

Live

ZZ Top

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Olympic Park, Melbourne,
Feb 25

ZZ Top's first tour downunder is viewed as a homecoming by some fans — downunder outlaws who identify with the redneck Texan lifestyle. Certainly ZZ drummer Frank Beard expects "kindred Texans" — beer drinkers and hell raisers on both sides of the Tasman. First glimpse of these cultural ambassadors is their arrival at the venue in three highly inappropriate late model Mercedes limos — not one bit cowboy hip. (I hope they've got solid American cars lined up for their stay in Auckland.) Meanwhile, ever-loveable Angry Anderson and his Rose Tattoo have warmed up the Melbourne crowd with a bit of rock and rhetoric.

The crowd don't have to wait for ZZ — minutes later, undaunted by modus transport, species maximus noisus explodes on stage to be observed in their natural habitat making a big din aided only by stacks of PA, laser technology, stage sets, musicianship and a sense of humour.

ZZ are electricity — no acoustic numbers from these boys — from openers 'Got Me Under Pressure' and 'Sleeping Bag' to the lengthy extended encore that included 'Velcro Fly', 'Tush' and 'La Grange' — the pace doesn't falter. Bassist Dusty Hill only switches to synth once, the rhythm section set an awesome pulse while guitarist Billy Gibbons adds the manic quality that makes their next move unfathomable.

Billy's eloquence with his guitar is not match by his repartee — "Let's partaaaay" was one of the few memorable lines — but a fine sentiment indeed.

The band's "partaaaaying" toys extend beyond their southern R&B base to embrace whatever fascinates Billy and the lads — lasers that draw ZZ imagery on the Olympic Park scoreboard across the stadium, Varilites (as used by Genesis) and timely transformations of the stage environment. But the focus of observations is ever-enchanted stage dwellers,



the funky three — Frank, Billy and Dusty.

Big surprise is how lithe a little mover is Dusty Hill and how strong Billy and Dusty are as vocalists — while showing off their prowess at their ZZ dance routines.

Highlights for me were 'Gimme All Your Loving' (a recent classic), the goofball 'Velcro Fly' (hybrid thrash gem), the fiery intro songs from *Eliminator* and *Afterburner*, and 'Tush' is still the ultimate ZZ Top anthem to end the show on (challenger 'Legs' was placed midway through).

The Melbourne concert crowd were appreciative but reserved compared to a Kiwi crowd — maybe Frank Beard will find his south seas "Texan kin" this side of the Tasman. But maybe us Kiwis are not as mature in terms of concert behaviour as our Aussie neighbours.

But 90 minutes of southern boogie later, I'm still wondering ... if they're ambassadors of Texas, why do they wear truckers' caps? **Murray Cammick**

Verlaines, Sneaky Feelings
Galaxy, February 28

Friday night, drizzling outside, Verlaines and Sneaky Feelings inside the Galaxy with an amiable but dull dog of a student audience. Some introductory solo songs greeted encouragingly, but the real meat in tonight's sandwich is the Verlaines.

The band has a dramatic too fast to live, too young to die presence, reinforced by the scalding effect of characteristically close guitar chords and lots of cymbals.

They've got some suber new songs, slower and more spacious, 'Only a Dream Left' has a country and western feel, there's 'Jimmy Jazz' and snatches of Byron. Left wanting more after one encore.

Some dire takeaway Chinese greasies followed by the Sneaky Feelings.

Sneaky Feelings have written some of the best songs to come out of Dunedin, (magnificent 'Won't Change' and autumnal 'Husband House' my favourites) —

informed by a moody and reflective intelligence — but they don't have the Verlaines' impact and professionalism as live performers. By contrast they're sedate.

Too many, too long, tonally similar songs — bad planning, boys — sends half the audience home before the finish. Maybe they're just better on record; the Galaxy has grave acoustic defects. They should have played first (and shorter). Maybe the moon and the traffic lights were wrong, maybe it was the audience. Maybe me.

Jewel Sanyo

Billy Bragg, Chris Knox, Nick Smith
Galaxy, February 28

A forest of black stovepipes and a 40-foot banner from the sponsoring bank; this must be a student orientation gig. Nick Smith opened the show with a song about rugby, penises and homosexuals, topics which concerned him for the rest of his set. After quarter of an hour we had learned nothing save that a left-winger can be as banal and as authoritarian as a centre-forward. His politics were as obvious as his sincerity and neither moved me an inch.

Chris Knox came on stage in far better humour. He's a good talker with good songs and the first half of his set was sharp and funny. The second half, a labyrinthine medley of songs and feedback, was less so. He concluded with a common-sense lyric about "people who govern" which he sang to the Prime Minister's "box" (a hastily partitioned area above stage left).

Moved by the moment, someone threw a glass at the PM's box. It was a limp gesture by a rotten shot (if it was a grenade, we would have had no PA stack on the left-hand side of the stage). The PM had just returned, carrying an (autographed?) album, from meeting Billy Bragg backstage. The glass passed a few feet below the balcony, unnoticed by anyone except for the security men.

And then it was Bragg's turn. To praise his stage presence seems contrary to his selfless, uncontrived image but it must be said that he is a superb performer. He instinctively wound up the crowd, opening with a lot of humour and some matter-of-fact love songs be-

fore channelling the cheers towards his political message.

