

THAT LITTLE OL' BAND FROM TEXAS

They've been on the business 40 years, they have a sublimely talented blues guitarist in the form of Billy Gibbons, they've got long beards (apart from drummer Frank Beard, naturally), they drive around in a snazzy 1933 Ford Coupe, and they've done a bunch of songs that everybody on the face of the planet seems to know and like. They are of course ZZ Top, and they're about to release their first ever full length live product, a brand spanking new DVD called 'Live In Texas'. With the trio being on tour Stateside, a telephone interview with bassist and co-vocalist Dusty Hill was offered, and despite the fact that he had yet to see the DVD in question, an undaunted James Gaden jumped at the chance to talk to one third of Texas' most famous trio...

You're touring at the moment I believe?

Yes, we are - I'm in Austin right now, the capital of Texas.

Ah, your home state! How are the shows going so far, because you've only just kicked off the tour haven't you?

Yes, that's right, it's just started and it's going very well. We're having a lot of fun and keying up to our big DVD release - we're having a good time!

Well that's the main reason I'm calling you, to

talk about your new DVD 'Live In Texas'. You've done a handful of live tracks on 'XXX' and 'Fandango' since you've been together, but there's never been an official live representation of ZZ Top available until now. What made you decide now was the time?

Well, to be honest with you, because everybody kept asking us! For years people have asked us about doing a live album, and as DVD's have become so popular, people wanted a DVD release. We were really up for doing it a couple of years ago, but we went through some management changes - we had to get all that straightened out, and now we have, we decided now was the time.

I see. I've yet to see the DVD, but I've been sent the set list...

Well, for your information, I'm the good looking one on the left!

(Laughs)

That said, if you were to describe the new DVD to somebody who's yet to see it, how would you put it across - what can ZZ Top fan expect?

Hopefully, it's just like going to one of our shows. Here's the thing - if you went to five of our shows, and we played a set list that was pretty much the same every night, there'll be little things different - you know, you've been to shows before, but for the most part, you get a show like the one you saw the night before. We had a really good night the night we filmed, it was in Texas, just outside of Dallas where Frank and I are both from, so it was like being home. It had a very good feel and there's some backstage footage included as well. The performance I think they caught really well - I think it serves the purpose - it means you can get a rock and roll concert from us anytime!

My information tells me there's a bonus version of you performing Jimi Hendrix's 'Foxy Lady'?

Right, right - well, we kinda wanted to include a cover, do someone else's song but we didn't discuss it too much.

We just said Jimi Hendrix and that was great - Billy toured with him, I met him back in the day, and it was so much fun to do, we decided to include that song. Jimi... he was absolutely great.

A legend - and quite a fan of Billy's playing too I believe?

Right, before this group Billy was in the Moving Sidewalks and they toured with Jimi. He even went on the Charlie Carson TV show and mentioned Billy's name as the new young up and coming guitar player.

Wow!

Yeah! And when I met him, I think I told him he had a nice hat.

(Laughs) How amazing would it be to have Jimi Hendrix single you out?

Yeah, unbelievable. As I hear it, Billy and he would go back to the motel after the show and talk guitars, play some licks and whatever - that in itself, when you're young, you wouldn't really believe it until it had chance to sink in!

The other thing that I think is special about

the upcoming DVD is, when it's released, it will be close to ZZ Top's 40th Anniversary. While that's impressive anyway, what makes it special is it's the same three guys - unlike almost any other band I can think of, you've never had a line up change in all of those years. What do you think it is that has kept you three together where so many other bands have broken up?

Y'know, we just enjoy playing together. The thing is, most everything that happens to one of us, happens to the others. We have a lot in common, we have the same sense of humour, which I think you can tell in the music... and we all played in three piece groups before we got together. Frank and I played together in a number of groups before this band, so there's a lot of factors. We toured a lot and love to play live, and all of the work we've done together has been so much fun... but I don't know to be honest with you! I don't think there's a big secret, I think we just have a lot of factors that keep us together and I'm happy to be here.

And I'm sure the fans are too! Once the DVD comes out, I've been reading on the internet that there is talk of you doing a new record and bringing in Rick Rubin to work on it - is there any truth to that?

That's the basic plan. We hope to get in the studio during the fall, or early winter. We were going to go in earlier this year but we got wrapped up in a couple of other things and the DVD and everything - but hopefully we'll have some new studio work for you in the not too distant future.

On the topic of studio work, I've noticed on almost all of your back catalogue, the writing credit is listing as a three way split between you all, but on the later ones it seems Billy has been doing more writing on his own. Is there a specific reason for this, or has there been a change in the way you write?

No, that's just the way it worked out. It's not a big deal with us, whoever writes whatever. The albums really begin to take shape in the studio, because things are constantly getting rewritten up to and including the recording process. We always have a lot of material, and it's usually as they begin to take shape we determine what finds its place onto the record. We just wait

and see how it works out.

