



# ZZ Top

By Tom Vickers

**A**FTER THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AS THE world's longest-running band with no personnel changes, ZZ Top is instantly recognizable, by both sight and sound. ZZ Top's beards and blues-based Texas rock have made the band a cultural icon. Their likenesses have appeared in *The New Yorker* – a cartoon depicting a long-bearded police officer, captioned “ZZ Cop” – and in an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Bart spies three Hasidim and yells, “Hey, look. It’s ZZ Top. You guys rock!”

Yes, they rock. But they do so with elements of blues, soul, garage punk and boogie, not forgetting a lyrical outlook that embraces sex, beer drinkin', hell raisin', cars, Texas lore and landscapes, and fine-lookin' gals.



Left: Frank Beard, Joe Michael “Dusty” Hill and Billy F. Gibbons (from left)

The fruits of Billy F. Gibbons’, Frank Beard’s and Dusty Hill’s imaginations, guided by manager/producer Bill Ham, have entered our consciousness in many ways.

The story starts on December 16, 1949, with the birth of Billy Gibbons. His father, Fred, was Houston’s premier society bandleader while serving as conductor for the Houston Symphony Orchestra. But it was a far different sound that sparked young Billy’s interest in all things funky, low-down and soulful. When Billy was seven, his seventeen-year-old baby-sitter, named Little Stella, took him to Houston’s Fourth Ward clubs, where he saw the blues and R&B stars of the day.

Little Stella’s musical field trips inspired Billy to learn to play guitar, and on Christmas day 1963, his parents gave him a Gibson Melody Maker, along with a Fender Champ amplifier. By the time he reached high school, he’d already played lead guitar in a number of Houston garage bands. In his senior year, his band the Coachmen broke up, and Billy, along with drummer Dan Mitchell, formed the Moving Sidewalks – a louder, more psychedelic outfit, playing mostly original material.

Backstage at a Doors show in 1967,





## "Three funky chords, three funky guys"

Gibbons ran into the man who would change his life. Bill Ham, a local record promoter and onetime teen idol, became the Sidewalks' manager, and his connections enabled the band to open four Texas shows for Jimi Hendrix.

Just as the Sidewalks were beginning to take off, the draft came calling, and the band folded. Gibbons, who successfully avoided Uncle Sam, had wanted to ditch the psychedelic sound for a more rootsy, blues-based approach, and so, in 1969, the earliest incarnation of ZZ Top was born. A young bass player named Billy Ethridge, who briefly played with Gibbons, introduced him to "a guy in a red Volkswagen, wearing blue-tinted shades and bowling shoes, [with] a backseat full of drums." Frank Beard would soon be part of ZZ Top. Born June 11, 1949, in Frankston, Texas, Beard had become obsessed with drums after seeing the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964. Beard had been playing in various high school bands when he met two brothers, Rocky and Dusty Hill, in 1967. They formed a band initially called the Warlocks that evolved into American Blues. Dusty (real name: Joe Michael) Hill was already an accomplished touring musician by the age of fifteen. Born in Dallas on May 19, 1949, he met his life's destiny at the age of thirteen when he picked up the bass and accompanied his guitar-slinging brother. They joined bluesman Freddie King's backup band for three years.

Dusty found himself in Houston in 1969, backing up Lightnin' Hopkins. Beard dropped by and mentioned that he was playing with the guitarist from the Moving Sidewalks and that they were looking for a bassist to round out a power trio. Dusty auditioned, and ZZ Top was born.

Their first live gig was at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Beaumont, Texas, on February 10, 1970. In late 1969, ZZ Top recorded their first single, "Salt Lick" b/w "Miller's

Above: The Top and their hot rod, the Eliminator. Left: Texans wielding axes: Dusty Hill (left) and Billy Gibbons, circa 1980.

Farm," which enabled Ham to go label shopping. The band landed on London Records, where it kept a low profile until its third album. Released in July 1973, *Tres Hombres* was the group's first platinum album. Capturing ZZ Top's dynamic live sound as well as the band's blues and soul roots, *Tres Hombres* featured their biggest FM-radio hit to date, "La Grange." The song was written as an homage to a famous house of ill repute, later celebrated in the Broadway musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. "La Grange" is where ZZ's boogie and rock met.

