

# Lynyrd Skynyrd

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## Background information

Also known as Skynyrd

Origin Jacksonville, Florida, U.S.

Genres Southern rock, blues rock, hard rock, boogie rock, country rock, roots rock

Years active 1964–present

Labels MCA, Atlantic, Capricorn, CMC International, Sanctuary, Universal, Roadrunner/Loud & Proud

Associated acts .38 Special, Van Zant, Rossington Collins Band, Allen Collins Band, Skinny Molly, Outlaws, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Blackfoot, Eric Quincy Tate, ZZ Top, The Rossington Band, Charlie Daniels

## Members

Gary Rossington

Rickey Medlocke

Johnny Van Zant

Michael Cartellone

Mark Matejka

Peter Keys

Johnny Colt

## Past members

Ronnie Van Zant (deceased)

Allen Collins (deceased)

Bob Burns (deceased)

Larry Junstrom

Greg T. Walker

Leon Wilkeson (deceased)

Billy Powell (deceased)

Ed King

Artimus Pyle

Steve Gaines (deceased)

Randall Hall

Kurt Custer

Mike Estes

Owen Hale

Hughie Thomasson (deceased)

Jeff McAllister

Kenny Aronoff

Ean Evans (deceased)

Robert Kearns

Lynyrd Skynyrd (pronounced /ˌlɛnərd ˈskɪnərd/ LEN-ərd-SKIN-ərd) is an American rock band best known for popularizing the southern hard-rock genre during the 1970s. Originally formed in 1964 as My Backyard in Jacksonville, Florida, the band used various names such as The Noble Five and One Percent, before coming up with Lynyrd Skynyrd in 1969. The band rose to worldwide recognition on the basis of its live performances and signature tunes "Sweet Home Alabama" and "Free Bird". At the peak of their success, three members died in an airplane crash in 1977, putting an abrupt end to the band's most popular incarnation.

The surviving band members re-formed in 1987 for a reunion tour with lead vocalist Johnny Van Zant, the younger brother of lead singer and founder Ronnie Van Zant. The re-formed band continues to tour and record with co-founding member Gary Rossington and core members Johnny Van Zant, along with guitarist Rickey Medlocke, who recorded with the band for a short time in the early 1970s. Drummer Michael Cartellone has recorded and toured with the band since 1999. Lynyrd Skynyrd was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on March 13, 2006.

## History

### Early years

In the summer of 1964, teenage friends Ronnie Van Zant, Allen Collins, and Gary Rossington formed the earliest incarnation of the band in Jacksonville, Florida as My Backyard. The band then changed its name to The Noble Five. The band used different names before using One Percent during 1968.

Robert E. Lee High School was where the group acquired the name Lynyrd Skynyrd from their physical-education teacher Leonard Skinner.

In 1969, Van Zant sought a new name. The group settled on Leonard Skinnerd, a mocking tribute to a physical-education teacher at Robert E. Lee High School, Leonard Skinner, who was notorious for strictly enforcing the school's policy against boys having long hair. Rossington dropped out of school, tired of being hassled about his hair. The more distinctive spelling was being used at least as early as 1970. Despite their high school acrimony, the band developed a friendlier relationship with Skinner in later years, and invited him to introduce them at a concert in the Jacksonville Memorial Coliseum. Skinner also allowed the band to use a photo of his Leonard Skinner Realty sign for the inside of their third album.

By 1970, Lynyrd Skynyrd had become a top band in Jacksonville, headlining at some local concerts, and opening for several national acts. Pat Armstrong, a Jacksonville native and partner in Macon-based Hustlers Inc. with Phil Walden's younger brother, Alan Walden, became the band's managers. Armstrong left Hustlers shortly thereafter to start his own

agency. Walden stayed with the band until 1974, when management was turned over to Peter Rudge. The band continued to perform throughout the South in the early 1970s, further developing their hard-driving, blues rock sound and image, and experimenting with making studio recordings.

During this time, the band experienced some lineup changes for the first time. Junstrom left and was briefly replaced by Greg T. Walker on bass. At the same time, Ricky Medlocke joined as a second drummer and vocalist. Medlocke grew up with the founding members of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Some versions of the band's history also have Burns leaving the band for a short time during this period. The band played some shows with both Burns and Medlocke, using a dual-drummer approach similar to that of The Allman Brothers. In 1971, they made some recordings at the famous Muscle Shoals Sound Studio with Walker and Medlocke serving as the rhythm section, without the participation of Burns.

