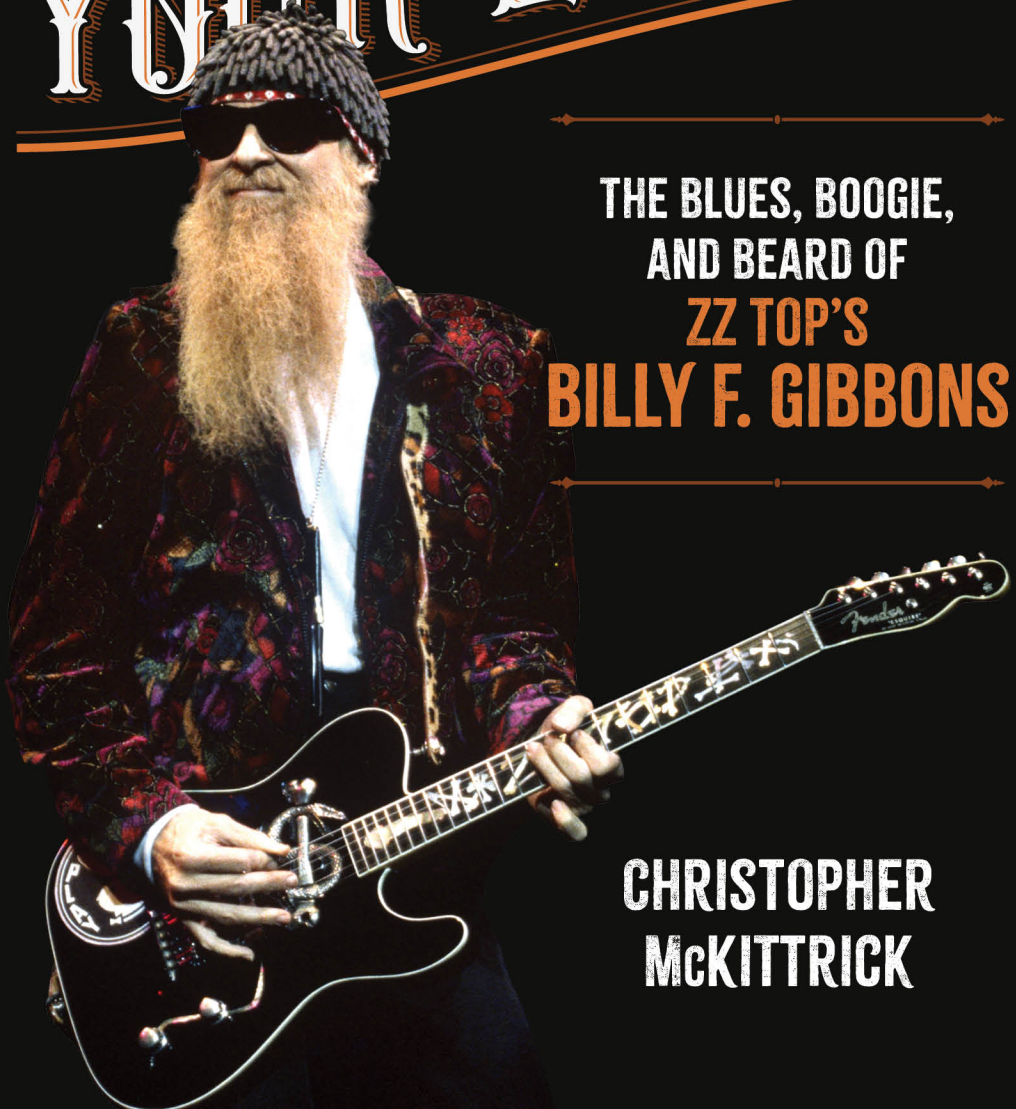
GIMME ALL YOUR LOVIN'

THE BLUES, BOOGIE, AND BEARD OF ZZ TOP'S BILLY F. GIBBONS



CHRISTOPHER McKITTRICK


GIMME ALL
YOUR LOVIN'

THE BLUES, BOOGIE,
AND BEARD OF
ZZ TOP'S
BILLY F. GIBBONS

CHRISTOPHER
McKITTRICK

Backbeat Books
Essex, Connecticut

An imprint of Globe Pequot, the trade division of
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Blvd., Ste. 200
Lanham, MD 20706
www.rowman.com

