

“Stairway to Heaven”—Led Zeppelin (1971)

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Essay by Mick Wall (guest post)*



Led Zeppelin, c. 1971

The best-known, certainly the best-selling, Led Zeppelin album of all time was their untitled fourth, a.k.a. “Led Zep IV.” The track everybody still remembers best from that fourth Zeppelin album, though, is “Stairway to Heaven”—“the long one” guitarist and band founder Jimmy Page had been tinkering away at for nearly a year before finally taking the band through it in the studio. One of the first songs they actually had a crack at, singer Robert Plant and drummer John ‘Bonzo’ Bonham were sent to the pub the second night while Jimmy sat with bassist/multi-instrumentalist John Paul Jones to write out the music for what would become the final version the band would begin to routine the next day.

Talking about it in 2001, on the 30th anniversary of its release, Jimmy’s face still betrayed his obvious pride in what is now regarded as probably Led Zeppelin’s finest recorded moment:

When I did session work, before forming Zeppelin, and when John Paul Jones did studio work, the rule was always: you don’t speed up. That was the cardinal sin, to speed up. And I thought, right, we’ll do something that speeds up. But that, seriously, was another thing we always did in Zeppelin. If it started to move in tempo, don’t worry, it’s finding its own tempo. Don’t worry, just all stay together. As long as you’re all together on it, that’s fine.

As for the lyrics, written entirely by Plant, “Jimmy and I just sat by the fire, it was a remarkable setting,” he recalled years later. “I was holding a pencil and paper, and for some reason I was in a very bad mood. Then all of a sudden my hand was writing out the words, ‘There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold/And she’s buying a stairway to heaven ...’ I just sat there and looked at the words and then I almost leapt out of my seat.” The lyrics, he explained, were “a cynical thing about a woman getting everything she wanted without getting anything back.” Jimmy was pleased, too, that there was “a lot of ambiguity implied in that number that wasn’t present before.” In fact, he liked the lyrics so much they became the first ever to be reprinted on a Zeppelin album sleeve, “so that people could really concentrate on it.”

Because he already knew the song was special?:

Yeah, I mean, there was a lot of stuff on there we knew was special. But “Stairway...” was something that had been really crafted. The lyrics were fantastic. The wonderful thing is that, even with the lyrics in front of you--you know how you listen to something, and you might not quite get what the words are but you get your own impression? With this, the lyrics were there but you *still* got your own impression of what the song was about. And that was really important.

More words would come the following day as the band worked their way bit by bit through the song’s epic journey. “I have an image of Robert sitting on a radiator,” recalled tour manager Richard Cole. “He was working out the words to ‘Stairway ...’ while John Paul pulled out a recorder. Whenever they went into pre-recording, John Paul would come down with a carload of instruments, usually different acoustic instruments.” Things went reasonably smoothly except for Bonzo struggling at first to get the timing right on the twelve-string part before the electric guitar solo. Page recalled how, “As we were doing all that, Robert was writing down the lyrics. They just came to him really quickly. He said it was like someone was guiding his hand.”

Assistant engineer Richard Digby-Smith remembered how:

They ran up the stairs for the playback. Sounds wonderful. Bonham says, “That’s it then!” But Pagey’s quiet. He’s a man of few words anyway. His hand’s on his chin, he’s going, “Mmm, hmm”--you never knew what he was thinking. So Bonham looks at him and says, “What’s up?” And Page says he’s convinced that they have a better take in them. Well, Bonham’s not best pleased. “This always happens--we get a great take and you want to do it again.” They go back down. Bonzo grabs his sticks, huffing, puffing, muttering, “One more take and that’s it.” He waits and waits until his grand entrance and, of course, when the drums come in, if you thought the one before was good this one is just explosive. And when they play it back, Bonham looks at Jimmy like, “You’re always right, you bastard.”

The track’s now celebrated crescendo--Page’s goosebumps-inducing guitar solo--was attempted that day but after three hours of trying and failing to get it just so, Page finally gave up. Instead, he saved it for when the band were back at Basing Street studios. Rejecting his Gibson Les Paul, he pulled out the battered old Telecaster that Jeff Beck had given him. Eschewing headphones, preferring to play the backing track back through speakers, as classical music soloists tend to, Digby-Smith recalled in “Mojo” seeing Page leaning against a speaker as he played, a cigarette stuck between the strings by the tuning peg. “I winged that guitar solo, really,” Page later admitted. “When it came to recording it, I warmed up and did three of them. They were all quite different from each other. I did have the first phrase worked out and then there was the link phrase. I did check them before the tape ran. The one we used was definitely the best.”

