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But in the Long Run

Led Zeppelin in Overview

If We Could Just Join Hands: Led Zeppelin as Supergroup

Rock music's unprecedented international success from the mid-1960s onward, in terms of economic impact, media notice, and critical respect, was marked by the growing numbers of acts comprised of members sprung from bands that had already enjoyed some measure of popularity. The term *supergroup* was first applied to Blind Faith in 1969, made up of Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker of Cream, Steve Winwood of Traffic, and Rick Grech of Family, all of them (especially Cream) with strong histories of record and ticket sales. Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young were another example of the phenomenon (they too debuted in '69), as David Crosby had emerged from the chart-topping Byrds, Graham Nash from the Hollies with their own string of hits ("Bus Stop," "Carrie-Anne"), and Stephen Stills and Neil Young from the Buffalo Springfield ("For What It's Worth"). Later the "supergroup" label was put to various highly successful bands, but it was most accurately employed as a description of ensembles made up of musicians boasting proven backgrounds in the business: Beck, Bogert & Appice; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Asia; Damn Yankees; the Traveling Wilburys; and so on.

By some standards, Led Zeppelin was a supergroup, but by most they were not. Jimmy Page, Robert Plant, John Paul Jones, and John Bonham were all full-time working players when they joined forces in 1968; Page and Jones had established solid reputations as session men, and Page had been a member of the world-touring Yardbirds; Plant had recorded and released songs under the CBS label; and by '68 Bonham was drumming for the rising star Tim Rose as well as catching the ears of other comers such as Joe Cocker and Chris Farlowe. The 1968 Atlantic Records press release that announced the label's signing of Led Zeppelin boasted that the group "consists of four of the most exciting musicians performing in Britain today," portraying Plant as "one of England's outstanding young

blues singers" and claiming that Bonham "caused a sensation with his drum solos." In contrast to previous generations of rock 'n' roll groups, Zeppelin were not a gang of teenage friends who'd worked their way up together playing dances, parties, and clubs in their home town—they were adult veterans signed on into serious performing and recording commitments from the start, and they were expected to deliver.

On the other hand, of all the men of Led Zeppelin only Page had been connected to a truly successful act, and it was his link to the Yardbirds that was put front and center in the group's earliest publicity handouts. Though Jones would certainly have continued to have an access to the higher levels of music production and management had Zeppelin not taken off, and though Plant and Bonham might have eventually found their own footings in the British music scene had Page taken on Terry Reid and B. J. Wilson as vocalist and drummer, respectively, none of them would have had the star factor of genuine supergroup recruits. If anything, it was generous of Page and Peter Grant *not* to extract a Jimmy Page Group or a Jimmy Page and the Mad Dogs out of the defunct Yardbirds, although in the long run the equal billing would give the foursome more credibility. Groomed to be a lucrative project of seasoned experts, Zeppelin nevertheless can't be properly put into the supergroup category. Surviving members have been involved in supergroups, though: Jones in Them Crooked Vultures, alongside Josh Homme of Queens of the Stone Age and Dave Grohl of Nirvana and the Foo Fighters, and Page in the Firm, with Paul Rodgers of Bad Company.

Have You Heard the News: Led Zeppelin as "Hype Band"

Just as Zeppelin's "supergroup" status may be confused by Page and Peter Grant's registering their music publishing company as "Superhype," so did the name virtually invite accusations that the band itself was no more than a product of corporate manipulation and capitalist greed. The charge is not without foundation, but neither is the way Led Zeppelin conclusively disproved it.

Following the watershed impact of *Sgt. Pepper* and the groundbreaking attractions of Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the record industry of 1968–69 had begun to codify some of the market trends observable during the era. Albums could be as lucrative as singles; artists didn't need Top 40 hits to draw a steady audience; blues-based, improvisatory electric guitar workouts were followed reverently by college-age fans; sexual, chemical, or other countercultural references in the music and on the record covers could be more and more overt; talking up the "mind-blowing" potential of new acts was a valid sales strategy. Atlantic Records took all these into account when signing Led Zeppelin in 1968 for a trade-headline-grabbing $220,000, a huge amount at the time and a sum few new acts have been granted since. With Cream disbanding and Jimi Hendrix, Iron Butterfly, Fleetwood Mac, the Who, and Vanilla Fudge more than demonstrating the continuing appeal of their heavy rock formula, Zeppelin looked and sounded like a good investment.

