

# Lynyrd Skynyrd



By Jaan Uhelszki



**L**ynyrd Skynyrd's story is one of desire, fate, extraordinary talent, and survival. It's also the tale of the intersection of history and one man's vision: Vocalist and songwriter Ronnie Van Zant was the original man with a plan, and the long history of Lynyrd Skynyrd is largely the story of Van Zant, a man driven by inexplicable demons that demanded he not only change the landscape of rock history but secure his place in it.

In 1964, the first seeds of what would become Lynyrd Skynyrd were sown at a baseball game in Jacksonville, Florida, when a ball batted by Van Zant, a truck driver's son who dreamed of being a rock star, knocked a spectator named Bob Burns unconscious. Burns turned out to be an aspiring drummer, and his companion Gary Rossington an equally aspiring guitarist. The three boys flailed around in Burns's garage, realizing that perhaps they needed better guitars and equipment. Rossington remembered a skinny kid from the other side of the tracks who could provide both. When Allen Collins saw a car full of rednecks pull up next to him and heard the voice of notorious badass Van Zant barking his name, he had no idea that they wanted him to join the band. Instead he thought he was going to get a beating because of his Beatle haircut, so he shinnied up a tree. It wasn't until Van Zant threatened him with a whipping if he didn't come down and play some music with them that Collins finally descended. With the addition of bass player Larry Jungstrom, the quintet became a band that called itself, at various times, My Backyard, the Wildcats, the Noble Five, Sons of Satan, and the One Percent. The

group eventually settled on Lynyrd Skynyrd in honor of Leonard Skinner, the gym teacher who'd had them suspended from school for their long hair.

Things soon got serious with the acquisition of a rehearsal space on a ninety-nine-acre farm outside town in Green Cove Springs. It wasn't more than four pre-fab walls and a roof in the middle of a cow pasture, but this sweltering shed, called Hell House, became the boot camp where Van Zant molded his raw recruits into musical men. He picked up his bleary-eyed and grumbling troops in his battered '55 Chevy truck every day at 7:30 a.m., stopping for jugs of coffee at the doughnut shop where his mother worked. By 8:30, he'd be putting his charges through their paces in workdays that regularly ran eight to twelve hours; sometimes they wouldn't straggle home until the next morning.

It would take more than willpower to make Van Zant's musical daydream a reality, but in Collins and Rossington, he was gifted with guitarists who could fire off a solo from either flank, and their distinctive styles meshed into something that began to resemble an identity as the group built a repertoire of originals. One of them was a deceptively simple love song called "Free Bird," written by Collins and Van Zant and elevated by the classically tinged piano intro that their then-roadie Billy Powell had worked up for kicks. After another roadie, Kevin Elson, made Van Zant listen to it, Powell moved from crew to band member on the spot, forever after playing keyboards with the band.

Although the group was portrayed in its early press as having sprung fully formed from the Allman Brothers' brow, that wasn't the case at all. Credit goes to Al Kooper for "discovering" the band, then unleash-

Lynyrd Skynyrd: Leon Wilkeson, Artimus Pyle, Allen Collins, Billy Powell, Ronnie Van Zant, Gary Rossington, Steve Gaines; with backup singers Cassie Gaines, Leslie Hawkins, and Jo Jo Billingsley (clockwise from top left), c. 1977





ABOVE: Powell, Collins, Wilkeson, Bob Burns, Van Zant, Rossington, and Ed King (from left), c. 1974. BELOW: Powell, Collins, Van Zant, Pyle, King, Wilkeson, Rossington (from left), onstage in '74. OPPOSITE: Van Zant wears Mistuh Young.

ing it on an unsuspecting world. Kooper had relocated to Atlanta with the notion of giving Phil Walden's Capricorn Records some regional competition with his MCA-bankrolled Sounds of the South label and was looking for talent. He spotted Skynyrd playing a local dive on a weeknight and was so taken aback that he attended every show of its six-night stand. Transfixed by Skynyrd's stage presence and prodigious talent, Kooper decided this was the guitar band that would cut through the prog rock clogging the airways, returning guitar rock to its rightful place. He also realized these were no musical fledglings. By the time he saw Skynyrd, the group had already played enough music for several bands' lifetimes, seasoned by more than a thousand gigs, a couple of local singles, and extensive recording at the Quinvy and Muscle Shoals Sound studios.

