

late date, have been able to latch on to the idea of what ZZ Top is all about, and to catch the humour and the camaraderie of the band and present it in a nonsensical, non-serious way."

ZZ Top aren't about to make the mistake of taking themselves seriously — "We're not really big on, ah, falling down on our knees and shaking our hair (heh, heh)," says Beard, chortling — and relaxed they might be, but not too relaxed. They know the importance of maintaining the comic, good ole boy persona.

"Well, for some reason everything that we see appears funny to us," says Beard. "We've managed through the years to have good people surround us and we don't have to worry about a whole lot, other than having a good time and playing some good music."

Manic Mechanic

It's 18 years since the sound of ZZ Top was first unleashed on Texas and the world. In that time the rhythms and riffs haven't changed much, but the sound has — the boogie blues of *Eliminator* and *Afterburner* was modernised and reinforced with synthesisers and drum machines. Didn't re-vamping their sound risk losing the chemistry of the band?

"It's a question we didn't really ask ourselves that much, because as things started appearing on the music scene, different instruments and different techniques, we've always wanted to explore. Even if we don't know how to play something, we'll still figure out a way for a noise to come out of it. I think we've managed to incorporate it into the ZZ Top sound rather than changing ZZ Top."

Since "day one" Bill Ham has been the band's manager and record producer. "It's been kinda an on-going relationship that's worked out for everybody," says Beard. But word has it that Billy Gibbons is the top Top, who twiddles the knobs and calls the shots. According to Beard however, the band has a collaborative approach to recording. "Basically the three of us get together and bash out what we consider to be about 10 to 20 good songs. Then we'll take 'em into the studio and lay 'em down and work on them, and during the process of finishing 'em, hopefully 10 or 12 will come to the fore and say, well this goes on the album and this goes in the trash."

Getting the complicated sound of ZZ Top on record across live must create some problems.

"Actually, there's not any difficulties we've encountered. Basically if we're using any outside source of information [ie, backing tapes, synthesiser support] it flows through me to the band and so they're in the same situation they've always been, just kicking back and firing away with both *guuuns*. I wear a set of headphones and I hear *everythaang*. I hear the box office, and if there's a good football game on I'll take a little feed off that. Get the scores and pass it on to Billy."

"What we'll be bringing over is everything we've done in the States with the *Afterburner* tour. We've got a super show put together — it's probably good that we've waited this long, cos it's gonna be a super production."

Staying home this time will be the four-legged supporting actors from ZZ Top's legendary 1976 "world

tour."

Beard chortles. "Heh, heh. It was pretty insane! We had a longhorn steer and a 2000 pound buffalo, six buzzards and a wolf, two rattlesnakes who were named Precious and Brace, and a Havalena pig. It would be much the same if an Australian band took a bunch of kangaroos and koala bears and cockatoos out on the road."

The stage was shaped like the Lone Star State, with a desert background and real cactus. Frank wouldn't want to ruin the surprises in the current show, but rest assured, the *Afterburner* tour featured the usual Top themes in technoflash style — cars, spaceships, sphinxes, and women.

I Got the Message

Speaking of women, which ZZ Top do often, according to Frank Beard there's little negative reaction to the band's rather "caveman" perspective on matters sexual. "I think the women enjoy it better than the men do," he says, referring to their fishnet fixated videos. Despite such

songs as "I Woke Up With Wood," "I Got the Six" and "Pearl Necklace," the band seems to have escaped the puritan wrath of the right-wing committees formed to clean up rock music:

"No, actually we've haven't had any trouble from them," says Beard. "It's pretty common knowledge that we

"I don't think I'm banned from Austin, Billy might be." Beard chuckles. "I think maybe that was one of his girlfriends that kicked him out of town."

Frank Beard and Dusty Hill grew up in Dallas, Texas, where Hill began playing bass at the age of 14 for such blues greats as

band the Moving Sidewalks, now regarded as pivotal in Texan punk history.

Over the Top

Naturally Dallas and Houston musicians were rather parochial towards each other. "Back in the 60s, there was tremendous rivalry between the two

got to experience Billy as a guitar player." An early sponsor of Gibbons's skills was Jimi Hendrix, who called him "the most promising young guitarist in America" when the Sidewalks toured with the Jimi Hendrix Experience in 1968.

What with Stevie Ray Vaughan from Austin, the Winter brothers growing up in Beaumont, not to mention the myriad of black blues musicians from Texas, it sounds like boogie heaven. Banned in Austin or not, ZZ Top are now official ambassadors of Texas, and they're conscious of their responsibility:

"Being from Texas we really don't have any choice," says Beard. "We've got that heritage, and in Texas they teach us Texas history before they teach us United States history. We like the open spaces."

What qualities make a true Texan?

"It's vital to have the biggest car, the fastest horse, the prettiest girl, the meanest dog and the biggest smile."