From the point of view of many punters, however, and certainly of many of the youthful reviewers writing for US rock magazines like *Rolling Stone, Creem*, and *Crawdaddy*, Led Zeppelin seemed to be a calculated ploy—a deliberately packaged band whose sound and style were designed to resemble those of a roster of famous acts, touted in the pseudo-groovy language that was even then creeping into the lexicon of Wall Street, Madison Avenue, and Hollywood. The aforementioned Atlantic press release, ascribed to Bob Rolontz of the label, told of the "hot new group" whose "pulsations" had caught the ears of "top English and American rock musicians," prompting comparisons "to the best of Cream and Hendrix." "Led Zeppelin is the eighth British group to be signed by Atlantic during the past 24 months," the statement closed. "The others are Cream, Bee Gees, Julie Driscoll-Brian Auger & The Trinity, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, The Marbles, The Magic Lanterns, and Jimmy James & The Vagabonds." Oh yes, the incomparable Marbles and Magic Lanterns. Led Zeppelin's first promotional flyers and zeppelin-shaped giveaway balloons were replete with slogans like "The Only Way to Fly," "Isn't that a gas!" and "Led Zeppelin 2 . . . Now Flying!"

This was all hype—PR efforts to stimulate interest in a fresh act Atlantic Records had already wagered a lot of money on and which had to earn its keep. Around this time other big entertainment companies had tried to push the countercultural authenticity of their artists or movies and were met with suspicion by the hip youth market. There was MGM's "Bosstown Sound" attempts to sell Boston-based bands like Ultimate Spinach, Kangaroo, and Chameleon Church, all of whom flopped; ditto "now" Hollywood films like *Getting Straight* and *Zabriskie Point*, attempting to cash in on 1967's blockbusting *The Graduate* and 1969's *Easy Rider*. In this climate, given the kind of promo motifs used to introduce Led Zeppelin to North America, listeners had a right to be skeptical. An early *Creem* review called the band "only redone joplinshake heavybody drughendrix," while *Rolling Stone* dismissed the premier *Led Zeppelin* album as a template taken up in "the aftermath era of such successful British bluesmen as Cream and John Mayall."

Such criticism frustrated the four members of Led Zeppelin, and their intense run of touring and recording between 1969 and 1973 may be seen

as an attempt to show how wrong the "hype" slander was. The untitled album usually designated *Led Zeppelin IV* was Jimmy Page's bid to refute any notion that it was the hype itself that drew fans: "We wanted to demonstrate that it was the music that made Zeppelin popular; it had nothing to do with our name or image." Ultimately they succeeded in winning over the rock intelligentsia through a respectably consistent career of albums and concerts, but their initial backing by a powerful media company, bragging of the potential they had yet to realize (let alone exceed), was not an uncommon problem for artists in the late 1960s. "All that stuff about us being a hyped band . . . ," John Paul Jones has reflected. "That didn't help us early on." The point is not that Zeppelin were not enthusiastically pitched by Atlantic Records and its field agents—they were—but that for once the act was worthy of the enthusiasm. Whenever salesmen have tried to plug a cool new product to a cohort resistant to the very notions of salesmen and products, red flags are raised (similar populist scorn greeted many of the post-Nirvana "grunge" acts signed out of Seattle in the early 1990s). Truly, *every* mass-marketed assembly of musicians, from the Texas Playboys and the Ink Spots to U2 and Public Enemy, has been a "hype band," even the ones that catered to the audience's conceits of integrity and independence. Insofar as Led Zeppelin was hyped, the gambit was one that backfired, and the group ended up having to make its case through music alone—which it more than did.

