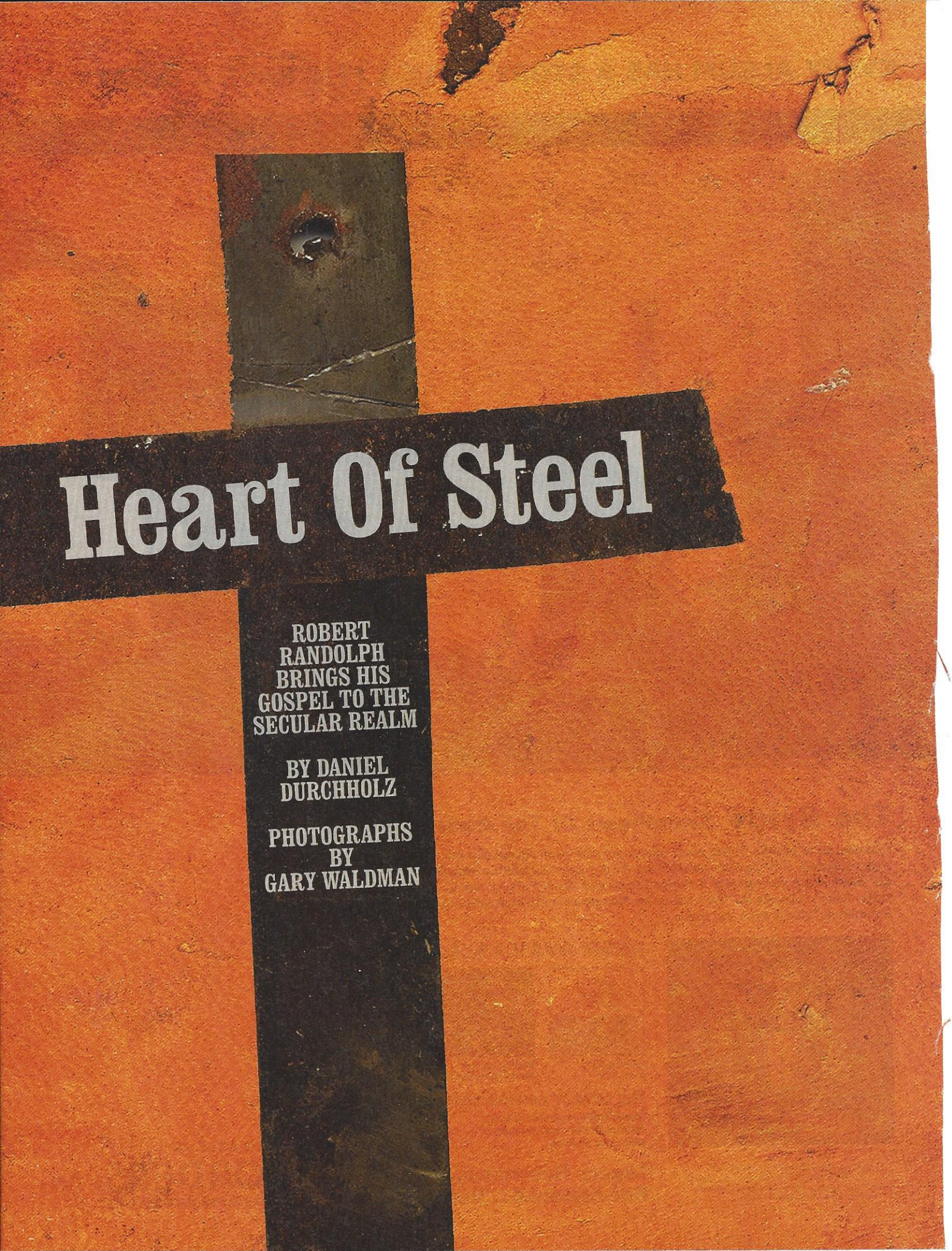
