

Led Zeppelin

Group Members: John Bonham, John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page, Robert Plant

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Led Zeppelin probably will be best remembered for their magnum opus, "Stairway to Heaven," but they also epitomized the loud, long-haired, 1970s **rock** and roll image in general.

Led Zeppelin's music was usually panned by critics during their heyday, but has survived to repeatedly win spots on all-time favorite polls and hit the charts with rereleased material and boxed sets. The band broke ground with huge arena **rock** smoke-and-light shows and were largely responsible for the "bad boy" stereotype as womanizers, hard drinkers, and drug users. The group was initially formed by legendary guitarist Jimmy Page. He enjoyed moderate success with his first group, Neil Christian and the Crusaders, a Chuck Berry/Bo Diddley-styled British group. After a continuous battle with bad health problems, Page quit in 1961 to attend art school in Sutton. By then he had converted the front room of his parents' house into a makeshift studio to jam with friends. Word of the guitarist's abilities spread, and soon English producers were using Page for session work on records by the Who, the Kinks, and even Tom Jones.

Meanwhile, the Yardbirds' manager, Giorgio Gomelsky, wanted Page to replace Eric Clapton on guitar. With the money he was making on sessions, however, Page could hardly afford to leave, and instead he recommended Jeff Beck for the position. Page also began producing for Immediate Records and experimenting with his bow/guitar technique.

In mid-1966 Yardbirds' bassist Paul Samwell-Smith quit, and Page was offered the spot. By then he was burned out from studio work and accepted. "I remember one particular occasion when I hadn't played a solo for, quite literally, a couple of months. And I was asked to play a solo on a **rock** & roll thing," he told Cameron Crowe. "I played it and felt that what I'd done was absolute crap. I was so disgusted with myself that I made my mind up that I had to get out of it. It was messing me right up."

On one particular night Beck was too ill to perform, so Page substituted on guitar. His flashy technique was so impressive that the band moved Chris Dreja over to bass and continued with the dual lead guitars of Page and Beck. When they were in sync with each other, the two would sound like nothing before. But, more often than not, Beck's ego would take over, and he eventually dropped out in the middle of a U.S. tour.

The group continued on with Peter Grant replacing Mickie Most as manager, but their future was very uncertain. By the spring of 1968 all remaining members except Page decided to call it quits. Two members of the Who, Keith Moon and John Entwistle, talked about forming a group with

Page and Steve Winwood. "We'll call it Lead Zeppelin," joked Entwistle, "cause it'll go over like a lead balloon."

With Clapton's Cream and the Jeff Beck Group blazing new paths for the blues **rock** genre, Page knew what type of band he wanted to form. His first acquisition would be bassist John Paul Jones. A veteran of early sixties sessions like Page, Jones was also an arranger--highly influenced by jazz--and equally competent on keyboards. "I jumped at the chance of getting him," Page told Stephen Davis, author of *Hammer of the Gods*.

Next in order would be a vocalist and finally, a drummer. Page was informed of a singer named Robert Plant who performed with the group Hobbstweedle. Formerly an apprentice accountant, Plant quit at age sixteen to become a bluesman, singing with Sounds of Blue, Crawling King Snakes, Tennessee Teens, Listen, and Band of Joy. Just one listen convinced Page that he had his man. "I just couldn't understand why, after he told me he'd been singing for years already, he hadn't become a big name yet," he told Davis.

Plant told Page of a drummer he had worked with previously in two other bands who would be perfect for them. John Bonham was a ham-fisted pounder who was heavily influenced by Keith Moon and Ginger Baker. With much persuasion, Page was able to pry 'Bonzo' away from the Tim Rose band, and the New Yardbirds were now complete.

Davis reported Jones's initial reaction the first time the four played together: "The room just exploded." And Plant told Cameron Crowe, "I've never been so turned on in my life." With such a unique sound, they decided they needed a different name and chose Led Led (instead of Lead to prevent any mispronunciations). They first recorded in October of 1968, and Peter Grant took the tapes to Atlantic Records where reaction was so enthusiastic that the group was given a \$200,000 advance and total artistic control.

Unable to secure proper gigs in England, the group came to America, where they ended up touring for a year and a half. Their first album ripped into the Top 10 within five months after its release despite a poor review in *Rolling Stone*. Their reworkings of blues classics without crediting the original composers would not earn them much respect either ("Dazed and Confused" and "How Many More Years"). Their tour also earned the band a very well-deserved reputation of debauchery. *LedLed II* was written and recorded on the road and had a 400,000 copy advance order. Within two months it had bumped the Beatles' *Abbey Road* from its No. 1 American spot. It too was slammed by *Rolling Stone* even though it contained a new anthem for rockers, "Whole Lotta Love." Once again, Zep failed to acknowledge the songwriter, this time Willie Dixon, who won a lawsuit against the band. Tour manager Richard Cole defended Zep's "unusual" road habits, which were becoming legendary. "There's nothing immoral in it. It's just that most people wouldn't *dream* of doing it. That's the whole story of LedZeppelin right there," he told Davis.

