Led Zeppelin Is the World's Greatest Rock Band -- And Why You Should Care

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“There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold / and she’s buying a stairway to heaven. When she gets there she knows if the stores are all closed / with a word she can get what she came for.” These are the opening lyrics of Led Zeppelin’s smash hit, “Stairway to Heaven,” released in 1971 on the album Led Zeppelin IV. Today, “‘Stairway to Heaven’ is STILL the #1 most requested song on FM radio, over 30 years after it's release” (Zangara). Historically, “Stairway” forever changed the landscape of contemporary music by introducing the acoustic guitar to electrified rock and roll—then a fledgling genre—and infusing unprecedented concepts in the rock ballad: tempo changes, dynamic variety, and improvisation. In retrospect, the song provides context for a unique cultural arc, transcending popular culture in numerous ways. That context began in 1968 with guitarist Jimmy Page and his vision form a rock band with a new sound—and attain complete creative control.

At the time, Page was a 22-year-old London-based studio session musician and guitarist in the iconic band, The Yardbirds. When the band separated in 1968, Page garnered the group’s name and began searching for members for his visionary super-group. He immediately contacted Terry Reid, a squealing blues rock vocalist in the vein of Steve Marriott of Humble Pie, who Page idealized for the lead singer position. But Reid declined and offered a recommendation: Robert Plant, who fronted a band called Hobbstweedle further out of the city in the Black Country. Meanwhile, bassist John Paul Jones, a studio colleague of Page’s, called to express his desire to join Jimmy’s new band. Soon after, Page heard Plant perform live in Birmingham, and later said Plant’s “primeval wail” was disturbing, but that was “exactly the voice he wanted” (Gilmore 10). Plant voiced his interest and told Page about a solid drummer named John
Bonham, who he had played with in Band of Joy. Page met with the three other musicians at his boathouse to listen to records and talk about the band’s musical direction. Less than two weeks later, they played together for the first time in a basement studio and discovered the exceptional chemistry that Page had long envisioned. Jones recalled the session, saying that when he had heard Bonham play, he “knew this was going to be great—somebody who knows what they’re doing and swings like a bastard. We locked together as a team immediately” (Shadwick 31).

Page talked about the first song they played, “Train Kept a-Rollin’,” as seminal: “…[A]t 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” (Considine 51).

Each of the four members brought a unique musical history and set of influences to the band, which may account for the strength and versatility of the unprecedented music they eventually composed, recorded, and performed as Led Zeppelin. Jimmy Page was passionate about blues and rock and roll but also had taken lessons on his first guitar before learning songs by ear from records. “By the time he was sixteen, Jimmy Page had played in local bands” (Davis 12). In his work as a session musician, he gained vast studio proficiency, having played on hundreds of diverse recordings such as “You Really Got Me” by the Kinks, “Little Girl” by Sonny Boy Williams, and even “Can’t Explain” by new-on-the-scene power rockers The Who. The manager of the Rolling Stones hired Page as a music producer in 1965. Robert Plant was interested in rock and blues music, and he read about mythology, magic, and fantasy, especially J.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. In fact, when Page heard Plant for the first time, he was playing in a band called Hobbswee—clearly inspired by *Lord of the Rings*. Both Plant and Page were captivated by Elvis Presley, “though Plant had a special affinity for American country-blues singers, such as Skip James, Bukka White, and Memphis Minnie” (Gilmore 10). John Bonham loved soul music, as did John Paul Jones, who also loved jazz. Jones, a studio musician with top-rated abilities, played multiple instruments: bass, keyboard, organ (including foot pedal bass), mandolin, and the mellotron, an extremely difficult instrument to master. Top music producer Micky Most hired 21-year-old Jones on the spot to replace a music arranger that Jones found to
be incompetent. All four members found their passions in blues and R&B music. At some point, they all “used the same word to describe their first rehearsal in a crowded little room below a record store on Gerard Street: magic” (Davis 55). Providing a perfect summation of the musicality of the band, Jones himself recalled, “[T]here seemed to be common area, which was Led Zeppelin. The fusion of all different types of music and interests” (Considine 50).

