

Finding Salvation

Growing up in Irvington, Robert Randolph found himself torn between the rough streets of his hometown and the warm embrace of his Pentecostal church. The pedal steel guitar showed him the way.

BY KEVIN FORD

IT'S APPROACHING THE MIDNIGHT HOUR inside Asbury Park's Stone Pony. Music fans jockey for position on the dance floor while stagehands make final adjustments to the instruments and sound equipment. Suddenly an ear-piercing roar signals the arrival of a young man in T-shirt and bowler, who emerges from behind the amplifiers on stage right and sits down in front of perhaps the most unusual looking instrument ever placed on the Pony's storied stage. Horizontal and boxy, the instrument is covered with thirteen strings, and soon the young man in the bowler will wield it like a talisman to hypnotize and tantalize this crowd with sounds they've never heard before.

In just two years, the young man on stage has gone from local church musician to nationally acclaimed recording artist. Popular bands clamor for him to join them on stage. Established artists call on his services in the recording studio. Legions of young admirers enthusiastically trade tapes of his shows, while elder performers shower him with gratitude for helping to popularize a once obscure instrument. And when Warner Bros. Records signed him on last spring, company chairman Tom Whalley announced to the world what thousands of fans already knew: Robert Randolph has arrived.

Randolph may seem like an overnight success, but the roots of his rise actually stretch back some twenty years. His childhood in Irvington was a constant tug-of-war between the values of the Pentecostal House of God in Orange, to which his family still belongs, and the temptations of the streets. He grew up in a musical household, the third of four children. At home the Randolphs listened only to gospel music, though at public school the kids discovered hip-hop and R&B. Raised



according to the strict morals of the House of God, they couldn't shield themselves from the gritty realities of the city. "It was sort of a rough neighborhood, growing up," recalls Randolph, 25. His time at Irvington High School was spent dodging the fallout from gang warfare that left many of his classmates in jail or dead. "I've seen a lot of that," he says. "You're talking about 60 people in jail that I was either acquaintances with or really good friends with." Randolph cops to committing "knucklehead" pranks, like "pulling the fire drill, cutting classes—you know." If it ever got worse, he's keeping it to himself. "As a child, you tend to do childish things," he says. "As you get older and you go through different experiences, you tend to stray away from those things.

Plus, growing up in the church gives you a sense of what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do." The church also introduced young Robert to the instrument that would become his life's calling.

A most unusual looking instrument: Robert Randolph at the helm of his steel guitar.

IT'S A LONG WAY FROM THE ISLANDS OF HAWAII to the streets of Irvington, yet such is the path the steel guitar has taken over the past century. Legend has it that the original steel guitar was born when a Hawaiian named Joseph Kekuku first slid a railroad spike across the strings of his acoustic guitar. In 1915 a more refined version of the instrument, played like a



LOWER FACELIFT

Target the 'best' solution for your face

Two generations of experience have taught The Glasgold Group, Alvin Glasgold, M.D. and Mark Glasgold, M.D., both board certified facial plastic surgeons, that choosing the right surgery is as important as choosing the right doctor.

Alvin Glasgold, M.D., Clinical Professor of Surgery at Robert Wood Johnson, consistently selected for best doctor lists: *NJ Monthly's* "Best Doctors", *NY Magazine's* "Best Doctors—NY Metro Area" and *Castle Connolly's* "America's Top Doctors", is in practice with Mark Glasgold, M.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of



Alvin Glasgold, M.D.
Mark Glasgold, M.D.

Surgery at Robert Wood Johnson.

Targeted facelifting is Dr. Mark Glasgold's unique approach, which lifts the cheek, the marionette line, and the jaw and neck to produce a non-surgical appearing result. His pioneering work in facial

rejuvenation has been seen nationally on the *CBS Morning Show* and *Inside Edition*. To schedule an appointment for a private consultation, computer imaging or to receive a complimentary information package and video, "Conversations with our Patients" call Linda at (732) 846-6540.



FACELIFT/BROWLIFT



FACELIFT/BROWLIFT



FACELIFT/RHINOPLASTY

theGlasgoldgroup
FOR PLASTIC SURGERY

31 River Road • Highland Park, NJ 08904
For an appointment call Linda at (732) 846-6540

FACIALS
PEELS
MICRODERMABRASION
PHOTOREJUVENATION
BOTOX COLLAGEN
LASER HAIR REMOVAL
WAXING

COMPLETE SKINCARE

...much more than your beauty salon and almost all the advantages of your doctor's office

\$20

gift certificate
TAKE \$20 OFF TREATMENTS
OF \$65 OR MORE
Good until December 15

ellen lange
PERSONAL SKINCARE



downstairs at
theGlasgoldgroup

FOR AN APPOINTMENT CALL 732 846-6592

31 River Road, Highland Park

visit our website at www.ellenlange.com | ellen lange products available at sephora

