

A Conversation with Robert Randolph
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 9/2003)

So many careers, even successful ones, read as predictably as a bloodless story in a hometown newspaper. The hairbrush microphone, the talent show, the clubs, the deal, the do or die. But the unlikely rise of Robert Randolph and The Family Band is more the stuff of legend.

Allegedly because a proper organ was too expensive at the time, William Eason introduced the pedal steel guitar into the choir accompaniment in a New Jersey parish of the House of God Church in the 1930s. As a worship instrument that could swell organ-like and beyond under the lifted voices, cry and wail, soar and sting, the steel was a mighty testifier that caught on in a number of other chapters of the House of God, and became a signature instrument of that denomination. A tradition developed called The Sacred Steel and a small group of virtuosos arose in the decades to follow, among them Calvin Cooke, Ted Beard, and the Campbell Brothers, Chuck and Darick. It spread to various parts of the country, and there have been several Sacred Steel Conventions recorded by Arhoolie Records, who now have no less than nine releases of Sacred Steel in their esteemed catalog. (God Bless Chris Strachwitz and his Arhoolie Records, they've been preserving and popularizing the music of various cultures for four decades. Their Grammy winning 40th Anniversary Box Set and countless other treasures can be purchased at www.arhoolie.com.)

But the emergent prodigy Robert Randolph was the real Einstein of the pack, and when he heard the music of Stevie Ray Vaughan in the late 90s, it really opened up his mind and his approach. He began to venture into the secular world of clubs with his funky soulful music, a black man seated at an instrument associated almost exclusively with Country and Western music.

He gathered around him a couple of cousins from the church on bass and drums, and eventually a white B-3 player. A few of them made a record at Roscoe Ambel's Brooklyn studio, and somehow that made its way into the hands of the North Mississippi Allstars, who arranged for Robert and Co. to open their imminent Bowery Ballroom show. That was the first big break, because organist par excellence John Medeski (of the notorious jazz jamband Medeski, Martin and Wood) saw that gig, and it led to the recording of all those forces on a Gospel project called *The Word*. Robert's name was now being spoken in many circles, and his reputation in the music-rabid and very communicative jam band world spread quickly.

Along the way, the labels caught on and swarmed in that me-too way they do, and eventually Robert inked a deal with Warners, with whom he seems very happy. Hell, have you seen the man all over VH-1? Now they're on national tour with great acts, and their following grows.

The new CD, *Unclassified*, is a masterful, muscular, and definitely secular major-label debut. (Check out the clips on the Listen page.) This amazing cat might make the pedal steel guitar the next big thing, which would be fine with me. Robert Randolph is making waves, let's see how high they get.

Puremusic: You know, it's just amazing, taking the world by storm with a pedal steel guitar. I mean, nobody even bothered to say that couldn't be done. Everybody *knows* that can't be done!

Robert Randolph: Yeah, it was—we're just having fun, man, playing, recording, and making a record. It's been great.

PM: It's just unbelievable. I was rooting around on the net this morning. I'm a big pedal steel fan—I'm a Nashville guy, you know. But is it known for sure who actually invented the pedal steel guitar in its more or less current form?

RR: I'm sure it is. I don't know that much history on the instrument, and which guy—it was one of the country music guys.

PM: It wasn't one of the Hawaiians but a country western cat who came up with it?

RR: The pedal steel, yeah. The lap steel was a Hawaiian instrument. But pedals and all that, it's country. I'm not sure if it's Alvino Ray or Buddy Emmons or one of these other guys. I'm not sure which guy it is.

PM: Right. I think Alvino Ray may be taking credit, but I thought that, oh, it must go back before that. But yeah, maybe that's it after all, him or Emmons or somebody.

RR: Yeah.

PM: But it was a Mr. Eason who brought it into the House of God, is that right?

RR: Yeah.

PM: It's an unbelievable and unpredictable tradition that sprang up. Was it just in that part of Jersey that the pedal steel was brought into the House of God, or was it kind of a national thing?

RR: No, it was more sort of a national thing. That's how it is today, where there's different churches and things like that that go on, and people play pedal steel. It's more a national thing.

