

## SONG OF THE DAY XC

And now... we enter the home stretch. And just like Secretariat in the 1973 Belmont Stakes, we are moving like a tremendous machine with today's song. I gave serious consideration to ending the series with this song since it is one of my all-time favorite Zeppelin songs and comes from my all-time favorite Zeppelin album, but alas, I kind of believe that anyone reading this will want a certain other song to wrap this all up, so I decided instead to have it start the final ten countdown.

If you've read many of these SOTD's or if you know me at all, then you know that "Presence" is my favorite Zeppelin album. There's a certain energy to that album and a sort of controlled chaos that isn't on any other Zeppelin album. It's also the only Zeppelin album to not employ any acoustic guitars, which makes it that much more odd that I favor it so much since I love acoustic songs, especially when Jimmy is playing the guitar.

When I began this whole endeavor, I started off with "For Your Life," another of my favorite Zeppelin songs. In fact, if one were to ask me to name my Top Ten Zeppelin songs, four of them would be from "Presence." Which is pretty telling since the album only contains seven songs.

Now before we dive into today's song, I want to explain this idea I had so many years ago and why this series will be concluding in the manner in which it is. Over their career, Zeppelin had many huge songs. They have a number of songs that are fan favorites, a number that were and still are, played on the radio ad nauseam, and something that I believe all Zeppelin fans can agree with; every album had at least one **EPIC** song.

As I began writing this back in late 1996, the idea was to cover all of their material, some of their post-Zeppelin work, and conclude with the songs that I feel are their most epic. And when I say "epic," I mean songs that defined the band. Songs that were staples in concert, fan favorites, songs that showed

off the band as a unit as well as individual members and songs that told endearing stories and have stood the test of time. All of these songs have their differences, but one thing they all have in common is that within the first few notes of the song, you, the listener, know exactly what it is and who it is. To pull that off is yet again another testament to their abilities as musicians and their ability to create lasting musical statements.

So, without further ado, pull out your copy of "Presence," you won't have to go far, because this is the first track, clocking in at an astonishing 10:25, the masterpiece titled "Achilles Last Stand."

Probably the only reason that "Presence" even exists is because of a tragedy that befell Robert and his family on 4 August 1975. The car Plant was driving went off the road and Robert sustained a serious foot injury that left doubt as to whether or not he would ever walk again. This forced a cancellation of an American tour and the result was that Page and Plant began writing for a new record.

"Achilles..." was initially titled 'The Wheelchair Song' as a nod to Plant's condition, but the song itself tells of a much happier and peaceful time. Following their 1975 Earl's Court dates, Jimmy and Robert began traveling and this song is about those travels to Morocco. There's a story about Plant being so excited hearing a play-back of this in the studio that he jumped up out of his wheelchair and nearly reinjured his foot, saved only by a quick moving Jimmy Page.

The song begins rather eerily as Jimmy's guitar slowly makes its presence felt... first just a whisper, then finally building up to a normal volume level. The guitar has a sinister quality to it and upon first hearing this, one has no idea what to expect.

At the :18 second mark, Bonzo enters and all bets are off. The song turns into a runaway freight train blazing down the tracks at a suicide pace. When Jimmy was introducing this piece to the band, John Paul told him there was no scale to go over the chord progression that Page had, but Jimmy told him he had one. This is Page at his absolute finest. Haunting melodies,

massive guitar overdubs, intertwining chords and single note runs; it was the Guitar Army in full force. And then... there was Robert. Once again he delivers lyrics that are so eloquent and mystifying and yet, he gives us one of his best performances ever, proving that an injured foot, the lingering doubt as to if he would ever walk again and the wheelchair, to which he was bound, would not hold him down.

It was an April morning  
When they told us we should go  
And as I turned to you  
You smiled at me  
How could we say no?

Whoa the fun to have  
To live the dreams we always had  
Whoa the songs to sing  
When we at last return again...

During the brief instrumental section that follows, it is Bonham's drums that take center stage. His playing is ferocious and on the very edge of the proverbial cliff, yet somehow he is also the glue that holds this whole thing together. Anyone who ever doubts the drumming ability of John Bonham, and yes, there are one or two out there who will argue with you on this point, just play this song for them. Not only does he answer any and all questions with his skill in this piece, he leaves people with their jaw firmly planted on the ground. He is, quite simply, that freaking great.

We swept New York a glancing kiss  
To those who claim they know  
Below the streets that steam and hiss  
The Devil's in his hole...

Whoa to sail away  
To sandy lands and other days  
Oh to touch the dream  
That hides inside and never seen

Yeah

And here is where the song changes for the first time as Page plays some killer riffs, the overdubbed guitars sounding like a full on assault of the senses before we are back to the main section. During this brief change, John Paul and Bonham are in perfect harmony with Jimmy, forming a tight, cohesive unit that seems capable of anything their minds can conjure up.

