

Led Zeppelin

Houses of the Holy

Scoter slugged his beer and put the can on the side table. Fanning out his fingers, he threaded the aluminum pull tab on to his pinkie like a ring. I gazed out the side of the curved windshield onto his front lawn, which was quilted white. In the distance I could see the low wooden fence that bounded the house next door, where I lived.

We were holed up in a Winnebago that Scooter's folks kept parked in the driveway, which they used for an annual family vacation, serving the rest of the months as a bat cave for us. Both Scooter's public school and my private school had called a snow day. The adults were at work, so nobody was in charge, and even though it was brittle cold outside, we had the heat cranked in the camper and could be assured of privacy from his sister and brother.

I pressed stop on the cassette player while he ran inside to steal a few more cans from his father's stash. His dad drank them so fast that he never noticed their absence. When Scooter returned, I hit play. He'd filled a bucket from his garage with snow, a makeshift cooler for the beers. The atmosphere felt positive, a little impromptu party. We were unperturbed, like we preferred; this was a celebration of being left to our own devices.

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“I don’t understand how they do this,” I said.

“What?”

“Like that guitar riff, where did that come from? How did they think of that? Did you ever stop to ask, where does it come from? Do they just think it up on the spot?”

“Yeah, it rocks so hard.”

“But why is it so much better than the riffs other bands use?”

Scooter sipped and pondered and sipped again. “I don’t know. But it is.”

We would both turn fourteen that summer. For three years we’d been best friends, ever since a night at Valley Forge on a Boy Scout camping trip, when, as assigned bunkmates and mutually faltering members of the troop, we’d exchanged all sorts of confidences and thereby sealed an airtight bond, which included the pricking of fingers, some vows, and unearthing the stakes on another tent.

“I mean, how do they compose something like that? Does it come into their mind and then they just play it?” I asked, flicking my pull tab at Scooter’s feet.

“I hear Jimmy Page is some sort of musical whiz kid. Like a savant or something.”

“Is he classically trained?”

“Nah. That’s fine for someone like Rick Wakeman or Keith Emerson. But I guess if you’re classically trained, it drains some of the rock out of you and you can’t be as nasty as Zeppelin.”

Led Zeppelin vacillated between histrionics and preternatural cool. Briefly known as the New Yardbirds, they had the pedigree of a first-generation British Invasion band but had managed to shake off the trappings of that earlier movement, the suits and skinny ties, the jerky rhythms and trebly guitars, the harmony vocals applied to garaged-up R&B. That was our parents’ music, not ours. The Kinks and the Rolling Stones never completely lost the British Invasion connotation—even after they’d matured, we always heard in them a bit of the Dave Clark Five.

Not Led Zeppelin. With a fresh new name containing a deliber-

ate misspelling, they flipped convention a righteous bird, replacing those old-fashioned attributes with a contemporary sound, longer songs, compositional experimentation, carnal insinuation, and coarse-grained distortion where the tin-toned treble had been. Zeppelin weren't pop; they were solid rock. They were tough and monumental. In the music of other bands, their mineral content would harden into metal. But Zeppelin themselves were loose-limbed and feral, naughty, occasionally evil. Page spewed riffs like they were going out of style. They were going *into* style. His guitar parts were our definition of vogue. *Let the music be your master*, Led Zeppelin told us. *Will you heed the master's call?* Oh yes, we heeded.

In the camper there was no stereo system, just the built-in AM/FM radio. I had brought my portable cassette player so we'd have control of the music. A few weeks earlier, I'd manually recorded *Houses of the Holy* in its entirety from the stereo in my bedroom, starting over a couple of times when my mother had made noise in the hallway outside. Scooter lent me his copy, as I didn't have it, and I brought the LP back so we could peruse the gatefold while we listened.

"I fucking hate the color orange," I said. "But somehow with these weird naked kids on rocks, I love the way orange looks on this record."

"*Oh*-range," Scooter said, chiding my midwestern accent. "What are you, Canadian? Dork."

"Sorry, I should have said *ah*-range. Asswipe. You sound like you're from Jersey. Next you'll tell me we should wait 'on line' instead of 'in line.' Like that makes any sense at all. Where's the line? What line am I standing on?"

"Fuck off back to Canada."

We sat smiling and sipping. The little Sony speaker did its best but was unable to reproduce John Bonham's drums as anything more than what a wind-up monkey would hit.

"No, but really, how do they make this stuff up? I mean . . ." We paused to listen to "The Ocean." ". . . I can't even fricking clap to

this rhythm, I keep missing a beat. What are they doing? It's such a bitch."

"But it's wicked raw, too. They don't lose the rawness. They're the precision raw bad boys of rock."

"You said it."

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After a while we bundled up and headed out into the snow. Behind our houses was Wissahickon Valley Park, which led through tall trees to an open-air pavilion down by the Wissahickon Creek. More stream than creek, it was in places quite deep and fast, and in its shallows it widened to fifty feet across. The sustained cold snap had frozen it over, which was rare. When we were together, Scooter and I were daredevils. He nearly fell to his death once when we were rock climbing in another park. Invincible little numbskulls, we pissed ourselves laughing. The iced stream was irresistible, so we took turns walking as far as we could toward the middle of the waterway, where the crust got thinnest, once there gingerly hopping up and down until the surface gave way, plunging one of us hip deep into freezing water. Convulsing in laughter, the soggy guy was fished out of the drink, and the routine started up again, finding another spot and tempting fate. Neither of us ever got pulled under the ice, though that could have easily happened. After a couple of hours, chilled to the bone, our pants frozen to the point that walking was arduous, we trundled back to his house, changed into dry clothes, and thawed out in the camper. En route, it had started snowing again, heavily, the air hushed with its dampening effect.

