



Rock and Roll, Kickin' ZZ Top's Billy F. Gibbons

An optimum conversation with that Lil' Ol'





Food & Hot Rods - Checks In on All Three...

Band from Texas' inimitable Billy F. Gibbons



**By:
Ron Adams**

*Photos by:
Patrick Ernzen*

If you ask Billy F.

Gibbons what the connection is between music and cars, he'll tell you in a Texas minute that it is and always has been a constant mystery. And if you follow that question up with what came first, the music or the cars, he won't hesitate with that one either.

"As many times as the question may be asked, the closest we seem to get comes back to fast and loud. And in my case, my first three words were Ford, Chevrolet and Cadillac."

Not too long ago, I flew out to California for the experience of a lifetime: a conversation with Billy F. Gibbons, a man who is known for blues, rock and roll, and hotrods. As guitarist and lead vocalist of ZZ Top, Gibbons knows a lot about music and the tall tales of traveling, but he's also been an avid car enthusiast pretty much since he drew his first breath, at least according to him. Between the rigors of touring and performing, Gibbons relishes those moments when he can slide behind the wheel of one of his babies and just drive.

"Well, keep in the mind, one of the constants that car enthusiasts seem to know is cars are a lot like babies," Gibbons says.

"They require a lot of attention, and a lot of fluids. So once that's been taken care of, the good news is when you fire it up, then you're ready to take the next step towards whatever destination you have in mind."

Gibbons adds that in his case, that next step is often an elusive one.

"cars are a lot like babies"

"As constant travelers on a tour bus, the dream days are those rare, non-performing times when we can put our hands on the steering wheel and slide in to crank the ignition key, and enjoy that experience of actually driving," he says. "Riding in comfort is something that we've mastered with the art of streamlining the touring experience. But the sheer joy of actually driving eclipses all of that. Recently, I went down to see Jimmy Shine. (Owner of Jimmy Shine's Workshop) We were enjoying the recollection of using the 33-4, which we've now called the Whiskey Runner, for a video shoot when it had no interior and we wound up sitting on a wooden beer box. We didn't care. It was the pure excitement of getting behind the wheel of something. I can say that even in the incomplete stage, it was starting to show signs of becoming a favorite, one of many."

Ron Adams: I remember a

video that I watched where you talked about your Harley. The one that people said if they touched it, they would need a Tetanus shot, the one that never got painted.

Billy F. Gibbons: Yeah. The official name we dubbed it was ZZ Funk 1.

RA: That I didn't know, but the tetanus shot stood out and I thought it was funny.

BFG: Yeah. It was like, don't get too close.

RA: What's on your bucket list for cars and for travel? What car is the one you've always wanted to own and what trip have you always wanted to take in it?

BFG: Well, we're somewhat synonymous with all things throughout the desert southwest. Sand, sun, suds, prickly things and that remains a constant draw. Studying a map, and comparing it with the timetable; how far can we go before we have to return to hit the touring trail? But it has proven to be a range that is far and wide, and you could restrict it to that we've discovered that the distance from Houston to El Paso is farther than El Paso to Los Angeles. And when you combine the states in between, that's quite a bit of ground to cover. So our destination wish-list continues to expand. And having just recently returned from the Pacific Northwest, and then we closed the BFG Solo Tour in the Northeast; we came across some spots



that have compounded and confounded our wish-list. It went from many pages to many more pages.

RA: Really? Can you give me examples?

BFG: The back roads of Pennsylvania, going north all the way up through Connecticut and upstate New York. We were on the tour bus, and of course, you obviously heard about that mammoth snowstorm that just pummeled from the northern part of the Tennessee border all the way up. We were in the big middle of it. And to avoid it, we found ourselves taking some off-the-beaten-path roads. And as we tip-toed through these previously untrodden pathways, just in the interest of avoiding getting trapped, we made new discoveries of some really interesting places. We were going through small towns that were quaint and we'll say, refreshing. It just opened our eyes to how great this country is.

RA: That's great. Cars and food are kind of tied together. If you were to do pairings, what kind of food and car pairings would you do?

"It just opened our eyes to how great this country is."

BFG: There was a dish out of San Antonio, Texas that was a specialty of an unfortunately long defunct restaurant known as Hipp's Bubble Room. There were two: Little Hipp's and Big

Hipp's. Little Hipp's was the large room and around the corner in a separate building was Big Hipp's, which was smaller.