The heavy-metal rampage continued on *Led Led III* with "Immigrant Song," but Page and Plant were heavily influenced by the California folkies during their stay in the States. Critics said the group was going acoustic when actually they had been doing so on *I* and *II*. There was no mistaking their live shows however. "With their epic explosions of sound and light, LedZeppelin

seemed to be a sublimation for the din of battle. A wargasm experience for its audience," wrote Davis.

For their fourth album, Page gave no mention of the band just to see if the music alone would stand up. He was more than right as *IV* produced gems like "Rock & Roll," "When the Levee Breaks," and "Black Dog". But it was "Stairway to Heaven" that would come to be recognized as Zep's signature tune and one of the all-time rock classics. It started off with a beautiful 12-string intro before slowly building up to a near-perfect solo by Page and then back down. "It had everything there and showed the band at its best," Page said in *Hammer*.

Their follow-up LP, *Houses of the Holy*, included more of Jones's keyboards and also went to No. 1 in America. The ensuing tour broke all attendance records in the States with a live show that included fog, cannons, and smoke bombs (eventual staples of hard-rock concerts).

In 1974, Led Zep resigned with Atlantic, which gave the band their own label to work with, Swan Song. It proved to be a very successful venture, with bands like Bad Company, the Pretty Things, Dave Edmunds, and Detective all signed to their label. Zep's 1975 *Physical Graffiti*, a double album *tour de force*, went No. 1 and, with their previous LPs and the stable of Swan Song albums, they had nine albums on the charts simultaneously.

Things were not all roses, however, as Plant was seriously injured in a car accident, and Page became addicted to heroin. Bonham became known as The Beast, with a temper like a monster and the maturity of a five-year-old. He lost control when he learned that he had finished behind drummer Karen Carpenter in a *Playboy* poll. Still, Led Zep ruled the rock world. "It's not just that we think we're the best group in the world, it's just that we think we're so much better than whoever is Number Two," Plant told Lisa Robinson.

In 1976 they would release two albums. The first, *The Song Remains the Same*, was a double live soundtrack from their movie of 1973 concert footage. As usual, it was belittled by critics, and even die-hard fans were a little dismayed. "A few bars from one piece convince the listener he's hearing the greatest of rock & roll, then the very next few place him in a nightmarish 1970 movie about deranged hippies," *Rolling Stone* reported. Expectations for their studio LP, *Presence*, were high, though, due to a one million-copy advance. Although it contains some quality cuts, like "Achilles Last Stand," the record eventually wound up in the bargain bins.

The band was on hold for nearly three years as Plant recovered from the mysterious death of his son Karac. Rumors were spreading that Page's dabbling in black magic had brought bad karma on the band. He was already living in the late occultist Aleister Crowley's Loch Ness mansion in Scotland, and things were looking suspicious.

In 1980 they entered the studios to record *In Through the Out Door*. With the exception of Page's guitar on the cut "In The Evening," the LP was basically a keyboard album, composed mainly by Jones. It did give a slumping record industry a much needed boost, and the band hit the road to promote it. Tragically, on September 24, 1980, John Bonham died in his sleep after an all-day drinking binge. On December 4, 1980, Led Zep officially disbanded.

Besides the 1982 *Coda*, an LP of Zep outtakes, Page continued to work, recording soundtracks for *Death Wish I* and *II*. At the 1983 ARMilitary service: benefit concerts for Ronnie Lane, Page, now off heroin, jammed with Clapton and Beck and proved the magic was still there. He later teamed with Paul Rodgers to form the Firm, and in 1988 he released his solo album, *Outrider*. Plant has also recorded several fine solo albums himself, quite different in sound from Zeppelin. In 1985, with Tony Thompson on drums, Led Led regrouped for the Live-Aid concert in Philadelphia. Word was that Zep was back together, but, alas, it was just a one-shot deal. Then, on May 14, 1988, at Atlantic Records' fortieth anniversary celebration at Madison Square Garden, LedZeppelin tore into five rockers. On drums sat Jason Bonham, John's son, sounding remarkably like his father. "It was really Jason's night. The atmosphere was fabulous and I made a few mistakes, but that doesn't make any difference," Page told *Guitar World*.

In 1990, an acclaimed four-CD box set of previously released and some unreleased Led Led tracks came out, and in 1993, another double disk set was issued. Page remarked in *Rolling Stone*, "The bitter irony was getting good reviews for LedZeppelin after all these years." Page also supervised the digital remastering of all nine Led Zep albums, issued as *Led Zeppelin--The Complete Studio Recordings*. Due to the success of the new CDs and the continued popularity of the long-dissolved band, some speculated there may be a reunion tour. Page did not seem hopeful, however. He commented that band members were more interested in their own solo efforts, and himself had collaborated with David Coverdale on an LP and tour of Japan in 1993. Finally, in 1995, Page and Plant embarked on a U.S. tour, filling arenas and again proving themselves to be one of the most enduring **rock** acts ever.

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Source Citation: "Led Zeppelin." *DISCovering Biography*. Online Edition. Gale, 2003. Discovering Collection. Thomson Gale. 30 September 2005
<<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/DC>>

Document Number: CD2102102040