But before they were officially called Led Zeppelin, they were still using the name The New Yardbirds when fate intervened just days before their first official tour. Former Yardbirds bassist Chris Dreja directed his lawyer to send a letter demanding that Page and company cease and desist using “The Yardbirds.” A new name became a legal necessity.

Whatever new name they might choose, Page wanted it to accurately reflect the key qualities he felt the music should have: a paradoxical combination of heaviness and lightness, finesse and bombast. It should also have a touch of wit.

As it transpired the new name had all those things and more (Shadwick 36).

Nearly two years before this imposition, Page had overheard a conversation between two members of The Who about some musicians trying to form a “super-group,” an idea they thought would “go over like a lead zeppelin,” meaning it would crash and burn a la The Hindenburg. Having made a mental note of this, Page introduced the name to his band mates, road manager, and business manager—they all loved the humor in it, and simply changed lead to led to avoid any confusion in meaning. Now with a new name and plans for their first album, Led Zeppelin was ready to win the world, one mighty, musical storm at a time. They wrote material, starting frequently with Page’s recorded riffs, rhythms, and fragments, adding improvised parts from Jones on bass and Bonham on drums. Plant would bring prior writings and often pen lyrics on the spot, improvising his vocal melodies. Each of the band members had been musically stifled in previous projects and sought maximum creativity; in Led Zeppelin, Page provided an ideal environment for edgy, inspired improvisation in songwriting, recording, and performing. In order to push the envelope and really fly musically, Page and Jones needed to break out of the “pop music factory” studio grind, while Plant and Bonham needed the freedom to indulge their
incomparable musical characters. A consummate leader, Page encouraged the individual members to flourish in serving the music. In a 2003 interview, he talked about composing “Stairway to Heaven” at a house called Headley Grange in the U.K.:

Going back to those studio days for me and John Paul Jones, the one thing you didn't do was speed up, because if you sped up you wouldn't be seen again. Everything had to be right on the meter all the way through. And I really wanted to write something which did speed up, and took the emotion and the adrenaline with it, and would reach a sort of crescendo. And that was the idea of it (Page NPR).

Of course, other pop and rock bands of the time were enjoying the creative process, trying new equipment with new sounds, and working with inventive producers, but Led Zeppelin was breaking new ground in every aspect of rock and roll. Separately, there was Bonham’s incredible drumming, Plant’s signature voice, Jones’s artful jazz-like bass parts, and Page’s matchless style and sound. Collectively, each member improvised, and Page said, “Everyone’s got something to say” (Shadwick 62). In this respect, “[T]hey were one of the very first rock bands to appear at formerly jazz-only events” (Shadwick 62). Their presence on the music scene affected other musicians, the industry, the press, and their fans. In general, the mainstream media panned their debut album, but listeners and a few members of the press recognized the musical brilliance of Led Zeppelin. Jimmy Page refuted this idea, stating unequivocally, “The only term I won’t accept is ‘genius’” (Considine 42), but history shows the authority of a band that created more than just music. Led Zeppelin forged and followed the arc of a counterculture shift, living within the constraints and freedoms—both positive and negative—of that revolution.