Medlocke and Walker left the band to play with another southern rock band, Blackfoot, and when the band made a second round of Muscle Shoals recordings in 1972, Burns was featured on drums and Leon Wilkeson was Larry Junstrom's replacement on bass. Also in 1972, roadie Billy Powell became the keyboardist for the band. Medlocke later returned to play drums for Lynyrd Skynyrd. Medlocke and Walker did not appear on any album until 1978, when *First and... Last*, which collected the band's recordings in the biennium 1971-1972, was posthumously released.

## Peak years (1973–1977)

In 1972 the band (now Van Zant, Collins, Rossington, Burns, Wilkeson, and Powell) was discovered by musician, songwriter, and producer Al Kooper of Blood, Sweat & Tears, who had attended one of their shows at Funocchio's in Atlanta. Kooper signed them to his Sounds of the South label that was to be distributed and supported by MCA Records, and produced their first album. Leon Wilkeson temporarily left the band during the early recording sessions for the

album, only playing on two tracks. Wilkeson rejoined the band shortly after the album's release at Van Zant's invitation[citation needed] and is pictured on the album cover. Strawberry Alarm Clock guitarist Ed King joined the band and played bass on the album (the only part, which Wilkeson had not already written being the solo section in "Simple Man"), along with some guitar work. King stayed in the band and switched solely to guitar after the album's release, allowing the band to replicate the three-guitar mix used in the studio for their live performances. Released August 13, 1973, the self-titled album with the subtitle "Pronounced Leh-nerd Skin-nerd" featured the hit song "Free Bird", which received national airplay, eventually reaching No. 19 on the Billboard Hot 100 charts.

Lynyrd Skynyrd's fan base continued to grow rapidly throughout 1973, largely due to their opening slot on The Who's Quadrophenia tour in the United States. On their 1974 follow-up, *Second Helping*, the band successfully avoided any sophomore slump, with King, Collins and Rossington all collaborating with Van Zant on the songwriting. The album was the band's breakthrough hit, and featured their most popular single, "Sweet Home Alabama" (#8 on the charts in August 1974), a response to Neil Young's "Southern Man", and featuring guitar work by King. (Young and Van Zant were not rivals, but fans of each other's music and good friends; Young wrote the song "Powderfinger" for the band, but they never recorded it.) Van Zant, meanwhile, can be seen on the cover of *Street Survivors* and in concert wearing a Neil Young Tonight's the Night T-shirt. The album reached No. 12 in 1974, eventually going multi-platinum. In July of that year, Lynyrd Skynyrd was one of the headline acts at The Ozark Music Festival held at the Missouri State Fairgrounds in Sedalia, Missouri.

In January 1975, Burns left the band and was replaced by Kentucky native Artimus Pyle on drums. Lynyrd Skynyrd's third album, *Nuthin' Fancy*, was released the same year. This album was recorded in 17 days. The album had lower sales than its predecessor. Kooper and the band parted by mutual agreement after the raucous recording of the LP. Kooper was left with the tapes to complete the mix before release. Midway through the tour, Ed King left the band, citing tour exhaustion. In January 1976, backup singers Leslie Hawkins, Cassie Gaines and JoJo Billingsley (collectively known as The

Honkettes) were added to the band, although they were not considered official members. Lynyrd Skynyrd's fourth album *Gimme Back My Bullets* was released in the new year, but did not achieve the same success as the previous two albums. Van Zant and Collins both felt that the band was seriously missing the three-guitar attack that had been one of its early hallmarks. Although Skynyrd auditioned several guitarists, including such high-profile names as Leslie West, the solution was closer than they realized.

Soon after joining Skynyrd, Cassie Gaines began touting the guitar and songwriting prowess of her younger brother, Steve. The junior Gaines, who led his own band, *Crawdad* (which occasionally would perform Skynyrd's "Saturday Night Special" in their set), was invited to audition onstage with Skynyrd at a concert in Kansas City on May 11, 1976. Liking what they heard, the group also jammed informally with the Oklahoma native several times, then invited him into the group in June. With Gaines on board, the newly reconstituted band recorded the double-live album *One More from the Road* at the Fox Theatre (Atlanta, Georgia) in Atlanta, and performed at the Knebworth festival, which also featured The Rolling Stones.