I Don't Know, But I've Been Told: Led Zeppelin as Heavy Metal

As late as the 1983 *Rolling Stone* review of *Coda*, Led Zeppelin was praised as "the greatest heavy metal band that ever strutted the boards." Around the same time they were included with other "Great Heavy Metal Bands" in *The Book of Rock Lists*, alongside Thin Lizzy, Uriah Heep, Blue Cheer, Grand Funk Railroad, and AC/DC, and a 1982 *Hit Parader* article titled "Heavy Metal: The Hall of Fame" decreed that "[q]uite simply, Led Zeppelin is, was, and will always be the ultimate heavy metal masters." The tag was stuck on the band early in their working life and they were saddled with it through the 1970s and beyond. Rock critics such as Dave Marsh and Lester Bangs included Zeppelin in their own definitions of the genre, and the average high school fan of 1974 would likely have classified the group's music as heavy metal. One Zeppelin tune, "Trampled Underfoot," actually uses the term in its lyrics, albeit as an automotive pun. Sociologist Donna Gaines's *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids* (1991) reported on the alienation and aggression of the adolescent heavy metal cliques she interviewed in New Jersey, calling them "The Children of Zoso," after Jimmy Page's runic signature from *Led Zeppelin IV*. Even today, few scholarly or popular studies of heavy metal as a social or musical subculture will fail to mention the centrality of Led Zeppelin.

This would not be such an issue if the members of Zeppelin themselves were not disappointed to be put into the company of Grand Funk Railroad and their ilk. "There was nothing heavy about that at all," Robert Plant said of the *Led Zeppelin* album in *Musician* magazine. "It was ethereal." To the *New York Post* in 1988 he also dismissed most of Zeppelin's imitators: "It's mindless, it's not a reflection of something sociological. I don't think Zeppelin was their inspiration—Tiny Tim was. . . . But this is some kind of demented dwarf giving strange hand signals as he walks out of a volcano onstage. It's tacky." Plant later told writer Chuck Klosterman that John Bonham had described acts like "Deep Sabbath" as "a conglomerate of English, sketchy, blues-based thud. . . . It was inane and no mystery to it at all." The other survivors, Jones and Page, have made equally distancing remarks about the band's relationship to the heavy metal format, Page pointing out the lack of "light and shade" dynamics in competitors like Black Sabbath, and Jones sneering at the "glowering, Satanic crap" of most metal acts. Page was quoted as saying, "I can't relate [the heavy metal term] to us because the thing that comes to mind when people say heavy metal is riff-bashing, and I don't think we ever just did riff-bashing at any point." "No one ever compared us to Black Sabbath after this record," was the bassist's blunt conclusion of *Led Zeppelin IV*'s impact. Yet even pundits who concede "Zep was always too arty and eclectic to be considered a real metal band" (*Guitar World*'s "Top 50 Heavy Metal Albums") allow that "[f]or sheer power chord mania and horny, guttural hoo-ha, it doesn't get any better than 'Whole Lotta Love' or 'Heartbreaker.'"

Jimmy Page and his bandmates were not alone in rejecting whatever pigeonhole they were consigned to. Most rock musicians at some point have complained about industry or critical simplifications of their work, a protest which usually tends to enforce their reputations all the more. "You cannot classify anything," Plant avowed to Chuck Klosterman. "Classification is a killer." Most artists in any medium, indeed, will resist being slotted into some or other stereotype, saying that their work is only their self-expression and that any generalization will miss the personal subtleties they try to impart to it; yet the defense of artistic freedom on the part of the creator is about as predictable as the inclination to format and sort on the part of the spectator or listener. As Led Zeppelin's players sought to demonstrate that they had more to offer than the one-dimensional boogie of Grand Funk—*Led Zeppelin III* was an early example of this—professional and

amateur audiences strained to define their songs as *something*, and heavy metal was still the handiest option.

The Zeppelin-as-heavy-metal controversy says more about the rapid evolution of rock 'n' roll aesthetics over twenty or thirty years than any objective parameters of what the music itself sounds like. Critic Chuck Eddy's *Stairway to Hell* compendium goes so far as to include Miles Davis's *Live Evil* as one of "The 500 Best Heavy Metal Albums in the Universe," in with records by Metallica, Guns N' Roses, and, inescapably, Led Zeppelin. The origins of the genre are usually traced back to the Steppenwolf song "Born to Be Wild" (1968), with its celebration of "*heavy metal thunder*," although other histories document the influences of Iron Butterfly, Vanilla Fudge, Cream, the Who, Jimi Hendrix, the Yardbirds, and the pioneering distorted guitar chords heard in the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" and "All Day and All of the Night" (both 1964). The very loud and sometimes deliberately primitive "acid rock" of the late 1960s, including the work of Blue Cheer, the Stooges, and the MC5 (Motor City 5), is also factored into some accounts. Of all the names linked to heavy metal's inception, it's notable that session man Jimmy Page played for two (the Kinks and the Who), was an official member of one (the Yardbirds), and that Led Zeppelin shared bills with two more (Iron Butterfly and Vanilla Fudge). Categorizing any music as heavy metal was perhaps no more than a convenient shorthand for fans and writers facing an expansive range of young people's pop music from 1965 onward—a way to distinguish it from the sophisticated harmonies of the Beatles and the Beach Boys, the acoustic introspections of Bob Dylan and Donovan, the soulful grooves of James Brown and Marvin Gaye, the ebullient melodicism of the Supremes and the Four Tops, the country-flavored craft of Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Band, or the bubblegum confections of the Archies, the Monkees, or the Ohio Express.

