

## SONG OF THE DAY LXXXIV

And now... for something extremely deep and drenched in rich tradition. Over the course of their career, Led Zeppelin wrote a lot of songs that dealt with a variety of topics, ranging from sex, to lust, to love, to lost love, to happiness, to sadness, to silliness, to the love of a pet, as well as many other-worldly ideas. But nothing they ever recorded was as intense as today's song when you look at the meaning behind this tale.

To their credit, this one was listed as such - Traditional: Arrangement - Page/Plant. Now why they chose to do that with this song and not many others is beyond me, but again, their version of this storied song is quite simply stunning.

So grab your copy of "Led Zeppelin III," side two, track one, clocking in at 4:58 and their phenomenal take on "Gallows Pole."

To begin to appreciate this tune, we must first understand that it has been around for centuries; often the person trying/hoping to be saved from the deathly gallows is a young maiden. There's a very interesting theory about some of the older versions of this song that I thought should be pointed out, even though they don't really relate to Zeppelin's version.

In all of the versions the person on the gallows, typically a female, asks: 'Did you bring some silver, did you bring some gold?' And one theory is that the "gold" isn't actually the metal, but merely a metaphor for the proof of the young lady's purity. And you have to remember, there was a time when an unmarried woman who participated in sexual acts was condemned and, in the case of this song, killed for her actions.

In Zeppelin's version, the protagonist is a male. This isn't uncommon, as some versions do change the sex of the "victim" from female to male, and the proof of this is in the lyrics Zeppelin used. Why Robert decided to do this is a question I cannot answer. It doesn't detract from the song at

all, though I do believe that a female on the gallows would make the song even more harrowing.

The song begins with Jimmy strumming an acoustic guitar. The chord progression is simple, but what helps elevate Zeppelin's version is how they keep adding instruments along the way; building the intensity of the song as well as the pace. It's actually quite clever, because as the person gets closer to death, the music is blazing along at a frenetic pace and it puts you, the listener, in a state where you can "feel" the adrenaline and the anxiety the victim is surely experiencing.

Hangman

Hangman

Hold it a little while

I think I see my friends comin'

Ridin' many mile

A-friends d' you get some silver?

D' you get a little gold?

What did you bring me my dear friends?

Keep me from the gallows pole?

What did you bring me?

Keep me from the gallows pole?

I couldn't get no silver

I couldn't get no gold

You know that we're too damn poor

To keep you from the gallows pole

At this point everything changes. More acoustic guitars are added as Page brings out a 12-string to join the six string, as

well as mandolin by John Paul. After a couple of lines the bass enters and adds another dimension to the track. The bass, and the way Jonsey plays it, has always given me the impression of the victim's heartbeat. It's fast... steady... and very nervous.

Hangman

Hangman

Hold it a little while

I think I see my brother comin'

Ridin' many mile

Brother you get me some silver?

A-d' you get a little gold?

A-what did you bring me, my brother

T' keep me from the gallows pole?

Brother I brought you some silver, yeah { *The clue that the one awaiting the gallows is indeed a male*}

I brought a little gold

I brought a little of everything

T' keep you from the gallows pole

Yes I brought you...

T' keep you from the gallows pole

Hangman

Hangman

Turn your head a while

I think I see my sister comin'

Ridin' many mile, mile, mile, mile

At this point the music changes again, with Bonham joining in as well as the addition of a banjo played by Page as the pace elevates ever so slightly.

Sister I implore you –

Take him by the hand

Take him to some shady palace

Save me from the wrath of this man

Please take him –

Save me from the wrath of this man, man

Hangman

Hangman

Upon your face a smile

Tell me that I'm free to ride –

Ride for many mile, mile, mile

Oh yes, you got a fine sister

She warmed my blood from cold

She warmed my blood - boiling hot

To keep you from the gallows pole

Pole, pole, pole, yeah, yeah

We are now at judgment day and the victim has done everything that has been asked. Silver, gold and his sister have been given to the executioner in exchange for pity on his life. But just as the old adage warns those who make a deal with the Devil, our victim soon learns that nothing that was given has changed the mind of the hangman.

Your brother brought me silver  
And your sister warmed my soul  
But now I laugh and pull so hard  
See you swinging on the gallows pole

What I find so intriguing about this song is that it is a true testament to the way life once was. During the Salem Witch trials, they actually had a method to tell if a person was guilty or innocent. They would place the accused in the water... a pond or lake... and if the water accepted them, they were innocent. Of course, they would drown if the water "accepted" them. If the water rejected them... i.e., they floated, then they were pronounced guilty, pulled from the water and executed.

How screwed up were our forefathers that this type of behavior was not only allowed, but encouraged? And in 100 years, what will they say of our behavior today? Songs like "Gallows Pole" teach us lessons... not only from the past, but also they warn us of our present. The question that must be asked is this: Is anyone listening?

Zeppelin barely played "Gallows Pole" live, only bringing it out during parts of the European and United Kingdom dates between April and May of 1971. Occasionally Robert would throw a few lines in during "Trampled Underfoot." Oddly enough, during the 1993 Coverdale/Page tour of Japan, David Coverdale would throw in lines of this near the end of "In My Time Of Dying."

I find it a terrible tragedy that they basically ignored this song when playing live. Bonham is superb in this as usual, but here, although he plays furiously, he also plays with a great deal of restraint, never taking away from the intended message or getting in the way. To be as powerful as he was and yet also display the amount of restraint he did showcases his talent in an entirely new light.

In 1994, when Page/Plant formed and aired their "Unledded" project, "Gallows Pole" was the single and became an instant smash. In fact, the actual CD single that was released contained versions of "What Is And What Should Never Be" as well as "The

Rain Song," making the single an essential item for diehards like me.

Page/Plant played this on their 1995/96 and 1998 tours, typically drawing a huge reception from the audience. Plant has also included it in his solo set in recent years.

"Gallows Pole" has been around, seemingly, forever, and rightfully so. The song tells a dark and ominous tale, and it begs the listener to pay attention. There is great prophesy in the song as well as a great warning... but of course, it's only a warning if anyone actually understands what the message is.

Until the next time...

Jeff