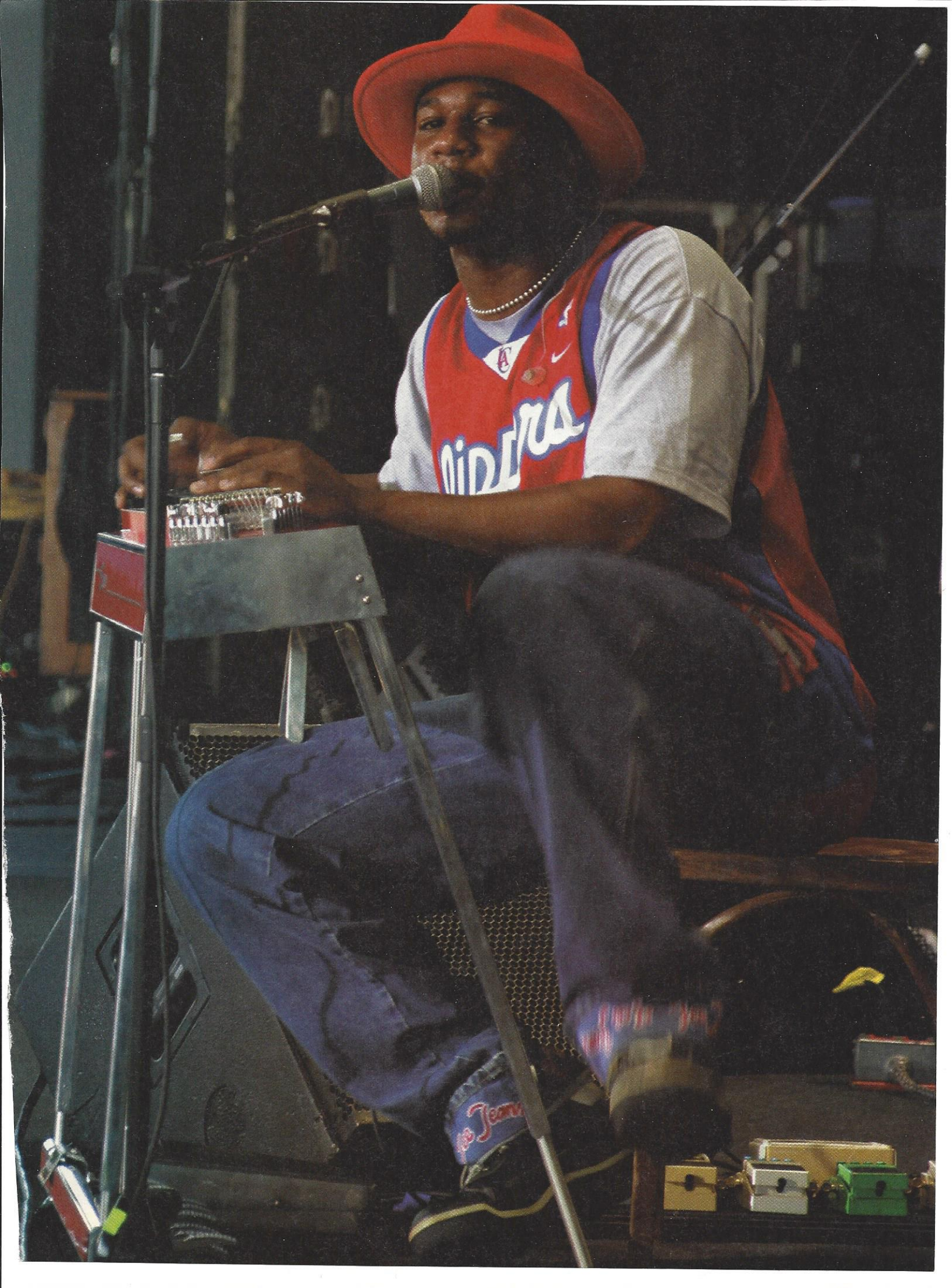


