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Makin' the Scene

Science and Soul

by Barry Friedman

The band is in the middle of *Like a Blind Man*, a song about hope and Quixotic futility, and Tom Skinner, on acoustic guitar and lead vocals, has his eyes closed. His hair is gray and thick with a beard to match, covering most of his face, but you can make out the hint of a smile, as if he's in the middle of a conversation only he can hear. He looks more like a man who reads utility meters for a living, which he used to do, than a folk musician--or maybe he's what a folk musician is supposed to look like.

His voice is a storyteller's--not pretty, but reassuring, seamless, almost hypnotic. To his left is a guitarist, one of many on stage tonight, dressed in black, on electric, looking masterful and bored; flanking Tom on the other side, another guitarist, Brad James, who's sitting cross-legged, playing slide. James and the other guitarist swap leads like well-behaved kids with a soccer ball at recess. Behind them is Jimmy Karstein, a drummer, whose beat is the one that matters; on the right of the stage, below the big BEER sign, on keyboards, is Rocky Frisco in a world all his own, the youngest 68-year old in town; and in front of Rocky is Wes Gasaway, on fiddle, an instrument he says is a violin that didn't go to college.

Don Morris, everyone's favorite bass player, who co-wrote *Blind Man* with Skinner, should be here, but isn't. His wife is not well. The band is worried about Marilyn--Tom says it's like a dark cloud is hanging overhead.

Welcome to Tom Skinner's Wednesday Night Science Project, a loose affiliation of, arguably, the finest musicians in Tulsa.

It'd be nice if you had heard of them.

It'd be nice if the tip jar wasn't empty.

On stage is more than 150 years of musical history, talent, craftsmanship, literal and

figurative scars, and missed opportunities, which is one way to look at it.

Another is to listen to what Joe Felzke, from Joe and Ellen, said after taking the stage for a guest set.

"I love playing with these old folkies."

Skinner, at the bar at the time, said, "Hey, hey, hold it."

The Science Project started with just Tom and Wes, and then along the way, as clubs closed and the band moved on, Don, Rocky, Brad, and Jimmy joined in.

"I promised myself before this one," says Skinner, 'no more bands.'"

"The difference, though, is their musicianship. It's the quality, the seasoning they have. If I made a conscious decision to put this band together, it never would have happened."

He laughs. "Now, I can't make these guys go away."

"Often, I'll call out a lead and the guys would have already figured it out. I tell them in case that happens, just ignore me."

Hunter Thompson once said before you know where "it" is, you have to go past it.

Many in the band have not only gone past it; they've lost years trying to find their way back.

It is a diverse, peculiar, and talented group with lives that read like Nathaniel West short stories.

"I mean, it sometimes hits me," says Skinner, "*I'm playing with Rocky Frisco and Jimmy Karstein.*"

Once, when Skinner was going through some liner notes of an old Gram Parsons' album, he noticed Karstein's name.

"I went to Jimmy and asked. I mean, he had played with one of my heros. I said, 'Did

you really play with Gram Parsons?' and Jimmy thought for a minute and said, 'Is he that country dude?'"

To give you some idea of the respect Karstein commands, once on stage, the band started playing something he didn't want to play.

"So we didn't play it," said Skinner.

The old joke in music is the only reason God made drummers is so bass players would have someone to talk to.

The Science Project got its name because, as Skinner likes to say, he never knows how it's going to turn out.

Don Morris said it's like watching a train wreck, seeing what songs won't work.

But when it does--and it usually does--the music is pure and alive and not easily explicable.

A singer one night told the band she wanted to have a rehearsal before her gig with them. Some in Science laughed; some, while familiar with the concept, were perplexed by the request. Brad explained to her that rehearsals are not what Science is about.

Skinner is uncomfortable when you bring it up, but what he was nearly about was Garth Brooks. He and Brooks started together in Stillwater, went to Nashville together, but Tom came back to Oklahoma a few milliseconds before Brooks exploded.

"I never played less music in my life than when I was in Nashville," he says.

"Really, other people have made a bigger deal than I have." he says about his time with Brooks. "When I left, it had nothing to do with personalities; it was about my family," which includes a son, Jeremy, now in college.

"Jeremy used to get in trouble in school and tell people, 'But my dad played with Garth Brooks' and I'd say, 'Stop telling people that.'" Then, when he's not getting enough press, Skinner says he starts reminding them, cackling, "Hey, I played with Garth Brooks."