PM: And it's the worship instrument in the House of God more than the organ, is that right?

RR: Yeah, exactly.

PM: That's interesting, because I've always thought that it's an eerily human sounding axe. I mean, it really sounds like somebody crying and somebody laughing, you know.

RR: Yeah. I mean, that's the way we was taught up to play it, like a singer moans and groans and weeps and hollers and screams, like the old Southern Baptist singers. You know how people in church go [singing] mmm-hmmm, and do a lot of moaning and carrying on.

PM: Right. [laughs]

RR: That's how like we was taught to play, off those singers.

PM: Well, you're making it do all that and a whole lot more today. I'll tell you, wow.

RR: Thanks.

PM: So tell us please about the project—that I haven't been able to lay my hands on yet, but I'm working on it—called *The Word*, that brought you together with John Medeski and the North Mississippi Allstars.

RR: I think those guys had heard me play on one of the old recordings—I mean, not that old, but like a couple years. It was 2000 or something like that.

PM: Was that live at the church?

RR: Yeah, yeah. So what happened, they had this idea of recording this record, and then they needed another guy to like make it all happen. I think once they heard that recording I was on, they basically asked me to come on board and do it with them. And it turned out to be cool.

PM: In helping our readership to find that record, do you know what label it's on, or the easy way to get that?

RR: I'm not sure if there are many copies still printed up out there. I'm not sure.

PM: Right. Okay. Well, I'll track that down and make sure everybody can find it who's got to get it, because I know I'm one of the people who's got to get it now.

RR: Yeah, I don't think there are many copies out there, because there were some business things that went on with that, some bad decisions that some people in that company made.

PM: Wow.

RR: But you should be able to find some somewhere. [actually we found some at Amazon.com]

PM: So yeah, from the House of God to the club and right to the top of the huge and enthrallable jam band scene, and right to VH-1. Lord in heaven, that's a hell of a ride.

RR: Yeah. It's... [laughs] Yeah, it is.

PM: [laughs] What's it like and how are you processing that meteoric rise?

RR: It's fun. It's every day, a process, and you just got to kind of stay focused and keep the love for music and keep it all rolling.

PM: Yeah, because with such a fast growing list of people blowing smoke every day—

RR: Yeah.

PM: —you really got to keep your head straight, know that it's just really about God, it's about the tunes and it's about the band.

RR: Yeah, basically. And it's about still standing true to who we are, but at the same time, keeping the music rolling and making people happy and things like that.

PM: We always feel that our interview subjects are uniquely revealed when they talk a little bit about their cronies. Would you give us a little bit on each of the Family Band guys?

RR: Oh, well, with Danyell, he plays the bass, and he's a singer and ultimate musician, and he's a great guy.

PM: Is he a blood cousin?

RR: Yeah. And Marcus Randolph, he keeps the tempo and keeps us all going through the record and while playing a show and whatnot. And John Ginty, I met him some years ago. He added that kind of gospel style organ a lot of people are familiar with.

PM: Where did you run into Ginty and his playing?

RR: In New Jersey. When we started out playing in some small bars there, he came along and started playing, and it sounded good.

PM: He's a hell of a B-3 guy.

RR: Yeah. He plays it really good, like soul stuff.

PM: Yeah. I saw that Neal Casal [a U.S. singer songwriter who found a strong following in Europe] is singing some backing vocals on the record. Is he an old Jersey friend?

RR: Yeah. We met him—it's like the same story. We met him somewhere along playing in Jersey. So I've known him probably the last four or five years.

PM: Ah, so he was there before you really got anywhere yet.

RR: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh-huh. He's on some of my early demos, he sang with us.

PM: Wow. Yeah, he's a really talented cat.

RR: Yeah.

PM: What are you reading lately and what are you listening to?

RR: Listening to like some Led Zeppelin.

PM: Crazy.

RR: Some Ray Charles, his old stuff.

PM: That's an excellent mix.