Distributed by NATIONAL BOOK NETWORK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: McKittrick, Christopher, author.
Title: Gimme all your lovin' : the blues, boogie, and beard of ZZ Top's Billy F. Gibbons / Christopher McKittrick.
Description: Essex, Connecticut : Backbeat, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023057959 (print) | LCCN 2023057960 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493074433 (paperback) | ISBN 9781493074440 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Gibbons, Billy F., 1949- | ZZ Top (Musical group) | Rock musicians—United States—Biography. | Guitarists—United States—Biography.
Classification: LCC ML419.G49 M35 2024 (print) | LCC ML419.G49 (ebook) | DDC 782.42166092 [B]—dc23/eng/20231226
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023057959
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023057960

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992

For Flynn

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

THE TONE OF BILLY GIBBONS

It was not a tremendous shock in the music industry in September 2006 when ZZ Top, the then nearly four-decade-old "little ol' band from Texas," as the multigenre trio had become known since the early years of their career, announced the band was no longer under contract to RCA, one of the oldest and most prestigious record labels in the United States. The announcement came fourteen years and four albums into a five-album record deal reportedly worth more than $30 million. Even when RCA signed the band in 1992, there was skepticism that the band was worth the price tag. After all, at that time it had been nearly a decade since ZZ Top had released their top-selling album *Eliminator*, and the band's subsequent albums, 1985's *Afterburner* and 1990's *Recycler*, were released to diminishing, though still successful, sales.

It didn't help matters that in 1992 many in the industry viewed ZZ Top as a gimmicky band whose popularity had been bolstered by a series of ridiculous music videos in the wake of the release of *Eliminator*. Instead of focusing on the band members—guitarist and vocalist Billy Gibbons, bassist and vocalist Dusty Hill, and drummer Frank Beard—the videos instead featured leggy models, hot rods, and comedic bits, like a men's humor magazine come to life. Most of the conversation about ZZ Top centered on Gibbons's and Hill's most distinguishing feature—their chest-length beards—rather than on the band's music, even though the group charted seven Top 40 singles in the United States during the 1980s. Other critics pointed to the band's

increasingly bombastic concert tours, which began to rival those of KISS in their reliance on special effects wizardry for both the visuals and the music.

A band that had once been a blues-based power trio in the tradition of the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Cream had evolved—or, in the estimation of critics and some fans, devolved—into a sideshow spectacle that heavily relied on promotional sponsorship and backing tracks. When ZZ Top signed the deal with RCA, it had been just over a year since the band's management had kicked then up-and-coming rock band the Black Crowes off the Recycler World Tour for rallying against corporate sponsorship while the tour was supported by a substantial marketing campaign—along with significant financial support—by Miller Lite beer. Following the dismissal, Chris and Rich Robinson, respectively the Crowes' singer and guitarist, made it no secret that they had grown disillusioned with ZZ Top's corporate sponsorship and use of prerecorded tracks to bolster their live sound, and the Crowes, at the time popular with the music press because of a highly regarded debut album and a propensity to ignore any semblance of tact in their interviews, were happy to share those views with anyone who would listen.

Still, at the time of the RCA signing, it was hard to deny ZZ Top's longevity. The Gibbons-Hill-Beard lineup had remained unchanged since Hill had joined the band in early 1970, and the band managed to become a top concert draw long before they had the record sales to support their success at the box office. The fact that the band had a massive hit record with *Eliminator* thirteen years into their career, followed by another enormous success two years later with *Afterburner*, was substantial proof that the group had staying power. The track record of success was there.

It's also fair to argue that RCA was also following the trend of massive record deals signed by bands like Aerosmith, Mötley Crüe, and the Rolling Stones around the same period as record companies had little idea of just how

much digital distribution would disrupt the historical model of record sales a decade later.

But after ZZ Top's first RCA album, 1994's *Antenna*, barely managed to go platinum and failed to produce a hit on the pop charts, the band's next three albums—1996's *Rhythmeen*, 1999's *XXX*, and 2003's *Mescalero*—were released to diminishing returns, with RCA holding up the release of *Mescalero* for weeks as the label tried to determine if it could do anything to salvage the underwater deal. By 2006, the band had not even made a music video—the medium that had made Gibbons, Hill, and Beard superstars—for a decade after 1996's "She's Just Killing Me" video directed by fellow Texan and emerging filmmaker Robert Rodriguez.

As such, the announcement that ZZ Top and RCA were prematurely parting ways did not come as much of a surprise. The big shock was the second part of the announcement: the band was also parting ways with manager Bill Ham, who had encountered Gibbons in 1969 in the waning days of his involvement with locally famous Houston psychedelic rock band the Moving Sidewalks and steered ZZ Top from a group of blues-crazy musicians just barely out of their teens to international superstardom.