Chris Bourke



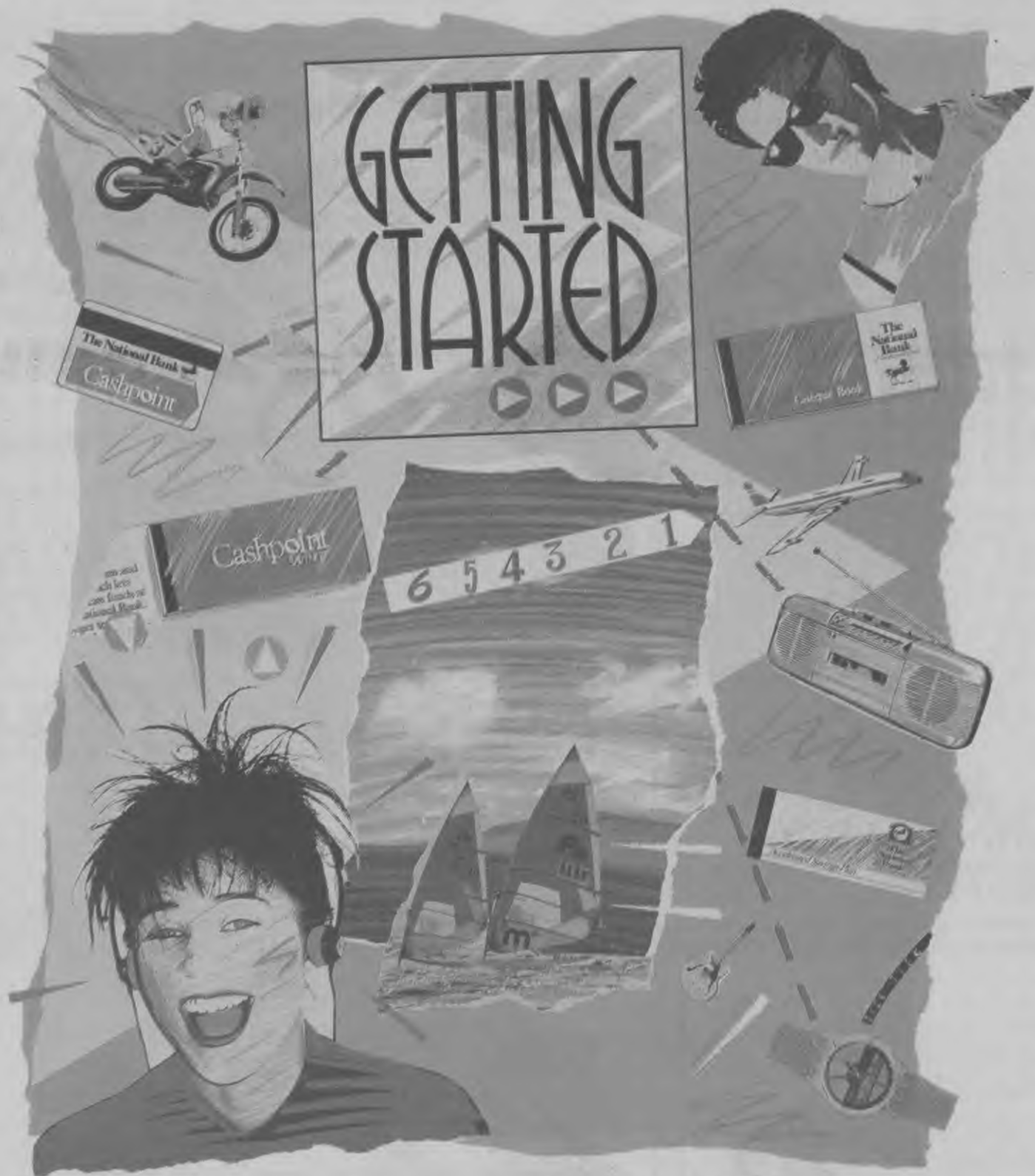
ZZ Top, 1981. Frank is the one without a beard.

don't know how to *cuss* good enough to be a really *truly* heavy metal band. I think we view it that we're poking fun at things that other people might be taking serious. We've not had a problem with any of that yet. We have written suggestive lyrics, but basically it's all in fun."

What's this I read about you being banned in Austin?

Freddie King and Lightning Hopkins. Three hundred miles away in Houston was Billy Gibbons; the trio were unwittingly linked as they listened to a blues radio station which beamed out of Mexico each night. While Frank and Dusty sported blue hair for their psychedelic American Blues band, Billy gathered acclaim with his acidhead garage

cities," says Beard. "In fact, Billy's band were probably the best band in Houston, and Dusty and myself's band were the best band out of Dallas. But we never would go hear each other play, because if you were from Dallas you'd say, well they're from Houston, they can't be any good ... it wasn't until Dusty and I moved to Houston that we



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