

# YRD

ERVIEW

# Tales Of Southern- Rock Survival

BY JOHN SWENSON

**I**n 1973, Lynyrd Skynyrd made its official music-industry debut in a packed Atlanta club, Richard's, where the Sounds Of The South label introduced what producer Al Kooper heralded as "the American Rolling Stones."

Lynyrd Skynyrd was a finished package that night—the group's astonishing live intensity was branded into the minds of everyone who witnessed this historic event. From the grim statement-of-purpose "Workin' For MCA" to the apocalyptic finale of "Free Bird," it was obvious that this was a band for the ages. Ronnie Van Zant, its frontman and leader, pushed each story forward with violent, poetic purpose; Allen Collins, Gary Rossington and Ed King spun interlacing ropes of electric guitar lines crackling through the mix, a sound that created mayhem despite its carefully calculated precision.

This was the real future of rock 'n' roll, destined not for Hollywood fame but for blood, tragedy, redemption and, ultimately, survival on its own terms.

The band was derailed by the infamous 1977 plane crash that killed Van Zant, Steve Gaines, the guitarist who replaced Ed King, and his sister, vocalist Cassie Gaines. A decade later, the remaining members reassembled for a tribute to Lynyrd Skynyrd, with Ronnie's youngest brother Johnny singing. That band, after a few more changes, is still going strong.

Twenty-five years after that memorable debut, Lynyrd Skynyrd played a pair of shows at New York's Beacon Theater that bristled with the energy of a new band trying to prove itself. The following interview took place after the first night, with all nine members offering their observations on Skynyrd history—vocalist Johnny Van Zant, guitarists Gary Rossington, Rickey Medlocke and Hughie Thomasson, keyboardist Billy Powell, bassist Leon Wilkeson, drummer Jeff McAllister and background vocalists Dale Krantz-Rossington and Carol Chase.

**You guys were obviously having a lot of fun out there last night.**

**Johnny Van Zant:** We've been having a real good time. We've been at this over 11 years now. I've been in the band longer than Ronnie was.

**Gary, you used to talk about how you first got together through playing baseball.**

**Gary Rossington:** Me and Bob Burns had a little band, and Ronnie was in a band called Us, and Allen was in a band called the Mods. Our band was called Me You And Him. Larry Junstrom played with us. Me and Bob went to watch Ronnie play baseball one time; he was on one team, and we were on a team called the Mustangs. We were right on the third-base line, and Ronnie hit a line drive and wham it hit Bob Burns right in the head and knocked him out. Ronnie thought he'd killed him, so he came runnin' over.

Then we went back and talked, and we went over to Bob's house. Ronnie just lived down the street. He saw the drums and the guitar, and we just started playing "Last Time" by the Stones and "Gloria." We got a band up that day, and we went and got Allen Collins. He was riding his

bike down the street. Ronnie was the badass of the town, and he had this big old red Mustang. Me and Bob were in it going down the road, and we saw Allen, and Bob went, "Hey, that guy's got a guitar, and he's pretty good, Ronnie." We were looking for anybody with equipment. So we pulled up and yelled "Hey Allen!," and he saw Ronnie, and Bob was pretty bad at the time too, so he took off, riding his bike out in the woods, threw his bike down and climbed up a big old oak tree. The rest of us are saying, "Come on down, we only want you to play with us," but he thought Ronnie was gonna beat him up. So we started to play music together 'cause we liked the Beatles and the Stones, the Yardbirds, and we started to dream, and the dream came true.

**Billy Powell:** I played guitar in Leon's band, the Little Black Eggs. I had been taking classical piano lessons for years, then one day I decided to pick up the guitar, and we started this band the next day. We only knew one song. Allen Collins later taught me how to play "Light My Fire."

**Leon Wilkeson:** Little did we know that we were gonna end up with a band as famous as Lynyrd Skynyrd.

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From left: Jeff McAllister, Billy Powell, Johnny Van Zant, Rickey Medlocke, Gary Rossington, Hughie Thomasson, Leon Wilkeson