The common denominators of heavy metal are distorted electric guitars, keening vocals, and a powerful rhythmic base, which would certainly encompass the typical Led Zeppelin tune. But the popular Zeppelin numbers "Your Time Is Gonna Come," "Going to California," and "All My Love" can't qualify by these standards. Conversely, the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" meets the metal criteria, as do David Bowie's "Panic in Detroit"; Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Change It"; Funkadelic's "Mommy, What's a Funkadelic?"; Michael Jackson's "Beat It"; the Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop"; and Pantera's "Cemetery Gates." Heavy metal has changed over the decades, too: In 1971, it meant Alice Cooper and Mountain; in 1978 it meant Van Halen and UFO; by 1987 it was Exodus and Megadeth; in 1995 it was Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson; by 2010 it was Converge, Mastodon, and

BBC Sessions was a successful 1998 release of the band's live radio appearances.
Author's Collection

Every Time I Die. Possibly the one constant in heavy metal is that most of its musicians are white males with very long hair.

Where Led Zeppelin fits in with any of these, let alone with Motörhead, Kiss, Godflesh, Venom, Judas Priest, or Iron Maiden, is the crucial question. Each successive generation of heavy metal artists seemed to take one element of a prior group's material and emphasize it, such that every few years someone emerged who looked and sounded like a cartoon version of someone else: louder, darker, faster, and more debased, but no less derivative. Who was Marilyn Manson if not Alice Cooper updated for the 1990s? Who did Guns N' Roses resemble more than a souped-up Aerosmith? In a mid-'70s *Rolling Stone* essay, Lester Bangs reduced Black Sabbath to a "sub-Zeppelin kozmic behemoth." The point is that, *pace* Page, Plant, and Jones, every heavy metal band from 1970 onward was consciously or unconsciously inspired by the Led Zeppelin of 1969–71. Rock author Charles

Shaar Murray has written that Jimmy Page and Zeppelin "professionalized" the hard electric blues timbres explored more haphazardly by Cream or Jimi Hendrix, and if by this he means that Page patented the sonic formula for the group's loudest and most propulsive riffs ("Communication Breakdown," "How Many More Times," "Whole Lotta Love," "Heartbreaker," "Immigrant Song," "Black Dog," et al), then there is no question that the patent was copied by a great many performers, among them the certifiably metallic.

In today's digitized, atomized music universe, the heavy metal appellation is largely obsolete, even after being broken up into subunits like death metal, speed metal, grindcore, and nu-metal. As with the "plagiarist" slur, calling Led Zeppelin a metal group is as indicative of the listener as the listened. To someone raised on the bright, catchy rock songs of the early British Invasion, Led Zeppelin was heavy metal; to a Deadhead, a New Waver, or a spandex-clad headbanger, they were hard rock; to rappers and hip-hoppers they might be an oldies act. Most remaining music retailers today find Led Zeppelin CDs between Lenny Kravitz and John Lennon in the mainstream "Rock / Pop" shelves, while their immediate followers and rivals Black Sabbath go in with Biohazard and Cannibal Corpse in the narrower "metal" aisle. In the family tree of rock genealogy, Led Zeppelin is at the root of several branches. Ultimately, Zeppelin began to transcend their characterization as a mere metal band only a few years into their active career and to an even greater degree thereafter, when critics and fans were forced to admit that their legacy had forever pervaded the whole field of rock 'n' roll.

