



ZZ Top has deep Dallas roots

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Everyone knows ZZ Top is the self-proclaimed "Lil Old Band From Texas." But most fans think the weird beards hail from Houston when, in fact, two-thirds of the group grew up in Dallas.

With the recent DVD arrival of *Live From Texas* – filmed last year at Nokia Theatre in Grand Prairie – singer-bassist Dusty Hill set the record straight about ZZ Top's local roots.

"You can't take the Big D out of 'Dusty.' Then you'd have 'Usty,' " says Mr. Hill, speaking by phone from a Georgia hotel room.

"Even though I moved from Dallas, I still live there in my heart."

Little Dusty grew up near Fair Park and studied at Roberts Elementary and Long Junior High. But school didn't excite him nearly as much as rock 'n' roll and he dropped out of Woodrow Wilson High at 15 to join the Deadbeats and later, the Warlocks.

The year was 1964, Beatlemania was in full bloom and teens everywhere were dreaming of becoming rock stars, including 15-year-old Irving High student Frank Beard.

But stardom would have to wait. Mr. Beard and his girlfriend had gotten pregnant, so he left school to get married and work at a sporting goods store.

After work, he'd thrash away at the drum set his dad bought him at Montgomery Ward in Fort Worth. And soon he was landing gigs at the Cellar, the infamous underground strip club-juke joint in Cowtown that later opened a branch in Dallas.

Mr. Hill was making the rounds, too. "One night, I was playing the Cellar with one group and Frank was playing with another," Mr. Hill says. "My brother Rocky saw Frank and says, 'Let's try to steal that drummer for *our* group.' "

The coup was successful, and in 1966, the Hill brothers joined forces with Mr. Beard in a series of Dallas bands, including American Blues – a psychedelic act with a one-of-a-kind shtick: The band members dyed their hair bright blue.



Brandon Thibodeaux / Special to DMN
 Texas rock band ZZ Top, from left: Dusty Hill on bass, Billy Gibbons on guitar and Frank Beard on drums

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"In the '60s, having long hair in Texas, you took your life in your hands. But having long hair *and* blue hair, people just assumed we were nuts and left us alone," Mr. Hill says.

After two poor-selling albums, American Blues split up. And on Halloween night, 1969, a 20-year-old Mr. Hill climbed on a bus to Houston to jump-start his career – only to run into Mr. Beard, who'd moved there without telling his former bandmate.

"Frank strolls into this blues-folk club I was working at and says, 'Man, you've *got* to get together with this guitar player I know.' "

The guitar whiz was Houston-born Billy Gibbons, formerly of the Moving Sidewalks. Within months, ZZ Top was born.

But despite the band's birth in the Bayou City, it's always kept strong ties to Dallas. Its first Top 40 hit, "Tush" (1975), had the line "I've been bad, I've been good/Dallas, Texas, Hollywood."

"When I was writing that song, I made sure to throw 'Dallas, Texas' in there," says Mr. Hill, 59. "In my neighborhood in Dallas, 'tush' was a term we used a lot to mean kind of like 'plush' and 'tushy.' "

Another Big D neighborhood with major ties to ZZ is Deep Ellum – and not just because blues heroes such as T-Bone Walker and Blind Lemon Jefferson cut their teeth there.

Mr. Gibbons lived part time in a Deep Ellum loft from 1994 to 2007. And at the dawn of the '70s, Mr. Hill bought his prized 1952 Fender bass Telecaster at the long-gone Rocky's Pawn Shop on Elm Street.

"There it was on the wall, this great guitar," Mr. Hill remembers. "I immediately turned it over to Billy because he negotiates better than I, and he got a really good price and made the guy throw in the case, too."

The trip was doubly productive. Later that day, cruising out of Dallas in their '69 Grand Prix, they picked up a pair of disreputable hitchhikers who inspired the *Tres Hombres* track, "Precious and Grace."

The bigger ZZ Top got, the more often it played in North Texas, from Reunion Arena – where it headlined more than a dozen shows – to smaller joints such as Billy Bob's in Fort Worth and the Wintergarden Ballroom in Far East Dallas.

But the homecoming gig Mr. Hill remembers most fondly is 2004's Crossroads Guitar Festival at the Cotton Bowl.

It was a who's who of blues and rock, including Eric Clapton, B.B. King, Jeff Beck and Carlos Santana. But Mr. Clapton picked ZZ to close the show because of the band's Big D roots.

"The Cotton Bowl wasn't far from where I grew up – I used to sneak into the fairgrounds for free over by the old railroad tracks," says Mr. Hill. "So for me, playing Crossroads was a real magical moment."

ZZ TOP IN D-FW

Tarrant County Convention Center arena (now Fort Worth Convention Center), 1201

Houston St., Fort Worth: The band played here many times from 1972 to 2000.

Panther Hall, 600 S. Collard St., Fort Worth: Billy Gibbons first saw bassist Dusty Hill perform when the Warlocks played *The Cowtown Jamboree* TV show here in the late '60s.

Reunion Arena, 777 Sports St.: Site of more than a dozen ZZ Top shows from 1980 to 1999.

Dallas Memorial Auditorium (now Dallas Convention Center Arena), 650 S. Griffith: Site of many ZZ Top concerts in the 1970s.

Deep Ellum: Mr. Gibbons owned a home here from 1994 until 2007. Mr. Hill bought his famous 1952 Fender bass from Rocky's Pawn Shop, 2018 Elm St., in the early '70s.

Fair Park Music Hall, Fair Park: 18-year-old Mr. Gibbons and his band the Moving Sidewalks opened for Jimi Hendrix, Feb. 16, 1968. Hendrix called Mr. Gibbons one of his favorite new guitarists.

Woodrow Wilson High School, 100 S. Glasgow: Mr. Hill's alma mater, class of 1967.

Cotton Bowl, Fair Park: ZZ Top headlined the Crossroads Guitar Festival, June 6, 2004; opened for the Rolling Stones, Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, 1981.

Irving High School, 900 O'Connor, Irving: Drummer Frank Beard's alma mater, class of 1968.

Nokia Theatre, 1001 Performance Place, Grand Prairie: The band filmed its first concert DVD, *Live From Texas*, on Nov. 1, 2007.