The band combined the visceral power and intensity of hard rock with the finesse and delicacy of British folk music, redefining rock in the Seventies and for all time. Then and now, Led Zeppelin looms larger than life on the rock landscape as a band for the ages with an almost mystical power to evoke primal passions (“Today in Rock”).
The post-Truman Capote era intelligentsia and perhaps even GenX and Millennial readers might ponder for a moment over a rock band that is supposed to mean something more than artsy Baby Boomers, uncool drug addiction, unfettered destruction, and ear-splitting noise. Many popular rock bands at the time engaged in overindulgent lifestyles, played loud music, and enjoyed massive industry success. The Rolling Stones had scores of hit songs over some forty years of on-again-off-again writing, recording, and touring. But the Rolling Stones admit to penning popular songs, while Led Zeppelin refused to participate in the practice of “selling out” to the music industry. This is not to say that the Rolling Stones lack uniqueness and creativity; they certainly have a distinct brand in their sound and style. And some of the lyrics written by lead singer Mick Jagger contain surprising metaphors. In “Bitch,” for example, he writes, “Feeling hungry / Can’t see the reason / Just had a horsemeat pie” (i.e., he just “ate a horse” and doesn’t understand why he is still hungry). This is the song’s sole uncommon connection; Jagger carries on in a conspicuous pop-rock current in the remaining lyrics, which are rife with clichés. Compare this to Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant’s fresh, refined lyrics in “Immigrant Song,” a tune that achieved similar levels in popularity as judged by record sales and radio airplay. He writes, “How soft your fields so green / Can whisper tales of gore / of how we calmed the tides of war / We are your overlords.” This juxtaposition of hard-hitting rock music and mystical, nuanced poetry satisfies the listener on a deeper level, much the same way as Stravinsky’s “The Rite of Spring” was both scandalous and a masterpiece, standing the test of time.

“Bitch” and “Immigrant Song” have only two similarities: both were “B-sides,” accompanying the band’s current “hit” track on vinyl 78 RPM singles, and both were recorded in mid-1970. Musically, “Bitch” grooves along an A minor pentatonic scale, “borrows” a chord or two, and features a bright chorus with vocal harmonies (an overt sign of a potential pop music sensation), horn section stabs, and a simple, effective guitar solo by Keith Richards. The studio version fades out slowly. In contrast, Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” is written in F# minor and showcases a heavy, driving gait reminiscent of galloping war horses, with Plant’s dark, wailing vocals (sans harmonies), and repetitive guitar rhythms that are anything but boring: they
rivet the listener to sheer sonic force. The two-minute-and-twenty-three-second studio version of
the song comes to a fierce, abrupt end, leaving the listener stunned and reeling from such
concentrated creative power.

Led Zeppelin spiked the creativity line off the charts, combining their classical, blues,
jazz, and performance abilities with appropriate seriousness—and humor. In a 1990 interview,
Plant discussed whether fans understood Led Zeppelin, saying, “[N]obody ever tells me how
they feel. They just go “Yeah, man, Zeppelin.” And that’s it! They don’t say, “Did you really
fuck somebody with a snake on your head?” Interviewer J.D. Considine asks him if he actually
did that, and Plant laughs, replying, “Ahhh, no, that must have been Jimmy.” Page, or “Pagey,”
as they also called him, was a seasoned, emotional guitarist with a fascination for mysticism.
Plant, or “Percy,” was a deep-thinking, self-deprecating vocalist with an ear for improvisation
and the voice to match, his mind drenched in poetry and mythology. Jones, or “Jonesy,” was a
keen multi-instrumentalist with sought-after studio chops and the humility to keep him steadily
working. Bonham was the disciplined monster, drumming with a rare, almost unearthly
precision, passion, and power envied by percussionists to this day. “Bonzo,” or “The Beast,”
perhaps the more suitable nickname, used the bass drum pedal in such an implausible and
efficient way that music equipment manufacturers invented the double-kick pedal so other
drummers could execute the Bonham technique without having to actually learn how to do it
with the single-kick pedal. “He had a crushing attack and [before joining Led Zeppelin] had been
tossed from clubs for playing too loud” (Gilmore 10). All four players found comfortable
territory in the song “Train Kept a-Rollin’” during their initial jamming session. According to
bassist Jones, he and drummer Bonham gelled immediately, playing, he said, “…like we were on
our 20th tour” (Fricke 67). In fact, “Page later said that when he first heard Bonham, he decided
what his band would sound like” (Gilmore 10). That sound, according to Page, would be
“heavy…but with a lot of light and shade” (Crowe, Box Set) and would come to characterize the
music of Led Zeppelin. Over time, the band would blend their brand of bluesy folk rock with
world sounds: Raga, Indian, Celtic, and Arabic riffs, fills, rhythms, and chord movements added
exotic traits to songs like “Dancing Days,” “White Summer,” and the band’s favorite, “Kashmir.”