RR: Yeah, I'm listening to all old music, man. But actually, there's this European singer, she made a record. A lot of people know about it, but it was a strange record that I picked up. Her name is Julie Mancini.

PM: And you're listening to that.

RR: Yeah, yeah. She's a guitarist and singer. I just picked this record up, and she's awesome. I forget what label it's on. But it was just something strange, I just saw a woman playing a guitar, and it just said "Julie" on it, on the CD, and I just picked it up and listened to it. It was amazing. There's a song on there, I'm ready to record it probably for the next record.

PM: No kidding!

RR: Yeah.

PM: Well, that's how we've found some of our favorite artists, we're turned onto them by other artists in interviews. And so, yeah, we'll look up Julie Mancini, see if we can find her stuff.

RR: See if you can hook it up, man. You should be able to find it. I remember somebody explained to me that it was probably never really released over here. I guess it was a European kind of thing.

PM: I was first told about you a couple of years ago by my friend Steve Kimock. Have you guys

done a gig together? Do you know his music?

RR: Yeah, I know his music, yeah. He's really awesome.

PM: He was the first guy to say, "Oh, you got to get onto Robert Randolph, man." [see our interview with Steve] And so I'm happy now that—well, it's been a year and a half but we're finally on the phone with you.

[Robert was driving, and we'd started to have some cell phone issues, a series of callbacks and all that.]

RR: Hey, I'm calling you from another phone now.

PM: Okay, beautiful. I did an interview with your friends the North Mississippi Allstars, yesterday on their bus. They were talking good about you.

RR: Oh, yeah, those guys are great, man. I mean, the first time I ever played a show was opening up for those guys a couple years ago. So cool, man, they can get it tight.

PM: And what an unbelievably nice pair of brothers they are.

RR: Truly.

PM: So we're going to get the Allstars and the Family Band on the next cover together, because those two bands belong together, don't they?

RR: [laughs] Yeah. We actually play a lot of shows together too, so... We tour a lot, and that's basically how the Family Band got started, opening shows for those guys.

PM: Wow.

RR: So that's how it goes. And their new record is coming out too, in a couple weeks.

PM: Yeah, *Polaris*, that's an amazing record. Have you heard the advance yet or anything?

RR: Yeah, I heard it.

PM: Yeah, you heard it. I love the pop tunes on that record.

RR: [laughs]

PM: It's interesting the corner they're turning there. [see our interview with the Dickinson brothers in this issue]

RR: Yeah.

PM: It's really cool.

So would you talk with us personally for a minute, about your relationship with God? How would you characterize it? Not exactly your usual rock 'n' roll question, but...

RR: No, but... Well, I grew up in a church. And my parents, early on when I was a kid, always taught me how to understand who God is and what he does for everyone, and how he keeps us all in line, and he is the ultimate being, he's the one that we only have to answer to. And it's kind of how I live my life. He's ultimate, he is to be thanked for everything that happens with us, because at any point in time, he's the one who could take it away.

PM: Right.

RR: And I can say I'm not the most spiritual person, but I know that I'm spiritual minded, and I'm always trying to get in that groove, where peace and brotherhood rules.

PM: In the age of the Bling Bling epidemic, your message is definitely coming from a much different place.

RR: Oh, it has to be. I mean, I just don't understand the mentalities of some of those guys who sing about some of that stuff, but we like to do otherwise. We just keep giving people some positive messages, keep them singing and dancing. And keep them happy about life. You know?

PM: Yeah, it's a beautiful message, and it's simple, and it's back to values that made a lot more sense to me, and to you, apparently.

RR: Oh, thanks.

PM: I sure appreciate it. When you get a little time off, where you do you go to get away?

RR: I like to go home, man.

PM: You go home.

RR: Back to New Jersey, yeah.

PM: No exotic locations yet.

RR: No, just like to go home and turn on the TV, watch some good football, basketball.

PM: [laughs]

RR: Cook out on the grill.

PM: I hear that. What about your first steel mentor, Ted Beard? Is he alive and well?

RR: Yeah, he's alive, him and Calvin Cooke as well. Calvin has a record that'll be coming out very soon.

