

Lez Zeppelin - Paying Tribute To Led!

by Chuck Dauphin



You often hear of tribute albums to various artists or groups, but rarely do you see a project that is a tribute to a singular album from an act. New York-based Lez Zeppelin has done just that.....and with a name like that, I bet you can guess who the tribute is to! The band, started by Steph Paynes in 2004, had previously released a project with songs made famous by Led Zeppelin, but for their sophomore project, they decided to go back to the very beginning by paying homage to the legendary Rock band's 1969 debut disc, Led Zeppelin.

Before MNN talked with Paynes regarding the album, we asked about the origins of the group. She said it was done totally from the heart.

"It was one of those great cosmic, I don't know if you would want to call it errors or serendipities, but really it was just born out of this desire to play the music. I was just really listening to a lot of Zeppelin. I was in between projects, so I was just getting into it. Someone gave me the box set of all the re-mastered recordings, and I had never actually heard of some of these later records from start to finish."

Needless to say, the music definitely left a mark on her.

"So, I really started digging into it. The more I listened to this music, the more I just felt 'Oh, My God! It's just so phenomenal! And, even in the late 1990s, it sounded so relevant and resonant. As a guitar player, I just had a fantasy of playing music like this. I said to myself one day while I was listening, 'You know, if I had my fantasy, I would play in Led Zeppelin.' Then I thought, 'Why don't you just do it?' Why don't you just get a band together, make it all girls, and play. I bet it would be fun, you'd be able to get a gig or two, and play a bar every once in a while, and make fifty bucks. It would be great fun, you could get your chops together, and you'd get all that Jimmy Page stuff going on. So I just went ahead and did that----not realizing what a task it was. Because being a musician, I took it seriously. I was so in love with this music that to do it right would take an unbelievable amount of work and attention to detail, like you heard on the new record."



Starting the band was one thing, but refining the sound was very much another, Paynes says.

“That took a whole evolution of playing this music around the world. Recording it, honing in on the right sound, the right instruments, and the right feel and emotions. There is so much about this band that is brilliant. It was really a Herculean task, but what a great education, you know? As soon as I got the band together, which was no small feat, the second we started to play out, it was clear this was an idea that was good.”

Still, trying to recreate such a historic musical work is a little different than just doing covers, as Paynes relates.

“Our first album was more like that. It was more or less--take one song from each of the first six records. This project was a real labor of love and just an intense scrutiny to detail. It was on hand, really trying to be faithful to who Led Zeppelin were, and their sound, their feel, and their vibe. Their first record is, I think, their hardest one. I actually tried to shy away from doing it for a long time. I originally thought we'd start with I, but I really didn't feel that we could play it until now. You really need all the right elements, because it's so blues oriented. There's so much spontaneity in that record. That's what makes it jump off the vinyl. If you try to do the record without any of that, you're never going to get it.

It's like you need to somehow recreate the conditions as well as the exact sound, and hope that something magical happens. Because that's what Led Zeppelin was, and for that reason, I think it might be the most difficult of all of them, certainly to recreate. Of course, we haven't done the others yet, so we'll see. But, there was incredible attention to every sound and every nuance of the record. It was such an amazing adventure. I mean, I had never done anything like this before, and even played the music for seven years, it was startling how much that you're really not hearing unless you get deep, deep into it, and you start picking it apart in this way. Then, you hear all sorts of other layers. So, it was really fascinating from a musical standpoint to take something, and de-construct it like that, then try to do it yourself. We had the resources---the time in the studio to do it. We had the gear and the musicians that can play it.”

The band---Paynes, bassist Megan Thomas, drummer Leesa Harrington-Squyers, and vocalist Shannon Conley also recreated history yet another way---by recording on the very same equipment that the band used on their original album from forty-two years ago.



"Yeah, we did." Paynes exclaims. "I think we pretty much got it down---100, or 98%. We had some help from the Led Zeppelin camp. There was one guy in particular, who was into our project and into the band, and he was helpful. You can probably guess who it is, but I can't say. Every once in a while, we'd be like 'What was that sound? What was that guitar? But, a lot of that stuff is documented, if you go into their bibliography, you'll find that the guitars are all listed, and the drums.

Everyone knows who played on what, the recording techniques, but there were still a lot of tricks of the trade, and a lot of little sounds that would make you ask 'Why does it sound like that?' I was playing one of the telecaster parts with one of the first Fenders ever made! A lot of the Zeppelin album was telecaster, but he did use a Les Paul custom a lot---the black guitar. We had the right acoustic guitars, and they all sounded different, trust me. We must have gone through at least ten acoustic guitars, and when we hit on the right one, we were like 'Oh, my God, that's it.'" As many times as she herself had spent listening to the record, she had to admit that she was surprised.

When you're listening to something that carefully, you start to hear stuff that you won't believe. I can hear things now that I never could before, which is unbelievable!"

One of the highlights of the album is their arresting take on "I Can't Quit You Baby." Of the track, Paynes says "That was done live, and that was hard for someone like me, because the guitar solo in that was so full of energy, and that's the way it has to be because it's live. We did not doctor that guitar solo, because as you can hear, there are parts that I listen to and think, 'Maybe I could have done something differently on that,' but the whole idea of what bands like Led did was exactly that.



On Led Zeppelin, there were mistakes of timing----coming in and coming out. There's all sorts of stuff that Jimmy Page left. That's part of the beauty of it. No one does that anymore. They think 'Oh, you've got to fix it.' I think that's what we're talking about is that immediately combustible expression that you catch in the recording studio that is the inexplicable thing that either makes a record something or not. I think that's a large part of it."

What do the longtime fans of the original band think of Lez Zeppelin? Paynes smiled and said "Well, it's been an amazing journey in that way. When I started the band, I wasn't really sure how we would be received by their hardcore people. First of all, we're all women. We did get some hate mail from them. There were people that, especially with a name like Lez Zeppelin, people assume....well, you know what they assume," she said slyly.

We've never answered it, but they think this is completely sac religious because they was one of the most male of the male bands ever, which of course, is ridiculous because there was such a huge feminine aspect into what Led Zeppelin actually did. It really is amazing, because the truly hardcore fans may come skeptical, but when they hear us, and realize that they're getting the real thing, they are really open to it. Some of those people are the most enthusiastic because they understand it on such a deep level, and what we're trying to do. People have been absolutely wonderful. I would say it's been completely receptive in that respect."

The spring and summer look to be a busy time of year for the ladies, with dates being added by the day. In May, they will be playing the "Rock On The Range" festival in Columbus, OH....something that Paynes says is right up their alley.



"We love playing festivals, because that's where this music belongs---on a big stage. That's where people heard it last, and it's very tense music and it's loud, and it needs to be. When you get it out on a stage like that, it's just a habitat. Festivals have always been fantastic for us. People just love it. It's usually a nice break, because they'll go in to see lots of alternative bands or this genre or that, and then they'll get this thing that is so beloved to them that they think 'Wow,' and they go nuts. So, yeah, we're looking forward to that."

For more information on this unique band, or to purchase their CD, log on to www.LezZeppelin.com

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