

# Skynyrd leaves ironically; 'Survivors' final album

By Casey McCabe

On October 20, a light chartered plane attempted to crash land in a Mississippi swamp. The result was death, for all practical purposes, of rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd, eight miles short of their airport destination.

Dead were lead singer Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines, and his sister, back up singer Cassie Gaines. Seven members survived after extensive injuries and hospitalization, but it became painfully obvious that Lynyrd Skynyrd would perform no more.

It was the loss of Van Zant that provided a void the band never could replace. He was the distinct voice of Lynyrd Skynyrd as well as one of the most prolific writers in the country. His powerful Southern anthems, "Simple Man," "Free Bird" and "Sweet Home Alabama," helped put the band in the fast company crowd of Marshall Tucker, and the now defunct Allman Brothers Band, as one of the South's leading exports.

As seems true of the deaths of most rock artists, Skynyrd was just starting to peak. They had just released their sixth album, ironically titled *Street Survivors*, and were in the middle of their most ambitious tour to date, one that would have allowed them to headline at New York's Madison Square Garden. It also included a scheduled Lincoln appearance.

### Premonition?

It was one year ago that Van Zant told a *Rolling Stone* reporter:

"Right now I think we can make it. We're just about the best there is. We knew Duane (Allman) and Berry (Oakley) (both killed in motorcycle accidents) and they lived the way they had to—that's what made them great. And when I go, it's gonna be with my boots on, too."

It is hard not to get an eerie feeling when looking at the cover of the last album. It says simply *Street Survivors* and features a group shot of the band seemingly engulfed in flames. The album also contains a song by Van Zant



Photo courtesy of MCA Records.

Lynyrd Skynyrd's image portrayed hard drinking, rowdy Southern rednecks who were proud of their roots.

## profile

that deals with death; "That Smell" was written last year by group members after some close calls in car wrecks. Album buyers are also informed of how to order a Lynyrd Skynyrd survival kit, of T-shirts, pendants and booklets. They were just starting to come in to their own.

Lynyrd Skynyrd was formed in 1973 in Jacksonville, Florida, where most of the group members attended the same high school. They took their name from gym teacher Leonard Skinner, the school's most notorious redneck. They caught the eye of producer/musician Al Kooper, who had just formed Sounds of the South records, and they went on to record their first and possibly finest album *Pronounced Leh-nerd Skin-nerd*.

### Hard living

Not that they were to go downhill from this point. It's just that the record best embodied the band's hard living, southern ideal, from the heavily orchestrated "Tuesday's Gone," to the light-hearted boogie of "Gimme Three Steps." "Free Bird," off the same album, still stands as the group's strongest achievement. Written as a tribute to

Duane Allman, the nine minute song fused the Southern blues and rock influences of the band into a tune that already has become a rock classic.

The album sold steadily, but the first real following the band developed came after a tour as opening act for The Who. Then came *Second Helping* and their first real commercial success, a single called "Sweet Home Alabama."

"Sweet Home" was a bitter retort to Neil Young's "Southern Man," and a call for pride among the South. Young, who viewed it as a breeding ground for prejudice and ignorance, was given this timely advice:

"Well I heard Mr. Young sing about us, I heard of Neil put her down. Well I hope Neil Young will remember, Southern Man don't need him around. . ."

*Nothin' Fancy* and *Gimme Back My Bullets* followed in 1975 and 1976 respectively. Skynyrd chose not to change its style as it already was well established, but the albums seemed to lack the same punch of the first two. Nevertheless the band was a crowd pleaser and kept up a frenetic touring schedule of up to 300 days a year. *One More From the Road* was a prime example of the group's excellent live capabilities.

### Final accomplishment


*Street Survivors* may prove to be some of Skynyrd's

best work. Especially engaging are "That Smell" and "One More Time," a slow, lonely blues number with haunting vocals by Van Zant. To their fans, *Street Survivors* will sadly be viewed as Skynyrd's final accomplishment, all the harder when one considers the strange premonitions of the album, which was released only three days before the crash.

Lynyrd Skynyrd had an image, a sort of hard drinking, rowdy Southern redneck image. The members were proud of their roots and often performed with a confederate flag behind them. But still the image is a bit unfair. Songs often dealt more with a desire to get back to the simple life, or their song of appreciation for a black man, "The Ballad of Curtis Lowe." They even struck it big in a terse little statement for gun control, "Saturday Night Special." Van Zant's themes dealt with romantic imagery, rebellion against industry, and often with death.

It will be interesting to see if the record industry will subscribe to the old idiom that 'rock stars never die, they are only repackaged.' Even if recycled, Lynyrd Skynyrd will have left even the staunchest Yankee with a certain feel for their down home South. Ronnie Van Zant was buried with his favorite fishing pole, that's probably the way he would like to be remembered.





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