

Q&A



Ross Harkin

Dusty Hill, Billy Gibbons, Frank Beard

ZZ TOP

After 40 years of rock and the road, there's still nothing they'd rather do

FOR THEIR FIRST FULL-LENGTH ALBUM in nearly a decade, veteran rockers ZZ Top decided to work with famed producer Rick Rubin. The Texas trio—frontman and guitarist Billy Gibbons, bassist Dusty Hill and drummer Frank Beard—recorded *La Futura* over a four-year period in Houston and Malibu. Rubin's intense brand of perfectionism fit well with the band's own deliberate style. "Rick does tend to be of the 'It's good but you can do better' school of thought," says Gibbons. "Turns out he's right, which is why we're all satisfied with the effect."

The resulting 10 tracks are a natural progression of ZZ Top's brawny blues-rock, a sound that's wowed audiences for more than

40 years. Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004, ZZ Top has enjoyed a rare achievement among rock bands: longevity. Their secret? "It's simple: We like what we do," says Gibbons. "Most bands fall apart because they're discontented with each other or some external circumstance."

ZZ Top has succeeded in pushing the creative envelope while satisfying longtime fans with an impressive string of smash hits, including "Legs," "Tush," "La Grange" and "Sharp Dressed Man." As the band continues an international tour, they've reflected on their good fortune. "We've certainly had our ups and downs," Gibbons admits. "The most basic element is that the answer is no when we ask ourselves, 'Is there something you'd

rather be doing?' If you like, you can think of this as a reunion tour—we just skipped the breaking up part."

What were your goals for this album?

The band wanted to get down with a sensibility that created who we are. And the way to do that was to take enough time, jam and slam and conjure up some wicked noise. That's what went down and that's what happened. When the same guys play together for long enough, a kind of sixth sense develops in how the others react and contribute. The entirety of the process is very organic. We had thrown on the fertilizer and this big funky shrub sprang up through the dirt as a result.



'When the same guys play together for long enough, a kind of sixth sense develops.'

Describe your songwriting process.

There is no set process—never had one. It might be a riff, a verse, a title or a chorus. Once there's an appealing element in mind, you build it out from there. Sometimes things fall into place on the spot, and sometimes they may take a little twisting and bending.

How were songs selected?

We probably recorded 20. The ones that sounded the most like us were those we concentrated on and brought to fruition. It should be noted that culling them is no easy task—they each have merit or else they wouldn't have been cultivated along, so paring things down is not for the faint of heart. What's been left behind could be revisited and resuscitated in the future, perhaps. But we're confident behind the survivors that made the album. We had spent time jamming in the studio, getting loose and throwing ideas around. We thrashed about for a few weeks in Malibu, and then it was back to the road. After that we regrouped in the ZZ studio in Houston and sent up what we thought were close-to-final versions of each number. We've known Rick for quite a while on a social basis, but it was something completely new to collaborate with him. His idea was "to let ZZ Top be ZZ Top" but he wanted us to be the best ZZ Top we could ever be.

What challenges your creativity?

After four-plus decades, it might be a challenge not to default to what we know—yet there are so many great sounds to share and sonic horizons to explore that it doesn't take much to get us going. Guys like Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed and Lightnin' Hopkins just did it to death all the way through the arc of their careers, and that's our main aim. They're the inspiration, and the challenge is to come through for those guys, and our friends and followers.

How has your guitar playing evolved?

I'd say that the emphasis is on economy and tone. It's so much better to express yourself in 12 notes than it might be in 24. The spaces between the notes are music, too, so there's a whole lot there and it's more comfortable to play and hear if you don't overwhelm everybody. As far as tone is concerned, the dirtier the better. Our motto is "grit is good."

What guitarists influenced you?

Hubert Sumlin's playing on those Howlin' Wolf Chess sides was more than great.

Freddie King—who we had the honor of inducting into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—is right up there, too. There are three kings, so add Albert King and B.B. King to that list.

Do you still practice?

We tour so much there's not a whole lot of time to practice per se, because we're doing it for real nearly every night. But when we're not on tour for a few weeks, we open up the road case and keep things limber.

What are your favorite guitars?

Nothing else sounds as good as Miss Pearly Gates, that special, special 1959 Gibson Les Paul Burst that's been with us for so long. It's got its own special blend of herbs and spices, and has stood us in good stead in the studio and on the road.

Mike Fossum aboard the Soyuz space vehicle so he could play it for fellow crew members sure beats having to dispatch a FedEx truck out to Kazakhstan with a disc or tape. Can you imagine the driver yelling, "Hold that launch!"?

How has touring changed over the years for you?

Many of our same friendly folks assemble in the audience who we've enjoyed getting to know over time—and now they're bringing their kids, and their kids are bringing their kids. As for our crack crew, it's more organized and efficient than ever. We've also each got our own touring coach so the "home away from home" aspect is part of the deal these days. No reason not to make the best out of a pretty OK situation.



Onstage in Paris, 2010

David Sipaul/Lanoboy



In the mid-'80s

'As far as tone is concerned, the dirtier the better. Our motto is grit is good!'

We really like the Gretsch "Billy-Bo" that was inspired by Bo Diddley. It's flexible, it's light—and it sounds like Bo's standing over your shoulder and patting you on the back.

Have you embraced digital technology?

The digital domain makes things way faster in the studio—you can find your place and pick up where you left off very efficiently. The fact that we could email a sound file of "Flyin' High" to our friend astronaut

Any goals left to accomplish?

There's a spate of BFG [Billy F. Gibbons] solo releases pending, and we hope those are out before long. It's electronica-skewed work and certainly won't be confused with ZZ Top, which is the very point. Why do something different if it sounds the same? This is and doesn't.

—Blake Boldt