

TOP MAN

ZZ Top main man **Billy F. Gibbons** is still pouring his heart and soul into his groovesome music into his seventies, and his latest solo album 'Hardware' shows that the creative juices are still flowing freely. The recent sad passing of his musical companion Dusty Hill shows that we should treasure Gibbons more than ever. *Dave Ling* meets a true rock original...

AN AUDIENCE WITH BILLY F. Gibbons is never dull. *Rock Candy* Mag emits one belly laugh after another over the course of a 75-minute Zoom call with ZZ Top's be-whiskered vocalist and guitarist, whose own chuckles of "haw haw haw" are now as instantly familiar as that grizzly talking voice.

At 71 years old, Gibbons is one of rock music's last great remaining characters. This much is now clearer than ever, given that shortly after we spoke ZZ Top's bass player and vocalist Dusty Hill passed away in his sleep. Along with drummer Frank Beard the trio had been a band for 51 years, and when Billy talks of Dusty, and of Frank, it's as if they're all members of the same family. Losing Hill must have been a body blow.

The group's return to the stage a mere two days after Dusty's death seemed impossibly premature. However, Gibbons emphasised in a statement to DJ Eddie Trunk that it was Hill's wish that "The show must go on."

All of this had yet to happen when we hopped on that Zoom call to chew the cud over 'Hardware', Gibbons's recently released third solo album. Of course, we were also keen to discuss the Little Ol' Band From Texas, as well as Billy's eternal love of blues music, collaborations past, present, and future, COVID-19, and much, much more besides.

GIBBONS MADE his latest solo album deep in the heart of the California desert, aided by former The Cult, Guns N' Roses, and Velvet Revolver drummer Matt Sorum, and Austin Hanks, an Alabama-born singer, songwriter, and guitarist whose two solo albums – the

second of which is named 'Alabastard' – were well received. Once a member of cult 1990s Southern rock act Slick Lilly, Hanks has also had several songs featured in the hit US TV show *Sons Of Anarchy*.

The sun-bleached solitude of the recording location certainly seeped into the grooves of 'Hardware', an album that, in the words of *RC*'s own Ross Sampson, "straddles many musical genres, from hard rock and metal to blues, new wave, and even country." The title of 'Hardware' is a tribute to late recording engineer Joe Hardy, who worked with Gibbons and ZZ Top going right back to the mid-'80s.

Gibbons's answers to our many questions are colourful and thorough, delivered with a theatrical zest that sometimes encroaches on shaggy dog territory. No wonder his favourite phrase seems to be "long story longer." In truth, some of Billy's quotes are like patchwork quilts that require piecing together after the fact. But what the hell, the man is rock royalty, so he can do what he wants...

"This interview has been a joy," a smiling Gibbons informs us on its conclusion. "We really peeled the onion on some unexpected right and left turns, didn't we?" Well, we certainly hope so...

'HARDWARE' IS SUCH AN INTERESTING RECORD. FAMILIAR-SOUNDING MOMENTS SUCH AS 'MY LUCKY CARD' AND 'MORE-MORE-MORE' ARE COMPLEMENTED BY OFF-THE-WALL SONGS LIKE THE TOM WAITS-ESQUE SPOKEN-WORD PIECE 'DESERT HIGH'. IS THIS THE SOUND OF A MAN DOING PRECISELY WHAT HE WANTS? "Oh, totally. Some of the credit for that goes to Austin ▶

Photo: Roger Kisby

