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ENTERTAINMENT

Lez Zeppelin: A band that flips the Page

The song may remain the same, but the purveyors are different

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NEW YORK (Reuters) -- Four women rockers who took on the music of Led Zeppelin are driving club audiences to a frenzy and, offstage, whipping up speculation over their sexual tastes with the name of the band: Lez Zeppelin.

"We have sort of a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy," says Steph Paynes, lead guitar player and the "Jimmy Page" of the group. "It's better to keep it all a mystery, and in the end it really doesn't matter. What matters is the music."

The New York-based quartet came together almost three years ago with the express purpose of covering songs by Rock and Roll Hall of Fame members Led Zeppelin.

They're among a small but growing number of all-female tribute bands Spin Magazine recently referred to as "Chicks with Picks," and include the playfully dubbed AC/DShe, Cheap Chick and The Ramonas.

"It wasn't like we decided just to do an all-girl cover band for the sake of it," Paynes said in an interview. "It was strictly me lounging on the couch, listening to a Led Zep album and being in absolute ecstasy over the music. I can't think of anything I'd rather be playing than this."

Zeppelin's brash amalgam of hard-driving rock, traditional blues and guitar-tinged ballads propelled the sale of millions of albums and made them one of the top bands of the 1970s. It disbanded in 1980 after the death of drummer John Bonham.

Paynes said the tribute group had been mulling a name for a week or two and when Lez Zeppelin was suggested, there was no question of them not using it.

With veteran New York-area musicians Helen Destroy on drums, Lisa Brigantino on bass, mandolin and keyboards and Sarah McLellan on vocals, the group is electrifying. But the question that consistently follows the band around is whether any or all of its

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members are, in fact, lesbians.

"Oh, definitely maybe," Payne said. "There's no question about maybes."

"I was aware of what the name might suggest, but that to me was not a problem at all," she added.

Paynes said despite the nudge and wink the band's name conveys, their audience is not dominated by lesbians.

"There is some gay and lesbian following, but it's mostly just a Led Zeppelin following. Male, female, in every age group," she said before getting ready for a sold-out gig that night at New York's Bowery Ballroom.

Her take on the group's demographic was borne out at the show that night. As the band opened with a thundering version of "The Immigrant Song," vocalist McLellan delivered the number's trademark opening wail faithfully and sent the predominantly male crowd into a frenzy.

The audience, including a few amorous Sapphic couples near the front of the stage, did not differ noticeably from that in any other East Village club on a Friday night.

Paynes said she thinks many come to see if a group of women can recreate music with such a testosterone-driven sound.

"It was pretty daunting to perform this stuff live, even for Led Zeppelin," she said. "Even they didn't keep it going once John Bonham died."

After a brief pause, she added, "I guess we've got balls."

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