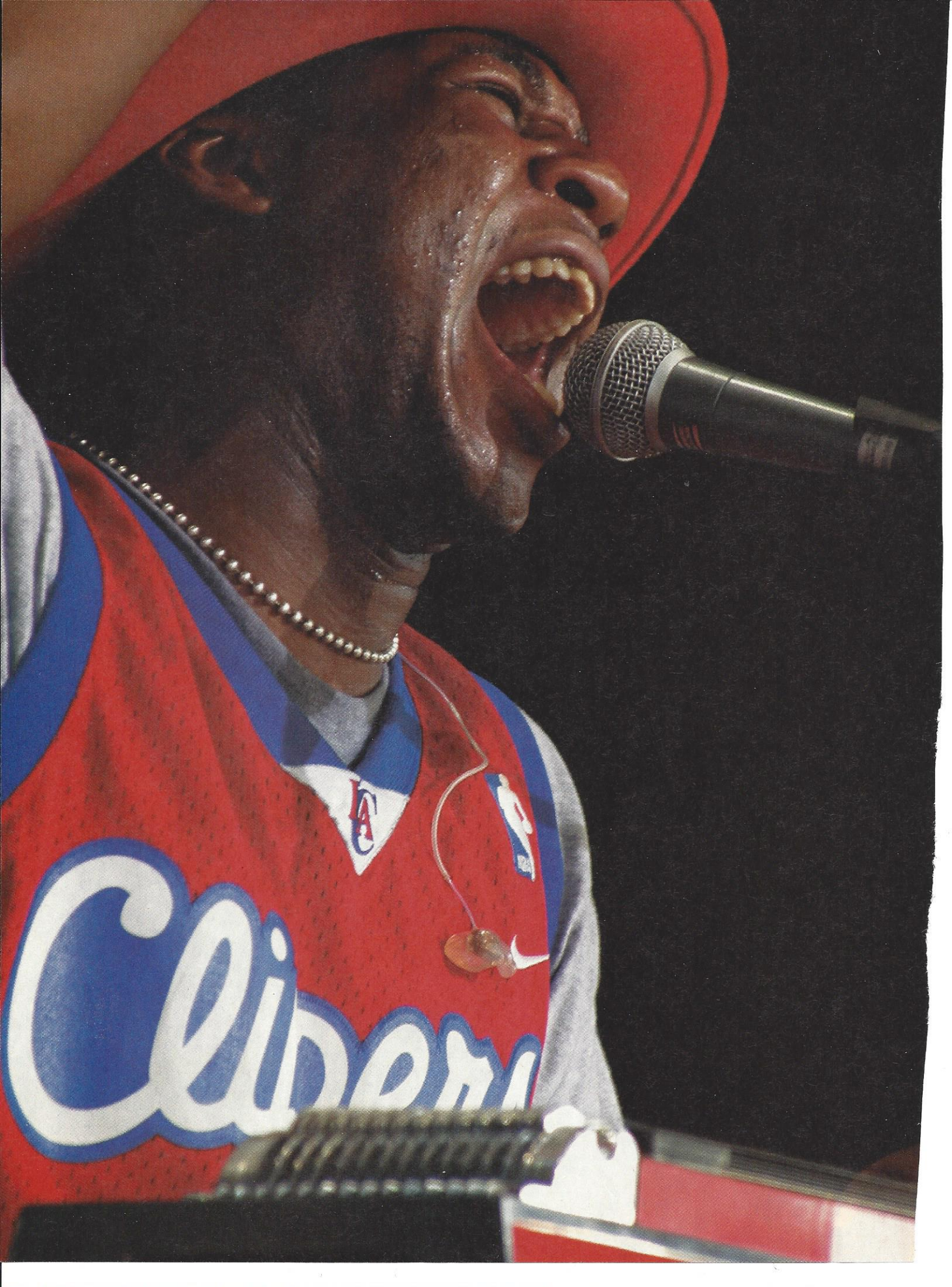
Heart Of Steel

ROBERT RANDOLPH BRINGS HIS GOSPEL TO THE SECULAR REALM

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY WALDMAN





ROBERT RANDOLPH is perched on the edge of the stage at St. Louis nightclub Mississippi Nights, so close to the crowd down front that at any minute the unruly throng might reach up and pull him in, along with his custom-made 13-string steel guitar. Should Randolph topple, however, there are plenty of outstretched arms to catch him.

Is there such a thing as stage diving in gospel music?

If not, it may fall to Randolph, the 25-year-old wunderkind, to introduce the practice. He's already brought the decades-old House of God Pentecostal Church tradition known as "sacred steel" — in which services are driven to sweaty, shouting, stomping ecstasy by a steel-guitar-led combo — into the 21st century (by mixing it with rock and blues) and into the secular world (by taking it to clubs such as the Nights).

Randolph, dressed more like a hip-hop star than a gospel performer, with a football jersey, skull cap, and sneaks, is a blur of activity at his instrument, leaning into it and wringing as much expression as possible out of every note, occasionally grabbing the mike and exhorting the crowd to "press on" through difficult times, or asserting that all of us need more love in our lives right now. At one point, the spirit — or maybe simple showmanship — moves him to stand and leap straight into the air; he lands nimbly on the folding chair he'd been sitting on an instant before. No mean feat for a big man.