PM: Is he a sacred steel guy?

RR: Yeah, yeah. He's one of the early mentors, too. He's one of the early players.

PM: Calvin Cooke. I'm going to go back and get a little learning.

RR: Yeah.

PM: Do you know what label Calvin Cooke will come out on? Is there like a sacred steel label or—

RR: No, I'm not exactly sure which one.

PM: Okay. We'll search him out. [visit calvincooke.com]

RR: If I can find out, probably call you back and let you know.

PM: How do Calvin and Ted, these early mentors of yours and some of the originators of the sacred steel, how do they feel about their student's rising stardom?

RR: Oh, they're happy about it, because these guys played for years and years and years. They wanted to become that, but they just couldn't do it because they had a heavy, heavy commitment to the church. And it was different back then, back in those days. So they're really happy about it.

PM: Wow. It's unbelievable, all the factors, that it's a black man playing the pedal steel—

RR: [laughs]

PM: —which is an incongruous image to a lot of people. And that it's a guy who comes out of the church and he's on VH-1. I mean, it's an unthinkable kind of quintessentially American scenario.

RR: Yeah. I mean, that's what a lot of people don't understand. It becomes weird to a lot of people, that whole story.

PM: And it's almost like one minute you're playing in church. Okay, you bust out into some clubs, but now you're like—you explode onto the jam band scene with all these—basically all these young white hippies going crazy! It's beautiful.

RR: I know, isn't it?

PM: Because, I mean, Kimock is an old buddy of mine, and he has been playing the lap steel out there for some years. But to see a funky black man get out there and blow minds with the pedal steel, it's really fun.

[laughter]

RR: And that's what it's all about, just to have fun. And keep the music good and pure, keep people dancing, and keep—you know, give people something good to remember.

PM: Yeah. So where do you think this train's headed? What do you see happening in the next year or two?

RR: I think I see the record being a real success. The record is going to be successful, and then it won't be an introduction to anyone anymore. And then they're going to want more songs and more records to be done, and that's what we're going to do.

PM: Warners is really behind it, aren't they.

RR: Yeah, they're great. I mean, they're working hard, everybody there, they really believe in the record. It's awesome.

PM: Wow. Are there things you haven't yet tried that you'd like to attempt in the future, musical or otherwise?

RR: Probably classical.

PM: Classical?

RR: Yeah, that's hard music there, that classical music. Get into that and kind of explore and see what's going on over there.

PM: Do you read music?

RR: No. I can't read it at all.

PM: Yeah, me neither. So you'd have to do it by ear, just take a piece that you like and do it?

RR: Yeah, basically.

PM: Has it ever been done on the pedal steel, classical music?

RR: I don't think so. Maybe some guy somewhere else tried it, but not to my knowledge. Jazz and blues have been tried, but I don't think classical has been tried.

PM: I just realized I've got to call my friend Bobby Lee in California. He's a great pedal steel player, and he's the head of this thing on the internet called Pedal Steel Guitar Forum.

RR: Yeah.

PM: And I don't know if he knows about—he better know about Robert Randolph, but if he doesn't, he's sure going to know in about an hour.

RR: Yeah, a lot of those people don't—they don't care about me, because I don't play traditional country pedal steel.

PM: But this guy's a real artist, so he'll like it.

RR: Yeah. Because I've read up on there sometimes, some people, they get at me.

PM: Oh, really?

RR: Oh, yeah. Because I know some of the country players, and they'll call me and tell me sometimes.

PM: The guys in Nashville, the many steel players I know here, they would be very hip to what you're doing.

RR: Well, we'll see what happens, what will happen in the future. Maybe it'll all change. And if not, then I can only keep doing what I'm doing.

PM: I think you're going to change a lot of hearts and minds and open up the instrument and open up a lot of young people to your beautiful vibes. So we thank you a lot, Robert, for your time today. I know you're a busy man, thanks for taking the time to talk with us.

RR: Thank you very much, Frank. I appreciate everything you're doing.

PM: You bet. It's really nice talking to you, and all the best to you.

RR: All right, you too.