Fearing his group would be lost in the Southern-rock wave that included the likes of Wet Willie, Marshall Tucker, and the Charlie Daniels Band, Van Zant had rejected an earlier offer from Capricorn, though no other company had shown the slightest interest in his band. But Lynyrd Skynyrd's nexus was always closer to London than Macon, Georgia — it modeled itself more after the first-generation British bands. In fact, Van Zant's musical vision can be seen in his band's covers on early set lists: Stones toughness and Yardbirds raveup, the virtuosity of Cream and Hendrix but also the swampy song sense of Creedence. Lynyrd Skynyrd's hard-rock design would be precisely what set it apart from the Southern-rock pack.

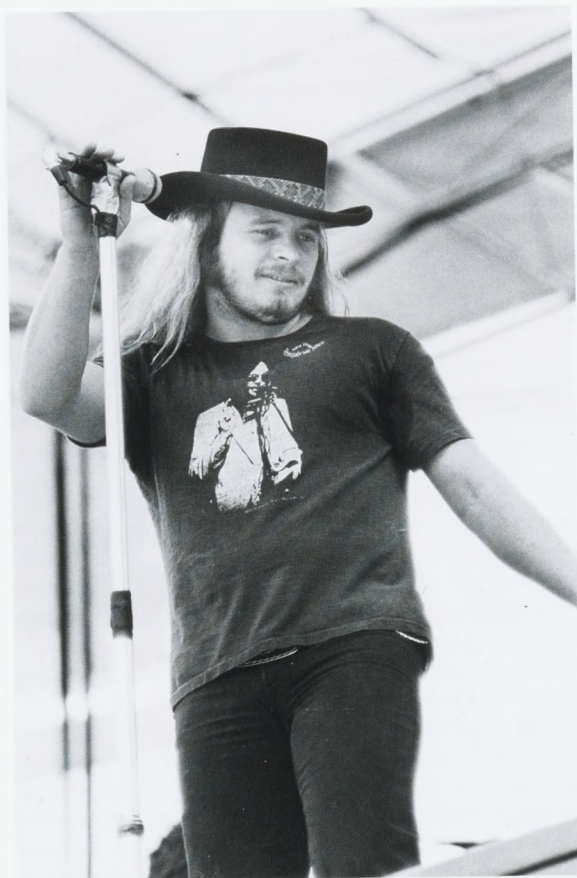
In 1973, the group served notice at a lavish party thrown by MCA to launch Sounds of the South. Skynyrd tore straight into "Workin' for MCA," which had been written specially for



the occasion and did not appear on the Kooper-produced debut album, *Pronounced Leb-Nerd Skin-Nerd*, released six weeks later. Van Zant prowled the stage barefoot – his trademark – spitting out the lyrics: “Just pay me all of my money and mister maybe you won’t get a scar.” Behind him a wall of guitars raged. Ed King, the Strawberry Alarm Clock refugee who’d been hired to play bass on the album, had switched to guitar, his Stratocaster filling the gap between Collins’s Gibson Firebird and Rossington’s Les Paul. Behind them kicked the heavy rhythm section of Burns, Powell, and bassist Leon Wilkeson – who in 1972 replaced Jungstrom (recruited into 38 Special by Ronnie’s brother Donnie Van Zant).

The gee-tar army had arrived, and the club, packed with media and MCA staff, was on its feet from the first notes of “Workin’ for MCA” to the last echoes of “Free Bird.” Lynyrd Skynyrd, the seven-year work in progress, was ready at last. The true watershed in its career came when Skynyrd secured the prestigious opening slot on the Who’s 1973 U.S. tour. The downside was that it meant going in one leap from tiny Florida honky-tonks to America’s largest arenas, playing music nobody knew to multitudes angrily impatient for the Who. Everyone’s worst fears were realized on the first night out, when several people among the 20,000 in San Francisco’s Cow Palace began pelting the unknown band with coins. Yet a half hour later, this same crowd called the group back for an encore.