Both Collins and Rossington had serious car accidents over Labor Day weekend in 1976, which slowed the recording of the follow-up album and forced the band to cancel some concert dates. Rossington's accident inspired the ominous "That Smell" – a cautionary tale about drug abuse that was clearly aimed towards him and at least one other band member. Rossington has admitted repeatedly that he was the "Prince Charming" of the song who crashed his car into an oak tree while drunk and stoned on Quaaludes. Van Zant, at least, was making a serious attempt to clean up his act and curtail the cycle of boozed-up brawling that was part of Skynyrd's reputation.

1977's *Street Survivors* turned out to be a showcase for guitarist/vocalist Steve Gaines, who had joined the band just a year earlier and was making his studio debut with them. Publicly and privately, Ronnie Van Zant marveled at the multiple talents of Skynyrd's newest member, claiming that the band would "all be in his shadow one day". Gaines'



contributions included his co-lead vocal with Van Zant on the co-written "You Got That Right" and the rousing guitar boogie "I Know a Little", which he had written before he joined Skynyrd. So confident was Skynyrd's leader of Gaines' abilities that the album (and some concerts) featured Gaines delivering his self-penned bluesy "Ain't No Good Life" – the only song in the pre-crash Skynyrd catalog to feature a lead vocalist other than Ronnie Van Zant. The album also included the hit singles "What's Your Name" and "That Smell". The band was poised for their biggest tour yet, with shows always highlighted by the iconic rock anthem "Free Bird". In November, the band was scheduled to fulfill Van Zant's lifelong dream of headlining New York's Madison Square Garden.

## Plane crash (1977)

Following a performance at the Greenville Memorial Auditorium in Greenville, South Carolina, on October 20, 1977 the band boarded a chartered Convair CV-300 to Baton Rouge, Louisiana where they were scheduled to appear at LSU the following night. Due to a faulty engine, the airplane ran low on fuel and the pilots were diverted to the McComb-Pike County Airport. After running out of fuel they attempted an emergency landing before crashing in a heavily forested area five miles northeast of Gillsburg, Mississippi. Ronnie Van Zant, Steve Gaines, Cassie Gaines, assistant road manager Dean Kilpatrick, pilot Walter McCreary, and co-pilot William Gray were killed on impact; the other band members (Collins, Rossington, Wilkeson, Powell, Pyle, and Hawkins), tour manager Ron Eckerman, and road crew suffered serious injuries.

The accident came just three days after the release of *Street Survivors*. Following the crash and the ensuing press, *Street Survivors* became the band's second platinum album and reached No. 5 on the U.S. album chart. The single "What's Your Name" reached No. 13 on the single airplay charts in January 1978. The original cover sleeve for *Street Survivors* had featured a photograph of the band, particularly Steve Gaines, engulfed in flames. Out of respect for the deceased (and at the request of Teresa Gaines, Steve's widow), MCA Records withdrew the original cover and replaced it with a similar image of the band against a simple black background. Thirty years later, for the deluxe CD version of *Street Survivors*, the original "flames" cover was restored.

Lynyrd Skynyrd disbanded after the tragedy, reuniting just once to perform an instrumental version of "Free Bird" at Charlie Daniels' Volunteer Jam V in January 1979. Collins, Rossington, Powell and Pyle performed the song with Charlie Daniels and members of his band. Leon Wilkeson, who was still undergoing physical therapy for his badly broken left arm, was in attendance, along with Judy Van Zant, Teresa Gaines, JoJo Billingsley, and Leslie Hawkins.

## Hiatus (1977–1987)

Rossington, Collins, Wilkeson and Powell formed The Rossington-Collins Band, which released two albums between 1980 and 1983. Deliberately avoiding comparisons with Ronnie Van Zant as well as suggestions that this band was Lynyrd Skynyrd reborn, Rossington and Collins chose a woman, Dale Krantz, as lead vocalist. However, as an acknowledgment of their past, the band's concert encore would always be an instrumental version of "Free Bird". Rossington and Collins eventually had a falling out over the affections of Dale Krantz, whom Rossington married and with whom he formed the Rossington Band, which released two albums in the late 1980s and opened for the Lynyrd Skynyrd Tribute Tour in 1987–1988.