Mama, Let Me Pump Your Gas: Led Zeppelin as Cock Rock

One of the more heated Led Zeppelin debates stems from their lyrical and visual representations of male and female identities. The term *cock rock* emerged out of the feminist movement in the 1970s, as progressive and newly politicized women (and men) began to question the traditional gender roles portrayed everywhere from classic novels and paintings to television and pop music. During the Rolling Stones' 1972 North American tour, handmade flyers decrying the Stones' swaggering masculinity were distributed among concertgoers, as covered by writer Terry Southern: "If you are male," the broadsheets read, "this concert is yours. . . . The Stones are tough men—hard and powerful. They're the kind of men we're supposed to imitate, never crying, always strong, keeping women in their place (under our thumbs). In Vietnam, to save honor (which means preserving our manhood), our brothers have killed and raped millions of people in

the name of this ideal. . . . We resent the image the Stones present to males as examples we should imitate. . . ." In 1978, British critics Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's article "Rock and Sexuality" was published in the book *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, where they named Mick Jagger, the Who's Roger Daltrey, and Zeppelin's Robert Plant as prime exponents of the style: "Cock rock performers are aggressive, dominating, and boastful, and they constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control. . . . In these performances mikes and guitars are phallic symbols; the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax; the lyrics are assertive and arrogant, though the exact words are less significant than the vocal styles involved, the shouting and the screaming."

As much as they embodied personas as long-haired, dope-smoking outlaws, male rock stars of the 1960s and 1970s were no advocates of Women's Liberation, and the cock rock charge was an important corrective to their supposedly "revolutionary" values. Many Led Zeppelin songs—"Dazed and Confused," "Your Time Is Gonna Come," "How Many More Times," "Heartbreaker," "Living Loving Maid (She's Just a Woman)," "The Lemon Song," "Since I've Been Loving You," "Black Dog," "Custard Pie," "Trampled Underfoot," and others—depict women as crudely and as chauvinistically as any leering hard-hat or patronizing business executive of the same time. Likewise, the sexual or martial boasting of "Good Times Bad Times," "Whole Lotta Love," "Ramble On," "Immigrant Song," and "No Quarter" cast the singer and his ensemble as conquering, untamable bad boys never to be tied down by any domestic conventions. Add to these the live performances of the band, their amplifiers cranked, their shirts open, and their pants bulging, and Led Zeppelin does seem like a prime example of cock rock at its hardest, loudest, and most offensive.

There are several reasons, if not excuses, for Zeppelin's macho exaggerations. Given that the band was an all-male act of individuals in their early to mid-twenties, of course there was bound to be a surfeit of testosterone flowing around onstage and in the studio. Many of their songs were taken directly or indirectly from blues or blues-rock antecedents, and the blues was rife with blaring declamations of male dominance and sexual power, Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man," Howlin' Wolf's "Back Door Man," B. B. King's "Ain't Nobody Home," Jimi Hendrix's "Stone Free," and Robert Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues" being only the most memorable examples. This posture itself was something of a façade, a way for otherwise poor and disenfranchised men to assert their authority over anyone at all, their wives and lovers often being the closest people they could turn to for validation. Blues-based music could reverse the received structures of male-female relationships, as it became the *men* who could sing of being done wrong by

a cheating partner (e.g., "Your Time Is Gonna Come," "Black Dog"), or of being hopelessly, romantically in love with a woman who rejects their affection ("Dazed and Confused," "The Lemon Song"), an appealing pretense for rock stars who were themselves usually doing the cheating and rejecting. In time the bluesy brag would degenerate into the bathroom-wall dreck of Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name," Mötley Crüe's "Looks That Kill," and AC/DC's "Let Me Put My Love into You."

The stark truth is that Led Zeppelin's cock rock—and that of most other rock 'n' roll bands of the period—was borne of the musicians' experiences in the real world of touring and giving shows. Male entertainers have always held special attractiveness to female followers, and the uninhibited years of the sexual revolution allowed them to take Dionysian advantage of this. Nubile young women came to their concerts, worked their way backstage, and convened at their hotels and barrooms; by Jimmy Page and Robert Plant especially, their attentions were taken for granted. Lyrics like those of "Living Loving Maid (She's Just a Woman)," though not deeply thought out, were accurate reflections of the players' feelings toward their most devoted admirers—the girls were at best disposable and at worst nuisances. Page's much-repeated remarks to journalist Ellen Sander in 1969 ("Girls come around and pose like starlets, teasing and acting haughty. . . . I haven't got time to deal with it") were, for better or worse, his summary of casual sex as an occupational hazard rather than an emotional commitment or personal responsibility. His approving reference to Aleister Crowley ("Crowley didn't have a very high opinion of women and I don't think he was wrong") is scarcely more sensitive. Writer and Zeppelin supporter Cameron Crowe, describing the real-life milieu that inspired his 2000 film *Almost Famous*, remembered how the 1970s rock 'n' rollers he covered regarded their female followers as "trinkets," and Bebe Buell, who had a fling with Page in 1974, overheard the guitarist say of her to Plant and Peter Grant, "She's not a coke whore," which other women around them presumably were. With such disdainful if not misogynistic impressions, it was inevitable that a jaded, imperial arrogance would seep into Led Zeppelin's music.