Ham, who had come to be known as the fourth member of ZZ Top, was a dozen years older than Gibbons, Hill, and Beard and, like the trio, was a native of Texas. Ham had unsuccessfully tried his hand at music in the late 1950s, releasing a doo-wop single under the name of Bill Ham and The Van Dels, produced by none other than 1950s chart topper Pat Boone, on Dot Records, a previously independent label that had recently been acquired by Paramount Pictures. While Ham wasn't destined to be a pop musician, he later turned his attention to attempting to create them instead—and in addition to ZZ Top, he helped shape the careers of dozens of artists as both band manager and music publisher.

Ham has been variously described as "brilliant," "shrewd," "intimidating," and "ruthless" by those who collaborated with him. "I will say that without Bill Ham there would have been no ZZ Top as we know it," notes Terry Manning, an acclaimed, industry-renowned recording engineer and producer who worked with ZZ Top for nearly twenty years. "Billy would have probably done something great and been a big star and success, and maybe the band would've gotten together with someone else, I don't know. But I know Bill Ham gave his heart, soul, and life to that group. He worked so hard to promote them."

Ham's guidance of ZZ Top's career has drawn more than a few comparisons to entrepreneurial promoters like Colonel Tom Parker, whose management of Elvis Presley's media career brought both unparalleled and unprecedented fame and financial ruin at different points in the career of the King of Rock and Roll. While comparisons to Parker are unfair in the scope of ZZ Top, his management of country superstar Clint Black ended after a lawsuit, in which Black accused Ham of pocketing too high a percentage of his publishing royalties, was filed the same year that ZZ Top signed their megadeal with RCA.

Ham managed ZZ Top with strict conditions to help ensure the success of the band. He was credited as the producer of all the band's albums from 1971's *ZZ Top's First Album* through 1990's *Recycler* and as coproducer of 1994's *Antenna* and 1996's *Rhythmeen*, even when at times his contributions to the technical musical direction of the material were minimal. He attempted to keep the band members away from bad influences when massive, expensive concert tours were at stake, and he promoted the band with gimmicks that would have made Texas showman Pappy O'Daniel proud. ZZ Top instead made their statement on stage, playing hundreds of concerts in the early 1970s while putting out well-reviewed—but not necessarily

top-selling—albums, 1971's *ZZ Top's First Album* and 1972's *Rio Grande Mud*, before having a commercial breakthrough with 1973's *Tres Hombres* featuring a single that just missed the *Billboard* Top 40, "La Grange."

He also enforced an ironclad rule for the group: ZZ Top was a trio. They would only perform together and appear together. That meant no solo albums or one-off guest appearances on other artists' records, and interviews and photo sessions—which were both a rarity in the band's early years—would only be conducted in a group setting. By the time ZZ Top was making popular music videos on MTV and appearing as performers on television and award shows, it seemed like Gibbons, Hill, and Beard were an inseparable three-man team, as iconic a trio as the Three Musketeers, the Three Stooges, and the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. During the peak of the band's popularity in the 1980s, nearly every ZZ Top public appearance was a group effort, with the trio typically conducting irreverent interviews, acting jovial yet cagey about revealing too much about themselves, often riffing on jokes about the band's curious name, their beards, or the state of Texas to dodge any questions of substance.

It was almost as if Gibbons had to sneak out of the country or go under an assumed name to accomplish any work outside ZZ Top—and that is not much of an exaggeration. Gibbons cowrote the song "One Step Back" with Dallas-born songwriter Jerry Lynn Williams, who had written songs for Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, and B. B. King, as well as the song "Tick Tock" for Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jimmie Vaughan. Swedish singer Louise Hoffsten recorded "One Step Back" and released it on her *Message of Love* album in 1991. This songwriting arrangement was not undertaken without Ham's notice—Williams had at one point been signed to a copublisher agreement with Ham's publishing company Hamstein Music, though that arrangement would end acrimoniously, with several lawsuits between the parties, which carried on even after Williams died in 2005.

Gibbons also cowrote the song "Powder Keg" with German-born, Arizona-based bluesman Rainer Ptacek, known mononymously as Rainer, whose ability caught Gibbons's eye when he had seen Rainer perform at a club in Tucson in the early 1980s. The song appeared on Rainer's 1992 album *Worried Spirits*, with Gibbons credited under the pseudonym "Justis Walkert." Gibbons also was involved in a production role on Rainer's 1993 album *The Texas Tapes*, but he similarly could not be credited due to his contractual arrangement with Ham (a "Willie the Workingman" is credited as "dial fiend" in the liner notes, a possible alias for Gibbons). Similarly, the mysterious Justis Walkert also cowrote the song "Cruel Little Number" on the 1992 album *Feel This* by the Jeff Healey Band. But back in the early 1990s, ZZ Top fans would likely have no idea that these songs even existed—and Ham would have wanted to keep it that way.

