

SONG OF THE DAY LXXVII

Imagine a picturesque Spring day; the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, the flowers are blooming and the mobile recording studio is set up to capture a moment of sheer inspiration!

Today, we journey back in time to 1972 and a garden outside Stargroves, owned by lead singer of the Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger. It's from "Physical Graffiti," LP two, side four, clocking in at 4:24; the majestic and rocking acoustic number "Black Country Woman."

The song begins with some chatter that is typically left off of a release, but this again shows the humor that Led Zeppelin had and gives us a brief glimpse behind the scenes as they prepare for the take that we now know so well.

There's some debate as to exactly what Eddie Kramer says in the first few seconds of this song and I don't claim to know precisely what is said, all I can do is go by what I hear. And what I hear differs significantly from what many people believe he said.

Shall we roll it Jimmy? We're rolling on what? One? No, one again.

That's Eddie speaking to guitarist Jimmy Page, and what follows is where the confusion comes in. I've seen and heard people who swear Kramer says - Gotta get this airplane off - and I've also seen and heard people who swear he says - Don't wanna get this airplane on. I just don't hear either of those things being said. So... while this may be wrong, this is what I hear Kramer saying next:

Trying to get this airplane on.

To which Robert responds with:

Nah, leave it, yeah!

Jimmy's acoustic guitar kicks in as he strums chords in an Open G tuning. Not only is this song addictive to listen to, it is also quite fun to play. Learning this on guitar so many years ago I would find it impossible to stop playing. That says a lot about Page and his ability to write great and catchy riffs, be it on electric guitar or, as here, on an acoustic.

Robert enters with the first two verses and we are sort of tricked into believing this is going to be just an acoustic guitar and vocal song, but then Bonzo makes his entrance and in typical John Bonham style, he completely pulls you in and blows you away with his power, skill and extremely equable drumming.

Hey, hey mama... what's the matter here?

Hey, hey mama... what's the matter here?

You didn't have to tell me that you loved me so

You didn't have to love me mama – let me go

Hey, hey mama... what's the matter here?

You didn't have to make me a total disgrace

You didn't have to leave me with that beer in my face

Hey, hey mama... what's the matter here?

Ah, that's alright... it's awful doggone clear

Hey, hey baby... why you treat me mean?

Oh, oh baby... why you treat me mean?

Just after those two lines above are sung, we can hear Plant's vocal in the distant background. It sounds like some bleed over from a previous vocal take on a different track and there's been rumor that it's from his vocals on D'yer Mak'er,

though I can't verify that. What is obvious though is you can clearly hear his distant voice in the background of the track.

It's also at this point that Bonzo enters and the song starts to roll like a slow moving freight train down the tracks, picking up speed as it chugs along.

You didn't have to crucify me like you did
You didn't have to tell me I was just your kid
Hey, hey mama... why'd you treat me mean?

You didn't have to say you'd always be by my side
You didn't have to tell me you'd be my blushing bride
Hey, hey mama... why do you treat me mean?
But that's alright... I know your sister too

At this point Bonham begins to assert himself and his drumming is just such a pleasure to listen to. From the 2:24 mark to 2:26 he plays a cool little stuttering fill that he makes sound so simple, though I'm sure it's not. This is something that permeates Zeppelin's music throughout their catalog and is one of the reasons that Zeppelin were so far above and beyond any other band. When you have an arsenal like John Bonham on board you just have to turn him loose, stand back and watch in awe.

You didn't have to tell me that you loved me so
You didn't have to leave me mama, let me go
Hey, hey mama... what is wrong with you?
You didn't have to leave like a total disgrace
You didn't have to leave me with that beer on my face
Hey, hey mama... what is wrong with you?
Oh but that's alright... I feel the same way too

As Plant adlibs some lines, Bonham's infectious and furious drumming pushes the song forward and we are treated to some tasty harmonica from Plant as well. Just as Robert is vastly underrated as a lyricist, his mastery of the harmonica is also grossly overlooked. Although he didn't play that much harmonica in the grand scheme of the Zeppelin catalog, when he did it was always a very sweet enhancement to the song.

Now, now, now, now you didn't have to crucify me like you did

You didn't have to tell me I was just your kid

Hey, hey mama... what's the matter here?

You didn't have to tell me you would be my own

You didn't have to tell me baby, let me go

Hey, hey mama... what is wrong with you?

Ah, that's alright... I know your sister too

The final :30 seconds or so of this tune sounds like an energetic battle between Plant's harmonica and Bonham's drums. Robert hits some especially sweet notes on the harp and the song ends in a rather staggered manner with Page's guitar strumming the last few chords alone.

"Black Country Woman" was initially titled "Never Ending Doubting Woman Blues" and is said to be written to Maureen, his wife at the time. At the end of the song, he originally said;

What's the matter with you, mama... never ending, doubting woman blues?

John Paul Jones not only played bass on this, but added mandolin as well. During live performances he would pull out his stand-up bass, adding yet another element to the many surprises that Zeppelin had for their audiences.

In concert, Zeppelin only performed this song in its entirety once, which was the 19th of June, 1972 in Seattle.

During the acoustic set on the 1977 tour it was included as a medley with "Bron-Y-Aur Stomp." Robert has played it on various solo tours, beginning in 1988 on the "Now & Zen" tour; he played it in 1994 in Rio de Janeiro as well as with Alison Krauss and most recently with his Band Of Joy.

This track was always a crowd-pleaser for Robert, as he would always cut loose in a live setting, his vocals rising with a fervent energy and the overall groove of the song sucking the audience in and driving the crowd to a fevered pitch.

What "Black Country Woman" represents to me is one of the main reasons that Zeppelin always stood out compared to their contemporaries. They were the only hard rock band that dared venture off into some of the territory that they would so completely embrace and no matter the song or style, they always pulled it off. From "The Battle Of Evermore" to "The Rain Song" to "Babe I'm Gonna Leave You" to "Black Country Woman," they were a dynamic group of musicians intent on scaling new heights and constantly searching for new horizons.

Until the next time,

Jeff