His set list is surprisingly eclectic. He plays tracks from his jam-filled debut disc *Live At The Wetlands* and previews several songs from his new album *Unclassified* (released in August by Dare/Warner Bros.). There's a down and dirty (but not profane) version of Slim Harpo's "Shake Your Hips" and brief nods to classic-rock guitar riffs, including Hendrix's "Purple Haze" and Sabbath's "Iron Man". There's even a dip or two into saccharine pop — Steve Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You" and Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy". In Randolph's world, just about everything is fair game.

Two and a half hours after he began, Randolph leaves the stage at last, having preached to the choir, as it were, and likely winning a few new converts as well — to his music, if not necessarily his faith.

A FEW WEEKS and a quick tour opening for the Dave Matthews Band later, Randolph is back at his New Jersey home trying to work in some doctor and dentist appointments between stints on the road.

"I've got some wisdom teeth that need to be pulled at some point," he says with a groan. "When you're on the road, you don't get a chance to ever do that stuff. In the last two years, I've been home maybe 60 days. We're going back out tomorrow."

For Randolph, the road goes on forever, or at least it has seemed to since he released *Live At The Wetlands* in 2001. He's toured relentlessly, on his own and as an opening act for artists such as Matthews, the Derek Trucks Band, Victor Wooten, Soulive, and others.

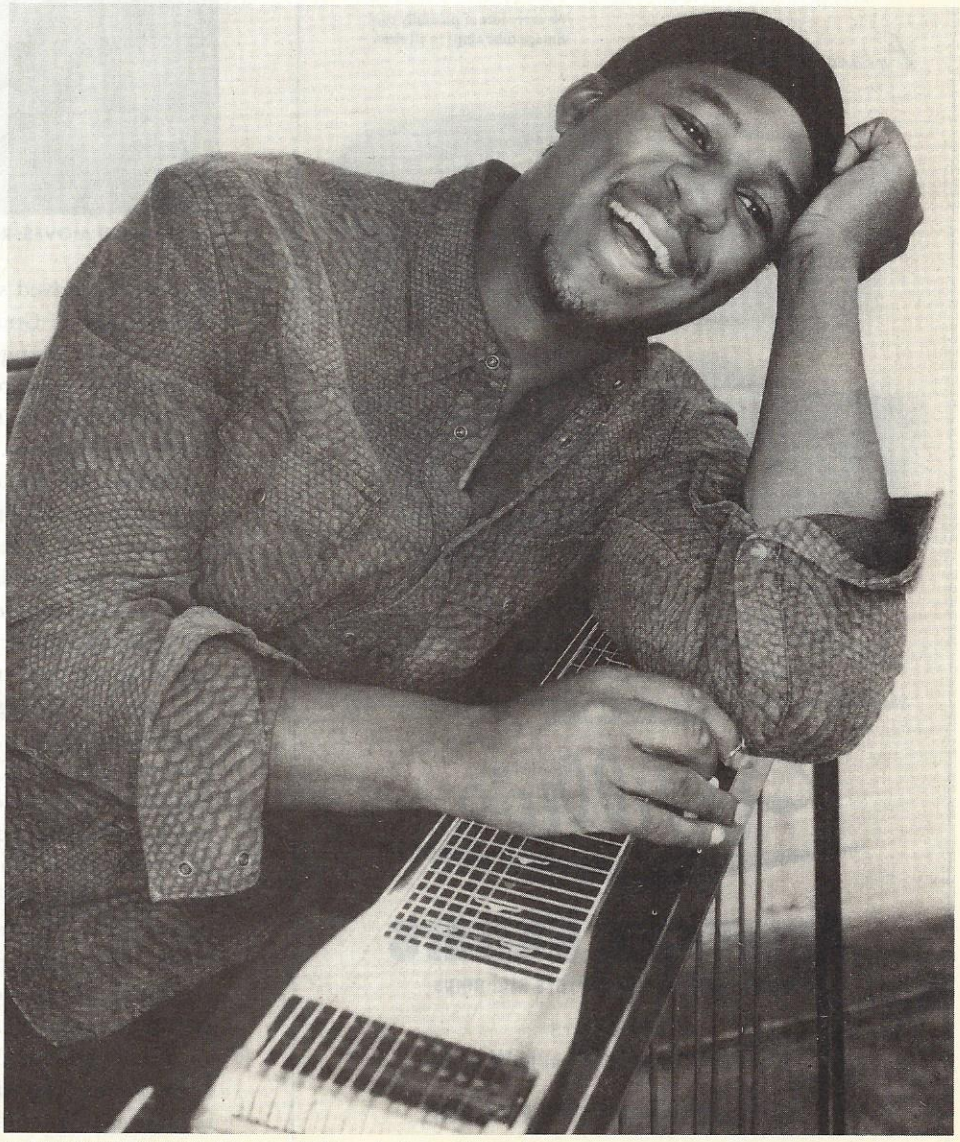
Unclassified, his first studio album, finds Randolph and the Family Band — cousins Danyel Morgan on bass and Marcus Randolph on drums, and "honorary cousin" John Ginty on keyboards — reigning in the jams in favor of a more song-oriented approach. Randolph sings as well, something he admits intimidated him initially.