In the final years of Ham's management of ZZ Top, the public solidarity of the group began to change. Though the band's music was credited equally to Gibbons, Hill, and Beard for most of their careers, it was no secret that Gibbons was the driving force behind ZZ Top. He was not only one of the founding members of the band in 1969, but as the guitarist and primary lead vocalist, he was the figure standing most prominently on the stage (though often just a few feet to the left of Hill). Though Ham made a substantial effort to promote the musical unity of ZZ Top, he never held back on extolling the guitar chops that Gibbons unleashed on the albums and on stage, frequently pushing in the band's press the story that Gibbons was once named as one of the nation's best young guitarists by none other than rock icon Jimi Hendrix, even if that wasn't quite the fact that Ham alleged. Ham was a firm believer that when it came to ZZ Top, the appeal and mystique earned by keeping the band at a distance from the public would leave the audience always wanting to learn more about them.

By the early 2000s, Gibbons began to emerge as the public face—or beard, if you will—of ZZ Top. He began by appearing as a guest musician on a handful of records by artists he admired and respected, like bluesman John Mayall and emerging country renegade Hank Williams III. Later in the decade, he began to step into the spotlight as the public face of the band, showing up solo on reality shows and award shows when he previously would only be seen along with and working with his two compadres.

It was a huge shift in approach to how ZZ Top normally conducted themselves in public. Over the last two decades, Gibbons has become positively verbose, spilling stories of a career that has stretched for more than half a century. When Gibbons finally started speaking regularly to the press, he revealed what had only been hinting at during his first three decades in pop culture in his rare interviews and lyrics—his infectious wit, a combination of the vocabulary of a bohemian, the sincerity of a street preacher, the perspective of a bluesman, and the humor of the guy at the end of a bar who will offer you a great joke if you buy him his next round. His offbeat humor is universally recognized—for example, Gibbons is known to hand out business cards that identify him as "Friend of Eric Clapton."

Pearls of wisdom frequently spill from the lips of the Pearly Gates axman, with colorful phrasing and observations. Take, for example, his description of Las Vegas in a 2017 interview with *Rolling Stone*: "Everything is square, nothing is round in Las Vegas. When you live this kind of uncertain life from being on the road, you don't like sitting in chairs with a round arm. You like sitting in a nice square chair because it has identifiable corners." It could safely be said with confidence that no other human being has ever thus described Sin City.[1]

In public, Gibbons never appears to lose his cool, except for an infamous 1990s Swedish interview in which, after being asked too many questions

about the politics of ZZ Top's music, Gibbons walks out (the footage regularly pops up on music forums to the surprise of ZZ Top fans). And yet, many who have interviewed Gibbons have noted his continued knack for frequently changing the subject of a probing question with a whimsical anecdote or boilerplate ZZ Top lore. "When he doesn't want to answer a question, he'll offer up some mysterious non sequitur or Zen koan," wrote *Guitar World* back in 1994. "If you try to press your query, he'll just become more mysterious. When he does this, the underlying message is clear: 'Back off, hombre.'"[2]

Even more so, fans of ZZ Top have learned that Gibbons is often a cunning fabulist, content to add new layers to the ZZ Top mythology that don't necessarily fit with the established facts. Joe Hardy, an engineer and musical collaborator who worked extensively with Gibbons for nearly forty years, once said of Gibbons, "Here's one thing I can tell you that is absolutely true and that he will approve if I say this: He will lie about anything. Our saying is that he would rather climb a tree to tell a lie than stand on the ground and tell the truth."[3]

Gibbons's persistent promotion of ZZ Top by using his oft-repeated phrase "same three guys, same three chords" has also downplayed his musical leadership of the band. Though Hill and Beard have both contributed to ZZ Top's music as songwriters and have driven the band's incomparable rhythm, it is Gibbons who largely directed the artistic path that the band would follow, choosing to embrace synthesizers in the 1980s to expand the sonic parameters of what ZZ Top's music could be, as well as the various rhythmic experimentations—both satisfying and perplexing—during the band's ill-fated RCA period.