They served a dish called Shy Poke Eggs. Basically it was a round tortilla with melted white cheese and in the center was melted yellow cheese. So, in effect, it had the appearance of a fried egg sitting on a tortilla. And at one point, we took a photograph of it, because under the yellow cheese was the little secret surprise: the hottest chili pepper known to man. To the uninitiated, you weren't given a clue, and then you were in big trouble. But we photographed this particular dish and when we glanced at it, we made a mistake. It was photographed in black and white. And then we noticed that it took on the appearance of a wheel. And for the first time, I think it was that experience in San Antonio, staring at that photograph of a Shy Poke Egg, that we realized it had an uncanny resemblance to a chrome-reversed wheel. I was like, "Wow, it's a car."

RA: (Laughs). What's a song that you most closely identify with driving your favorite car?

BFG: Going back early on, there was this Texas trio that came to be known as ZZ Top and they were always associated with cars. One of the early

titles was "Chevrolet," "She Don't Love Me, She Loves My Automobile," "Arrested While Driving While Blind." It seems that throughout the release of almost 20 disks there hasn't been a shortage of automotive themes here.

RA: A memorable moment in a car, and I've heard a lot of police stories; any favorite or memorable moments in a car for you?

BFG: Well, there's one that ties directly to a ZZ Top record, Degüello, which was our first release for Warner Brothers and that goes back to 1980. And we had another car-related number titled "Manic Mechanic." We were fussing with the intro: how do we get into a song about a car? And it was our lighting director who said, "I heard you making a remark that you had accidentally hit a divot in the road which yanked the muffler right off the manifold, right off the tailpipe." And I said, "Oh yeah." And we climbed aboard this 1964 Dodge Dart with the lonely slant 6 engine, which cannot be destroyed. I think they decided to stop making the slant 6 because it was indestructible. But, the sound heard on the opening of that particular song, "Manic Mechanic," was that of our first car, the '64 Dodge Dart without its muffler.

RA: If you were able to move through time and go back to the Golden Age of Motoring, when do you think that age would be?



Who is BFG?

- Billy F. Gibbons
- Guitarist
- Bands: Moving Sidewalks, ZZ Top
- Born: Dec 16, 1949 (age 66)
- Birthplace: Houston, TX
- Zodiac Sign: Sagittarius
- Jimi Hendrix called Gibbons his favorite and "One of America's best young" guitarists
- The song "Apologies to Pearly" references Billy's Guitar
- Never married
- No children
- Like his father and grandfather before him, Gibbons is a Reverend

*"Turn on,
tune up,
rock out."*



RA: There's something that I have wanted to ask you for a long time, ever since I saw your very first video. And mind you, I grew up on "Legs" and "Sharp Dressed Man." In all these videos, the car, the guy and the girl just go off into the sunset; where are they going?

BFG: That has been a constant question.

RA: Really?

BFG: Well, there are several questions: where's the car? Do you guys still get to drive it? Did you ever get to drive it? And, of course; where are the girls? And where were they going? If you take note of that closing scene, that's quite a long road into the far distance.

**

At this juncture in the cool conversation, we decided to grab some lunch. Gibbons is a connoisseur of barbecue and Mexican fare, no doubt about it. This day we had barbecue and we talked about the art of barbecuing...

BFG: So, the art of barbecuing is basically open-flamed grilling with a pasting of sauce. It's the sauce that really matters. Texas is a rich, red barbecue sauce, and as you move east, it gets a little more vinegary, and yellow mustard becomes the base rather than tomatoes. Texas, moving east through Louisiana stays red. When you get to Mississippi, it turns brown from the molasses. You get

of barbecue moving west might be San Antonio, Texas. By the time you get to El Paso, they don't even know the word.

RA: Oh, really?

BFG: And then you go to Albuquerque, Santa Fe... even Arizona... Arizona was stagecoach lines and Wells Fargo, the big trails coming out of Mexico. So there was no barbecue, it was more grilled steaks, until recently. Barbecue, like Mexican food, has become more traditional.

**

This exquisitely copacetic train of thought Gibbons and I had hijacked always came back to the one thing we both loved: cars. And the fact that in February, he debuted in the new Discovery Channel

"Texas is a rich, red barbecue sauce, and as you move east, it gets a little more vinegary, and yellow mustard becomes the base rather than tomatoes. Texas moving east through Louisiana stays red. When you get to Mississippi, it turns brown from the molasses. You get to Alabama, and it turns white. Then you to North and South Carolina, and it becomes yellow. It becomes mustard."