Into the sun and South and North

At last the birds had flown

As shackles of commitment fell

In pieces on the ground

Whoa to ride the wind

To tread the air above the din

Oh to laugh aloud

With dancing eyes we court the crowd

Yeah

Once again, Jimmy changes things up a little bit here, adding some lead lines, keeping you, the listener, constantly guessing and constantly surprised.

To seek the man who's pointing hand

The giant step unfolds

To guide us from the curving path

That turns our feet to stone

An' if one bell should ring

In celebration for a King

So fast the heart should beat

As proud's the head with heavy feet

Yeah

Jimmy gives us a heavy riff for a few bars before breaking into another lead break that once again takes the song off into another direction. Bonham behind him with a start/stop section

on the kit and then Jimmy just plays an absolutely heavenly solo. What is even more remarkable about all of this is that Page did all of the overdubs for the entire album in one long session. That he could perform under that type of pressure and play this beautifully really says a lot about what he was capable of when his back was against a wall.

Days flew by and you and I  
Bathed in eternal summer's glow  
As far away and distant  
Our mutual child did grow-oh-whoa

Whoa the sweet refrain  
That soothes the soul  
And calms the pain  
Oh Albion remain  
Sleeping now to rise again...

Wandering and wandering  
One place to rest the search  
The mighty arms of Atlas  
Hold the Heavens from the earth  
Well the mighty arms of Atlas  
Hold the Heavens from the earth  
From the earth...

{I'm gonna reign – gonna reign – gonna reign – gonna reign}

A final push to the end and we get a shot-gun blast from Bonham as he attacks the drums with all his might. Plant goes into his: "Ah-ah-ah Ah-ah-ah Ah-ah-ah Ah-ah-ah" section as the band continues the assault behind him. More Page guitars; layering, building, adding... constantly changing and bringing new additions to the piece.

Finally we reach then finish line as Jimmy ends the piece in the same way that he begins it with just his guitar playing through the fade out.

And that is what can best be described as an absolute tour-de-force. It's mind-boggling to me that Page even concocted this idea and the fact that Plant, Jones and Bonham were able to take his vision and not only keep up with it, but add so much to it, just reflects how perfectly in-sync they were as a group.

This is not the type of song you hear very often. It's long, it's complex, it's mystical, it's haunting, it has some extremely cool lyrics with great metaphors and hidden meanings and it truly stands out as one of the best of Led Zeppelin's catalog. During its time, the only other song that I can think of that comes remotely close to this is "Xanadu" by Rush.

The influence of "Achilles..." was felt shortly after it was released when, in 1977, the band Heart released their "Little Queen" album which had the heavily "Achilles" inspired "Barracuda" on it.

When Zeppelin began preparing "Achilles" for the live show, Page felt he would probably need the Gibson double-neck, but realized that his Gibson Les Paul could handle all of the necessary parts just fine. He even played his Telecaster on it at least once, including the first Knebworth show in 1979.

After the release of "Presence," "Achilles" was a constant in the set list every night save for two in 1980. On 27 June 1980, in Nuremburg, the song wasn't played because Bonzo fell ill and the show was stopped after just three songs. The entire 1980 tour, "Achilles" was the tenth song in the set, but for some mysterious reason, on 7 July, they did not play it at all. This would be, sadly, their final performance ever as Bonzo would pass away just a few short months later.

In 1995, when Page/Plant toured the States, they played this in Pensacola, Florida and the first of two shows in Atlanta, Georgia before deciding to drop it entirely. With no offense intended to Michael Lee, I rather suspect the reason the song was dropped by Page/Plant was because nobody could replicate what John Bonham brought to this song.

I will say this for Led Zeppelin; they sure knew how to kick off an album. If you think about it, every single album had amazing opening numbers. They grabbed you by the throat right

from the start and didn't let go until the last notes rang out on the final song. From "Good Times Bad Times" to "Whole Lotta Love" to "Immigrant Song" to "Black Dog" to "The Song Remains The Same" to "Custard Pie" to "Achilles Last Stand" to "In The Evening" to "We're Gonna Groove," they had some of the most amazing album openers in rock history.

I remember hearing this for the first time as a mere 12-year old and all I could wonder was how did Bonham last through this song? This is a massive workout for any drummer and yet, he is just so solid and so impressive throughout this piece that I would literally sit with my jaw on the ground listening to him play.

Is there any question as to why "Presence" is my favorite album? I mean, my God man... when you start off with this song and then go straight into "For Your Life," it just doesn't get any better.

If you consider yourself a fan of Zeppelin but you just haven't given "Presence" a chance... do yourself a favor and listen to this album. Then listen to it again. And again. And then... listen to it again. Eventually, you will be hooked and you will see what I mean about this album. It is Led Zeppelin backed into a corner and they come out brawling like a lethal street-fighter. No backing down, no cowering in the corner. This is the full power of a band willing to take risks and always rewarding their fans with the best possible result.

Next up... another **EPIC** song from the Zeppelin catalog.

Until then,

Jeff