What not even Jimmy Page could have known was just how incredibly popular this one track would become. Now one of the best-known, most highly regarded songs in rock history, alongside such comparable cornerstones as The Beatles’ “A Day In The

Life”--whose three-act, beginning, middle and arresting finale structure it draws on--and Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”--which, in turn, clearly apes the epic grandiosity of Zeppelin’s slow-build to a guitar-blazing conclusion—“Stairway to Heaven” has become the national anthem of rock; a track whose fame now far exceeds its original context--despite the album itself becoming one of the biggest-selling of all time. At last count, “Stairway ...” has been played on American radio alone more than 10 million times, despite famously never having been released as a single.

Despite huge pressure from Zeppelin’s record label, Atlantic to release “Stairway ...” as a single in America--there were actually seven-inch advance promo singles pressed up for US radio--the only track from the fourth album eventually issued in that format was “Black Dog,” an edited version of which was released (with “Misty Mountain Hop” as its B-side) in the US on 2 December, eventually reaching No. 15.

“‘Stairway to Heaven’ was never, ever, *ever* going to be released as a single,” Jimmy told me earnestly:

Australia put it on an EP, with “Going to California” and “The Battle of Evermore” on it. They might have tried to slip out a single as well, but it was too late to do anything about it when we found out. But when [America] said “Stairway ...” should be a single, I said absolutely not. The whole thing was we wanted people to hear it in the context of the album. Also, I said it will help the album sell because it’s *not* a single. One thing I would never have entertained was messing around with that song. I knew that the minute it was a single, the next thing, they would want it to be an edited version, and I wasn’t having that, no way.

Did Jimmy have any sense at all as he was recording it though that it would become so enormously popular and well known? “Well, I knew that it was really good,” he said with a grin:

I knew that it had so many sorts of elements being brought in that were really gonna work, I knew it was gonna hold up as a piece of music. But I didn’t ... I mean, obviously, I never expected it to ... I thought it would make a bit of a splash, so to speak. But, of course, one could have only hoped in your secret dreams that things could last the way that they did. I never really expected that, but I was always fully aware of how good our music was. Because of the way it was played.

Is it the best song he’s ever written; the best Zep song ever? “It was certainly a milestone along one of the many avenues of Zeppelin, yes.” Did he wonder how he would ever top it? He says:

No, because that was never the intention. That’s definitely not the thing to do if you want to keep creating great stuff. To try and top it would have been like chasing your own tail. There was never meant to be another “Whole Lotta Love” on the third album, nor was there meant to be another “Stairway ...” on [the album that followed]. In the context of Zeppelin, they [the record industry] were playing by the old rules, and we weren’t doing that. The

albums were meant to sum up where you were at, at the time you recorded them.

Since its release, however, there have been those who claim that “Stairway to Heaven,” like so many previous Zeppelin songs, was more closely based on the work of others. Most notably, a track from Spirit’s eponymous 1968 debut album called “Taurus,” a short instrumental which does contain a brief passage that bears a passing resemblance to the opening guitar lines of “Stairway ...” Unlike tracks like “Dazed and Confused” or “Whole Lotta Love,” where the amount of “borrowing” is clear for all to hear, the case for “Stairway ...” being partly lifted from “Taurus” is much weaker.

If Page, who was a fan of Spirit--witness Zeppelin’s performance of “Fresh-Garbage” from the same “Spirit” album on their earliest US tours, when the two bands shared bills--was influenced by the guitar chords on “Taurus” what he did with them was the equivalent of taking the wood from a garden shed and building it into a cathedral, which somewhat wipes the slate clean.

Equally, claims that Page lifted chords from a song by the Chocolate Watch Band--a band he had also shared a bill with in Yardbirds days--called “And She’s Lonely,” would seem to miss the point entirely, as do suggestions that “Stairway ...” was based, structurally, on “Tangerine,” from “Led Zep III.” Even if this were the case, any suggestion that these songs in any way prefigured the existence of a landmark musical moment like “Stairway to Heaven” is ludicrous.

Page was certainly a musical magpie--to put it mildly--and would continue to be so as the years blinked past like the lights of a passing train. And yes, of course “Stairway to Heaven” didn’t just arrive out of thin air. Jimmy once told me, in an interview for BBC-TV which they later shamefully “misplaced,” that for him the antecedents of his most famous musical creation lay in the same “She Moved Through The Fair”/“White Summer”/“Black Mountain Side” guitar showcase he had already spent years “fine tuning.” However, in this instance full credit needs to be given to the creator of what quickly became perhaps the grandest, certainly most affecting musical statement of his generation.

Mick Wall is an Anglo-Irish writer, TV maker and podcaster, who has worked in the music business for over 40 years. He is the author of numerous critically-acclaimed books, including definitive, bestselling titles on Led Zeppelin (“When Giants Walked the Earth”), The Doors (“Love Becomes a Funeral Pyre”), and Jimi Hendrix (“Two Riders Were Approaching”). He lives in England.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.