I think it cost me one of the best friendships and music that I had, with the Mustangs."

Around 1976 Robinson joined the ranks of James Polk and the Brothers, a tight soul/R&B outfit that included W.C. Clark and an up-and-coming Angela Strehli. "Man, you should see how cool I thought I was dressed up with them. Black and white shoes, checkered pants, leather hippie vest." Robinson had been woodshedding, gaining proficiency on guitar and continuing to hone his vocals during the group's tours throughout Texas. After parting ways with Polk, who went on to work for Ray Charles, Robinson continued to perform in various bands and one-off East Side jams. He fondly recalls jamming with the Vaughan brothers, and Jimmie's words of encouragement when Robinson expressed frustration with his guitar playing.

Robinson got his first opportunity to

Matthew Robinson and the Texas Blues Band, 1996. L to R - Matthew Robinson, Mickey Bennett, Eddie Stout, and William Fagaen.

COURTESY MATTHEW ROBINSON

tour Europe in the early 1990s as one half of the "Dynamic Duo" with Henry "Bluesboy" Hubbard, a relationship that formed out of an Antone's gig organized by Harold McMillan. McMillan, who works tirelessly to promote the city's African American musical heritage through his nonprofit DiverseArts organization, considers Robinson to be one of Austin's lesser-known treasures. "[W]hen you're reading that book about the history of Texas blues and Austin blues," he says, "you're usually reading an interview with Clifford Antone and Stevie Vaughan and Jimmie Vaughan. You're not reading an interview with Grey Ghost, or Snuff Johnson, or Matthew Robinson, so their story's not really out there, you know."

Robinson speaks highly of his time playing with Hubbard. "We went to Europe and spread it thick," he remembers. "We had a good great time, and I wouldn't trade nothing for those experiences. I felt proud because I was like the youngster, and he was like the old man master, going to show you how to do. And so I was just grateful for the opportunity just to be there. Because early when I was small, and we had just moved to the projects, I remember hearing him practice. I was shooting marbles. And then I found out later that was *him* practicing. But then to end up playing with him, it was just amazing. How can faith do that?"

Robinson formed his own group, the Texas Blues Band, in the mid-1990s. He had already caught the eye of Dialtone record label owner Eddie Stout, who first saw him perform with Hubbard in an East Side catfish parlor. Stout, a devoted advocate of all things Texas blues, produced and played bass on Robinson's 1998 Fedora Records debut, ***Bad Habits***. That same year, Stout brought Robinson and the Texas Blues Band to the Blues Estafette festival in Utrecht, Holland, where they played to enthusiastic crowds. In the following years Robinson would return to Europe on several occasions, in addition to completing successful tours in Tokyo and São Paulo, Brazil. "He has a hell of a voice, he really brings it out," Stout beams.

In early 2003 Stout released Robinson's self-titled debut on his own Dialtone label, a hard-hitting set of Texas blues that featured guest vocals by Robinson's sister Glenda Sue Hargis. Ex-Mustangs drummer Charles Shaw returned for the session, which also included the guitar work of Johnny Moeller, who now plays in the Fabulous Thunderbirds. On *Wet Paper Sack*, one of the original compositions on the record, Robinson's soulful swagger carries a hint of disdain when he weighs in on the pains of a love gone sour: "What do you call love that's like a wet paper sack?/When you put something in it, you might not ever get it back." He also makes guest appearances on two other Dialtone releases: ***The Texas Trumpets*** and the holiday compilation ***Blue Christmas***.

Robinson, now retired from his day job as a janitor for the state, is able to focus all of his energy on his music. He describes his current group, the Central East Band, as "a thick, full pool." With sister Glenda sharing vocal duties, Richard "Cricket" Quiroz on tenor sax, and the rhythm section of brothers Joe "Wolf" Aros on bass and Isaac "Big Daddy" Aros on drums, Robinson keeps an active schedule playing private parties and various live venues around Austin, and he maintains a presence at impromptu jams in East Side jukes like T.C.'s Lounge, a black-owned club that is increasingly popular with college students from the University of Texas, and the Victory Grill, which continues to be a mainstay of Austin's vibrant music scene. He continues to support the musical and cultural scene in East Austin as well, most recently by headlining a benefit concert organized by Harold McMillan and DiverseArts, where he was joined by up-and-coming blues artist Gary Clark, Jr. (profiled in ***LB #192***).

Although steeped in the blues and classic soul, Robinson, now 61, strives to keep his music fresh and contemporary. He's as likely to point to a hip hop star as an influence as he is to mention names like T-Bone Walker and Freddy King. I recently gave him a copy of ***Tell 'Em What Your Name Is!***, the new album by Black Joe Lewis & The Honey Bears. This young Austin eight-piece plays a mixture of James Brown–inspired hard funk and gritty garage soul, not a far cry from the music that inspired a young Robinson when he first joined the Mustangs 45 years ago. He called me after giving it a listen, his voice brimming with excitement. "I got to meet these guys! With a little input from the old school, we can get together with these young guns, and who knows what will happen?"

His heart, though, will always be in the blues. "All it is is a conversation," he says. "That's what music is, communicating a way of life. And it's a lifetime thing if you love it. And if you don't love it, it's going to beat you down. [laughs] So, I realized that I was a bluesman, after many years of doing all kinds of things I finally realized it and I'm just going to accept my path and keep it going."

The interviews for this article were conducted as part of the Project in Interpreting the Texas Past: African American Texans Oral History Project, under the direction of Dr. Martha Norkunas.