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ZZ Top

By [Joan Tuppance](#)
May 1st, 2010

ZZ Top's iconic sunglasses and beards may give them a distinct identity, singling them out in a New Yorker cartoon and on "The Simpsons," but it's their earthy every-man mix of blues and rock 'n' roll that landed them in The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

"They brought rock 'n' roll back to its core," says Jim Henke, vice president of exhibitions and chief curator at The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio. "They brought it back to the blues. They are three tremendous musicians."

Strip away the beards, the sunglasses and the rock 'n'roll persona and what do you have? Three fun-loving, blues-based Texans who are out for the ride of a lifetime.

"What you see on stage is what they are in real life. The two have merged," observes Bob Merlis, the band's spokesman for more than 30 years. "They have become the persona they are on stage because they have lived it for so long. They have a great sense of humor in their presentation and commentary as well as in their songs."

The chest-length beards that give the group its special look have a purpose, according to the band's front man, Billy F. Gibbons. "This may come as a shock, but we're not as cute and kissy as some of the boy bands out there," he jokes. "Keeping things under wraps brought on a splendid excuse for mastering laziness."

In reality the beards weren't part of any master plan. They took hold during the band's three-year hiatus in the late 1970s. "While we were on that infamous lengthy break, the chin whiskers sprouted quite independently," Gibbons says. "When the break concluded, notes were compared and the realization that our chin whiskers had grown totally out of hand [was acknowledged]. It figured as a good idea to keep 'em and that's more or less the way it's been ever since."

Guitarist Gibbons, bassist Dusty Hill and drummer Frank Beard (who doesn't sport a beard because, as Gibbons puts it, having the last name Beard doesn't compel one to "wear the name on the chin") are now in their fourth decade of music. The original trio has remained intact since 1969, something no other major band can claim.

ZZ Top is legendary in the music industry. The band was inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in 2004. Band members were named Official Heroes of the State of Texas in 1986, and on May 4, 1991, Gov. Ann Richards declared the day ZZ Top Day in Texas.

The band reached the 50 million-records-sold point in 1990. Their "Eliminator" album achieved the Recording Industry Association of America's Diamond status – they were in the first group of artists that received the award – with domestic sales in excess of 10 million units. Their lyrics, which are often gritty and tongue-in-cheek, may be simplistic but their songs are epic. Tunes such as "La Grange," "Legs," "Tush," "Gimme All Your Lovin'" and "Sharp Dressed Man" still spawn new generations of fans.

ZZ Top dates back to 1969, when Gibbons was in search of a new musical

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venture: a band with a great rhythm section. Gibbons had been playing with the band The Moving Sidewalks. Hill and Beard had been with their own band, American Blues. The three Texans got together and the rest is, as they say, history.

All three drew their musical inspiration from artists such as Little Richard, James Brown and Ray Charles, creating an instant and strong camaraderie. "It was rock 'n' roll kismet and now, marking the fourth decade of doing this, it's clear the stars aligned for this terrifying trio," Gibbons says.

Gibbons, who hails from Houston, caught the blues bug when he was a youngster. "Our housekeeper inundated the house in loud R&B radio music – blues musicians and singers such as Jimmy Reed, Bobby Blue Bland and Lightnin' Hopkins – and, from way early on, there were them bad, bad blues," he says, adding that he was also influenced by an outing with his little sister. "We got to see Elvis in Houston with our mom. That certainly made that hard-lasting impression, to say the least."

He became interested in the electric guitar because he felt it "was the requirement to go from bystander to byproduct of the eccentricity of electricity in the rock 'n'roll world." His first electric guitar, a 1963 Gibson Melody Maker, was a Christmas present, received just nine days after his 13th birthday. "That changed his life," says Merlis.

