



THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Johnny Van Zant opens up on his life and place in Skynyrd's history...

"IT IS WITH OUR deepest sympathy and sadness that we have to advise that we lost our brother, friend, family member, songwriter, and guitarist, Gary Rossington, today. Gary is now with his Skynyrd brothers and family in heaven and playing it pretty, like he always does."

When Gary Rossington passed away at the age of 71 on 5 March this year, it really did mark the end of an era. The man from Jacksonville, Florida was the last surviving member of the Lynyrd Skynyrd line-up that recorded the band's seminal first album, 1973's '(Pronounced 'Lēh-'nérd 'Skin-'nérd)'. Frontman Ronnie Van Zant and recently added guitarist Steve Gaines had both perished in that awful air crash way back in October of 1977. But one by one, musicians from the first album – guitarist Allen Collins, keyboardist Billy Powell, drummer Bob Burns, and bassist/guitarist Ed King – all departed. When Rossington died, the final link back to the first official recording of the most influential Southern rock band of all time was broken. There has been plenty of tragedy associated with Lynyrd Skynyrd over the years, plenty of death. But Gary Rossington's departure seemed particularly poignant, a watershed moment that could easily have signalled the end of Lynyrd Skynyrd.

"When Gary passed, my first thought was that maybe it really was the end of Lynyrd Skynyrd," admits frontman Johnny Van Zant when he calls me from his Florida home. "Particularly because this isn't my first boat ride on people dying. When Billy

passed [in 2009] and when Leon [Wilkeson, an early Skynyrd bassist who came back into the fold shortly after the debut album] passed [in 2001] we talked about ending the band but decided against it. But with Gary being who he was, the last surviving member of that first album line-up, when he went I really felt that was it."

Fortunately for those of us who just can't get enough of Skynyrd's distinctive blend of hard rock, R&B, and blues, Rossington's widow, Dale Krantz-Rossington, had something to say about that.

"Gary's wife really sealed the deal," confirms Johnny. "Dale has been singing backing vocals with Skynyrd for years and years, ever since the Tribute Tour that brought the band back together in 1987. And when Gary died, Dale said to me, 'This is what Gary did and he would want you guys to carry on.' So now more than ever I want to continue. Gary was out there carrying the legacy for Ronnie and Allen, for Billy and Leon, and for all those guys for so many years out of respect for what they did. Now I think he deserves the same kind of respect from us."

GARY'S DEDICATION to the Skynyrd cause is all the more remarkable for the fact that his health hadn't been the best for quite a while. In October of 2015 he'd suffered a heart attack and he'd even undergone emergency heart surgery in July of 2021.

"For the last couple of years Gary hadn't been playing every show with the band because of his health issues," Johnny clarifies. "He'd come out to odd shows, play three or four songs with us, just as much as his health would allow. But he and I talked every day. We talked about how long the band should go on for and he had a theory. [Southern legends] The Allman Brothers had stopped. [Musical inspiration] Charlie Daniels was gone. That weighed on him. He wanted Skynyrd to keep this type of

music alive. The records Skynyrd made were great, but Gary felt that in truth Skynyrd had always been about the live performance. Now we're no young turkeys, no spring chickens. But what I do know is that everyone still loves getting out there and playing the music. We feel like a family when we're out there together, and we all want to go out there again and really give Gary his due."

OF COURSE not everyone agrees that Lynyrd Skynyrd should continue without any members from that all-important first album. To my mind that doesn't really take into consideration the fact that there were a number of line-up changes within the ranks in the days prior to Skynyrd signing a major deal. But Johnny is nevertheless respectful of these views.

"Since we made the announcement that we're going to be carrying on, I've looked at comments out there on the Internet. Some of the older fans say 'Oh, it should have ended' and I understand that. They've seen the band in the past and they've loved it. But what about the new generations that love this music and want to hear it live? The band's bigger than all of us. The music's so strong and it's been around for generations. If we were doing this

thing really badly, Howard, phoning it in, then I'd walk away in a minute. But I don't think it's like that because you can see and feel that we still enjoy getting out there and we see so many people getting so much pleasure out of it. There are people who follow us around from

town to town because they love the music so much. That really means something to me, because I still can't believe I'm living this, especially as I never really wanted to be in Lynyrd Skynyrd in the first place. That was never my goal. It was always Ronnie's band, and it always *will* be Ronnie's band. Nobody can do what Ronnie did better than Ronnie, and over the past 36 years I've never tried to do what Ronnie did. I just went, 'Hey, I'm Johnny and I'm going to go out there and do the best I can.'"

OF COURSE it was never Johnny Van Zant's intention to be singing in Lynyrd Skynyrd. How could it be? When the band first changed its name from The One Percent to Leonard Skinner back in 1969, he was just 10 years old.

"I was around them when I was just a little kid," he laughs. "And what was funny was that because my dad wanted me to be a good, upstanding citizen, the guys in the band were never allowed to cuss or talk trash around me. They couldn't even smoke cigarettes! They used to rehearse in my parents' living room and I thought they were good. But of course I didn't know they'd go as far as they did, and that the music would stick around for so long. They didn't think that either. It was never 'LYNYRD SKYNYRD' to me. It was just a bunch of guys playing music. Ronnie was never 'Ronnie Van Zant of Lynyrd Skynyrd' to me. He was just my brother."

According to Johnny, singing was as natural as breathing in the Van Zant household.

"All of us sang. There were three boys – Ronnie, Donnie, and me – and three girls – Joanne, Darlene, and Marlene – and we would all sit on the swing set that we had out front of the house and spend a lot of time singing. Our dad, Lacy, was a long-distance truck driver, and he was always listening to country music. He'd take us on a bunch of runs with him and we'd

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