What the cock rock indictment significantly overlooks is that many women were Zeppelin fans, found the male musicians attractive, and responded to the sexual overtones of the songs as much as any boy or man buying the records or attending the concerts. Though Led Zeppelin had never been a teenybopper act of winsome youngsters like their contemporaries the Osmonds or the Bay City Rollers, teenyboppers had older sisters and in time grew up themselves, and chaste fantasies of doe-eyed Donny or Woody evolved into more explicit ones of sweaty Robert or mysterious Jimmy. Cock rock worked both ways: the performers expressed it (Mick Jagger rode an inflatable oversize phallus during the Rolling Stones' 1975 US tour), and both sexes in the audience encouraged it. Though there were probably many women put off by Led Zeppelin's overt machismo and crushing rhythms, preferring the sensitive tones of a James Taylor or a Van Morrison, or instead identifying with the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell or a Carole King, there were still plenty happy to find in Zeppelin a larger-than-life eroticism the musicians could not help but convey. For a term intended as a rebuke, Zeppelin's "cock rock" was sometimes exactly what listeners wanted to see and hear.

Airwaves to Heaven: Led Zeppelin as AOR Band

The band was one, but not intentionally. The group's debut in 1968 was in part planned around the rise of "free-form" FM radio in North America, stations that broadcast music far removed from the sanctioned two-minute ditties of their AM rivals. In the 1960s the coolest FM outlets might play extended sides of jazzer Sun Ra, avant-gardist Captain Beefheart, or sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar; or choose from among the best new tracks by Iron Butterfly, the Band, or Jimi Hendrix; it was these stations that the young baby boomers turned to when seeking out the most progressive sounds. FM came through in stereo, as well, adding a new dimension to the already expanding home sound systems proliferating in the basements, dorm rooms, and campus pubs of the era. At the time of Led Zeppelin's appearance such stations were considered "underground," but into the next decade the format was popular enough to be reconfigured into "Album-Oriented Radio" or "Album-Oriented Rock." "FM radio was just beginning to have a huge influence," John Paul Jones acknowledged of Zeppelin's initial marketing mediums. "They weren't afraid to play longer tracks or even whole albums. We went around to a lot of radio stations to plug the record." Publicist Danny Goldberg added that "rock stations like WCBN in Boston, KMET in LA, and KSAN in San Francisco really made Zeppelin very big, very fast."

AOR was both the expression and the basis of a music industry whose prime product had become the long-playing 33 -rpm record. Audiences were now affluent enough to afford the discs in large numbers, competing with (though not completely eliminating) the market for 45-rpm singles. Both rock artists and rock audiences came to revere the album format as a more personal or serious art, less constricted by the time and content regulations of AM, and the most important rock albums were compared

to the most important novels, plays, or films of older generations. To Peter Grant and Led Zeppelin, AOR was the perfect complement to their strategy of album-only releases, where the quartet's AM-friendliest singles ("Communication Breakdown" or "Immigrant Song") were no more helpful to the bottom line than the longer album cuts featured on FM ("Dazed and Confused," "Stairway to Heaven," or "Kashmir").

But from the middle of the 1970s onward, AOR became synonymous with a smug and cynical business culture that was a natural product of rock's billion-dollar revenues. Staple AOR acts such as Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles were derided as spoiled prima donnas disconnected from the day-to-day lives of their middle-class fans, and fresh AOR additions like Boston, Styx, Journey, Kansas, and Supertramp seemed to have been specifically crafted for the highbrow pretensions of listeners raised on *Abbey Road*, *Dark Side of the Moon*, or *Tommy*. Drug-based corruption was endemic between record labels and disc jockeys, with cocaine replacing payola as the standard currency of greased palms; AOR playlists shrank to almost exclusively white rosters, the occasional exception being a song from Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Wonder (some called it Apartheid-Oriented Radio). "Through AOR," noted 1995's *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, "FM radio became almost as, and some would argue substantially more, conservative than the AM radio of the Sixties to which FM had been an alternative. . . . AOR music, which is now termed 'classic rock,' is played all the time because it's popular; it remains popular because it's played all the time."