Gibbons has never gotten rid of a guitar since that first one. "He sold his first guitar early on for a better one," Merlis explains. "Almost 47 years to the day, the neighbor who bought it appeared at a book signing for Billy's book, 'Rock + Roll Gearhead.' He told Billy he still had the guitar. They stayed in touch and he loaned it back to Billy who played it at the Roxy in Los Angeles in 2009."

One of Gibbons' early musical influences was Jimi Hendrix – Gibbons opened for the Jimi Hendrix Experience in 1968 before ZZ Top was formed. "That was mind-blowing," he says. According to Internet reports, Hendrix referred to Gibbons as his "favorite guitar player" on late-night television.

Like any new band, the trio had to come up with a name for the group. Gibbons explains their unorthodox selection process. "We kept toying with names and were totally addicted with the name and recordings of some great blues men. Then of course there were Zig Zag and TOP rolling papers, and ... and ..."

ZZ Top grabbed the industry's attention with its third album, "Tres Hombres," their first gold album. One of its tracks, "La Grange," a boot-tapping gritty ditty about a particular chicken ranch featured in the film "The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas," shot up the charts.

In 1975, the group began a year-and-a-half worldwide tour that Gibbons describes as "play, travel, play, travel, repeat a few hundred times." City identities blurred together during the grueling schedule. "It's going from dressing room to the stage and that's almost all there is," Gibbons explains. "The endless exacting surroundings of Holiday Inn made for seamless stumbling into closets and cantinas. Rock on!"

ZZ Top continued to rack up the hits. Two of their most popular tunes, "Legs" and "Sharp Dressed Man," were tracks from the "Eliminator" album, which had a different, more engineered feel musically than previous albums. "There were new contraptions to hammer on and seeing how they could meld modern electronics with down-home blues, well, it provided a powerful point," Gibbons explains. "It seems like the combination was a winning one in light of the fact that the recording sold more than 10 million copies in the U.S. alone. It's still a powerful reference point for excursions into the experimental unknown, a bluesy unknown at that."

Onstage, the band made a statement with their unique style and props, everything from cactus to cattle. While they may appear to be "party hearty" rockers, and yes, they have had a good ol' time over the years, that "bad boy, hell raising" persona is just that, a glorified persona. "Ah, yeah ... TVs out the window ... betting on the calculated bounce factor," Gibbons kids. "And, of course, the never-ending late-night outings to experience local music at the first hint of the rarity of 'time off' and tucking into bed ... wondering if it's beards on top of the covers or ..."

Over the years, Merlis has never seen any members of the group let their



celebrity status go to their heads. "They have handled success very well," he observes. "They don't have that attitude that some have; that superiority complex. They feel they are equals to the people that come to see them and buy their records. They really are just folks."

Band members are happy to stop and sign an autograph or have their picture taken with a fan, if they have the time. "They have a really good work ethic," Merlis says. "Their job is to be ZZ Top."

Forty years of music means 40 years of dealing with one another, something many married couples can't do successfully. Are there any secrets we could learn from ZZ Top about working together and remaining friends? "No secret really," Gibbons says. "It's a groove getting to do what we do."

There could be mayhem, however, if someone was to take off with Beard's stash of the soft drink Tab, one of Beard's perks of stardom. "Frank and I are the last people in the world that drink Tab," Merlis says. "Whenever I see them on the road I covet his Tabs. He's always nervous he will run out."

During its career the band has had its share of memories, some memorable, some the band would like to forget. "I would probably like to forget the gig early on when a single paying customer, only one single paying customer, showed up," Gibbons says. "All in all it was a groundbreaking show and the crowning moment was buying the guy a Coke afterward. Still know that cat! He's at all the gigs to this day."

One of the band's defining moments came in the mid-1980s when they appeared on the MTV Awards and the entire audience dawned beards. Their proudest moment, career-wise, happened when they were inducted into The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame by their friend Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones. "It was a great time that night," Gibbons says. "It kind of recounts the extraordinary ongoing opportunity to bring the blues to a great number of people – and get paid!"