This pattern (minus the nickel-and-dime shower) was repeated at most stops on the tour. The reason? Two words: “Free Bird.” The wistful love song had grown with the band. First came Powell with his eloquent piano introduction and rhythmic coloration. Then, during the recording sessions, it





FROM LEFT: Collins, Wilkeson, Rossington, Pyle, Van Zant, Powell (from left), 1974; Rossington, Collins, and Wilkeson, 1977.

acquired not only the triple-guitar format but also the multi-tracked lead duel that burned the closing instrumental passage into the consciousness of every seventies rock follower. Nine minutes on the album, as the perennial set closer, it was never less than twelve searing minutes long. “Free Bird” became an anthem, gaining even greater resonance when Van Zant began dedicating it to the spirit of the late Duane Allman.

The road became Lynyrd Skynyrd’s home for more than twelve years, and members used to boast that they were never off it for more than two days at a time. After touring Europe, drummer Artimus Pyle replaced founding member Bob Burns, who left because of exhaustion. Also due to the hectic touring schedule, guitarist Ed King departed the band the following month.

Although Van Zant pined for a less complicated life in songs like “Comin’ Home” and “Simple Man,” he ultimately defined himself more by his wandering lifestyle than by the time he spent fishing off his back dock. Lyrics to songs that he wrote like “Travelin’ Man” and “On the Hunt,” with their tales of drinking, fighting, and loving on the run, seemed to better sum him up. But Van Zant did more than chronicle rock & roll excess. He was both a poster boy for rugged individualism and an unofficial spokesman for the army of beautiful losers of the modern South who vowed to “rise again” after the physical and emotional destruction visited upon them by the Civil War in the 1860s. Van Zant not only railed against the harshness of life as a member of a regional underclass; he showed his brethren a way out. “We’re rednecks, and we make no bones about it,” he explained in ’75. “We had to fight to get out alive.” Along the way, he created his own battle hymns of the republic – songs of liberation that struck a chord with disaffected, underemployed young folks everywhere.

Skynyrd’s prepunk attitude was much in evidence on “Sweet Home Alabama,” the single from *Second Helping*, the band’s second album to crack the U.S. Top Ten. In it, the band took Neil Young to task for his “Southern Man”: “Well I heard Mistuh Young sing about her/Well, I heard ol’ Neil put her down/Well, I hope Neil Young will remember/A Southern Man don’t need him around anyhow.” The reality was that Skynyrd immensely respected Mistuh Young, who was delighted to be name-checked on so fine a record. Young even sent demos of his “Captain Kennedy” and “Powderfinger” for the band to consider, and tentative plans were made for Van Zant and Young to collaborate.

In 1975, Skynyrd’s Torture Tour kicked off in February

with the release of the band’s third album, *Nuthin’ Fancy*. In three years, it had established itself as one of America’s top touring bands – selling out ten-thousand-seat arenas and making money hand over fist – and it couldn’t risk upsetting the momentum by taking a break. The pressure began to build, and band members not only annihilated hotel suites and dressing rooms but also began to steadily chip away at one another. “A bad gig will upset me,” admitted Van Zant in 1975. “When we screw up what we’re playing, I’ll come back and get really mad. Or if we’re out for four months or something – anytime after a month or so, and I’m really tired, then I get uptight! We smash up a lot of shit. If we feel the pressure, we’ll tear up the place. And then pay for it and say, ‘[T]hat’s better than smashing up each other.’ Although we do that too, sometimes.”

After Skynyrd’s stunning debut, each of its succeeding albums had sounded a bit more rushed and less inspired. Changing producers to Tom Dowd for the fourth, *Gimme Back My Bullets*, failed to stop the slide. Since King’s departure, the band had reverted to twin guitars, including on the recording of *Bullets*. The album’s lack of musical spark made it all too obvious how much the triple-guitar attack had electrified Van Zant’s simple songs. Then one night in Kansas City, backing vocalist Cassie Gaines announced that her little brother was in the house and wondering if he could sit in. Exchanging knowing glances, the band said okay, later quietly instructing the soundman to fade the guitarist out of the mix if he sucked. But when the kid plugged in and ripped off a slide solo on “Call Me the Breeze,” they’d found their man. Steve Gaines brought the whole picture back into focus.

