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. “I was saved and born again then,” 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.

“Till you tell one time we went out, we had a gig. I think we set out with the jets out to Ernie’s Chicken Shack. And we played, and Daddy came, and my sister Genda was there. And I think everybody saw him and thought maybe Genda was his girlfriend. They didn’t know it was his daughter, because they were out there dancing and swinging and all of the sex stuff. And then after it all was over, everybody was leaving. Dad went over there to the piano and started playing. And he got to playing and stamping 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 stamping 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 Nannon 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 1953 (Dialtone Records), an independent blues and gospel label based in Austin, has since released albums as 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 who “kicked out” I had to go because I looked like my father. And I don’t know if 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 gotta get on. I’m just really scared because [he] pulled the gun out. And I knew I had to get away. And that’s all I had to do. I didn’t know what I was doing. I think that’s why I was scared. When I was young he’d sneak into them under the pretext that he was there to shine shoes, all the things that a teenage boy could do. It was a tough time. But you need to understand that sometimes, you can’t hear every note you want to...
When the band got on stage, and it was real, 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?'

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We were just practicing. And warming up and a sound check and all that. I saw that was her, and I wanted to see her.

In fact, looking at it, we really were. But we were just so happy that we were a group.

And right across from the street from chicken shack, the [Black] Muslims had a church there. And on the top of it, which was the roof, there 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 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 a song co-written by fellow Mustangs Townsend and Scott. Scott handled lead vocals on the B-side, 'How You Do It'. A few hundred discs were ever pressed on the novelty Stangs imprint, and copies are so elusive that my discs were ever pressed on the novelty Stangs imprint, and copies are so elusive that my

Robinson fondly remembers his experience opening for Tho- mson. "We were just playing, I was wearing a suit 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!'

And so I just realised it and I'm just going to 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 organiza-

Robinson speaks highly of his time playing with Hubbard. "We went to Europe and spread its 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 him practicing. I was shooting marbles. And then I found out later that was him practicing. But then to the end by 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 Diamond record label owner Eddie Stout, who first saw him perform with Hubbard in an East Side cafe parlor. Stout, a devoted advocate of all things Texas blues, produced and played bass on Robinson's 1998 Fedoras record debut, Bad Habits.

That same year, putting together a band, he played 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 Sao 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 Diamond label, a hard-hitting set of Texas blues that featured guest vocals by Robinson's sister Glenda Sue Harris. Ex-Mustangs drummer Charles Stout returned for the session, which also included the guitar work of Johnny Moeller, who now plays in the fabulous Thunderbird Party. The Stangs, one of the original compositions on the record. Robinson's soulful swagger carries a hint of disdain when he weighs in on the pans of a live 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 DiverseArts 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 sound." With sister Glenda sharing vocal duties, Richard "Clinton" Queru on tenor sax, and the rhythm section of brothers Joe "Wolf" Hargis and William Fagaen 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 jukeboxes like T.C.'s. A low-key, a 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 social 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).

Though steeped in the blues and classic soul, Robinson, now 61, strives to keep his music fresh and contemporary. "He's so active as to point to a high hop step as an influence. As he is to mention names like B'one Walker and Freddy King. I recently gave him a copy of Tell 'Em What Your Home 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 far a 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 briefly wavering with excitement. "I got to meet these guys! With a little input from the old school, we can get together these young guys, 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."

"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, then you're really doing something wrong."