"It was kinda like that at first, but not really, because that's what all artists gotta do somewhere somehow — you gotta learn how to do something else," he says. "Even for Danyel, who's been singing since he was young — he's always sang high falsetto. For him to make the transition to singing some songs in a lower register and doing backgrounds, it was challenging for us all."

As for lyrics, the approach on *Unclassified* seems to be the simpler, the better. Each of the album's seven vocal numbers is built around a basic message addressed, if not to God specifically, then to a special someone who has pulled the song's protagonist out of the dark and kept them safe, warm, spiritually nourished. The verses move into anthemic choruses that are repeated time and again as the music builds, the solos intensify, and the songs break out into raucous celebrations.

In short, it's roof-raisin' music.

ALL OF THIS is a long way from where Randolph was just a couple of years ago. He worked as a paralegal during the week and



PHOTOGRAPH BY WYATT MCSPADDEN

ROBERT RANDOLPH, in full voice (left) and relaxing (above).

AS THE SPIRIT MOVES: Robert Randolph, live.

on Sundays played steel guitar in the House of God Pentecostal Church in Orange, New Jersey, winding his improvised licks around the minister's entreaties to the congregation.

Before he picked up the steel guitar and came back to the church in a serious way, Randolph did his time on the street corner, skipping school, listening to gangsta rap and getting in his share of trouble.

"Jersey is a rough place to begin with," he says. "The area I grew up in is urban and kinda rough — a lot of crime and crookedness going on. A lot of the frustrations that go on in life, I grew up with. Friends getting killed, you know? What happened to me when I became a teenager, music became that kind of escape for me. A way out."

Randolph says he always knew the way out was by going to church. "But when you're young, you need something to keep you occupied. As things go on, with people going to jail and getting killed, I was in the house playing music. In some ways, it's amazing that I'm still alive today. I was really a part of all those things my friends did. But music was just that thing that got me out of it."

His mother was a minister and his father a deacon in the House of God, and he took an interest in music early, playing drums in the church youth choir. But he also grew up listening to sacred steel greats such as Calvin Cooke, Maurice "Ted" Beard, and the Campbell Brothers.

Beard, in fact, became Randolph's step-grandfather after his parents divorced and his father married Beard's daughter. And it was Chuck Campbell who bought him his first guitar, a small lap steel that cost $100, as a Christmas gift.

Sacred steel itself dates back

to the late 1930s, when Philadelphians Troman and Willie Eason learned how to play lap steel guitar from a Hawaiian acquaintance and then brought their instruments into the House of God. The sect itself cites Psalm 150:4 ("Praise him with stringed instruments") and Psalm 149:3 ("Let them praise his name in the dance") as the scriptural justification for their use of musical instruments and dance in their services. Their distinct approach to the instrument developed all but unnoted beyond church walls until Florida folklorist Robert Stone stumbled upon the music in 1992.

Nearly all of the elder players who came across Randolph gave him advice, not just about music, but about life.

"They taught me how to play, but they also taught me how to be humble," he says. "How to always have an open mind about learning and criticism and stuff like that."

Randolph credits Beard as a special source of inspiration. "I spent a summer with him and he taught me a lot of things. I spent a long time with him and every day I'd practice, play, and learn some songs — good gospel songs, old traditionals. It was great."

But the real turning point for Randolph was in 1998, when a friend loaned him a cassette tape filled with songs by Stevie Ray Vaughan.

"Once I heard him, that just did it for me," Randolph says. "The way he approached the music with his soul — that's one thing I tell to a lot of guitar players, or people who sing or play anything. I'm like, 'The soul is what counts, not how much you can play, how many notes, how many scales or chords, you know?' It's like your soul is connected to somebody else's soul. People feel that. That's what Stevie Ray did."