BFG: I have a personal preference toward the stylings of the 1930s. It seems like 1932 through 1936; all the manufacturers were keen on joining that rather interesting period of artistic expression. You had the explosion of Deco, and it's difficult to restrict it to just the '30s because then Harley Earl comes along with his vision of stylings, and he remains one of our heroes with the advent of the tailfin.

RA: Yes it is.

BFG: And, likewise, ZZ Top has continued traversing that seemingly endless touring trail. Fortunately, fast cars and pretty girls have become a part of the ethos surrounding this ZZ Top -whatever. I think it would suffice to say that wherever they were going was second to the fact that they were going and invited us to chase'em down.

to Alabama, and it turns white. Then you get to North and South Carolina, and it becomes yellow. It becomes mustard.

RA: What's the white?

BFG: The white is like flour gravy.

RA: Yes, that makes sense.

BFG: Barbecue loses its impact across New Mexico. I think the last bastion

pilot "Rockin Roadsters," where he teamed up with professional hotrod builder Jimmy Shine.

RA: How much of it is the adventure and traveling and trying to find the car, versus once you get it and start to build it into something cool?

BFG: It's more about the search. It's very little about "in" the shop.

RA: And that's exactly what's interesting. Who doesn't dream of running around the countryside looking for cool cars? If I didn't have a real job that would be my job. That's exactly what I'd want to do.

BFG: One of the surprise elements while we were filming...we actually did stumble across one of the coolest cars, and we're hoping to go back; it was a '53 two-door Plymouth Station Wagon with sliding rear windows.

creative one who's going to pitch it, and he's the logic behind the madness.

BFG: Exactly. That's pretty much the premise. It's been through several plot suggestions and changes, and there's quite a bit of footage of Gilligan (Gibbons' wife) and another crazy buddy of ours from Texas, John Paul Shellnut. And he is a nut. The February show was a pilot, they were just testing the waters. But by and large, it seems the excitement is genuine.

RA: I'm sick of watching people just weld metal. I'm

where there's a car tie in?

BFG: What's funny is that there are two elements to that story. We did not build that car, it was already done. I was searching the Web and I stumbled across this link and a red car appeared and it said for sale. And then I glanced down and the post was dated three years prior. I told myself the thing was probably long gone, but there was a phone number connected. So I rang it up and this guy named Yaril Quintana answered, and I said, "Yeah, I know the car is probably long gone, but

RA: So you were able to get the car?

BFG: Yeah! So, Conan O'Brien called up, and said, "I've got to have you guys on the show." I was all for it. Turned out, Conan was in love with the song "Treat Her Right." We showed up at the NBC studios over in Burbank, and the stage manager was outside having a smoke. We pulled up in that car and, lo' and behold, he gets all nervous and excited and runs in and calls the prop masters and says, "Open the doors wider, we've got a new prop." He asked me if I

"I was searching the Web and I stumbled across this link and a red car appeared and it said for sale [...] the post was dated three years prior. I told myself the thing was probably long gone, but there was a phone number connected. So I rang it up."

I just happened to see a phone number connected to the for-sale sign, and I was wondering who got it? And he said, "I still got

could pull the car right up onstage. I said, "You bet."

RA: What do you think about the cars having as much of an identity as the band name itself has?

BFG: There is a celebrity factor in that algorithm that is genuine. We literally could not drive some of the cars down the street more than two blocks away.

RA: Awesome! In taking the journey and looking for the cars, it's you and Jimmy (Shine), is it a play-off of your personalities? I kind of get that from the trailer, where they actually kick him out of the shop and say he's kind of useless. It's funny and so is the dialogue with his employees. And then the two of you are on the road; you're the

really fascinated by this journey of seeing people look for cars. With your recent album, "Perfectamundo," I saw the Conan O'Brien video where you played "Treat Her Right," and you had a Chevrolet on the stage. Is that right?

BFG: We'll be seeing it at Shine's. That's the customized '50.

RA: Is there something in the song that I'm missing;

it. Nobody bought it." So I asked him was it still for sale and he said, "You couldn't have called at a better time. My wife just told me she's pregnant." I asked him if he wanted to make a deal and he said, "Go for it." The next thing I knew we were hammering out the finer points. It was down in Miami and he actually drove the car from Miami to L.A.