Joining the band on stage tonight is Rich Bentz, a flautist. Larry Spears, who's not officially in the Project but a Made Guy nonetheless, sits down to listen.

"What do you think happens in life to make someone want to play the flute?"

Spears, too, one of the grizzled Tulsa musicians who gets less press than he deserves, throws away more songs than most songwriters in town finish.

He and Skinner have an unusual friendship. When Skinner made *UTW's Top 100 Movers and Shakers List* last year, Spears commented on his friend's inclusion and the accompanying blurb that read "Skinner makes every song his own."

"He's a damn thief is what he is, a song-stealing bastard," Spears says, smiling.

For his part, Skinner marvels at Spears' musical output, which includes the peaceful yet haunting *Muddy Water*, a song, Spears likes to say, that everyone does better than he does.

"His stuff just blows me away," Skinner says, "but he's jealous; he's not a mover and shaker."

Their relationship, full of love and symbiotic admiration, is like Waylon and Willie, with Spears in the Jennings' role. He's the cranky one, especially when people start talking about his friend in beatific terms.

"Seriously, I don't look at it as competition," says Skinner. "I am competing against myself. If I sing three songs flat last week, I'll try to sing only two flat this week."

That "making stuff his own" is worth mentioning, because when Skinner covers a song, he usually unearths something--something, more often than not, the original artist didn't.

Mining Gold

Recently, playing at Camerelli's, Skinner was talked into doing Elton John's "Levon," and for a minute the restaurant stopped being a restaurant. Cooks and waiters and barflies listened like young musicians at a workshop.

Skinner, as usual, brushed aside the praise.

"A *gaa-rage by the motorway*? Come on," he says, mocking the emphasis in the lyrics, "what the hell is that?"

What happens at Boston's on Wednesday nights is unique in Tulsa. The music and the messengers here, unlike most venues, is more important than the polish and the performance. And while it's unusual if every member of Science knows the tune, it's that imperfection, that experimentation that makes it mesmerizing.

James says it can go from brilliance to debauchery to brilliance in a few bars. He met Skinner in town, but his introduction to the band began with a chance encounter with Karstein when they were both in California.

"Once, we spent all night in his van, talking about music," he tells me.

It is a van, it should be noted, that has sometimes been Jimmy's home through the years.

Another great joke: Question: What do you call a musician without a girlfriend?

Answer: Homeless

Rocky, who's played with Clapton, not to mention J.J. Cale, talks about "the joy" of playing with Science and, like many in the band, his genuine affection and respect for Skinner; still, none of Science ruminates too long on the dynamic of the band or is comfortable talking about themselves--even if they wanted to.

A few weeks back, outside Boston's, on the patio, I was talking to Don Morris about the perception that he's the businessman in the band. Don's a quiet, reserved guy, and as he was saying, "Well, yeah, it's a job. I'm coming to work," some musician, half drunk, walked by and pinched his nipples.

"Have you ever twisted Don Morris' titties? Damn!"

Wes has been known to play standing on his head--of course, there was some help from Jack Daniel's.

Though the band is tired of the label, their music is sometimes called "red dirt"--one part Woody Guthrie, one part country, one part blues: songs of the road, coming home, and, as Jackson Browne wrote, about being one day away from where you want to be.

There's a special musical guest every week, backed up by the band, which Skinner schedules. People like George Barton, Don White, Susan Herndon, Jared Tyler, Jeff Graham, Bob Childers, Ray Rodgers, Scott Aycock, and the Farm Couple.

Science, though, attracts a cross-section of Tulsa musicians. Like acne on a teenagers face, you can spot them all over Boston's on Wednesday--some waiting to play, some trying to catch Skinner's attention, some just hanging out.

A few weeks back, a musician borrowed Skinner's guitar and broke his G-String.

"Happens every time he plays," Skinner said, frantically trying to fix it before going back on stage.

The guitarist from earlier, the masterful, bored one, says it comes from "beating the fuck out of it."

Susan Herndon, surveying the dynamic of Science, calls Tom the rudder of the ship. Wes talks about Tom being a magnet, uncannily drawing people to him.

The audience--and Don says for some it's like coming to church--is a healthy mix of music lovers, practitioners, and groupies.

At times, an exotic, odd-looking pair, called "The Dance Couple," take the floor in front of the band and move like Fred and Ginger after too much Xanax and not enough sleep. They haven't been around lately--his back is out--and it's no wonder. He bends her over and plays her like a guitar; she mimes pulling his hair and pushing away his face.