WORD OF RANDOLPH'S talents spread, and he contributed a cut to the 1999 anthology *Sacred Steel — Live!* (Arhoolie) which featured Cooke, Beard, the Campbells, and Willie Eason, among others. He and his cousin Marcus also cut a demo with producer Eric "Roscoe" Ambel that found its way into the hands of blues-rock jam band the North Mississippi Allstars.

"It was his combination of technique and soul," says Allstars frontman Luther Dickinson. "We were just freaked out by this guy we had never heard of before."

The Allstars, who were touring with Medeski, Martin & Wood, had been kicking around the idea of doing an instrumental gospel album with keyboardist John Medeski They tapped Randolph to open for them at New York's Bowery Ballroom, and were floored by his electrifying performance. It was Randolph's first gig outside of church; he had entered the world of secular music at last. "I might have to pay some karmic retribution for that that later," Dickinson says with a laugh.

The instrumental album did come together, and *The Word* was released in 2001. It served as a coming-out party for Randolph, who was warmly embraced by the jam-band crowd, which already monitored every move made by the Allstars and MMW.

Randolph embraced them right back. "The reason the jam-band scene is getting so huge and you have all these big jam bands today is because mainstream music is so bad," he says. "A lot of these kids who like these bands had parents and aunts and uncles that grew up on true bands — band like Led Zeppelin and the Stones. They watched actual bands sing and play and perform, and these kids want that, too.

"That's what the jam scene is all about. These bands are coming out and they're actually playing their guitars. You listen to records these days and a lot of the bands are

not even playing. A guy plays a riff, it goes into a computer. That gets looped, the drums get looped. And when you go see the actual band perform, it's like, 'That's not what I heard.'

"I just call it a true music scene, that's what I call the jam scene," he continues. "When the right band performs, like the Allstars or Widespread Panic, it's great. They have fans of all sorts and different ages.; hippies, fraternity or sorority kids, whatever. And that's what we've become. We're in that jam scene and we just play and jam for like 30 minutes sometimes.

"A lot of people are kind of afraid to listen to a jam band. With us, it's just a new sound and a new thing. It's positive and it makes people want to dance. At our shows, we'll have people from 18 to 60. It's just great. It makes my heart feel so good to be interacting with people and to let the music connect with people in a good spirit. Making people happy — that's what music is about, and that's what it should always be about."

THE JAM-FRIENDLY New York City venue Wetlands was the natural place to record Randolph's live album. Last year, he and the Family Band added another line to their impressive resume by serving as the backing band (along with guitarist Ben Harper) on the Blind Boys of Alabama album *Higher Ground.*

"It was cool, just learning from those guys and just talking to them about all their times on the road and what they've done in the music business," Randolph says. "It worked well because we're used to playing with older gospel singers anyway, coming from the church. Those guys can sing anything. They're ready to do whatever, as long as it's cool and it's spiritual to them and as long as it fits."

Paying respect to his elders comes a little easier for Randolph today, for as the head of his own label, Dare Records — part of the deal when he signed with Warner Bros. for the release of *Unclassified* — he can dole out a few record contracts, as he has done with Calvin Cooke and several other of his inspirations. Cooke's album, which Randolph produced, is due in the fall.

"It feels great to be able to do that for these guys," Randolph says. "Guys like Calvin — he was me and probably more 30 years ago. To be able to help him, to continue on his dream or whatever he wants to do now that I have my foot in the door, it's great."

Randolph has other acts lined up for Dare as well, and he's setting his goals high for the label and his own career. He's intent on nothing less than changing the face of music itself — or at least its attitude.

"I want to do this thing now where music becomes this thing that is good and true and about the instruments and about the heart and the soul again," he says. "You have some of that out there, but as far as the mainstream and what is being pushed to kids..." his voice trails off.

"I'm still young, but when I look at some of these kids and the mind frame that they're in, it's like, the world is in trouble, man. Corporations don't look at that. All they look at is making a dollar. But you can make that same dollar if you spend time putting a good message out there.

"What I want to do with Dare is to do music of artists that I know that are talented, putting it out in a way that can appeal to a mass audience. Music that's not cheesy pop or cheesy rock. Music that has that gospel flavor and that energy. People will love it. That's what it's all about."

Daniel Durchholz worships at the altar of rock 'n' roll. He lives in St. Louis.