Tight musically and emotionally, Led Zeppelin made a pact to shun the media in order to focus on their music, generating a mystique that fed into the band’s creative process and provided ample fuel for their fans’ insatiable fancies. But this decision also came with major drawbacks:

The lack of press accessibility had kept the band mysterious, but the mystery cut both ways. What press did reach the papers usually centered on a) riots over concerts tickets, or b) motorcycles-in-the-hallway-type behavior. [Led Zeppelin’s music manager] Peter Grant found himself involved in constant crisis management (Crowe, Box Set).

The band endured harsh criticism, with much of the press complaining that Led Zeppelin’s music was “a manifestation of anger and male aggression” (Gilmore 13). Such disparaging remarks stimulated the band’s already cynical relationship with the media, and further contrasted Led Zeppelin with other so-called “World’s Greatest Rock Bands.” While bands like the Rolling Stones “maintained a constant publicity circus” (Davis 165), Page and company had their own approach: “…we just didn’t play whatever game the game was. We figured the best thing to do was shut the fuck up and play, you know?” (Considine 46). Journalist Ellen Sander toured with Led Zeppelin in 1969, later claiming in her infamous memoir that they had assaulted her. At this point, feeling ravaged by the entire media, the band started a self-defense campaign. Plant spoke candidly, acknowledging that Led Zeppelin was more successful than “…a lot of people who were glorified in the press. So without being egocentric, we thought it was time people heard something about us other than that we were eating women and throwing the bones out the window” (Davis 165). Other witnesses claimed to see unsavory activity by band members—and even their management team—and the stories were detailed, outrageous, and intensifying. Page himself reluctantly read some of Stephen Davis’s controversial 1976 “tell-all” book about the band—*Hammer of the Gods*—and threw it out the window, saying, “The whole humor of the
band disappeared in the parts that I read, and it was just a sensational book” (Considine 52). But Page was also open about his fascination with truth seeking through tarot, rituals, and psychological and sexual exploration inspired by the writings of “self-proclaimed devil worshipper and dabbler in the black arts,” Aleister Crowley (Shadwick 111). He even bought a home that Crowley had owned near Loch Ness in Scotland; it came with reports of the sound of heads rolling in the attic, and other “haunted house” stories. But the band rejects most of the legendary tales, and John Paul Jones dismissed the majority of media attention they received: “…the total subject matter was all about the hype of Led Zeppelin…. It helped foster my general hatred for the press” (Considine 46).

Amid controversy, the quality and creativity of rock and roll music peaked with Led Zeppelin’s studio recordings and live performances. At the same time, here in the U.S., where the band experienced immediate and continued success, the federal government was silently undercutting music and the arts in school. Former President Richard M. Nixon “is currently either credited with or criticized for taking significant steps toward centralized planning and structural decentralization in domestic affairs” (Greenstein 176). The National Endowment for the Arts outlined the timeframe: “The downward “turning point” for arts education actually occurred sometime during the seventeen years before 1985 — not in that year precisely, but between 1967 and 1984” (Rabkin 15). Since that time, studies continue to show the importance of music and art: “Arts education also showed strong associations with personal creation or performance, as well as consumption of the arts through media” (Rabkin 13). Without at least some knowledge of music appreciation, listeners are not likely to distinguish high-quality music from simple, marketing-driven pop music. Additionally, the quality and creativity of even mainstream, radio-friendly pop music declined following the peak of Led Zeppelin in the mid-1970s. And by this time, Hollywood and Madison Avenue had become the control centers for music production and marketing, deciding for audiences what music was popular by controlling which songs reached the airwaves in the U.K. and the U.S. Of course, just before the formation of Led Zeppelin, Page had been a member of the fashionable pop-rock band The Yardbirds, and
both he and Jones were selling their musical skills to contemporary studio recordings such as Donovan’s “Sunshine Superman.” But Page craved the creativity and control of his own band. In an interview for Go magazine he said “The whole idea is to get a new sort of collage of sounds that is not the sound normally associated with a rock ‘n’ roll group. But it will still have a beat backing” (Somach 12). Jones, too, was growing tired of studio session work, and said “joining Page’s band and getting on the road would be a welcome change of pace” (Somach 14). On a grander scale, Led Zeppelin’s music would stand out as a marker for change and pace in the counterculture shift.