In addition, despite Gibbons's frequent "same three guys, same three chords" assertion, the truth is that the "little ol' band from Texas" has never been a three-man operation from the moment that Gibbons and Ham decided

to go into business together. This is not a shot at the trio's musical abilities or their monumental accomplishments together—after all, most rock-and-roll bands are not simply the sum of their core membership. There are numerous candidates often dubbed the "Fifth Beatle" who helped the Fab Four conquer the world, and the Beach Boys' most-loved hits are the products of dozens of first-rate studio musicians backing up the famous voices. When Joan Jett and the Blackhearts were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015, Jett's longtime manager and producer, Kenny Laguna, was among the inductees, and it's nearly impossible to write about the success of Bruce Springsteen without recounting his wildly successful partnership with manager Jon Landau. While it's no surprise that ZZ Top sought to preserve the iconic image of the "Tres Hombres" jamming together to develop their hits over more than five decades of partnership, there have been many more "hombres" involved to help the band succeed during that stretch.

Furthermore, it hasn't always been the "same three guys"—in the early months before Beard and Hill joined ZZ Top, Gibbons was originally joined by bassist/organist Lanier Greig and drummer Dan Mitchell (the lineup that recorded ZZ Top's first single), with Greig later replaced by bassist Billy Ethridge. However, Greig, Mitchell, and Ethridge's membership quickly became footnotes because the Gibbons-Beard-Hill lineup famously remained unchanged for over five decades until Hill died in 2021 at the age of seventy-two.

Another point that nearly all fans agree on is Gibbons's ability as a musician. While most people speaking about Gibbons first mention his beard, guitarists and guitar aficionados often look past the facial hair and talk about his tone—Gibbons's seemingly uncanny ability to make a guitar sound exactly how he wants it to in new and different ways, from a clean-sounding polished hum to a sludgy crunch. In the studio, Gibbons has been known

to use whatever guitar he feels will give him the best sound and tone for the particular song he's working on. He has not always been forthcoming in identifying which guitars he has used on which tracks, which of course may be intentional in order for the magician to keep some of his tricks a secret. This extraordinary skill is widely admired by Gibbons's peers. "Billy Gibbons is one of the most creative people I have ever met," says Mark Erlewine, owner of the landmark Erlewine Guitars in Austin, Texas, who has built a variety of custom guitars for Gibbons, including a model called the Automatic. "He is an excellent guitar player. His tone is unique. I remember Mark Knopfler came in one time to have me build an Automatic for him because he had talked to Billy and asked him where he got his tone. To me, Billy is the tone master and he is really able to do pretty much anything. I feel like he is the creative force behind ZZ Top and he wrote most of their original music."

The same goes for his vocal tone. Though most would agree that Hill had the better voice of the two, Gibbons is the primary lead vocalist of the group and has used a variety of different voices throughout the band's career, from a gnarly, low growl (most famously in "La Grange") to funky phrasing ("Cheap Sunglasses") to a higher register howl ("Legs"). It was often a challenge to determine whether Gibbons, Hill, or some unknown entity was singing upon first listen, particularly because Gibbons has so many vocal stylings that shift from song to song to find the right groove for the tune.

Similarly, Gibbons is largely beloved by his musical peers, who revere him for his ability, persona, and—since the mid-2000s—willingness to collaborate. "He's just a beautiful man—a sweet, intelligent, and fucking funny-as-hell man," says Al Jourgensen, the musical force behind the industrial rock band Ministry and someone who has had several collaborations with Gibbons. "He's awesome, and there's nobody else I would rather hang out with on the planet than Mr. Billy fucking Gibbons. It's one of those things where

I've met a couple of my heroes where you are highly disappointed, but Billy is the opposite of that. You meet one of your heroes and he turns out to be even beyond your expectations as a human being and just as a really talented person. He exceeds your expectations, which is just amazing to me. I don't know anyone else like that."

And yet that's how Gibbons's history—both with ZZ Top and outside the group's history—has been woven and retold through interviews, profiles, documentaries, and other pieces documenting the life of the man affectionately called the Reverend Willy G by his friends, associates, and fans.

A few months after the end of the band's RCA contract and split with Ham, ZZ Top announced that they had acquired new management, Carl Stubner, a powerhouse manager who envisioned ways to broaden ZZ Top's appeal beyond the band's greatest hits and recording of new music that struggled to be noticed. The move was financially lucrative for the band—or, at that point, it would probably be far more accurate to say "brand." New music from ZZ Top was no longer the priority (the group has released just one album, 2012's *La Futura*, since the end of the RCA contract), and the edict was now to get the aging rockers as much publicity as possible to remind the world that ZZ Top are rock-and-roll legends. That required more visibility for a group that Ham had previously tried to hide behind the curtain. Gibbons, now acknowledged as the face and primary force behind the band, fully embraced his role as one of rock's elder statesmen. By the time ZZ Top made an appearance on the singing competition series *American Idol* in 2008 to perform "Sharp Dressed Man" with the winning contestant of that season of the reality show, it was clear that a new blueprint was in place—one that got the band face time on an episode of a television series watched by over thirty million viewers, including millions of younger viewers who may not have ever seen ZZ Top on TV before.