The other former members of Lynyrd Skynyrd continued to make music during the hiatus era. Billy Powell played keyboards in a Christian Rock band named Vision, touring with established Christian rocker Mylon LeFevre. During Vision concerts, Powell's trademark keyboard talent was often spotlighted and he spoke about his conversion to Christianity after the near-fatal plane crash. Pyle formed The Artimus Pyle Band in 1982, which occasionally featured former Honkettes JoJo Billingsley and Leslie Hawkins.

In 1980, Allen Collins' wife Kathy died of a massive hemorrhage while miscarrying their third child. He formed the Allen Collins Band in 1983 from the remnants of the Rossington-Collins Band and released one tepidly-received album, but many around him believed that the guitarist's heart just was not in it anymore. Most point to his wife's death as the moment that Collins' life began to spin out of control; he spent several years binging on drugs and alcohol. In 1986, Collins crashed his car while driving drunk near his home in Jacksonville, killing his girlfriend and leaving himself permanently paralyzed from the chest down. Collins eventually pled no contest to DUI manslaughter, but was not given a prison sentence since his injuries made it obvious that he would never drive or be a danger to society again.[citation needed]

## Return (1987–present)

In 1987, Lynyrd Skynyrd reunited for a full-scale tour with five major members of the pre-crash band: crash survivors Gary Rossington, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson and Artimus Pyle, along with guitarist Ed King, who had left the band two years before the crash. Ronnie Van Zant's younger brother, Johnny, took over as the new lead singer and primary songwriter. Due to Collins' paralysis from a 1986 car accident, he was only able to participate as the musical director, choosing Randall Hall, his former bandmate in the Allen Collins Band, as his stand-in. As part of his plea deal, Collins would be wheeled out onstage each night to explain to the audience why he could no longer perform (usually before

the performance of "That Smell", which had been partially directed at him). Collins was stricken with pneumonia in 1989 and died on January 23, 1990.

The reunited band was meant to be a one-time tribute to the original lineup, captured on the double-live album *Southern by the Grace of God: Lynyrd Skynyrd Tribute Tour 1987*. The fact that the band chose to continue after the 1987 tribute tour caused legal problems for the survivors, as Judy Van Zant Jenness and Teresa Gaines Rapp (widows of Ronnie and Steve, respectively) sued the others for violating an agreement made shortly after the plane crash, stating that they would not "exploit" the Skynyrd name for profit. As part of the settlement, Jenness and Rapp collect nearly 30% of the band's touring revenues (representing the shares their husbands would have earned had they lived), and hold a proviso which forces any band touring as Lynyrd Skynyrd to include at least three from the pre-crash era. As the years have gone on, however, and continued lineup changes occurred for various reasons, this so-called "rule of three" was eventually no longer made a requirement.

The reconstituted Lynyrd Skynyrd has gone through a large number of lineup changes and continues to record and tour today. One by one, the members of the pre-crash band have left, been forced out, or have died. Artimus Pyle left the band in 1991 and his place has been taken by a variety of drummers since, with Michael Cartellone finally becoming his permanent replacement. Randall Hall was replaced by Mike Estes in 1993. Ed King had to take a break from touring in 1996. In his absence, he was replaced by Hughie Thomasson. The band did not let King rejoin after he recovered. At the same time, Mike Estes was replaced by Rickey Medlocke, who was briefly the second drummer and a vocalist (playing also mandolin) with the band in the early 1970s. Leon Wilkeson, Skynyrd's bassist since 1972, was found dead in his hotel room on July 27, 2001; his death was found to be due to emphysema and chronic liver disease. He was replaced in 2001 by Ean Evans.