ZZ Top is now part of the "Legends of Rock and Roll" exhibit at the Hall of Fame and Museum. The exhibit includes everything from Beard's "Sasquatch" (think white fuzzy fur) drum set from the band's 1986 video "Sleeping Bag" and "Yunker," a guitar crafted from metal pieces used in the 1986 "Rough Boy" video to three stage outfits from the Afterburner tour and the band's 1933 Red Ford Eliminator car, featured on the cover of the "Eliminator" album.

Henke of the Hall of Fame talked to Gibbons in 1994 about donating some of the band's items to the museum. "He invited me to go to Texas and go through the band's warehouse where they had their guitars, props and clothing," he says. "I picked out what I wanted. We've had something from ZZ Top on exhibit since we opened in 1995."

In the past, ZZ Top has used its celebrity status to help preserve the history of the blues. In 1998 the band contributed to the formation of the Delta Blues Museum in the Mississippi Delta on Highway 61. "It was a real thrill to support it back then and it still is," Gibbons says. His guitar, "Muddywood," was born in the Delta after a huge cypress timber had fallen to the ground during a tornado. Curators of the museum gifted it as a keepsake of Muddy Waters' childhood home. Waters, known as the Father of the Chicago Blues, was born and raised in Mississippi.

"The idea soon struck to use that very timber as the basis for an electric guitar, commissioned and built in Memphis and returned to the Delta," Gibbons explains. "It became an iconic instrument and actually went on tour on its own and became a centerpiece for fundraising efforts for the Delta Blues Museum. Muddy's house giveth and giveth."

When ZZ Top is not performing, each band member has his own pastime. Beard is an avid golfer, Hill is a gearhead, into gadgets and electronics, and Gibbons is a collector of African art, guitars and custom cars and motorcycles.

"Billy is a very interesting individual. He can be very introspective," says George Gruhn of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville. "He's very intellectual, educated and sophisticated. He knows a lot about numerous topics. When he learns about new things, he goes into depth."

Gruhn has been selling vintage guitars to Gibbons since 1970. "Over the years

Billy has bought more than 100 guitars from me," he says. "He also bought a custom-designed Gruhn Guitar."

Gruhn admits that Gibbons can be quirky. "He's very conscious of his image, both on and off stage," he says. "But I can assure you there is very little that he does that he is unaware of. He ain't clueless. In fact, he's highly knowledgeable."

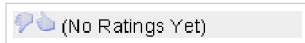
When it comes to cars, motorcycles and guitars, Gibbons has "somewhere north of one too many and a hundred ain't enough," he says. His favorite guitar: "Pearly Gates." "It's a mysteriously mad 1959 Les Paul Gibson that sounds like no other," Gibbons says.

The Gibson was Gibbons' signature trademark for several years. Today, his on-stage guitars are visually flashy, often with unique shapes and distinctive coverings – think fur – and special effects – think flames. "What he realized was that playing an original vintage guitar on stage didn't have a psychological impact on the audience," Gruhn says, noting that manufacturers often make copies of the originals, giving them less prestige. "It's no longer easy to impress the audience with some rare, vintage instrument with all the replicas that are readily available."

Gibbons' Mexican Blackbird, named after one of the band's early songs, is his current favorite car. "It's a wonderful '58 Thunderbird custom, spirited for any kind of all-day-long abuse," he says. "It shipped out to Japan recently for the famed annual Mooneyes gathering and before its triumphant return, it caused a sensation ... yet ... now back on the asphalt, it demands a down-home, lean-and-mean, cross-country shakedown. Let's roll!"

Even though each has ceremoniously passed the age-50 mark, band members are still touring four to six months out of the year. They've played all around the world, from Bulgaria to Macedonia. This spring and summer they will play Chile and Brazil along with some dates in the United States.

Gibbons sees the band's success as a "trio's tanglings that certainly clicked." "[It's] just the simplistic concentration on what's best," he says. "After all this time, same three guys ... same three chords."



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