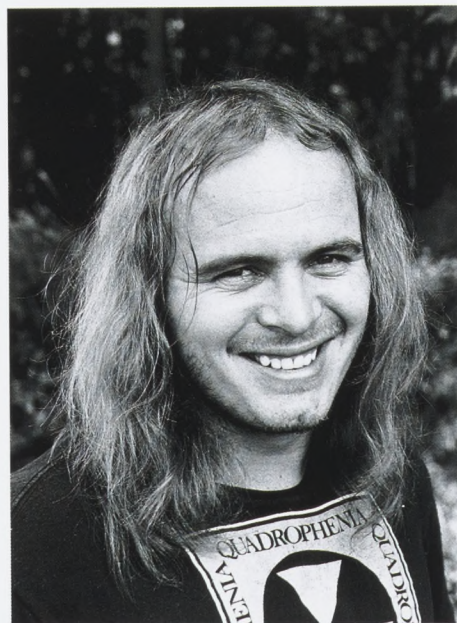
“Steve and Cassie never get enough credit for breathing life back into Lynyrd Skynyrd,” Artimus Pyle insists. “Gary and Allen were in awe of Steve because he was a fluid stylist who could play anything. It was beautiful to see how he inspired those two, not to mention Ronnie. We were the guitar army again.” Gaines’s arrival was still too fresh to be fully displayed on the 1976 live recording *One More From the Road*, but 1977’s *Street Survivors* was the return to form the band’s fans had dreamed of. Not coincidentally, it also saw most of the band members taking their first wobbly steps toward cleaner living.

The clear sign of Skynyrd’s rebirth was the band’s formidable appearance at the 1976 Knebworth Festival, headlined by the Rolling Stones. “That show was a landmark,” notes Bill Curbishley, a former comanager of the band. “It meant that they’d finally achieved something lasting in terms of a

European audience. Ronnie understood clearly that this was where Led Zeppelin had played, Pink Floyd, the Who, and now the Stones as well."

Knebworth should have been the gateway to a bright future for a mature Lynyrd Skynyrd. Instead, it marked the band's final peak before the dark valley into which it plunged on October 20, 1977, when the dazzling career of this two-fisted Southern-rock band was literally knocked out of the sky at its highest arc. The second-most famous plane crash in rock history occurred two hours out of Greenville, South Carolina. Skynyrd's 1947 Convair aircraft's right engine sputtered, then ran out of fuel, becoming a dead weight hanging in the sky over Mississippi, before hitting the tree line at ninety m.p.h. and breaking into pieces in the swampy muck. Van Zant and Steve and Cassie Gaines died in the crash, along with a road manager and the two pilots. But to their extreme credit, ten years after the crash, the surviving members reassembled – Gary Rossington, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson, Artimus Pyle, and Ed King, with Allen Collins as musical director, since he could no longer perform after a 1986 car accident left him paralyzed.

The band's reunion was not without much soul searching. (The group even received death threats from some fans.) Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the re-formation was the recruitment of another Van Zant brother to handle lead vocals. Johnny Van Zant was reluctant to take his visionary older brother's place, even though Ronnie had, in his last year, talked about retiring and handing vocal chores to either Johnny or Paul Rodgers. But Johnny relented after his parents persuaded him to do it. The rest of the present-day lineup comprises Rossington and Powell – Allen Collins died in 1990 from pneumonia, and Leon Wilkeson passed away in 2001 – and has been reconstructed with a sense of family that echoes the original unit. Also on board is Blackfoot guitarist Rickey Medlocke, who was Skynyrd's drummer for a short spell early on; guitarist Hughie Thomasson from the Outlaws; bassist



Southern-rock visionary Ronnie Van Zant, 1974

Ean Evans; and drummer Michael Cartellone, former Damn Yankees stickman, along with backing vocalists Dale Krantz Rossington and Carol Chase.

No matter what the configuration, the will of one extraordinary man still prevails more than forty years after the band's inception in that Jacksonville makeshift baseball field. Ronnie Van Zant's legacy documents how important this band was to the Southern-rock canon with its songs of uncommon depth and perception, showing the epic trajectory from ruin to redemption and exposing the complicated soul of life below the Mason-Dixon Line. ←



Skynyrd's guitar army conquers San Francisco: Gaines, Van Zant, Collins, Rossington, and Wilkeson (from left).