It would be impossible to fully capture Gibbons's sixty-plus years in music in one book, let alone to fully explore the career of ZZ Top. For one, many key figures have passed, including Bill Ham. There are also Gibbons's admitted tall tales about his own history.

But the constant remains that Gibbons has been one of the most mythologized, respected, and, in some cases, misunderstood figures in American rock music history, a place where he rightfully stands shoulder to shoulder with other guitar greats like Hendrix, Clapton, and Jeff Beck.

1
A GUITAR FOR CHRISTMAS

By the late 1970s, the fully bearded Billy Gibbons surely looked like he had stumbled into the spotlight out of a remote shotgun shack situated somewhere in the wild Texas badlands. In reality, Gibbons grew up in Houston, the son of Frederick "Freddie" Royal Gibbons, a musician and songwriter who had an impressive musical journey of his own.

Unlike his guitarist son, Freddie was not a native Texan. He was born on New Year's Eve 1907 in Gloversville, New York, an upstate town named for its once-prominent industry, glove making. Freddie, like his six siblings, was given piano lessons as a child, and as a teenager he formed a band that became a local sensation, just like his son would do decades later. Freddie became so proficient as a musician at a young age that he was recruited by a high school in Geneva, New York—150 miles west of Gloversville—not only to attend the school but to teach music classes to the other students. Though Freddie was apt at playing numerous instruments, by the time he graduated from high school his primary instrument had become the organ, and he earned additional money playing it as an accompanist for silent movies in theaters. It soon became Freddie's primary source of income and livelihood.

As the silent movie era began to sunset in the early 1930s, Freddie received a job offer to play the organ at the Texas Theatre in downtown Houston. Houston was a booming city—its population had more than doubled from 1920 to 1930—which led to the development of more leisure activities across the city. One of Freddie's roles at the theater was to perform "organ sing-alongs," many of which he would compose himself, which would fill

time between features. The theater was owned by businessman Will Horowitz, whose daughter, Ruth Iris, would become Freddie's first wife.

The cinema industry trade paper *Box Office* reported in its July 20, 1940, edition that Freddie's Saturday Midnight stage shows in Houston at the "Texan" were a huge hit, noting that he was drawing crowds akin to a *Gone with the Wind*–size opening, an incredible benchmark for comparison, considering the immense popularity of the 1939 classic film, especially in the South. By the early 1940s, Freddie had found additional work playing music for radio broadcasts—the November 1947 edition of the *Radio Showmanship* trade magazine mentions Freddie as the organist of *Grand Prize Beer*, a show sponsored by Houston's Gulf Brewing Company and syndicated all over Texas. He would later perform with the Houston Symphony and conduct the Houston Philharmonic. Iris passed away due to an illness in 1946, and shortly afterward Freddie married his second wife, Lorraine Duffy. William "Billy" Frederick Gibbons, their second child, was born on December 16, 1949.

In the 1950s, Freddie was the regular Monday performer at the private Cork Club in the Shamrock Hilton Hotel, which merited several positive notices in the Hollywood bible *Variety*. Freddie's musical proficiency and connection to the entertainment industry led to occasional work in both Hollywood and Las Vegas. This included possibly working with his relative, Cedric Gibbons, an acclaimed Hollywood art director who became the supervising art director at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) when the studio was established in 1924. Cedric worked on iconic films like *Ben-Hur* (1925), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), among hundreds of other movies, and married actresses Dolores del Río—a stunning Mexican-born starlet who appeared in films on both sides of the border—and Hazel Brooks, who was thirty-four years his junior. Cedric was one of the founding members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and designed

the iconic Academy Award statuette. He would go on to win eleven Oscars for Best Art Direction during his career. It is unclear if Billy ever had a relationship with Cedric, who died when he was ten years old—their relationship is often noted as a piece of trivia rather than a matter of serious exploration.

According to Billy Gibbons, his father found additional work as a music director for MGM and maintained his connections to Hollywood and Las Vegas while living in Houston, though records of what film or television projects Freddie may have performed on are difficult to locate (Billy has also claimed that his father performed with Frank Sinatra on several occasions). Still, he recalled as a youth going to the Tropicana in Vegas with his father for a birthday party for entertainer Dick Powell, where he encountered Humphrey Bogart poolside (it's no surprise that ZZ Top recorded "As Time Goes By," the Herman Hupfeld–penned standard made famous by *Casablanca*, as a hidden track on the band's 2003 album *Mescalero*). Also unsurprisingly, considering his pedigree, on several occasions Gibbons has identified himself as a film buff and a devotee of many things Hollywood.