At this time of glorious excess in rock production, Ham dreamed up an extravaganza called ZZ Top's Worldwide Texas Tour. The most expensive Texas-size tour to hit the road, it encompassed five semis' worth – about seventy-five tons – of stage equipment and Texas flora and fauna, including a wide range of cacti, a longhorn steer, a buffalo, a rattlesnake and buzzards, all presented to audiences on a Texas-shaped stage.

The Worldwide Texas Tour came in the wake of ZZ



The Moving Sidewalks with Jimi Hendrix, who once called Gibbons (right) his "favorite guitarist," circa 1968



## "The beard had grown to doormat proportions"

Top's second huge hit of the seventies, a two-minutes-and-change boogie-rocker called "Tush." Pulled from the band's fourth album, *Fandango!*, "Tush" was cooked up on the road. "We took a booking in Florence, Alabama, in 1974 or '75, in a dirt-floored arena," Gibbons recalls. "I had been turned on to the flip side of a Roy Head single, which was an instrumental called 'Tush Hog,' and I threw down this guitar riff, and it took all of three minutes to create it right there."

The band's second consecutive platinum album, *Fandango!* was followed by *Tejas*, which was released in December of '76. After seven years of nonstop touring and record making, the band was exhausted and ready for a break. The months off stretched into a couple of years. In 1978 they got a call from Ham and decided to fire up the ZZ Top engine for another round. They were free from their deal with London Records, and they signed with Warner Bros. When the three members got together for a band meeting, they noticed something had changed during their time apart. They had always had some form of facial hair, with Frank usually sporting a mustache and Billy and Dusty wearing scruffy little beards. "I walk into the room, and I'm looking at a guy I think I know," Billy says with a laugh. "My beard has grown to doormat proportions, and I realized that Dusty had done the same thing." Ironically, Beard was the only clean-shaven member, having hacked off his mustache and goatee so he would look presentable for the meeting.

Sporting a new look and a new label, ZZ Top continued to refine their sound. Change was in the air. In 1981, a brand-new phenomenon, MTV, was launched nationally. Meanwhile, Billy had been nurturing his longtime love of hot rods. He had painted his 1934 Ford coupe fire-engine red, with the band's logo detailed on the side. He had also been experimenting with the latest musical gear. The world of loops,

experimental guitar sounds and streamlined electronics all went into the making of ZZ Top's new album. By the time it was finished, it was clear the group had created something special.

Soon the Toppers found themselves with a hot, fresh sound; a new visual hook in Billy's red street rod; and a new medium of exposure in MTV. They titled the new album *Eliminator*, after the drag-racing term, and put an illustration of Billy's new hot rod on the cover. Next came the video: "You put three funky chords with three funky guys and three pretty girls and a nice, shiny red car," recalls Gibbons. "Man, it was just automatic." The video for ZZ's first single off *Eliminator*, "Gimme All Your Lovin'," had an immediate impact. Heretofore, the band had deliberately shied away from television appearances. "We had toured extensively," Billy adds, "and yet we remained an enigmatic, invisible mystery band." Now the beards, the sunglasses, the cars and the girls blended together to create a new image of what ZZ Top had become. *Eliminator* broke the group to a global audience. The *Eliminator* trilogy of singles ("Gimme All Your Lovin'," "Sharp Dressed Man" and "Legs") became MTV staples, and the album went ten-times-platinum in America.

While *Eliminator* was the biggest of their Warners albums, the band continued to have multiplatinum success into the nineties. By mid-decade, ZZ Top had negotiated a new deal with BMG and to date have released four albums, the most recent being *Mescalero*. Their 2003 Beer Drinkers and Hell Raisers Tour, which took them across America, as well as to twelve European countries (including a Helsinki gig with the Rolling Stones), underscores their ongoing appeal.