She has great legs and, apparently, is not a big fan of panties; the band, though, is a big fan of hers. Others dance, too, including various lesbians and couples who have no business being out on this or any other dance floor.

Recently, Karstein, 62, who's answering machine welcomes you to the Karstein Action Hotline, joined me in the back of Boston's as some kid, young enough to be his grandson, played drums for a few songs.

The talk gets around to J.J. Cale, someone with whom both he and Frisco toured last summer and whose biggest problem, according to Karstein, is wearing out the soles of his tennis shoes going from the house to the mailbox to pick up residual checks.

The Science Project should be so lucky. Tonight, six of them, not including the special guest, will split \$250.

"It's embarrassing," says Skinner "to have to pay these guys so little."

If you think it's glamorous, this musician business, that works out to about \$35 per performer ... for four hours, not including set-up and load-out.

As an added insult, and what really hurts, Boston's charges them full price for drinks.

Science is at Boston's every Wednesday, except when the band is bumped for a special event.

In July, that will be someone called Afroman.

"Afro who?" a number of musicians want to know.

Skinner knows, and breaks into Afroman's big hit, "Because I Got High."

Karstein, who's also played with Joe Cocker, Leon Russell, and Taj Mahal, is philosophical about musical venues in Tulsa: "Ah, hell, they're all pool halls to me."

Other members of Science like to quote Karstein's Rules of Show Business; unfortunately, the only two anyone can remember are numbers 1) *Take the money they give you*, and 17) *Get on the bus and shut up*.

After Hours

There are two shows: the one at Boston's and the other at breakfast.

After Science is over and the band carts its respective stuff into their 10-and 15-year old cars and trucks, some of us head to Village Inn, where Schyler, our waitress, awaits.

I am only here because I'm married to one of the musicians. This Village Inn gig is Invitation Only.

On this day, like most early Thursday mornings, the talk is about musicians, extra terrestrials, new songs, ex-wives, and Tom's heart attack a few years back.

Susan, a vegetarian, gets the Boca Burger; Rocky gets eggs over hard and toast, a meal he orders in painstaking detail, making sure Schyler knows how he wants the yolks presented to him; the other musician, whose name I didn't get, orders ice cream; and Skinner gets the pancakes, extra butter.

Schyler rolls her eyes. She's been through this before. She knows to bring the crackers and extra mayo and to make the fries well done.

Someone kids Tom about the time Tom, strung out on something or other a million years ago, swore the car radio had a face.

"I swear," Skinner insists, "the knobs were singing to me. I could see their lips move."

Rocky, who knows more than is probably healthy, talks about a DVD he wants us to see that exposes the 9/11 Conspiracy and then begins to explain the Illuminati, a movement that began in 18th-Century Bulgaria and its link to George Bush, the anti-Christ, lizards, and world domination.

Skinner is perplexed; Susan and the other musician listen intently.

Tom, who's called Tiny by his friends, then mentions he's traveling to Texas next week to play with Mike McClure and imagines he'll continue his streak.

"What streak is that?" he's asked.

"The 'Tiny going down to Texas and not getting laid' streak. I'm on Week Three."

His pancakes come. He's had one heart attack for sure, but thinks there might have been one or two others recently. The extra butter is the celebration he's still here, though Susan won't let him order any more. He carries a small tin of nitro tablets on his keychain, just in case, of which he said, "If you're having a heart attack, these will save your life; if you're not, they'll give you one blinding headache."

Spears jokes that every time Skinner's career starts waning, he has another heart attack.

To look at these musicians, you'd think a Village Inn in Tulsa, Oklahoma at 3 in the morning is heaven.

The sun will be up soon and nobody's in any rush to leave.

There's more talk about a gig at the Blue Door in Oklahoma City; the predilections and prejudice of the musical press here in Tulsa; the various women, ex-wives, girlfriends and children in their lives who alternately torture and soothe them; and why there's a 17-mile per hour road sign on a ramp on the Turner Turnpike.

"Must have been the guy's last day before he quit," someone says.

Skinner then pays Susan \$25 for some previous gig.

"Yeah, you stick with me, kid. You'll get the big bucks."

Back Home

Music is full of images--from the songs, from the singers, from the venues. And on Wednesdays, in front of the best band you've never heard of, there's Skinner--this musician who should be as famous as Brooks; the song-stealing bastard with the bruised heart; this 50-something bearded folkie, who sings with his eyes closed, who won't be getting laid for a third consecutive week--reaching deep into a song about a washed-up minor league baseball player who can't leave the game he loves and pulling out the lyrics by the guts.