Music

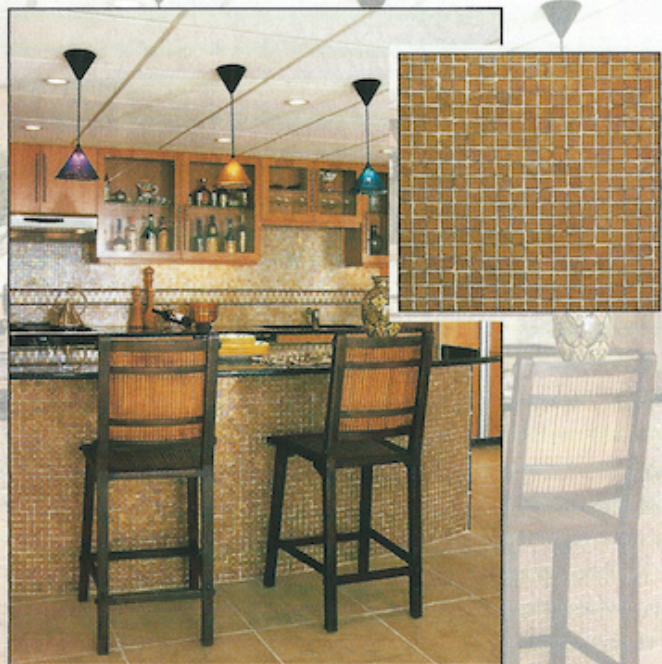
regular guitar but held horizontally across the lap, made its way to an exposition in San Francisco. Thus was born a Hawaiian music fad in the United States that would last through World War II. By the 1950s the instrument's signature sound found its way onto hit country-and-western albums. But it was decades earlier that African-American musicians incorporated the steel guitar into services in the House of God church.

"It's just an instrument that you would keep playing and practicing at for hours. That took up a lot of my time instead of being on the street."

Founded in 1903 by Tennessee evangelist Mary Magdalena Tate, the denomination had spread rapidly throughout the United States by the time Tate died in 1930. In the decade that followed, Willie Eason, a street performer living in Philadelphia, introduced the steel guitar to the church. While Eason's brother Troman had studied and embraced the traditional Hawaiian style of playing, Willie skipped formal lessons and used the instrument to mimic the sound of gospel singers. This style, using a single string, formed the basis of the "sacred steel" tradition in the House of God. Eventually the upright pedal steel replaced the lap steel, the pedals giving players more control over pitch and tone.

It was this instrument that helped set a course for Robert Randolph. In 1995 he found himself at a crossroads. Like many of his classmates, he would soon graduate from high school unsure of what he wanted to do with his life. All around him, kids were getting caught up in the drug trade and other crimes. Randolph concedes to being "into those things," but he knew he didn't want to spend the rest of his life on the streets. To his rescue came the pedal steel. "I fell in love with it," he says. "In

Elegantly Traditional



Classically Contemporary



**MEDITERRANEAN
TILE & MARBLE**

Design Ideas • Drawings • Technical Expertise • Natural Stone and the Finest Handmade Ceramics

Phone: 973.808.1267 • Fax: 973.808.7085 • www.medtile.com

Visit our showroom at 461 Route 46 West • Crown Plaza • Fairfield, NJ 07004

Designers and Manufacturers of fine custom bars and interior woodwork



CALL FOR BROCHURE AT: (973) 773 7475
VISIT OUR SHOWROOM 102 Route 46 E. Lodi, NJ 07644
www.wlbars.com



WOOD & LAMINATES, INC.
CUSTOM BARS AND INTERIORS



Music

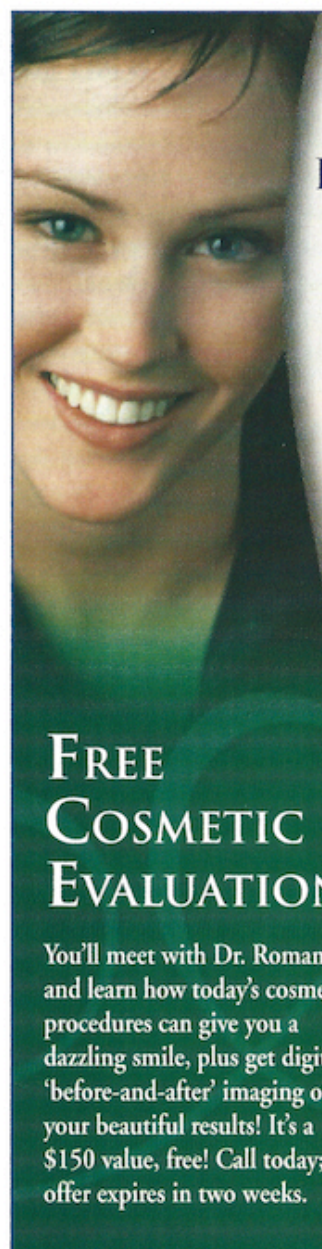
our church, there's a long tradition of sacred steel musicians—older guys playing lap steels and pedal steels. Watching those guys play, you say to yourself, *Maybe I could play like that some day.*"

Chuck Campbell, a well-known steel guitarist and friend of the family, bought Randolph a six-string model to try out. His son's interest in the instrument pleased Everett Randolph, though he initially cringed at Robert's incessant practicing. "He was awful," the elder Randolph recalled in a *New York Times* interview last year. "It was the worst thing you ever wanted to hear." Robert traveled to Ohio, where he spent a month studying with Ted Beard, the preeminent House of God pedal steel player. He proved a quick study and returned to New Jersey determined to master the instrument. His commitment would be his saving grace. "I was sixteen going on seventeen when I took it up," Randolph says. "Those are the years that most kids determine what they're going to do for the rest of their lives, especially in those neighborhoods. As you learn pedal steel, it's just an instrument that you would keep playing and practicing at for hours. That took up a lot of my time instead of being on the streets."