Prior to the emergence of Led Zeppelin on the late 1960s music scene, only a few female vocalists could be categorized in the rock and roll genre: Janis Joplin, Grace Slick, Tina Turner. But after Led Zeppelin became popular, increasing numbers of female rock singers entered the stage, including Pat Benatar, Anne Wilson, and Stevie Nix—and then came female guitarists like Chrissy Hynde, Joan Jett, and Nancy Wilson. Many well-known female artists such as guitarist and vocalist Melissa Etheridge and singer-songwriters Sheryl Crow, Alannah Myles, and Edie Brickell claim that Led Zeppelin shaped them musically (Zangara). When Led Zeppelin received honors in 2012 from the Kennedy Center Honors for the Arts, vocalist Anne Wilson and guitarist Nancy Wilson of the band Heart performed “Stairway to Heaven” and received enthusiastic reviews. On the red carpet at the event, Anne said about Led Zeppelin, “I'm proud to say that they've influenced us” (Clark). Later, on their official website, Anne wrote a gracious and more detailed response to the praise that Heart received for their performance: “My main goal though was to please Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones...especially Plant, since all these many years he has taught me so much about singing from the soul and has given me such pleasure in his lyrics” (Wilson).

Lyrical analysis shows that Led Zeppelin was not only cognizant of the Women’s Movement; the band understood the extreme reactions to female liberation. Plant writes in “Livin’ Lovin’ Maid (She’s Just A Woman),” “Alimony, alimony, payin' your bills / Livin', lovin', she's just a woman / When your conscience hits, ya knock it back with pills / Livin', lovin',
she's just a woman.” In a later verse, he writes: “Tellin' tall tales of how it used to be / Livin', lovin', she's just a woman / With the butler and the maid and the servants three / Livin', lovin', she's just a woman.” While Plant wrote the lyrics about a groupie that annoyed the band, they clearly depict a woman who abandoned her luxurious married life to collect alimony and follow a rock band. This situation reflects a negative aspect of the era: women abusing the newly won privilege of their “freedom.” Further elucidations by Plant reveal his concern when discussing the topic of “Stairway to Heaven,” saying the lyrical content is “some cynical aside about a woman getting everything she wanted all the time without giving back any thought or consideration (Llewellyn). In contrast and as a testament to Led Zeppelin’s admiration for women who had earned their liberation, Page initiated the revamp of Joan Baez’s rendition of the folk song “Babe, I’m Gonna Leave You” and included on their debut album. Would a true misogynist elect to cover a song made popular by a female artist? Additionally, Page and Plant also admitted that guitarist and singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell influenced them. Their song “Going to California” was written partly in homage her (“Joni Mitchell”). When the band performed the song live, Plant occasionally said “Joni” out loud after the line “To find a queen without a king / who plays guitar and cries and sings.” In their 1975 Earl’s Court concert, Led Zeppelin “even delivered a scintillating version of Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock” (Shadwick 241).

In the famous 1975 Rolling Stone magazine interview of Led Zeppelin by Cameron Crowe, readers are allowed into the emotional space of Jimmy Page as he shares his inner thoughts about Mitchell:

[But] the main thing with Joni is that she's able to look at something that's happened to her, draw back and crystallize the whole situation, then write about it. She brings tears to my eyes, what more can I say? It's bloody eerie. I can relate so much to what she says (47).

