

Lynyrd Skynyrd in their Southern fried heyday. L-R Allen Collins (guitar), Ronnie Van Zant (vocals), Steve Gaines (guitar), Leon Wilkerson (bass), Gary Rossington (guitar), Billy Powell (keyboards), Artimus Pyle (drums), Leslie Hawkins (backing vocals), Cassie Gaines (backing vocals) and JoJo Billingsley (backing vocals)

# SATURDAY NIGHT HIT SPECIALS!

When *Sounds* journalist Pete Makowski joined Southern rockers **Lynyrd Skynyrd** on the road in the States back in 1976, the band were at the height of their powers – and the peak of their good ol' boy madness. Let's head back

in time for a wild, wild ride featuring guns, booze and plenty of flashing sirens...

*"You know the odds of us landing in a fight before the night's over are about even."*

– **Ronnie Van Zant**

*"When I get this mad, I could shoot anybody"*

– **Joe, ex-biker, California**

*"My Saturday Night Special/Gotta barrel that's blue and cold. They ain't good for nothing/But put a man six feet in a hole."* – **Lynyrd Skynyrd**

**MAYBE SOME PARTS OF** the West Coast aren't as mellow as legend would have it. It seemed that way when we nearly got a taste of another kind of Heavy Metal, that Saturday night...

In the land of Skynyrd, days and nights seem to mingle and fuse themselves into a haze of blurred incidents. Life can look pretty vague through a glass of Jack Daniels. But wait! Let me gaze into my Coke chaser. I see a giant metallic bird machine, with one confused juvenile type

creature going on a mysterious journey into the land of Marvel comics and Tootsie Rolls...

A genuine look of sympathy spreads across the cashier's face as I hand over my worthless cabbage [money] to exchange.

"You realise how much this is worth?" she asks, pausing as if to allow me time to change my mind and take the next return flight home.

LA's lit up like some goddamned Christmas tree at night. Millions of billboards register onto my drowsy pupils like flashbacks as the Yellow Cab zips down the highway. We pass all the familiar niteries I'd previously read about. The Rainbow, Roxy, Filthy McNasty's... Filthy McNasty's, hmm...

*"But I'm used to four seasons, California's got but one."*

– **Bob Dylan**

**NEXT DAY** a walk round town, to Tower Records, up the road from the hotel, past the fallout shelter, turn left

down Sunset Strip or Boulevard. The weather, the cars, the women – all nice and hot.

I must be in heaven.

Due to my work schedule I barely see LA, 'cept for a few streets. Initial impressions – it's like a showbiz holiday camp. Its attractions are obvious. It's got so much to offer, from the most breathtaking and exhilarating sights to the tackiest, grease-stained armpits that always thrive in business centres like this. A proverbial energy source.

It's as disposable as the tampons and douches that are constantly advertised on American TV, yet so necessary, an interesting enigma that requires deeper investigation next time round.

OK Skynyrd fans, the story begins here...

*"They're gonna take me to California, Make me a superstar."* – **Lynyrd Skynyrd**

**THE STARLIGHT** Ballroom smells real good tonight. A deceptive name for an outdoor gig. I hadn't made

any contact with the Skyns yet. They weren't staying in town. Virtually all the kids have come up by car. The organisation is tight. Spellbound by the wide selection of tasteful motors, suddenly broken by the appearance of a battered Ford Anglia. Where am I?

The audience is mellow, as in Mexican weed. Considering the army of security crawling all over the joint the atmosphere seems pretty loose, although I was later informed there were a few nasty scenes.

The scenery around the venue is breathtaking, not far from the Fault where they say if the big rumble (earthquake to you) does occur it will happen in 1982 when all the planets are in line. A nice location for weed, whites, wine and music.

When the band hit the boards everything becomes a blur. My mind is suddenly beginning to register the situation. I'm in LA, 6000 miles away from my bleedin' bank manager and responsibility. Let's parteeeee! Hey pass me that...

Looking back, it wasn't Skynyrd's best night.

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Something was lacking. Their whole procedure was workmanlike. My brain wasn't responding to anything, 'cept that chick in skintight white trousers bending back and splaying her legs during the solo in 'Freebird' in a fashion that would make Runaway Lita Ford topple off her stacks in embarrassment.