As anyone who has listened to a local classic rock radio station for an hour or so will confirm, Led Zeppelin was an early pillar of AOR airplay and has been ever since. This was a good thing for the band while they were making records, but since their demise the prevalence of the fistful of Zeppelin cuts in heavy rotation on FM radio—"Whole Lotta Love," "Ramble On," "Black Dog," "Over the Hills and Far Away," and, notoriously, "Stairway to Heaven"—has misrepresented their overall canon and gotten them lumped them in with a range of other acts and tracks whose familiarity has muted their original appeal. Today the inescapable AOR classic "Stairway to Heaven" is reviled as much as it's revered, in company with the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again," the Rolling Stones' "Jumpin' Jack Flash," AC/DC's "Back in Black," plus Boston, Styx, Kansas, Journey, Supertramp, Fleetwood Mac, and the Eagles. On their own, all of these are fine works and fine musicians whose continued fame is justified, but repeated ad infinitum on AOR they have suffered grievous overexposure. What began as a trade term subsequently became a derogatory epithet, and Led Zeppelin and other artists have been tarred by association.

A Minute Seems like a Lifetime: How "Classic Rock" Radio Represents Led Zeppelin

Since the early 1980s Album-Oriented Radio has been transformed into classic rock, a programming format devoted to the rock music of roughly 1966 to 1980—AOR frozen in time. Just as it was in the 1970s, Led Zeppelin has been prominent on classic rock stations, and the broadcasters have played a large part in the band's continued popularity with generations too young to remember them from their heyday. Whereas many of Zeppelin's onetime peers on the charts and tour circuits have been relegated to the oldies, "soft favorites," or "where are they now" categories (say, Three Dog Night, Paul Simon, Stealers Wheel, or Van Morrison), Zeppelin are thriving on classic rock stations, where the children and perhaps even grandchildren of their original fans can still catch their hits at all hours of the day. Because of classic rock radio, Led Zeppelin's posthumous releases, such as the box sets of 1990 and 1993, the *BBC Sessions* of 1997, and the *Mothership* collection of 2007, have all found ready markets. By maintaining Zeppelin's favored status on its airwaves (and offering syndicated shows like *Get the Led Out* and other Zep-focused program blocks), classic rock has been the group's best marketing vehicle for some thirty years.

Like the earlier AOR, however, classic rock broadcasting has tended to adhere to rigidly controlled selections of songs and an entrenched mythology that has had the unfortunate effect of making the music less and less interesting. Even Led Zeppelin's boosters admit that the band's place in the classic rock system has harmed the group as much as it has helped them: in his liner notes to the 1990 Zeppelin four-CD box set, critic Robert Palmer wrote, "The preponderance of 'Led Clones' on American FM radio, and continuing frequent airplay for the original recordings, have kept the band's legacy alive. They have also done our memories of the band a great disservice by carrying on as if 'Stairway to Heaven' and a few crunching, blues-based riff tunes . . . represented the entire scope of the Led Zeppelin heritage." As the years go on, defenders of Zeppelin have had to distinguish the true richness of classic rock, the genre, from its caricature in classic rock, the sales pitch.

Ironically, the initial attraction of classic rock was that most of its tunes had rarely been heard on the conventional AM stations and might thus be thought of as heavier or cooler than the happy pop hits of the 1970s or 1980s. Likewise, the advent of music video in the 1980s came as a garish contrast to the substance of rock 'n' roll's greatest decades of creativity and artistic freedom, as noted by Brad Tolinski in *Guitar World* in 1993: "Thanks to constant exposure on MTV, today's pop heroes somehow seem smaller,

more disposable than their predecessors. But pre-MTV bands like Queen, the original Kiss, and Led Zep have retained a powerful mystique. Unlike today's overexposed supergroups, those Classic bands were rarely captured on film, and when they were, they left distant, grainy images which have themselves taken on an almost mythic power." But by 2010 even the best-loved tracks by Queen, the original Kiss, and Led Zep had been almost exhausted by continuous airplay on classic rock radio, especially under an enforced regimen that has shrunk their catalogues (and those of other classic rock stalwarts like Pink Floyd, Lynryd Skynyrd, and Steve Miller) to but a fraction of their depth.