Rendering Page’s heartfelt statement against Led Zeppelin’s alleged misogynistic carousing with women is a difficult task, one that contrasts the notion of their involvement, however indirect, in furthering the women’s movement. In that era, women were beginning to
enjoy greater sexuality and deeper emotional relationships with men—no one was forcing them to have fun. Still, books such as *Hammer of the Gods* by Stephen Davis seem to rely heavily on rumor, speculation, and “The Led Zeppelin Mystique” which amplified the notion that the band despised and exploited women solely for their own sexual gratification (as if the women weren’t enjoying themselves). For example, Davis writes about the notorious May 1973 stay at the band’s favorite Los Angeles hotel, dubbed the “Riot House,” and their typical after-concert night in Hollywood’s Rainbow Bar. He resorts to loose storytelling, referring to the women in a term usually reserved for abandoned dogs, and blaming them for potentially exposing the band mates’ marital infidelities: “Women knew where to find them…. [Led Zeppelin] could get loaded, hold court all night long, and go home with whomever they wanted. Their only worry was that the stray girls would get into the photographs and alarm their wives back home” (Davis 201). Highly sexualized rock musicians and their groupies was not a new concept, but it both helped and hindered Led Zeppelin’s mythic celebrity. But from the musical perspective, with their mastery of dynamics, instrument variety, and unprecedented, expressive depth in rock music, Led Zeppelin effectively tapped into the female soul: an archetypal treasure chest. As individual band members and as a group, they exhibited the raw power, the vacillating emotions, and the excited yet pained wailing of the newly liberated woman. Plant’s voice is her moaning, whining, and laughing; it is her primal menstrual pain groan, her laborious childbirth howl, her exuberant orgasmic exclamation. And while Led Zeppelin’s music inspired females to learn to play a rock and roll instrument, to write songs, to perform and record, to take the stage and bring their musical voices to the world, to take chances by developing their talents, The Beatles’ music caused girls and young women to scream, cry, flail, and urinate in public. In analysis, Led Zeppelin’s music motivated females to *take control instead of losing control*. Led Zeppelin brought the world into full focus when they began channeling the once-veiled true power of femininity.

Both The Beatles and the Rolling Stones have consistently been labeled as the “World’s Greatest Rock Band.” But in analysis, the music of these two bands constitutes simple, well-
written popular songs played on electrified rock and roll guitars and bass. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones each attained *The Billboard Top 100* several years in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Beatles had numerous pop singles in the charts: “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” “She Loves You,” “Can’t Buy Me Love,” “Love Me Do,” and “Hard Day’s Night” all made the list in 1964 alone (“Billboard”). In October 1968, Led Zeppelin was recording their pioneering debut rock album—and refusing to release official singles—while The Beatles topped *Billboard* with the monotonous, lyrically and melodically hook-laden song “Hey Jude.” During Led Zeppelin’s early years creating radical rock songs such as “Whole Lotta Love,” “Dazed and Confused,” and “Since I’ve Been Loving You,” the Rolling Stones were charting with unsophisticated pop singles like “Brown Sugar,” “Honky Tonk Woman,” and “Angie.” At the same time, The Beatles occasionally expanded on the typical three- and four-chord pop tune in songs such as “Yesterday,” but the lyric content remained wholly in *Billboard* and *Top of the Pops* territory. The Beatles’ song arrangements, with a few exceptions like “I Want You / She’s So Heavy,” rely on standard verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus format. The same is true for typically one-dimensional Rolling Stones songs, which frequently do not even contain a bridge; when it is present, it usually degrades into repetition of the lyrical hook, as in “I know / it’s only rock and roll / but I like it.” In contrast, Led Zeppelin songs typify classical and jazz music arrangements, creating motifs and building on these, frequently featuring imaginative introductions, time signature changes, and codas, with improvised keyboard or bass parts, vocalizations, and guitar and drum solos. For example, one of Led Zeppelin’s most popular radio songs, “Communication Breakdown,” showcases a fast and furious electric guitar solo prior to the final chorus, a brilliant coda that combines a dusky, jabbing repeat of the lyrical hook with Plant’s trademark improvised wailing and then merges into another guitar solo. In stark contrast, The Beatles relied solely on rehearsed parts that mirrored the single or album version released by their record label. Furthermore, The Beatles’ George Harrison was a fine guitarist, but playing a guitar solo with a pick is hardly as inventive as playing one with a violin bow, as Jimmy Page did “Dazed and Confused.” He also used the neck of his guitar to perform ingenious, unprecedented solos on a
Theremin, as in “Whole Lotta Love.” To compare album success of the two bands, “Led Zeppelin was the only band to knock The Beatles from first place. In December 1969, Led Zeppelin II made history by replacing The Beatles’ Abbey Road from the top spot” (Zangara).