I see - well that leads me on nicely to my next question. My personal preference is having you singing - I think you have a much better voice... 'Hi Fi Mama', 'Can't Stop Rocking' and 'World Of Swirl' are three of my favourite ZZ Top tracks and you did the vocals on all of them. Yet Billy sings the bulk of the material so I was wondering if there was a way you determined that - although I suspect you're going to say it's whatever works out right?

I appreciate that, thank you! With the singing, it works out like the songs. When we work 'em up in the studio, we see how it goes. I hope to be singing a bit more on the next one.

I'll look forward to that! I thought you did a great job on 'Viva Las Vegas' - I know you're a big Elvis fan.

Oh yeah - you know, that was fun, that was no chore to do that. When we filmed the video for 'Viva Las Vegas', we went down to Vegas and we worked on it all through the night until sun up... but that's the way you need to be in Vegas. You stay out there until the sun comes up - not necessarily goes down, but comes up! (Laughs)

When I think of your videos, I immediately think of the ones from 'Eliminator', and we're approaching the anniversary of that record, and I believe there's talk of the album being reissued with some bonuses. Is that true?

There's talk about it - this year will be the 25th Anniversary of 'Eliminator'. I've heard talk about doing something but to be honest I don't know what the plans are. I'm out touring, I know about the live DVD, but whatever out people decide about 'Eliminator' is cool with me. I've always enjoyed that album, there's a lot of songs on it I like.

When you started out, you were a classic blues rock trio, but with 'Eliminator', you brought in a more synth and electronic element, giving you a more mainstream sound, which you enhanced with the MTV videos. Did you find it a difficult musical transition to go from that sort of roots blues to the chart pop rock that took you to new levels?

No, it wasn't. I was kind of a natural thing for us - we've always played around with things in the studio, going back to when we played around with foot pedals and stuff. When we made that record, there was a lot of new equipment and using that... I'm not saying we're like Bob Dylan, but when Bob Dylan went electric a lot of people said 'Hey, what is he doing?'. But it's just another instrument to be used. So we came upon that equipment and didn't know really how to use it when we recorded 'Eliminator', and I think that's why it sounded good. We weren't so precise with it, so it still sounded like us.

And I think your ability to make such memorable videos was hugely beneficial - I think the videos fit the songs so well.

When they asked us to make videos, we had no idea what to do - we'd never had to make any before! So we had the car, that's something we do, we asked to have some nice looking ladies and asked that we could just be the band that played in the video, rather than being always the focal point. You saw what came out of that.

I think that's a great way to do it, they were like mini movies. There's nothing more boring than a band video which is just footage of a band playing.

That's right, they're little stories, little movies.

This is a potentially huge question, but with forty years in the business, what moments would you look back on as true highlights?

Oh God... there's really been a lot. The first time we recorded... er, the first time we received a gold record. The reason I say that is not necessarily because of the prize of getting one, but we toured so much at such a pace, that they piled up. We went to New York City and we were presented with quite a few. We were on London Records then and I don't think they knew how to take our stuff, so to get gold records was memorable.

Y'know, 'Eliminator', the productions and video from that era were great, and of course, the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, that was a big moment for us. But all through the years, I think some of the people we've had opportunities to play shows with, that stands out as much as anything.

I often see you and Billy on WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) television, more often than not with ringside seats. Is wrestling a big passion with you all, something else you all have in common?

That's something that we all... well, Frank doesn't share it that much, but Billy and I, I've had a passion for it all my life. It's a fun thing and Billy and I go to a lot of their shows. It's hard to stay out of the ring!

(Laughs) I'm a big WWE fan as well - as well as seeing you in the front row, Kid Rock covered 'Legs' for Stacy Kiebler's entrance music. Have you ever been asked to do any WWE theme tunes? They get a lot of big acts like Kid Rock, Motorhead, Saliva, Lil' Kim, Limp Bizkit and many others, so have you been approached?

Yeah, we have, but

once again, we haven't gotten around to it. We know quite a few of the people involved, they're friends and the topic has come up many times. There's always that possibility.

Looking at your current tour dates, you did have gigs planned in Europe in 2007 but you had an ear problem, so they were cancelled. Presumably everything is ok now with you being back on the road, so can we expect you in Europe soon?

Yeah, I had some problems but they've been addressed and I don't have any problem playing and touring now. When this tour and the album is finished, I hope so, but I hate to say anything because I don't know, that's in other people's hands. I really hope so though. We haven't done a proper one in a while and we like to come and play over there.

We can't wait either - thanks very much Dusty, and I'm looking forward to the DVD.

I hope you enjoy it. Adios Amigo!

FIREWORKS

