

LEISURE & ARTS

Texan Cowboys Trade Six-Guns for Guitars

By ROBERT L. MILLER

Auckland

Four decks of speakers hummed in a stadium here two weeks ago as a record 60,000 New Zealand concert-goers grew restless to hear the rock-blues sound of a Texan band called ZZ Top.

The crowd—enormous in a country with a population of only three and a quarter million—ranged from students and yuppies to motorcycle gangs. Seeing ZZ Top in concert is like watching latter-day Marx Brothers, with two of the trio masquerading in soup-dragging beards, and all of them sporting dark sunglasses, and tuxedos so contrived any cowboy would be proud to wear one.

In the concluding leg of their 15 month, 202 date "Afterburner" tour, the Houston-based band, comprising lead guitarist and vocalist Billy Gibbons, bass guitarist and vocalist Dusty Hill, and drummer Frank Beard, all aged 37, cashed in on an opportunity to take their first down under plunge while on a working holiday.

ZZ Top's "Greatest Hits" album was holding third spot on Japan's record charts when the Texas sight'n'sound exposition arrived in Japan to play in Yokohama, Osaka, and Tokyo's revered Budokan auditorium, which is the target for any band touring Japan. The venue was built to house indoor competitions at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. "There's something incredibly unique about Budokan," said band manager, John W. Williams. "The only thing I can compare it to is Madison Square Garden [in New York]."

"People are different wherever you go," said Mr. Hill, who hails from Dallas. "But the Japanese were very polite—it seemed like we were playing to clubs rather than crowds."

That was in sharp contrast to Australia's rough n' rowdy atmosphere. "My impression of Australians was a wild bunch of guys out to have a good time—that fits our idea of what a Texan is," drawled Mr. Beard. "We figured we were going to a place that was similar to home and Australia turned out to be that way for us."

Tickets to the Australian concerts sold briskly to fans who had waited for over a decade for the band's first down under tour. ZZ Top doubled the expected number of performances at most venues on their five-city tour, and left Australia on a triumphant note after playing four concerts in Sydney.

"We've got similar roots," said Australian rock singer Jimmy Barnes, who opened 70 shows for ZZ Top in the U.S. as well as the New Zealand performance. "In a musical and cultural sense Texans are very much like Australians—we're really gung ho."

New Zealanders' appreciation of Mr. Marasek's soul-drenched rock combined with the popularity of ZZ Top's tight rhythm and cool vocals turned Auckland

into an epicenter of rock fans. When the stadium lights were raised after the concert, police had arrested over 200 extra-active fans and attended 10 minor car accidents involving concert-goers.

The band wasn't too concerned about the heavy contingent of motorcycle gangs at their concerts. "If they like rock'n' roll, I'm not worried," Mr. Hill said.



"Do they have women gangs in New Zealand?" he asked with a gleam in his eye.

ZZ Top was interested for about seven years in touring Japan, Australia and New Zealand but Mr. Williams said a lot of groundwork and promotion was necessary to make a foreign tour successful. "We would love to have played Hong Kong and Bangkok, and we seriously looked at the Philippines (as a tour venue)—but the fact is that an extensive amount of groundwork has to be done and we, unfortunately, didn't have time to fit it in."

"When we put on a show we want to do it properly. Just having good record sales in a country doesn't guarantee a good reception for a concert," Mr. Williams said.

The "Afterburner" concert featured a laser light show, plenty of fog, trapdoors, and a 30-foot-tall golden Sphinx (referred to in the ZZ Top song, "Sleeping Bag"). The backdrops were a refinement com-

pared with the 1976 "World Wide Texas Tour" when the band shared the stage with \$100,000 worth of Texas wildlife. "I think we have a bit more control over this tour than we did with a buffalo and a longhorn steer," said Mr. Hill. "The animals tended to do whatever in the hell they wanted."

In contrast to the North American and European tour legs, the logistics of making the Pacific loop allowed the band comfortable two-to-four-day layovers between performances. It was a break from the airport-hotel-concert hall grind.

"We actually got to go to the beaches and casinos, and to downright enjoy the places where we were," said Mr. Beard, the only member of the trio who *doesn't* sport a beard. He is also the only married band member and blames his clean-shaven appearance on having "a mean wife who won't let me look like Dusty and Billy." Mr. Hill and Mr. Gibbons have their beards insured for undisclosed amounts.

The soft-spoken, hard-singing lead vocalist, Mr. Gibbons, acknowledges that evocative music videos pushed the band into the mainstream European and Asian markets. "Seems like all of a sudden we were next to some pretty girls in a pretty car, and I guess people wanted to see that," he said.

Mr. Gibbons is referring to the first of a string of videos that appeal to hot-rod enthusiasts, and admirers of long-legged women. It was made in 1984 to herald the "Eliminator" album and showed three women with long legs and short skirts cruising the Texan desert in an extravagantly customized car. They lived adolescent fantasies in time to the rock played by Texan ghosts—two sporting long beards and all three wearing dark sunglasses.

ZZ Top finished the tour on Saturday night in Hawaii. They will drift back to Houston while their management start checking out the possibilities of touring China and the U.S.S.R. Soviet officials took in their show in Stockholm and presented Mr. Gibbons with a Russian guitar. "It's about as funky looking a piece of gear as you could hope to find, with a very unusual sound to it," he said.

Back in the land of the longhorn, ZZ Top will keep playing the music and appearing in videos that prove Texan cowboys are not dead—they just traded their six-guns for electric guitars.

Mr. Miller is an American writer now living in New Zealand.

Japan's Answer to Dear Abby

By TERRY TRUCCO

Sacramento, California

When Kaoru Nakamaru, a well-known Japanese television commentator, visited California last year, she decided to interview three distinguished Americans—Charlton Heston, Pat Boone and Helen Bittel.

