

LED ZEPPELIN

TO SAY THAT Led Zeppelin invented heavy metal is like saying Einstein was good with numbers. It's true enough that the quartet influenced an entire generation of heavy rockers, but to suggest Led Zep's music was therefore equivalent to run-of-the-mill heavy metal would be like blaming the theory of relativity for all the bad science fiction in the world.

Certainly the Led Zeppelin canon had heft. From the galloping rumble of "Whole Lotta Love" to the swaggering, bluesy howl of "Black Dog" to the oriental exoticisms of "Kashmir," Led Zeppelin's sound was larger than life in ways other bands could hardly hope to emulate. Yet there was always more to the group than that, for it was equally at home with the Celtic mystery of "The Battle of Evermore," the raffish reggae of "D'yer Mak'er," the James Brown funk of "The Crunge" and the old-timey twang of "Gallows Pole."

At times it was hard to believe that there were only the four of them up there: Robert Plant, the archetypal arena-rock frontman with his golden mane, open shirts and soaring, heroic voice; Jimmy Page, whose angelic face and frail figure seemed somehow at odds with the huge, snarling sound he coaxed from his guitar; John Paul Jones, the compleat technician, whose command of bass, keyboards and other instruments allowed him to do the work of dozens; and John "Bonzo" Bonham, whose ferocious strength and unflinching time gave his drumming the power and authority of rhythm incarnate. Together they played with such force and originality that no previously existing category could contain them — their music was Led Zeppelin and nothing else.

"Led Zeppelin were a central, reserved area between four musicians who had more or less different tastes in music," said Jones in an interview many years later. "It wasn't a purist band, as you get nowadays, where the entire band listens to the same type of music."

"Among the blues influences of Robert and the rock & roll influences of Jimmy, who also had strong blues influences, the soul influences of Bonzo and the soul and jazz influences of mine, there seemed to be a sort of common area which was Led Zeppelin — the fusion of all the different types of music and interests."

Of course, no one could have predicted that sound in the beginning. Back in 1968, Jones was an established session musician and arranger, Plant and Bonham were playing with no-name bands in the Midlands, and Page was desperately seeking a band that would help him fulfill the Scandinavian bookings he'd gotten before Chris Dreja decided he didn't want to be in the New Yardbirds after all.

Yet from the first, the four of them made magic. "We got together in this small room and just played 'Train Kept A-Rollin';" recalled Page of that first rehearsal. "We sort of went, 'Well, this is

the riff,' and then played, and at the end of it, we knew that it was really happening, really electrifying. *Exciting* is the word. We went on from there to start rehearsing for the album."

That album, *Led Zeppelin*, was an immediate success, knocking the listening public on its collective ear. *Led Zeppelin II* did even better, topping both the U.S. and the U.K. charts. By 1970 the band was — if not one of the biggest groups in the world — dominating the charts despite its refusal to think like a singles act, and it quickly became a top concert attraction on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet Zeppelin weren't really worried about the size of their success. As Plant put it, "We were more concerned with diversity, self-satisfaction, creativity. So, really, there was nobody to compete with, because we were trying to entertain ourselves first and foremost and with no intentional stab at a pretty song for a pretty song's sake."

"From the beginning, really, it was group policy that singles were not to be considered, that the whole game would be that if you wanted to find out about Led Zeppelin, you had to get into the whole thing. But I think the way that the music moved around — in its Englishness and its blues root — the inspiration didn't allow it to compete with anybody, really. Because it wasn't a pop band. I mean, it's popular, but it was certainly not pop."

Instead, Led Zeppelin did a little of everything. They drew from Celtic music as avidly as did Fairport Convention and did the white-soul thing as well as any guitar band in Britain. Zep could evoke the sun-dappled sound of California rock as easily as they could the misty dells of Wales, and they were playing world-beat music long before most listeners had even heard of the term. Best of all, Led Zeppelin didn't just play the blues, they transformed them, pulling from them a sound that was bigger, brasher and bolder than the original — but every bit as heartfelt and personal.

Led Zeppelin's potential may have been limitless, but their existence was maddeningly finite. After Bonham's death in 1980, the band called it quits — and apart from an appearance at Live Aid in 1985 and the Atlantic Records 40th Anniversary concert in 1988, has kept it quits. Needless to say, that absence hasn't exactly dimmed the audience's enthusiasm; "Stairway to Heaven" remains radio's all-time most-requested rock song, and clubs and concert halls continue to be filled by Zeppelin imitators.

But the imitators, no matter how carefully they cop licks or retrofit riffs, never quite seem to get it. "They miss the point," said Page. "They miss the whole spirit that was behind it and the passion; *passion* is the word. They just get caught up on imitating the riffs without going for what was underneath. But it was a very passionate band, and that's what really comes through the whole thing."

— J.D. CONSIDINE

Led Zeppelin flirt with defenestration: Bonham, Plant, Page and Jones (clockwise from top left)