Billy Gibbons grew up in the Tanglewood neighborhood of Houston, a then newly established insular upscale community, later home to many members of the Bush political family and other notable Texans. Gibbons's mother became acquainted with the Bush family during their years in Tanglewood ("They are a fine family," Gibbons would later say about the Bush clan before playing a concert in Washington, DC, to mark George W. Bush's inauguration).[1]

Gibbons has told several different stories about how he first became interested in music. Though his father's work was undoubtedly an influence, Gibbons credits Elvis Presley for inspiring his first interest in rock and roll. "When I was five, I saw Elvis and I knew I wanted to spank the plank," Gibbons shared with *Thrasher Magazine* in 2015. "It just looked like the coolest thing you could possibly do." Gibbons has said that his mother took him to

a Presley concert in Houston when he was five years old (according to the website of Presley's guitarist Scotty Moore, Presley played over a dozen performances in Houston in 1955 and 1956, making it difficult to determine the exact show Gibbons might have seen). Gibbons would later say that he saw Presley around the time "Jailhouse Rock" became a hit, but the song was not released until September 1957, when Presley was playing far fewer live performances because of his recording and film commitments (none of Presley's 1957 performances were in Texas, and Presley began the military service that kept him off the road in March 1958). Gibbons would also later point to being inspired by Presley because of the singer's appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the first of which occurred on September 9, 1956—infamously, the crew only shot Presley from the waist up because of his controversial gyrations. Gibbons's future ZZ Top bandmate Dusty Hill saw Presley perform at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas on October 11, 1956, which could have very well been during Presley's swing through Texas when Gibbons saw him (Presley performed two shows in Houston on October 13, 1956).[2]

While music was the most influential subject on the mind of young Billy Gibbons, a close second was cars—he frequently quips that his first three words were "Ford," "Chevrolet," and "Cadillac." Cars would remain a tremendous influence on Gibbons, inspiring the lyrics of ZZ Top songs and becoming part of the band's music (the revving sound at the beginning of "Manic Mechanic" from *Degüello* is from Gibbons's father's 1964 Dodge Dart, which later became Gibbons's first car); in the MTV video era, they were an essential part of the group's image.

Gibbons would also say that he first crossed paths with the blues, the music that would define his career, about a year afterward, at around age seven, when his father took him to Audio Company of America (ACA) Studios, a prominent Houston recording studio, where B. B. King was recording at the time. The ACA Studios Master Books, which have been digitized and

are part of the University of Houston's digital collections, list King's last session at the studio in September 1953, more than three months before what would be Gibbons's fourth birthday. However, King's booking agency at the time, Buffalo Booking Agency, was based in Houston, and the blues legend, with whom Gibbons would record decades later, may have dropped in on occasion at ACA Studios in later years.

Gibbons has also occasionally given an alternate explanation for his early love of the blues: he learned it from his family's Afro-Caribbean maid, "Big" Stella Matthews, and her daughter, "Little" Stella Matthews, recalling that they would sneak him blues records and that Little Stella would also bring him and his older sister to local shows at a club called the Mocombo in Fourth Ward Houston, much to the disapproval of his parents.

Gibbons's upbringing and introduction to the blues contrast starkly with the experience in Dallas of his future bandmates, Frank Beard and Dusty Hill, more working-class teenagers who performed in blues clubs—particularly Hill, who even began backing Texas blues great Freddie King on occasion starting when he was fifteen years old (decades later, ZZ Top would induct King into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame posthumously in 2012).

Regardless of what hooked Gibbons on the blues, his parents attempted to foster their son's interest in music at a very young age. When he was about thirteen years old (Gibbons has cited the year 1963), he was sent to New York City to spend the summer studying percussion with mambo legend Tito Puente. "Tito was devoted to focusing into how things are structured rhythmically," Gibbons recalled to the *Providence Journal* in 2016. "That's certainly helpful when playing guitar since there's a very significant percussive element to that. I'm not entirely sure that 'El Rey del Mambo' was aware I even had a passing familiarity with any stringed instrument, but as noted, the lesson learned from him had an impact on just about everything that came thereafter."[3]

While Gibbons grew up surrounded by music, he did not often reveal his depth of musical knowledge and education in the early days of his fame. "I think what I learned about him later explained why I felt the way I did about him," shares Robin Hood Brians, who is credited as an engineer on ZZ Top's first four albums.

