



LED ZEPPELIN IN CONCERT, 1970–1979

by Susan Fast

Led Zeppelin's studio recordings are innovative and awe-inspiring, but they tell only part of the band's story. For Led Zep fans in the 1970s, live shows were considered the "real deal," and there is little question that the concert setting highlighted much of what has become legendary about this group. Until recently, there was only one official live concert release, the 1976 documentary film *The Song Remains the Same* (also released as a double live album). This film captures Zeppelin in concert at Madison Square Garden on their 1973 tour, at the height of their domination of record charts and concert stages around the world. It is a fascinating document, not just for the music, but also for the famous "fantasy sequences" in which Page, Plant,

and Jones are depicted as protagonists in different fictional quest narratives. But the quality of the performance fails to capture how great they really were in concert. For years, committed fans circulated bootleg recordings of particularly renowned Zeppelin concerts, and *The Song Remains the Same* simply paled in comparison. In 2003, some of these recordings were remastered and officially released as a two-DVD set (*Led Zeppelin*) and on the CD *How the West Was Won*. These recordings provide an accurate and easily accessible snapshot of the band's concert legacy.

Led Zeppelin's concerts were marathons: three-hour shows were not unusual, and the increased length of individual songs, filled with extended improvisation, is a Led Zeppelin trademark that signals the band's much-revered penchant for taking musical risks.

Their 1970 gig at the Royal Albert Hall ranks as one of the best representations of the band's musical capabilities. Long virtuosic guitar solos by Page, sometimes brilliant and sometimes slightly off the mark, are moments in which expressiveness overtakes technique, usually to great effect. Aside from guitar solos, improvisation also included full-out jams by the band on old blues and pop songs, and musical ideas worked out on the spot. Page referred to the combination of precision and risk taking as the "tight but loose" factor of the band. Robert Plant's vocals are in peak form at this show, and the overwhelming power of his voice reaches above the excessive volume of the instruments. The performance of "How Many More Times" brings all these elements together: listen to the incredible driving energy of the riff, played by Page, Jones, and Bonham for large stretches of the song; the improvised exchanges between Page and Plant; and the lengthy blues-based improvisations toward the end of the song.

Bonham's drum solo—the core of the song “Moby Dick”—is already a feature in this early concert, and it remained a central component of their live shows. Much of what is “heavy” about Zeppelin's sound comes from Bonham, an astonishingly powerful drummer who was also agile and capable of very subtle gestures. Another important element of the live shows was Page's use of the violin bow to play his guitar during “Dazed and Confused.” The purpose of this was to explore new and interesting timbres on the electric guitar. The technique became strongly associated with Page's image as a kind of musical wizard.

A few features crucial to the later Led Zeppelin concert experience are not yet present in the Royal Albert Hall show. As with other rock bands, when they moved into stadiums and played to much larger crowds, the band exaggerated its visual gestures so the audience could see them. Page started wearing custom-made suits—one of them black with stars and planets, another featuring dragons, and a white silk suit emblazoned with red poppies—that furthered the magical aura around him. He also began to cultivate a grander kind of showmanship, duck-walking across the stage and throwing his left hand up triumphantly after laying down a riff. These gestures became more “wizardly” and emphatic when Page played the theremin, a simple electronic instrument used to re-create the experimental middle section of “Whole Lotta Love” in concert. Plant

began to bare his chest in a display of virility, like many rockers in the 1970s. The band rarely used pyrotechnics, which they felt would detract from the “pure” presentation of the music, but Bonham did set his gong on fire at the end of the concert. The musical and visual sparring between Page and Plant was a constant feature of the shows, Page often playing licks on his guitar that Plant would respond to or imitate. There was one of many displays of intimacy between singer and guitarist that have become hallmarks of rock music.

Page played the acoustic instrumental “White Summer” at the Royal Albert Hall, but the band would subsequently perform an entire acoustic set. While the band became legendary for the raw and excessive power and volume of their music (some have claimed them as the progenitors of heavy metal), they also produced a great deal of acoustic music. This is especially evident on their third album, and their acoustic songs were showcased in a separate section of their concerts. The acoustic set demonstrated an important element of the band's musical ability: they were flexible and multifaceted musicians. Heavy-rock bands have used acoustic performances to prove their versatility ever since.

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