**BACKSTAGE, AN** assorted array of LA types: Rodney Bingenheimer, *Exorcist* actress Linda Blair, John Carter – a Capital A&R man whose past career includes the composition of 'Peppermints And Incense', a hit for Strawberry Alarm Clock, a group that featured old Skynyrd hand Ed 'Fender' King.

"F\*ck man, this group just don't pull any fox," commented one guy. The scene was incredibly subdued in the dressing room after the show. Introductions were brief. First Gary Rossington. If you haven't already heard, he was involved in a near-fatal car accident, but made it to the shows. The scars were healing, although he was suffering from a shortage of molars and had a slight limp, brandishing a thick wood walking stick. Rossington strolled round calmly. He's just had his gums re-set and teeth replaced, which made it painful for him to talk, and limited his vocabulary to one of his favourite lines: "Wha's happening?" It's a phrase I vaguely remember repeating by the end of my stay.

Next I met drummer Artimus Pyle, who on hearing I was press, stuck his finger across his mouth, glared and backed away in mock fear. Hello Art. Weird guy, brilliant drummer. His shaggy dog appearance makes him look like a wild man. You'd expect to see him leaping around wearing a leotard in a wrestling ring. Good bloke, just hard to pin down, ultra evasive. The rest of the band had already shifted. Awready gon?

**I'VE FOLLOWED** Skynyrd's career with keen interest since their debut album was released on import. Even before that, when their former producer Al Kooper had spouted words in their praise when he spotted them at a small club in between recording sessions. That was quite a while ago. Now the band are a truly established force. This success comes after a series of reshuffles, including the loss of their original guitarist, the aforementioned

Ed King, and drummer Bob Burns. Burns, as you already know, was replaced by Pyle whose previous experience was exclusive to small clubs.



Allen Collins gives it some good ol' chicken scratch

SKYNYRD ARE THIRD GENERATION ROCKERS, BUT FIRST IN THEIR GENERATION. NO DOUBT ABOUT IT. NOTHING PRETENTIOUS, OR 'NUTHIN' FANCY' AS THEY WOULD HAVE IT. JUST BOOGIE EXECUTED WITH MAXIMUM TASTE AND FINESSE.

The band kept the line up with two guitarists (Gary Rossington and Allen Collins), in fact the original axe format, and augmented some backing singers in the form of Cassie Gaines, Jo Billingsley and Leslie Hawkins (pause to drool). A new guitarist came in the form of Steve Gaines, Cassie's brother, who demonstrated his chops at Knebworth.

So the current line up is Collins, Rossington, Gaines (guitars), Ronnie Van Zant (vocals), Leon Wilkeson (bass), Pyle (drums) Billy Powell (keyboards) and the Skynettes. Got it? Now read on...

*"Stop drinkin' Johnny Walker Red, Don't drink poison whiskey, don't you drink it boy."* – **Lynyrd Skynyrd**

**VAN ZANT** looked particularly hungover today when Toby Mamis, the band's PR, and I arrived at their hotel. "Ah hate people," were his opening comments as we entered the lobby. He didn't need an illuminated sign above his head to spell out his condition. It was an early start to the morning, the band were playing an afternoon gig at Santa

Barbara supporting Jefferson Starship. It was (rock musicians of a nervous disposition don't read this) nine o'clock in the morning!

"No one should have to get up so early," he sighed, nursing his forehead.

"I was up all night," groaned a voice from the corner. Artimus! Eyes covered by shades he looked fragile, almost breakable. The group dragged themselves out to the black limos waiting outside, like coffins into hearses, and we swept off to the airport where their chartered plane was waiting. Yes, the guys have hired their own Freebird to take them to concerts. A much more viable proposition than their old bus. Nice size machine, equipped with couches and bar, the closest thing to an airborne living room I've seen.

"Ahm gonna fly this thing," announced Van Zant with an air of vengeance in his voice, "and when we hit Santa Barbara, we're going to hit it, BAMMM!!!! HAW! HAW!" Suddenly I felt ill too.

