

Never too old to rock and roll

The Texas Blues Rattlers keep the music alive without burning out.

by Kirby F. Warnock

IT'S A SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE LEGENDARY Sons of Hermann Hall in Deep Ellum as the band takes the stage. It could be one several live acts playing DFW on a weekend, from country twang to punk, but this is a blues band. Nothing unusual about that — after all, Dallas is the home of the blues with performers like Freddy King, T-Bone Walker and the Vaughan Brothers hailing from here.

The Texas Blues Rattlers launch into a spirited set that features tight guitar playing and set list that includes Blind Willie McTell. It's a bluesy sound that would fit any good bar band, only this isn't a bar band. The group doesn't contain a single "professional" musician but a communications company president, a retired engineer from Raytheon, a telecom tech, a software trainer for a medical company and a pre-press man for a printing firm.

They don't need the money and they aren't looking to gain a million hits on YouTube. With an average age of 58, playing steady bar gigs is not in their future. Yet if you ask any member of the Texas Blues Rattlers why they are hauling their gear to play shows that barely cover their costs they will tell you to a man, "Because I love it."

Drummer Jimmy Dusenberry started the Blues Rattlers because, "I wanted to do something different. I wanted to play the kind of music I want to play, the more obscure stuff."

By day he works pre-press for a printing company, so the band is like a hobby, yet it's much more than that to him and the other band members.

"It's a satisfying feeling to play," says bass player Emerson Hovey. "This is the first band I've played with in more than 20 years."

Hovey makes his living as a telecommunications engineer, but played in bands several decades earlier.

"I played in some garage bands, but didn't get serious until the early 80s when I moved to West Germany and played in bands there. Then I stopped and went to work for a telecommunications company, just working tech jobs around Dallas.

"There were a couple of decades where I just got with friends and jammed. Folks would approach me about playing, but it didn't fit into my lifestyle; getting married and having a kid. When the Blues Rattlers called me, it just felt right."

Hovey's story is similar to rest of the group — played in rock bands as a teenager, didn't "hit it big" so a day job became the routine for the next 30 years. Now that the kids are grown it was time to return to that passion you had when you were young.

"I don't have a real drive to be onstage, entertaining people, who are drinking in a bar," inter-

jects Hovey. "I am drawn to make some really good music with these guys. I want to play with people who are creative and enjoy what they're doing."

"I just love to play music," says keyboard player Wayne Tibbett. "I always have. Some guys play golf all of their lives, but music is just something I really, really enjoy." Tibbett grew up in Natchitoches, Louisiana and started playing at age 16. "I was in a house band playing in a place where my mother was working as waitress in the club's restaurant."

For whatever reason, the music career did not work out and Tibbett joined the Air Force, then went to work for Raytheon for the next 20 years. Like a scene from The Blues Brothers, Tibbett answered the call when Jimmy Dusenberry said, "We're getting the band back together."

First Dusenberry called up his old friend Joe Blair, whom he had jammed with on several occasions. For several practices it was just Joe on guitar and Jimmy on the drums, much like Willie Nelson's early career when only he and drummer Paul English would take the stage.

"We rocked along as a two-man show until we added Emerson Hovey on bass," recalls Blair, who by day runs Blair Communications, a company that sells and services two-way radios.

"We added a guitar because I didn't want to carry the lead on every song. My thought was we should find a guitar player I can play with, let him carry some

songs, then I could take my turn on leads. We went through several players until we found Kevin."

Kevin would be Kevin Sullivan, a former X-ray technician who now works as a software trainer. After answering an ad, Sullivan joined the band. Like the others, he first played nearly 30 years ago in a band called The Menagerie.

"We did it for three years, then everyone got married," says Sullivan. He spent the next three decades earning a living and raising a family until the siren call of the blues lured him aboard.

"I always identified more strongly with the blues, but we didn't know at the time that those bands we were copying — Cream, the Stones and Led Zeppelin — were covering black

blues music."

Now the band was together and the only thing left was to get out of the practice room and play. There has recently been a burst of "baby boomer bands", but most of them just play neighborhood parties, not real gigs at bars and nightclubs. The reason is that when you are holding down a day job, it's not that easy to play until 2 AM and show up to work the next day. This is why the Texas Blues Rattlers limit their gigs to weekends and generally



He was one of the founders of the Texas Blues Rattlers: Jimmy Dusenberry

take the stage earlier than the usual 9:30-10 PM start time.

They also lean toward a set list of old blues songs that most bar crowds are unfamiliar with, such as "Crosscut Saw" by Albert Collins and "The Last Four Nickels" by Son Seals.

The crowd at the Sons of Hermann reacts positively. Some are familiar with the set list, but to several it sounds like a band playing original songs. The main thing that sets the Texas Blues Rattlers apart is their musicianship. These guys can play, which shouldn't come as a surprise since the average musical experience of each member is almost 30 years. The only difference is that nearly 25 of those years was spent playing in living rooms, not onstage.