The remaining members released a double collection album called *Thyrty*, which had songs from the original lineup to the present. Lynyrd Skynyrd also released a live DVD of their *Vicious Cycle Tour* and on June 22, 2004, Lynyrd Skynyrd released the album *Lynyrd Skynyrd Lyve: The Vicious Cycle Tour*. On December 10, 2004, Lynyrd Skynyrd did a show for CMT, *Crossroads*, a concert featuring country duo Montgomery Gentry and other genres of music. In the beginning of 2005 Hughie Thomasson left the band to reform his disbanded Southern Rock band *Outlaws*. Thomasson died in his sleep on September 9, 2007 of an apparent heart attack in his home in Brooksville, Florida. He was 55 years old.

On February 5, 2005, Lynyrd Skynyrd did a Super Bowl party in Jacksonville with special guests 3 Doors Down, Jo Dee Messina, Charlie Daniels and Ronnie and Johnny Van Zant's brother Donnie Van Zant of 38 Special. On February 13 of that year Lynyrd Skynyrd did a tribute to Southern Rock on the Grammy Awards with Gretchen Wilson, Tim McGraw, Keith Urban and Dickey Betts. In the summer of 2005, lead singer Johnny Van Zant had to have surgery on his vocal cord to have a polyp removed. He was told not to sing for three months. On September 10, 2005, Lynyrd Skynyrd performed without Johnny Van Zant at the Music Relief Concert for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, with Kid Rock standing in for Johnny. In December 2005, Johnny Van Zant returned to sing for Lynyrd Skynyrd. The band performed live at Freedom Hall in Louisville, Kentucky, as a part of their 2007 tour. The concert was recorded in high definition for HDNet and premiered on December 1, 2007.

Mark "Sparky" Matejka, formerly of the country music band *Hot Apple Pie*, joined Lynyrd Skynyrd in 2006 as Thomasson's replacement. On November 2, 2007, the band performed at the University of Florida's Gator Growl, the world's largest student-run pep rally, in Ben Hill Griffin Stadium – also known as "The Swamp". The event's 50,000-person attendance marked the largest crowd that Lynyrd Skynyrd had ever played in front of in the U.S., until the July 2008 Bama Jam in Enterprise, Alabama where more than 111,000 people were in attendance.

On January 28, 2009, keyboardist Billy Powell died of a suspected heart attack at age 56 at his home near Jacksonville, Florida. No autopsy was ever carried out. Powell's death left Gary Rossington as the sole pre-crash member still in the band, unless Rickey Medlocke's brief stint with the band in the early 1970s is counted.

On March 17, 2009, it was announced that Skynyrd had signed a worldwide deal with Roadrunner Records, in association with their label, Loud & Proud Records, and released their new album *God & Guns* on September 29 of that year. They toured Europe and the U.S. in 2009 with Peter Keys of the 420 Funk Mob on keyboards and Robert Kearns of The Bottle Rockets on bass; bassist Ean Evans died of cancer at age 48 on May 6, 2009. Scottish rock band Gun performed as special guests for the UK leg of Skynyrd's tour in 2010.

In addition to the tour, Skynyrd appeared at the Sean Hannity Freedom Concert series in late 2010. Hannity had been actively promoting the *God & Guns* album, frequently playing portions of the track "That Ain't My America" on his radio show. The tour is titled "Rebels and Bandoleros". The band continued to tour throughout 2011, playing alongside ZZ Top and The Doobie Brothers.

On May 2, 2012, the band announced the impending release of a new studio album, *Last of a Dyin' Breed*, along with a North American and European tour. On August 21, 2012, *Last of a Dyin' Breed* was released. In celebration of its release, the band did four autograph signings throughout the southeast.

While promoting the album on CNN on September 9, 2012, members of the band talked about its discontinued use of Confederate imagery. In September 2012, the band briefly did not display the Confederate Flag, which had for years been a part of their stage show, because they did not want to be associated with racists who had adopted the flag. After protests from fans they reversed this decision, noting it is part of their Southern American heritage and states rights symbolism.

## Recognition

### Honors

In 2004, Rolling Stone magazine ranked the group No. 95 on their list of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time.