> *You know, he gives this image of "I'm just a poor ol' dude, I ain't got no money, I wandered in here with this ol' guitar that the dude down at the music store gave me 'cause it was broke and I kind of like to play the blues." Billy was raised in a home where music education was a big deal and I think he had a whole lot more musical knowledge than most people realized, and I think he's smart for never talking about it. You know, you're supposed to be cool, like it just seeps out of your soul. But it was seeping out of his education there and we didn't realize it at the time.*

The blues had a tremendous effect on Gibbons, but it was just one of the many genres of music that influenced him. His upbringing in Texas gave Gibbons—and his future bandmates—a bountiful musical crossroads to draw from. Because of its size and relative isolation from the media markets of the East and West Coasts, Texas' music scene was more insular in the 1960s and 1970s, though it was actually a net exporter of national talent. Some early rock-and-roll stars, like Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison, hailed from Texas. Rock singer Janis Joplin was born in the Lone Star State but left for San Francisco in 1963; aside from a brief return to Texas in 1965, she remained more identified with the counterculture scene of San Francisco until she died in Los Angeles in 1970. Outside Texas, the state's music output was largely recognized for its country music stars like Tex Ritter, Bob Wills, Buck Owens, and George Jones, among countless others, and later for its "outlaw" stars like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. The constant stream of Texas-born country music talent continued to solidify Texas' identity with the spirit of

the West even though the state was increasingly growing more diverse in population and culture.

For instance, Texas was also a hotbed of blues musicians—though this was far less nationally acknowledged than its country music scene—and gave Gibbons, Hill, and Beard ample opportunity to indulge in the music that inspired them. Blues pioneers like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie Johnson, T-Bone Walker, Lightnin' Hopkins, Freddie King, and Albert Collins were all born in Texas, and many others born outside the state, like B. B. King and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, had professional success there. The Texas blues tradition would be kept alive not only by ZZ Top but by more traditional Texas-born blues musicians like Johnny Winter, Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, and even Rocky Hill, the older brother of ZZ Top's Dusty Hill.

Another tremendous musical influence on Gibbons, Hill, and Beard was later recounted by ZZ Top in the songs "Heard It on the X" and "Antenna Head": the proximity to Mexico and its high-powered AM radio stations known as "border blasters." Because the stations were situated outside the United States, they did not need to adhere to broadcast restrictions imposed by US law. The signals for these Mexican stations—which had call signs beginning with XE or XH, giving rise to the nickname "X stations"—could be as high as 250,000 watts, which was five times the US limit, and could be heard hundreds of miles away. The stations often featured all kinds of programming meant to attract American audiences, from country to blues to gospel to Chicano to mariachi, interspersed with advice from quacks selling fraudulent cure-alls. "Dr. B," who is mentioned in the lyrics of "Heard It on the X," refers to John R. Brinkley, an early-twentieth-century charlatan who presented himself as a doctor. Brinkley infamously promoted a male impotence cure involving goat glands (he would later tout the goat glands and other phony treatments as a cure for dozens of ailments). Despite his complete lack

of legitimate medical knowledge, Brinkley amassed such wealth and popularity that he mounted campaigns for governor of Kansas in 1930 and 1932, drawing about 30 percent of the vote in each campaign.

After running afoul of the US Federal Radio Commission for providing fraudulent medical advice on the radio in Kansas, in 1932 Brinkley set up shop on Mexican radio's XER, a station the Mexican government launched to house his program. Brinkley packed the station with performances by country stars, including such notables as Gene Autry, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Carter Family, to help draw attention to his program. Though that station was initially a massive success—at one point it was so powerful it could even be heard in Canada—Mexico shut down XER after a short period. But XER proved to be a successful trial run for border blasters, and several other stations would broadcast from across the border until November 1972, when the United States and Mexico signed an agreement to limit the power levels of FM radio stations (however, AM border blasters continued to encroach on US airwaves). Most famously, American disc jockey Robert Weston Smith, better known as Wolfman Jack, became the voice of XERF-AM in 1963 and later XERB-AM in 1966, helping to make him an iconic radio figure across the United States.

Through X stations, the future members of ZZ Top were able to absorb all kinds of music as well as outlandish programming and advertising that would not have passed American regulations, likely helping to shape the irreverent, humorous lyrics of their later songs.

Perhaps influenced by what he was hearing on the X stations, Gibbons's interest soon turned from the drums to the guitar, and he begged his parents to buy him one. Though his parents were skeptical of rock and roll, for Christmas 1963 Gibbons received his first guitar, a sunburst 1962 Gibson Melody Maker, and a Fender Champ amp. Gibbons would later recall that the first songs he learned to play were Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man" and Ray