"It's more satisfying now because there's no pressure," reflects Joe Blair. "It's playing for the pure joy of it. There are moments where it still takes my breath away." ■

COUNTRY

Don't put "red dirt" label on them

Robby White and Ronny Spears team for phase 3 in their long Texas music careers

By Mary Jane Farmer

NOW IN PHASE 3 OF HIS PROFESSIONAL career, North Texas singer/songwriter Robby White is doing what he's wanted to do all along — "It's real country, with tinges of western swing and Texas music, and it's the kind of music I've always wanted to make."

White has teamed up with Texas country music longer-timer Ronny Spears and together, they are taking their fast-paced, stone-cold country show on the road.

White grew up in his native Van Alstyne, and, like so many do when they graduate high school, got the blue blazes out of there after graduation.

He traveled around the country a bit, getting a feel of the music across the U.S.A., and was in the south when the 9/11 attack on America made so many Americans re-evaluate their values. White was no exception, and knew almost immediately he would return home, still a young man but with a stronger dream to make memorable music.

Spears, during that time, was busy building his own career, and building it the point that he has played for one American president and shared stages with Texas artists such as Deryl Dodd, The Dixie Chicks, Robert Earl Keen, and huge numbers of more favorites.

Turning point

LIKE WHITE, SPEARS HAD his life-altering turning point, and that came from his idol, Ray

Wylie Hubbard. They were song-swapping together, the story goes, when Hubbard turned to him after he sang, and said "Quit playing copy songs." Spears did quit, and turned the volume up on his songwriting talents.

Phase 2 had both artists writing more and more, and incorporating their lives into their music. They also developed their bands and their fan bases.

The two artists met by chance one night in White's hometown. He and Texas singer Jerry Audley were to song swap at a new restaurant. In a 6-degrees-of-separation moment, Audley brought Spears with him, and quickly there was one more mic added to the diminutive stage.

White said of that encounter, "It was organic the way it came down. He and I have a musical chemistry, hard to describe."

Spears tried describing the musical chemistry between them, saying, "It was instant brotherly love. I think our souls kind of went click right off the bat."

They both continued their separate careers for a few more years, Spears and his band hitting the Texas stages with his two-fisted drinking songs and White building and traveling with his band, the Tejas Gringos.

Phase 2, for White, seemed to be coming to an end as described in one his songs, "A Texan's Prayer." A married man with two daughters to his credit, White wrote, while being threatened with an Oklahoma tornado on his way home from a gig, "Lord, don't let me die in Oklahoma... I'm out here spending dollars chasing dimes."

Phase 3 began for White when told The Tejas Gringos he wanted to take a little time away from the road, and spend some of that time looking for ways to advance the music. The band moved to back another Texas singer/songwriter.

White said, "This was real amicable, I love them and want them to win, but it got to the point that we wanted different things. (The new singer/songwriter) needed players. And

so everybody is doing what he wants to do."

White and Spears connected again, and, with luck and hard work, the results will be an historical bridge between unashamed country and Texas music. Billing themselves as "White & Spears," the duo is using Spears' band, which White calls "seasoned pros," and as of mid-September they have worked without a single rehearsal. It's been moving that fast for them. The duo said they will be adding a fiddle and a steel soon, and there will be rehearsals.

Phase 3

WHITE DESCRIBED PHASE 3, "Now, I'm brave enough to make music for me. I'm doing exactly what I want to do. This is going to be fun, without all the trap-

pings and the pressure. It was getting bigger, but I was losing control of it all, and I was feeling like, 'Don't I get a say in all this?'" He added this is why his heart is so excited, because it is unapologetically country. "Don't 'Red Dirt' me," Spears is

equally as excited about Phase 3. "Actually, there wasn't much to it, once we said, 'Let's do this together.'" They have begun writing together now. "We are starting to get ideas together, and we'll throw them, like a piece of bologna, against the refrigerator. If it sticks, we'll go with it." He said that, so far, they've "got a pipeline full" of song ideas.

Spears said the band is excited, too, and some of those have been with him since their Frisco High School days. "The music Robby White does is Texas music, our vocals fall together, and it's like we know each other like the backs of our hands."

So what is Spears' goal in five years? "To walk to the mailbox and capture me a check. I've been after this since I was a kid. I always knew I wanted to be a writer, a singer, a picker, whatever it takes. And yes, every song is for sale. Yes."

White & Spears also plans to let somebody else handle the business. "That will handle you smooth down to a nub," Spears said. "Our nubs would all be rubbed."

White and Spears said it's weird, but together they are better than either of them alone, they are two halves of a musical whole.

White asks, "Get your ears on, and get down for some stone-cold country music."

And listen while listening, because most of the songs have stone-cold simple truths of life. ■



They perform at Love and War in Texas Plano: Robby White and Ronny Spears