Unlike The Beatles, or the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin relied heavily on soulful vocalizing and jazz-inspired spontaneous improvisation among the players during studio recording sessions and concert performances. This might be an argument for extrapolating that, similar to jazz musicians, Led Zeppelin attracted niche listeners. In fact, “Led Zeppelin out-grossed The Beatles’ record for largest audience and out-grossed all Rolling Stone shows from the mid to late 70's. [These are] records that STILL stand to this day” (Zangara).

Led Zeppelin would come to be the primary influence on the rock and roll genre and on many rock and pop artists:

…. Metallica, Madonna, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Audioslave, Alice Cooper, and Beastie Boys to name a few. Aerosmith, Guns ‘n Roses, and Van Halen borrowed the sound from the song “Whole Lotta Love” for their basic feel. Brian May of Queen even said that Led Zeppelin created the overall blueprint of a rock band.

Musicians such as Jack White copy their style and even to this day Led Zeppelin t-shirts are worn by celebrities (“Legacy”).

Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995, Led Zeppelin has also received numerous awards, including the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. “…[B]ands such as Stone Temple Pilots, Tina Turner, Duran Duran, and even the London Philharmonic Orchestra” have made Led Zeppelin tribute albums” (“Legacy”). Led Zeppelin may also be responsible for inventing rock and roll “cool”—The Yardbirds affectionately referred to member Jimmy Page as “Mr. Cool”—and for establishing “cock rock.” Some credit Page with creating the iconic rock guitarist stance, an impressive, physically and psychologically assertive stage presence that stemmed from both his technical mastery and his ultimate creative control in Led Zeppelin (Shadwick 15). At the time, record label-signed musicians did not experience the luxury of producing their own records or even approving their own album artwork. Their careers, and thus, their personal lives, were
subject to the bottom-line worries and production whims of executives. Yet most rock musicians mimicked Page’s posture: the stance of refined defiance, the sultry moves of dance, the controlled passion of lovemaking. To this day, many people attribute this extreme confidence to his interest in Aleister Crowley and the occult, claiming that Led Zeppelin (with the possible exception of John Paul Jones) had “made a deal with the devil” in order to attain such musical mastery and wild success.

As Led Zeppelin continued to evolve as musicians and morph their revolutionary music in the late 1970s, sporting events became venues for playing rock and roll and popular songs as anthems: “We Are The Champions/We Will Rock You” by Queen, “Rock and Roll Part 2” by Gary Glitter, and “Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye” by Steam. “Such anthems challenge the hegemonic power of masculinity but are also, in the context of their broadcast at sporting spectacles, co-opted by mainstream society” (McLeod 124). While Led Zeppelin was a powerhouse—packing 90,000 seats year after year at both Pontiac Silverdome in the U.S. and Wembley Stadium in the U.K.—the band never assimilated into the spectacle of modern sports. Their music conveys something grander than hyper-masculinity: rock and roll with grace, a modern female finesse.