When all three band members reflect on how they've managed to stay together for so long, Billy notes, "Frank figured it out. We've done this longer than school, than marriage—longer than just about anything." The sheer joy of playing together seems to be the driving force that has kept ZZ Top going all these years.

It is still a gas for these three Texans to get onstage and gather in the studio and create their unique sound that has rocked the world for the past three and a half decades. It's an incredible legacy, and even more incredible still that it's a work in progress.

Hill, Gibbons, Beard  
(from left), Bandara Cafe,  
Brackettville, Texas, in 1973

# "They Were Burning Live"

Bill Bentley on ZZ Top's early days as Texas' "boogieingest" band

ZZ Top might be the first rock & roll band that actually sounds like Texas. Biting guitar, thumping bass and back-alley drums: From the very first shows, the trio captured everything great about the Lone Star State. They were raised on the soulful musical strains that make Texas strong, learning their lessons so naturally that watching them get started was to share in a destiny being born.

Down in Houston, it was almost taken for granted that guitarist Billy F. Gibbons was going to make it. Even when his early band, the Coachmen, was playing in Dr. Denton Cooley's den during one of his daughter's parties, Gibbons stood out like a lightbulb. He had the touch, the tone and the determination. He carried himself like a man, at all of fifteen years old. There's no doubt he caught some of that character on the natch. Houston was home to not only Lightnin' Hopkins, whom you could still see playing in front of ice houses and bars, but to a slew of other

**The furry freak brothers of the guitar kind**

guitarists like Albert Collins, Johnny Copeland and Joe Hughes. Add to that a heavy dose of psychedelia, and Gibbons' hitmaking high school group, the Moving Sidewalks, quickly became the talk of the town.

Bassist Dusty Hill and drummer Frank Beard were privy to the same soulful education a few hours north in Dallas. Blessed with blistering blues-radio signals and a whole string of nightclubs and ballrooms, Dallas was a city where it was impossible not to get immersed in Texas music: jazz, rock, blues, country, conjunto, R&B and beyond. Dusty soon crossed the line into true blues, and there was no looking back. Beard never missed a chance to see touring acts like Jimmy Reed, not to mention homegrown heroes like Freddie King and T-Bone Walker. When you dip that deep into the blues well when you're young, you're pretty much covered for life. When the bassist and drummer threw in together in American Blues, they joined the elite list of rhythm sections like Stax's Dunn and Jackson and Muscle Shoals'

Hood and Hawkins. The difference for the Texans was they were burning live.

In 1969, when ZZ Top was born, the Lone Star State's musical landscape had taken some heavy hits. Its two top bands, the Sir Douglas Quintet and the 13th Floor Elevators, had fought the law, and as the Bobby Fuller Four predicted, the law won. The R&B and blues scenes had lost much of their power following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The integration that music did so much to promote seemed to stop in its tracks. Which made the arrival of ZZ Top and its hellacious first single, "Salt Lick" b/w "Miller's Farm," a pivotal signal that not everyone was folding up his tent. Now all they had to do was find a following.

The good news and bad news about the Texas rock & roll circuit is the size of the state. There are a dozen cities for club bookings, but it's hard to create any sustained excitement when everything is so spread out. So the group did what great bands do: They played anywhere and everywhere until acolytes started

singing their praises to all who would listen. Concerts in College Station got people talking in Huntsville, and from there a night in Alvin led to an offer in San Antonio. Hell, it was only a matter of months before the band crossed state lines and worked its way through Louisiana all the way to Memphis.

Even with an absolutely adamant fan-hood building, the trio still had to endure its fair share of oddball endeavors out on the early road: Gigs included cafeterias, lumber yards and even one National Guard Armory appearance to an audience of one. These character-building tours never deterred what was fast becoming known as Texas' own state band, and by the time ZZ Top's first LP was released in 1970, many Texans were signed on for life as devotees of the state's "boogieingest" band. Thirty-five years later, and the music still feels as strong as it did that night at Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters, when Gibbons, Hill and Beard announced to the world they were coming to get us. □