Studying the steel guitar did indeed occupy his time, but he also needed an income. In 1997 he landed a job at a Roseland law firm, where he eventually worked as an assistant paralegal. When not at the office, Randolph performed with his family at social gatherings or at church. He developed a particularly good chemistry with two of his cousins, drummer Marcus Randolph and bassist Danyel Morgan, and by 2000 they were calling themselves the Family Band. "Marcus follows my head movements. I don't know how he picks up on that sometimes," Randolph says. "And Danyel just looks at me and Marcus." To this day, the Family Band has only rehearsed once, honing their skills at shows or in church.

The band's first secular appearance was at the tiny Lakeside Lounge, in New York City's East Village, in September 2000. No more than twenty people showed up. For their fourth date at the bar, studio musician John Ginty of Morristown sat in on organ, and he's remained with the band ever since. Their mix of spirituals, blues, and rock hooked the crowds and blurred the line between church and nightclub.

"The music's not about me," says



FREE COSMETIC EVALUATION

You'll meet with Dr. Romano and learn how today's cosmetic procedures can give you a dazzling smile, plus get digital 'before-and-after' imaging of your beautiful results! It's a \$150 value, free! Call today; offer expires in two weeks.

SMILE MAKEOVERS: FOR THE LOOK YOU'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF

FROM THE DENTIST WHO'S BEEN
FEATURED ON NBC'S DATELINE

Dr. Edward A. Romano and his associate use only the very best of today's advanced dental technology to achieve beautiful, lasting results.

Custom-crafted porcelain veneers, one-visit onlays or inlays and the BriteSmile™ in-office whitening system are just a few of the ways the doctors at Aesthetic Smiles of New Jersey can give you the smile of your dreams.

Dr. Romano is a recognized leader in cosmetic dentistry who's been featured on NBC's Dateline. To discover why patients from across the United States and Europe trust their smiles to his care, take advantage of this great offer.



**AESTHETIC SMILES
OF NEW JERSEY**
World-class smiles - guaranteed

CALL 973.285.5480

95 Madison Avenue • Morristown • (Across the street
from Morristown Memorial Hospital)
www.AestheticsmilesOfNJ.com

©PHO 2002

Flexible appointments • Financing plans • Free parking

Screens That Don't Ruin Your View



Custom Fit
Retractable AIRA™
Screen Doors & Windows
From Eclipse Technologies

ECLIPSE

TECHNOLOGIES
NJ Distributor - Eclipse Disappearing Screens
of NJ, NY & PA

Dealer Inquires Welcomed!

Call 732-556-1198

or fax 732-556-1344 or e-mail JohnMuntz@hotmail.com
for more information or in-home demonstration.

Music

Randolph. "It's about having a connection between me and the audience or me and the congregation." Word began to spread, and soon the Family Band was playing at more prominent venues like Irving Plaza and the Bowery Ballroom. Nationally known musicians like Derek Trucks of the Allman Brothers Band and jazz innovator John Medeski would sit in with Randolph or invite him to join them when they were in town.

Despite the solid income his day job provided, Randolph's growing musical success emboldened him to quit the law firm in May 2001. After a summer of touring the country, the Family Band released its debut recording, *Live at the Wetlands*, to rave reviews. The 70-minute album, recorded at the now defunct Manhattan nightclub, contains six of Randolph's concert staples. Songs like "Pressing My Way" showcase Randolph's spiritual optimism, while the electrifying "I Don't Know What You Come to Do" brings the foot-stomping excitement of a House of God service to secular audiences. The *Boston Herald* called Randolph's guitar a "bluesy, rocking weapon of joy," while the *Austin Chronicle* likened his voice to "a train whistle in the humid Georgia night."

Though Randolph maintains a Morristown address, his real home these days is the road. This spring, five weeks after the Stone Pony date, the Family Band appeared at Madison Square Garden as the warm-up act for the Dave Matthews Band. Over the summer the band crisscrossed the country and in August traveled to Barcelona for a Warner Bros. showcase. On the rare Sunday that Randolph finds himself back home in New Jersey, he can still be heard inspiring the congregation at the House of God church in Orange.

For all his recent acclaim, remembering his roots and staying close to his family remain most important to Randolph. He credits Beard, his mentor, with instilling those values in him. "Ted was the one who sat down with me and told me, 'Stay humble and just know that God is always in control of your life when you're playing,'" Randolph says. "Whether you have \$20 million and are playing stadiums or you have \$5 and work at McDonald's, that's something you can never forget about." ☞

Kevin Ford is a former New Jersey Monthly research assistant.