Disc jockey Jon Shap of WKOT in Illinois, a Zeppelin lover who asserts that "Led Zeppelin will always have a place on classic rock radio," nonetheless harbors reservations over they way the band are covered on his own and other stations. "Without a doubt, 'Stairway' and 'Whole Lotta Love' are on their own overplay level. . . . Air Talent (DJs) really have *no* freedom [as to] what goes on the air. Everything is picked ahead of time by the programming department and then scheduled by a computer. Some programmers base their playlists on research done with target listeners, or test songs on how quickly listeners recognize them. Other programmers are told what to play by consultants, and check with their consultants for everything! It's nuts!" One on-air personality confesses anonymously that he breaks ranks by playing the Led Zeppelin drum solo "Moby Dick" every year on the anniversary of John Bonham's death. Many classic rock outlets now cater to a middle-aged male audience, with DJs telling dirty jokes and cueing up advertisements for power tools and military recruiters between spinning forty-year-old anthems of personal and social liberation. If you want to hear a Led Zeppelin song on the radio, tune to classic rock—if you want to really hear Led Zeppelin, turn to your own collection.

Takin' Home My Hard-Earned Pay: Led Zeppelin as Corporate Rock

Like pornography, corporate rock is something hard to define—but you know it when you hear it. The phrase cropped up orally and in print around the time of the punk rebellion of 1976–79, although by the late '60s some acts, including Led Zeppelin, had their countercultural bona fides questioned by the most politically vociferous segments of the youth movement. The disco craze of the late 1970s, driven by anonymous dancers, DJs, and club hits like Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" and the Commodores' "Brick House," likewise made four- or five-man collections of millionaire hippies look much less populist than they thought themselves to be.

Corporate rock refers to the music made by artists so commercial, so conspicuously rich, or with such confident label promotion, that its spontaneity, humanity, and air of social menace have been all but suppressed. Some critics have written off nearly every pre-punk pop record of the decade as corporate rock, as the *New York Times*'s Howard Hampton did in 2001:

> Something happened to rock music in the 1970s that it has never quite recovered from: the sound congealed into a dense, ponderous and soporific mass. . . . Where playfulness, humor, chaotic weirdness and wayward passion had reigned supreme, now even excess and outrage came to seem stage-managed by an invisible bureaucracy of FM station consultants, management firms, technocrat producers, and record company apparatchiks. . . . FM rock's infamous disco-bashing campaign was an understandably panicked, phobic reaction, given how insular rock culture had become by that point.

The first of corporate rock's prime suspects might include the flamboyant Elton John, the gaudy Queen, the faceless Doobie Brothers, the imitative Blue Öyster Cult, or the arena demagogue Ted Nugent. Others might cite the proliferation of extravagant artist-owned record companies (the Beatles' Apple, the Rolling Stones' Rolling Stones, and Zeppelin's Swan Song) or the prominence of oversold live albums like Peter Frampton's *Frampton Comes Alive*, Kiss's *Alive!* and Cheap Trick's *At Budokan* as crucial indicators of corporate rock's arrival.

Along with their manager Peter Grant, the men of Led Zeppelin earned a lot of money for themselves (so much that they could only keep it by going into tax exile); they were treated like royalty by industry personnel; and their records and promo paraphernalia turned a neat profit for their financial backers, so by that definition the band was certainly corporate rock. Of course, no performers would ever identify themselves as such, and the term *corporate rock* is purely a derogatory one that can be thrown at anybody deemed too popular or successful for the thrower's liking. Such an epithet also disregards the very real struggle and hard work that a group like Led Zeppelin underwent before getting to their vast stadium shows and decadent private jets of later in their career. A more judicious application of the label would be to the ready-made superstars whose airplay and revenue piled up a little too fast and more easily than their music warranted: Toto, REO Speedwagon, Night Ranger, Foreigner, Meat Loaf. The whiff of corporate rock was also strong off of works heavily produced, cowritten, or otherwise doctored by employees or supervisors of the named artist: Bryan Adams, Bon Jovi, Carly Simon, latter-day Aerosmith, and the antiseptic Starship, whose '80s hit "We Built This City" must surely be liable in some

kind of corporate rock class-action suit. Next to these, Led Zeppelin were no more than a mom 'n' pop operation dispensing handcrafted merchandise at honest prices.