The message itself was persuasive and watertight. It's enough to point out that the crowd were cheering in support of the English Left, some 12,000 miles away. Bragg's humour and his politics are commonsense rather than communist and, as such, everyone can relate to them. He's a powerful communicator, very clear, very direct and he earned the audience's respect, point by point, with every passing minute.

Adversities were his allies. Breaking guitar strings ("The curse of Joe Strummer!") and a jet-lagged voice became the evening's running gag. "All the people here tonight who've been dragged here by their boyfriend or their girlfriend," he grinned, "are saying, 'Look, I told you he couldn't fucking sing!'" The hecklers found themselves to be the unwitting prompts for new anecdotes. Bragg likes crowds, and crowds like him.

The songs sounded better than ever. From the indignant 'New England' to the terse 'Levi Stubbs' Tears, his guitar was picked and chided ("b'chank-b'chank-b'dang-dang") with the bravado of a professional amateur, although the new songs ('Greetings to the New Brunette' and 'Valentine's Day is Over') are demonstrating a fierce subtlety. Bragg returned for the final encore with a backing guitarist to perform an 18-carat version of the Beat's 'Stand Down Margaret', a six-minute skank improvisation of great beauty.

Humour, songs, noble sentiments and the impeccably designed Red Wedge T-shirt. No wonder the English go ga-ga. I did. **Chad Taylor**

Jimmy Buffett, Herbs
Mandalay, Feb 19 & 20

It was indeed a surprise to find upon entering the circular Mandalay cabaret a crowd of about 800 of the oldest people I've seen at a concert for a long time — so many beards! Still, old hippies or Windsor/Cascade young hippies, take yer pick. But the Jimmy Buffett concerts were more than the "comfortable music for comfortable people" one constipated reviewer referred to; they were the most fun since the Saints hit town.

Buffett, the easy-sexy goodtime boy from Florida, is still firmly root-

ed in the tequila drenched mid-70s, but he provided a rave-up of a time plus the classiest band of backing musicians for many a sunset. Shame therefore that the sound of the first night was so woolly, caused perhaps by the bins being hung in the pagoda-shaped ceiling — it meant El Lay's (holidaying?) top session rhythm section (Russ Kunkel on drums, Tim Drummond bass, plus Little Feat percussionist Sam Clayton) couldn't be made out in the murk. But the crowd full of devotees didn't mind, they'd been waiting years to see Buffett and hear his witty songs and one-liners.

Early on, he seemed to spend as much time being a stand-up comic as singing, but that got the crowd lubricated and by the end they were roaring. His guitarist Tim Krekel and harp-player Greg Taylor led the band with their assured playing, assisted by the R&B piano of Mike Utley and Vincent Melamed's Hammond B3 organ with the wonderful vibrato sound of a spinning Leslie speaker. Melamed also provided much of the comedy — a blow-up Godzilla entered to his *Jaws* theme, plus on both nights he did cameo impressions, first a Muddy Waters blues rap, the next night Johnny Cash.

After a solo acoustic middle section, with tunes such as 'Pencil Thin Mustache' and a mellow 'Pirate Looks at 40', the band returned and lifted the tempo several notches with 'Volcanoes' (led by Utley's Jerry Lee glissandos), 'Why Don't We Get Drunk', the hit 'Margaritaville' and a Saints-like 'Floridays'. Both band and crowd were cooking by the encores, 'One Particular Harbour' (with Herbs) and 'Brown Eyed Girl'.

On the second night, the crowd had less "Parrotheads" but the improved sound made up for the more restrained spirit. Herbs, playing with a harder feel, looked a little lost on the first night, with the audience unappreciative except for the acapella 'E Hine', but both swung together the following night. The Mandalay is the perfect venue for a "club" act that requires more intimacy than the Galaxy; it's civilised, you can see and get a drink easily, only the selection of beer was a disappointment. Buffett said he'll be back within a year; don't miss him. **Chris Bourke**

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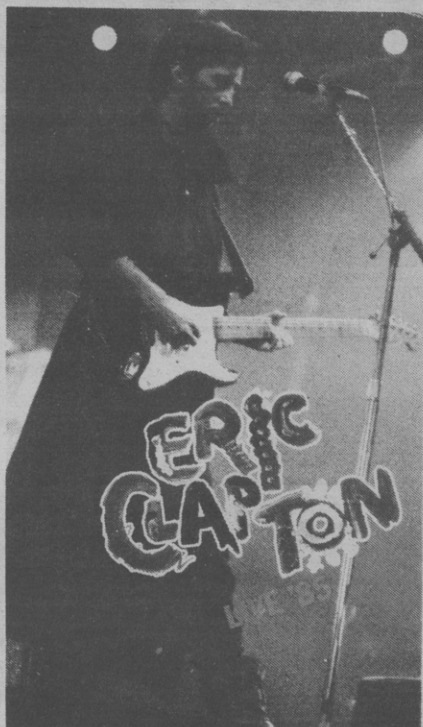
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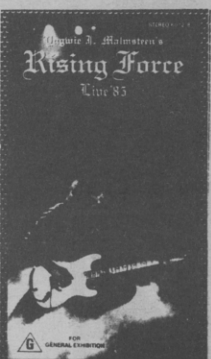


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