The band's manager Peter Rudge (who also manages the Stones) was on board. Pale, chain smoking, a look of concern on his worn features, he looked pretty healthy for a manager. If there's one guy these hell raisers would listen to, it's Rudge. Constantly working, bubbling with ideas, he looked as if he could use 26 hours in a day.

Keyboardman Billy Powell strolled over, after walking past a couple of times casting a vague glance of recognition. We chatted for a while about a series of pictures he took of me on the first tour gradually getting inebriated and collapsing over a table in Glasgow. Looking much fuller in the face, longer hair, Powell's one of those quiet-spoken guys who definitely has his moments.

Our conversation was cut short when he rushed to the front to watch the plane land. Great crew flying this machine. One of them used to fly a certain rock and roller around, but quit when he thought the guy might get clumsy with the gun that he constantly wielded when drunk.

Santa Barbara airport basically consists of a check-in point and a hamburger stall. On the way to the venue the main topic of conversation was choosing a name for the girls. Suggestions touted included The Honkettes, The Junkettes and Allen Collins' contribution, Puss In Boots.

**THE VENUE** was only three quarters full due to rain showers earlier in the week and ominous clouds earlier that day that had by now dispersed in favour of California sunshine. The ground on the way to the band's trailer was like swampland. The group disappeared into their mobile dressing room, while I wandered off to watch opening band Heart.

There was a varied collection of West Coast photographers and journalists assembled in the backstage area. The majority, surprisingly enough, there to see Skynyrd...

"In the old days Toby used to ring me constantly trying to get me to write about the band," commented a writer. "Now the situation's reversed. I've travelled from LA to try and get an interview with Ronnie Van Zant."

**AFTER A** few years of solid touring and hit records Skynyrd are now hot property, suddenly in a position to dictate on their own terms. The situation has escalated even more since the release of their double live platter, which has entered the charts with apparent ease and

has all the promise of becoming a BIG seller.

"By the way, which one of those are in the band?" asked the same scribe pointing at a gathering outside the trailer.

"Not many people can tell the difference between the band and the roadies," someone commented wryly.

And it's true. Offstage the band maintain a very low key profile. It's not until they reach the stage that their characters are magnified. Then you know who's who. It's not contrived, it's just their music brings out their individual aggressions, their separate ways of expressing themselves. They put their total energy into the music. The rest comes naturally. Of course there are certain rehearsed steps, but that's all a part of the show.

Rudge is furious. You can tell. His intake of tobacco increases and the atmosphere around him deters any form of communication, i.e. you don't approach him. There are no screens between the band and the trailers, the result being a mass of gawking stoners, staring at the group as if they were exhibits in a cage.

"WHERE'S THE F\*CKING GUY IN CHARGE?!", he screams with the kind of authority that commands instant reaction. Within minutes the security guys, who wear T-shirts that bear the unusual slogan – NO DRUGS, NO GLASS CONTAINERS – put up a plastic sheet over the rails.

**AFTER AN** impressive set culminating with Zeppelin's 'Rock And Roll' as an encore (an unusual choice, totally out of character) Heart left the stage and the road crew worked furiously for the changeover. It seems that if there's more than 15 minutes' interval between acts in the States, a riot ensues. Pretty tight.

Skynyrd attack their set with more force today. It's not their gig, so they have to fight a little harder to get the whole crowd going. A hardcore mass of LS fans made the situation easier. One of the finest qualities about this band that's immediately evident is that the only product they're selling is their music. The whole show revolves around the material. OK, you can accuse 'Freebird' of being a gimmick, a tightly arranged guitar blitz. It's still music.

The band, singers, Gaines are all improving immeasurably. The progress can be noticed day by day. Today was good, but tomorrow was going to be the one... it *had* to be.

Gary Rossington carrying a walking stick and showing off the dental work needed to repair his busted teeth and gums after a nasty car crash just before this piece was written in '76



REEFER MADNESS IS IN FULL FORCE, BUT THE KIDS ARE READY TO MOVE. THE AUDIENCE GO POSITIVELY APESH\*T AS THE GROUP WALK ON, PLUG IN AND BELT OUT THE OPENING BARS OF 'WORKING FOR MCA'. THIS IS IT! SOUTHERN FRIED.