Led Zeppelin music feeds the souls of listeners. So if the old adage “you are what you eat” is true, does feeding the mind on simplistic music the way most U.S. Americans feed their bodies on processed food lead to degraded mental ability? As far back as in ancient Greece, citizens received formal music training as a part of their academic curriculum. For hundreds of years following, developments in music lead to increasingly complex theory, composition, and performance, with a wide range of dynamics. In rock and roll, Led Zeppelin’s music stands at the peak of that development; since then, technological “progress” has actually degraded the overall quality and experience of music. Today’s music producers use digital compression to cause the sound of a single acoustic guitar or a cappella vocal in a recording to be as loud as a full rock band with electric guitars and bass, drums, and vocals. A forty-year veteran engineer in audio recording talks about the impact of digitally recorded and produced music: “…the ear just gets
tired of it. When you're through listening to a whole album of this highly compressed music, your ear is fatigued. You may have enjoyed the music but you don't really feel like going back and listening to it again” (Ludwig). The technique not only fatigues the listener’s ear, it seems to trick the brain into a musical experience that is unrealistic: the compressed loudness cannot be recreated in a live setting—at least not yet. Research published in the Journal of Science “….shows that modern recordings are louder than those of those of the 1950s and 60s. This is thought to not simply due [sic] to better recording equipment but an attempt to make music that catches the attention and is suitable for playing in discos” (Macrae). The research team in Spain analyzed data from nearly 500,000 pop, rock, and hip hop songs from 1995-2010. The study also suggests “….songs are more similar than in the past. The chords used and the changes between chords are simpler, leading to the production of music that is easy on the ear but contains little variety” (Macrae). Much like junk food, this pre-chewed music is effortless to consume but contains little mental nutrition. Unlike the simplistic music in the study, Led Zeppelin’s compositions tend toward maximum variety in chords, melody, instrumentation, and lyric content. Although the band may deny it, their songs are more similar to classical music, taking listeners on an auditory adventure. That their recordings contain some loud parts enhances the experience: listeners physically feel the music. Still, Led Zeppelin’s music borrowed an idea common to large orchestras for hundreds of years, revolutionizing the rock and roll genre with radical dynamic variation, as in “What Is and What Should Never Be,” “Ramble On,” and “Stairway to Heaven.”

In the singular case of Led Zeppelin, one could easily ignore the music industry standard of record sales, concert ticket and merchandise sales, and contemporary factors such as total Facebook fans as indicators of true power and in the rock and roll genre. However, a few telling facts should be noted:

The 1990 4-CD Led Zeppelin Box Set is STILL the highest grossing box set EVER released. When Jimmy Page released the live DVD and the subsequent CD set in 2003, it went straight to NUMBER 1 week after week, topping ALL of the
Top 40 performers of today! The 1994 *MTV Unledded* special maintains the highest rating on the network and the highest rated television musical performance in history (Zangara).

Additionally, the album *Led Zeppelin IV* has achieved a 23X multi-platinum ranking (RIAA “Gold…”). Official album sales statistics also show: “This month, *Led Zeppelin IV* advances to 22 million sales; *Led Zeppelin II* moves up to 12 million and *Houses Of The Holy* climbs to 11 million. The band’s 1975 double-album *Physical Graffiti* holds at 15 million” (RIAA June 2013).

As far as online success, as of June 4, 2013, the official Led Zeppelin Facebook page has nearly 9,000,000 “likes.” Dismiss the preponderance of rock songs at spectacle sporting events as indicative of anything other than a band’s ability to assimilate into mainstream cultural activities. And discontinue listening to simple, technologically tedious, overproduced and pre-chewed pop-rock music—however successful it might be—because it requires little brain activity for the return in effortless entertainment value. Instead, appreciate one band’s distinctive combination of hard-earned musical gravitas, uncompromising artistic integrity, widespread cultural influence, and masterful mystique making that continue—even after the shocking 1980 death of drummer John Bonham—to span nearly five decades of enduring musical dominance. This is the electrifying, inimitable phenomenon of Led Zeppelin, the world’s greatest rock band. Led Zeppelin created a “Stairway to Heaven” that is worth more than its weight in gold. Are you buying?
Works Cited


