

Led Zeppelin: the mothership of all reunions

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Pete Paphides at the O2 arena, London

Back in 1976, when Led Zeppelin were part of the musical furniture, Jimmy Page claimed that the minutes before a show were the worst. "I always get very edgy, not knowing what to do with myself." Lord knows, then, what he must have been feeling as the lights went down to herald a comeback far more hotly anticipated than any show Led Zeppelin played during their 12 years together. If he was nervous though, you couldn't tell. Silhouetted by lights at the back of the stage, he gazed out behind his shades and casually dropped his hand onto six strings, playing the first chord to bear the Led Zeppelin imprint.

With Good Times, Bad Times came a noise that suggested the rockers were, for a laugh, setting themselves the task of inventing heavy metal all over again. It seemed to catch everyone by surprise, including Robert Plant, who momentarily struggled to assert his vocals.

At a rehearsal a few weeks ago, Plant was heard to complain about the challenges of divining a voice of a 20-year-old from the body of a 60-year-old man. He needn't have worried. Older equipment may take a while to get going, but once the requisite valves heat up, the quality is unmistakable. And so it turned out 15 minutes in, when a bracing round of call-and-response oh-yeahs triggered an incendiary Black Dog. Plant's quick kick to the base of his mike stand sent it flying up into the path of his hand. Page dispensed powerchords like an aged Thor lobbing down thunderbolts for kicks. It had been good before, but something of the devil seemed to get hold of them at this point. Now sans shades, Page launched into a filthy seam of swamp guitar, from which a magnificent In My Time of Dying swelled to epic proportions.

Events that have so much resting on them rarely unfold with such an air of assurance. The three original members of the band and Jason Bonham, the drumming son of John Bonham, seemed relieved to be relinquishing the burden of anticipation. Their heaviness has always been the cornerstone of their reputation but it was astonishing to see how funky they could be for a rock band. Moving to electric harpsichord, John Paul Jones offered some redress on a pile-driving danceable Trampled Underfoot.

Bonham's volcanic fills on Nobody's Fault But Mine confirmed that there are some things that can be transmitted only through DNA.

In a set of trusted crowd-pleasers the inclusion of Stairway to Heaven was inevitable, but the song's ubiquity made it difficult to summon much enthusiasm for it. Perhaps it just comes down to the fact that some tunes have dated better than others — because the moment Page and Bonham locked into Kashmir something transcendent took hold. Over a rhythm that have a way of advancing like Martian tripods, John Paul Jones billowed out chords of portent while Plant's used his wildcat roar to the best effect of the evening.

An on-stage embrace and sundry bows seemed to hint at the band's relief. They returned for a cathartic Whole Lotta Love and a sublime Rock'N'Roll. "It's been a long, lonely time since I last rock'n'rolled" screeched Plant. Well, at least since he has showed this sort of fire-eyed intensity. And so, was it all for a one-off show in memory of their label boss Ahmet Ertegun? Come on. With a synergy like this going on, it would be an act of cosmic perversity to stop now.

Full set list

Good Times Bad Times

Ramble On

Black Dog

In My Time Of Dying

For Your Life

Trampled Under Foot

Nobody's Fault But Mine

No Quarter

Since I've Been Loving You

Dazed and Confused

Stairway To Heaven

The Song Remains The Same

Misty Mountain Hop

Kashmir

Whole Lotta Love

Rock And Roll



Led Zep's song remains the same

By Jon Kelly
BBC News

We have been promised a spectacle. A bona fide, lighters-in-the-air, feet-on-the-monitors moment in rock history - with the amps, naturally, turned up to 11.

The fierce contest for seats has seen millions of fans scrambling for just 9,000 pairs of tickets. These musicians are living legends, we are reminded, giants of their genre, reuniting properly for the first time in nearly three decades.

So whether or not you like their music, it is just as well that the act charged with matching expectations is Led Zeppelin.

Of all the embodiments of rock 'n' roll over-indulgence, this band must surely be the most notorious. Trashed hotel rooms, pseudo-Satanism, epic binges and unspeakable acts involving groupies - it is a template that, 30 years after their heyday, still makes Pete Doherty look like Aled Jones.

But, as ever, the group's music outdoes the offstage antics in terms of excess.

Instrumental workouts

As Robert Plant, 59, struts on stage for opener Good Times Bad Times - the singer's garments not quite hugging his figure like they did in 1976 - it is clear that age has not wearied him.

He and his band mates' brand of weighty, ponderous, steamrolling proto-metal - essentially, Queen without the sense of humour - set the standard for 70s stadium rock in all its bombast.

THE SETLIST

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Whole Lotta Love
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Their heyday overlapping with punk, it is easy to see why they regularly earned critical maulings. Zeppelin were cited as a key example of all that had become overblown and self-important about the genre.

A key inspiration for the 1984 rock satire *This Is Spinal Tap*, Zeppelin specialised in portentous, if vague, lyrics about grand, mystic themes.

But after all the hype that has led up to the event, you suspect anything less than the full 70s stadium rock treatment would be an anti-climax.

The extended instrumental workouts. Jimmy Page's double-necked axe being wheeled out for guitar shop favourite *Stairway To Heaven*. The lighting rig descending during *No Quarter* to emphasise the music's deeply celestial importantness.

The ecstatic crowd love it. There is a sense of genuine occasion. And little wonder.

Neat touch

This is a reunion in the truest sense of the word. Other alumni of the pop and rock canon who have reformed recently cashed in on the nostalgia market - the Spice Girls, Sex Pistols et al - have resembled little more than tribute acts to their younger selves.

But past reunions involving Page, Plant and bassist John Paul Jones have, by contrast, been low-key and rare. None have even come close to approaching tonight's scale.

"There's no-one comes close to what they do," says Tony Harper, 50, who has driven from Middlesbrough to be here. "They're still the business."

"I couldn't believe I landed a ticket," says Carole Smith, 41, from Plymouth. "And when they came on stage I had to keep reminding myself this was really happening."

The event - a tribute to the late Ahmet Ertegun, the founding chairman of Atlantic Records - suggests the band are motivated by more than just the prospect of swelling their already inflated bank accounts. It is, of course, a neat touch that percussion is tonight provided by Jason Bonham, son of original drummer John Bonham, who died in 1980.

The group are at their most successful when, on songs like Black Dog and In My Time of Dying, the sparse, taut blues needs no dramatic emphasis - and demonstrates Zeppelin's influence on the likes of the White Stripes' Jack White.

And when Page strikes up the riff to Kashmir (Duh-duh-duh! Duh-duh-duh!) you remember why this band have earned such a passionate following.

Perhaps because they have kept the comebacks to a minimum, Zeppelin carry their advanced years better than most groups of similar vintage.

Plant, at 59, now exudes an aura of gravitas that lends authority to the band's more extravagant moments.

And Page - Mephistophelean with his black frock coat and explosion of white hair - is an equally commanding presence, an incongruous gardening accident which forced the show to be rescheduled notwithstanding.

The erstwhile disciple of Aleister Crowley even looks - whisper it - as though he is enjoying himself.

Nearly 40 years may have passed since Led Zeppelin formed. But for fans and band alike, the song remains the same.

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/7137852.stm>

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