Helen Bittel? She's a 72-year-old grandmother who lives here with her husband, a retired state-government worker. And in Japan she is probably better known than either Mr. Heston or Mr. Boone.

For the past four years she has dispensed a weekly dose of snappy all-American advice to the lonely, the love-lorn and a lot of disenchanted housewives. Her forum is the Sunday edition of Yomiuri Shimbun, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Japan—and the world. Readers know her as "Heren Obasan," or "ancient and venerable Aunt Helen." She is the Dear Abby of Japan.

She's hardly an obvious Abby-san, at least at first glance. She doesn't speak or read Japanese, and until September had never even visited the place. Her knowledge of the nation is gleaned mainly from the public library. "I can't even use chopsticks," she admits.

That's never stopped her, however, from dashing off plain-speaking advice that is often the most controversial commentary in the paper. A Mrs. K. from Saitama recently complained that her husband took business trips abroad and went drinking most evenings while she was stuck in the house with a cranky mother-in-law and two small children. "I am about to lose the smile on my face for everyday I feel the unfairness," she complained. "Don't just sit there and lose the smile," chided Aunt Helen. Her advice: Hold a family conference and demand change in the house. If that fails, join—or start—a women's-rights organization.

To a Mr. T. who wrote that wives should be content to work in the house, Aunt Helen replied, "A woman has as much right as a man to seek a life outside the home." And to the woman wondering what an elderly lady in Japan should do, Aunt Helen counseled, "Go out and get married."

Sit down and write a letter is what many do after reading Aunt Helen. Several columns have sparked as many as 1,000 reader replies, some delighted, many appalled. "But even when they disagree, the Japanese are very polite," Mrs. Bittel observes in flat California tones. "In America, people can be very mean when they disagree."

Helen Bittel is familiar with American-style back talk because for 25 years she wrote a nationally syndicated

advice column for King Features. Called "Helen Help," she loaned the name—it appeared on more than 200 papers at its peak.

Three years ago (and three years earlier to enter the Chicago Sun) Ann Landers replacement contented of being "the third person of two," as she refers to the world's twin oracles, Dear Abby and Landers. She retired "Helen" but only after she had been

There. That happened in 1982. As a result to King Features, the Japanese had received Mrs. Bittel's columns for years. "They just never use," she says. Then a new editor, education U.S., took over the Yomiuri page. She liked Mrs. Bittel's style and savvy counsel, and ran the column. It was an instant hit. (The Japanese offered valuable insights in can culture.)

The editor next asked her to write a weekly column especially for the Japanese. "She told me, 'Don't punch. Write exactly as you would to American readers,'" Mrs. Bittel said and she has. Her appeal, she believes, is that she is totally different from Japanese advice columnists, who take a traditional approach to advice. (Women are routinely told to be home, persevere and quit complaining. Occasionally, Mrs. Bittel's advice is teamed with that of a Japanese columnist, or for that bicultural touch. But the column consists of a reader's question, Aunt Helen's answer and a photograph of the smiling and clearly youthful-looking California mother.

Mrs. Bittel has few qualms about dispatching advice to a nation with a different culture from her own, though she agrees that attitudes differ. U.S. and Japan can be contrasting. Japanese wife who complains about her husband will end her letter asking, "Is my husband a bad person?" while an American usually concludes, "How do I get the bum?"

But problems are the same in the world, she says. "You have problems with your husband, your wife, your children. Teen-agers have problems at school." She admits she was a mother for her first week on the job when she wrote a letter about arranged marriage: she didn't know about it at all. "I raised a ruckus when she suggests a childless Japanese couple adopt a baby, a heretical notion in Japan that prides itself on racial 'purity' she likes stirring things up, always leap before I look," she adds.

Mrs. Trucco is a free-lance writer based in London.

Props Give Stagehands Something to Chew On

By LAUREL GRAEBER

New York

Jan Marasek spent weeks last fall searching for the perfect date. Not to fill lonely hours on Saturday night, but to fill a box for the actors starring in Neil Simon's "Broadway Bound."

"I had such a hard time," says Mr. Marasek, production property master for Emanuel Azenberg, the Broadway show's producer. "They didn't want pits, they didn't want them coated; the ones from Balducci's and Zabar's were too big to mouth. I finally ended up in a health-food restaurant. I'm always looking for dates," he says with a sigh.

Like many theatrical property people, Mr. Marasek finds that his role often resembles a cross between a maitre d'hotel's and a magician's. Years ago, he says, scripts frequently called for

coction was an unappetizing combination of apple butter and green food coloring.

Property masters also worry about safety. Mr. Marasek has been known to sew a loaf of bread together to prevent the cast from tripping over a fallen slice. Eating itself poses a risk to actors, who may swallow more than their lines. "A dry cookie can be a disaster," he says.



Theater

Edible Props

During tryouts of "Broadway Bound," for example, actor John Randolph caught a seed in his throat from a piece of rye bread. From then on, only seedless bread was used. "I'm not a fan of bread," says Mr. Marasek.

"The cast goes through a pound a show, even though there's only a line about one nut in the script. We don't have the nerve to ask Planter's for all the nuts we use, and they're \$5.99 a jar in the supermarket. No one admits to eating them, but," he says with determination, "I'm investigating now."

To fill a production's gastronomical needs, property masters have gone everywhere from Oriental food shops to caterers. Mr. Marasek once even consulted the Catholic Church to find out what the Host was made of, to see if it would be a viable substitute for the "Hello, Dolly!" dumplings. It wasn't.

With so much time, energy and money at stake, property masters prefer artificial food. Mr. Marasek once made a turkey out of plastic-treated felt and cucumber slices out of silicon caulking compound. Liquor is almost never real