On November 28, 2005, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame announced that Lynyrd Skynyrd would be inducted alongside Black Sabbath, Blondie, Miles Davis, and the Sex Pistols. They were inducted in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Manhattan on March 13, 2006 during the Hall's 21st annual induction ceremony. The inductees included Ronnie Van Zant, Allen Collins, Gary Rossington, Ed King, Steve Gaines, Billy Powell, Leon Wilkeson, Bob Burns, and Artimus Pyle (post-crash members, the Honkettes, and pre-crash members Rickey Medlocke, Larry Junstrom, and Greg T. Walker, were not inducted). The current version of Skynyrd, augmented by King, Pyle, Burns and former Honkettes JoJo Billingsley, and Leslie Hawkins, performed "Sweet Home Alabama" and "Free Bird" at the ceremony, which was also attended by Judy Van Zant Jenness and Ronnie's two daughters, Teresa Gaines Rapp and her daughter Corinna, Allen Collins' daughters, and Leon Wilkeson's mother and son.

In October 2008, Lynyrd Skynyrd's song "Free Bird"'s solo was named the 3rd greatest guitar solo by Guitar World. In September 2010, Lynyrd Skynyrd was named No. 77 VH1's 100 Greatest Artists of All Time.

## Tributes

In 1994, various country music artists united to record a Skynyrd tribute album titled Skynyrd Frynds.

In 2010, another country tribute album was produced, primarily by Jay Joyce, entitled Sweet Home Alabama – The Country Music Tribute to Lynyrd Skynyrd. This album features a more modern country flavor than the 1994 tribute, featuring Randy Houser, Jamey Johnson, Eric Church, Eli Young Band, Uncle Kracker, Ashley Ray, Randy Montana, and Shooter Jennings.

Ronnie Van Zant's widow, Judy Van Zant Jenness, operates a Lynyrd Skynyrd tribute website for the educational purpose of sharing the original Lynyrd Skynyrd band's history, as well as Freebird Live, a live music venue in Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

The Drive-By Truckers dedicated their album Southern Rock Opera (2001) to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Under the Influence: A Jam Band Tribute to Lynyrd Skynyrd (2004) features Les Claypool, Galactic, Gov't Mule, North Mississippi Allstars, John Hiatt, Blues Traveler, Drive-By Truckers, Big Head Todd & the Monsters, The Disco Biscuits, Yonder Mountain String Band, and Particle.

An All-Star Tribute to Lynyrd Skynyrd (2007) features Molly Hatchet with Charlie Daniels, Outlaws (feat. Hughie Thomasson), Artimus Pyle, Ed King & The Honkettes, Great White, Canned Heat, Blackfoot (feat. Rickey Medlocke), Walter Trout, Jim Dandy's Black Oak Arkansas, Pat Travers, Dangerous Toys, Atlanta Rhythm Section, Rick Derringer, Sky Saxon (of The Seeds) & Joey Covington (of Jefferson Airplane)



## Band members

Gary Rossington – guitars (1964–present)

Rickey Medlocke – vocals, drums, mandolin (1971–1972), guitars, backing vocals (1996–present)

Johnny Van Zant – lead vocals (1987–present)

Michael Cartellone – drums (1999–present)

Mark Matejka – guitars, backing vocals (2006–present)

Peter Keys – keyboards (2009–present)

Johnny Colt – bass (2012–present)      Current touring members

Dale Krantz-Rossington – backing vocals (1987–present)

Carol Chase – backing vocals (1996–present)

## Discography

### Studio albums

Date of release	Title	Billboard peak	RIAA cert.	Label
August 13, 1973	(Pronounced 'Lĕh-'nérd 'Skin-'nérd)	27	2× Platinum	MCA
April 15, 1974	Second Helping	12	2× Platinum	
March 24, 1975	Nuthin' Fancy	9	Platinum	
February 2, 1976	Gimme Back My Bullets	20	Gold	
October 17, 1977	Street Survivors	5	2× Platinum	
June 11, 1991	Lynyrd Skynyrd 1991	64	—	Atlantic
February 16, 1993	The Last Rebel	64	—	
August 9, 1994	Endangered Species	—	—	Capricorn
April 29, 1997	Twenty 97	—		CMC
August 10, 1999	Edge of Forever 96	—		
September 12, 2000	Christmas Time Again	38	—	Sanctuary

May 20, 2003	Vicious Cycle	30	—	
September 29, 2009	God & Guns	18	—	Roadrunner
August 21, 2012	Last of a Dyin' Breed	14	—	