"Let's listen to 'D'yer Maker,' pretend it's 'Dryer Maker,'" I said.

"Ooh, that's a hot one," he retaliated. "That joke makes me want to listen to 'The Crunge' and pretend it's 'The Cringe.'"

"This line of conversation is making me want to be 'Over the Hills and Far Away.'"

"But really, my bet's on 'No Quarter.'"

Flakes fluttered down on the Winnebago. Scooter shuttled backward through the other songs until he found the beginning of "No

Quarter,” with its eerie keyboard intro and opening lyrics: *Close the door, put out the light / No, they won't be home tonight / The snow falls hard and don't you know? / The winds of Thor are blowing cold.* It seemed to pair perfectly with the day.

“I mean listen to that bad-ass distorted guitar part,” he said, as Jimmy Page’s definitive melody imposed order on the nebulous tune. “It’s so simple, but it’s just so cherry. And they put it in the middle of this other slow, weird stuff, with piano—who’s playing piano, anyway? And Bonham’s monster drums.”

“He’s the best drummer in music. There’s Keith Moon, but he’s almost too wild, so there’s Bonham. Fattest gun in the West.”

The drummer’s inimitable pocket and sloshy ride cymbal were icebreakers in the song’s frozen tundra as the band took it on home. I pressed fast-forward and found the beginning of “The Crunge.” Its broke-back funk stretched the capacity of our little imaginations, Page’s acidic jazz chords and the song’s timing gently pointing at some references we didn’t know. We thought John Paul Jones was just a bassist, but he played keyboards too—that was him on piano. *Houses of the Holy* utilized more overdubbing than their first four records had, and Jones’s bass and piano could be heard simultaneously in some places.

“Pluck a duck, where does that rhythm come from? And the bridge, what’s the story with the ‘confounded bridge’ they’re looking for?”

The dry Brit humor and nod to funk both flew over our heads. Neither of us recognized their reference to James Brown. Anyway, this was a heavy rock band. When we listened to “D’yer Maker,” we didn’t know that the title was a play on the word Jamaica, twisted up the way a Cockney might. For that matter, we didn’t recognize the opening drum thwacks and the jerky rhythm as having anything to do with reggae because, like many Americans in 1976, we didn’t know what reggae was.

We let the tape roll on into “The Ocean,” listened to the final track on the record another time.

“Don’t forget Plant,” said Scooter. “Without him, it wouldn’t work. He can sing better and higher than lots of girls. Take the screaming ones that mob him, his groupies. He sounds like them when he pleads, *Oh baby, I still love you so*, at the end of ‘D’yer Maker.’ He whines like a girl and still gets the girls. How does that work?”

I returned my attention to “The Ocean.”

“Zeppelin saves the most bitchin’ song for the end. I still don’t understand how they think up these riffs. They’re so serious it’s hilarious. I keep losing track of this one. What kind of beat is that, anyway? It’s not 4/4 or 2/4.”

It’s in fifteen.

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A day after my fourteenth birthday, I bought an electric guitar. It was my way of going in search of those riffs, though I was not successful in finding many of my own. I purchased the instrument from Susie and Beth Miller’s stepfather, who worked at a guitar shop. Rather than buy a Gibson or Fender, in a typical move I went for something more obscure than was advisable, a solid body electric made by Martin, a company known almost exclusively for its superb acoustic instruments. Beautifully tooled, it was extremely heavy, which gave it excellent sustain but made it awkward to move around with, like carting a barbell with frets, and it behaved most like a Les Paul, without the distinctive double humbucker pickup sound.

Most of Jimmy Page’s recordings were made on a Les Paul. Later, after I’d left town and slowly lost touch with Scooter, I would hear bits and pieces of the rhythms and riffs I knew from Zeppelin records on down-home and electric blues records. When I finally heard James Brown take it to the bridge, I knew something about what he was up to from having memorized Zeppelin’s “The Crunge.” It was a strange de-evolutionary feeling, learning about those essential African American genres through the iconic hard rock band. But that’s the way it went then, and Zeppelin transformed those influences into something undeniably their own, which is more than you can say for some white rockers with blues roots.

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“You ever notice we skip over the songs without riffs most of the time?”

Scotter nodded and took charge of the Sony, looking for the beginning of our favorite song. When he located the start of “Dancing Days,” he spun the little dial to the loudest position, hitting play. The song’s boomeranging slide guitar mystified us further. We had never heard Indian music, so once again Zeppelin seemed like magicians pulling a new sound out of their hat every time. A few months down the turnpike, when we heard “Kashmir,” with its bowed guitar part, and the delayed issue of the title track from *Houses*, which also appeared on *Physical Graffiti*, the same applied. Led Zeppelin was apparently able to invent whole new genres with each track.

Thirty-eight years later, under very different circumstances, I attended a press conference at a legendary studio in Berlin, where the newly remastered first three Zeppelin LPs were being unveiled. I met Mr. Page and asked him to sign a *Zeppelin III* beer coaster for my cousin, who is an accomplished jazz musician; Page obliged, inscribing it: “For Tim—good luck with the guitar.” Listening to the refurbished music in Germany, I felt a little pang in my heart remembering those dancing days with Scoots, wishing they were here again, also happy they’re not.

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The beer and ice escapade had drained us. We sat in twilight, nodding, eyes closed, mouthing the words: *As the evening starts to glow / You know it’s all right / I said it’s all right / You know it’s all in my heart.*

“Hey, Corbs, you think we could come up with riffs this cool?”

“Yeah, man. I know we could. Those riffs would rule.”