

SONG OF THE DAY XCIX

And then... there was one. The final SOTD about the music of Led Zeppelin. There's no secret what song this is as it is only the most popular song in rock and roll history. So, without further ado, pull out your copy of  and turn to the final track on side one, the biggest epic of all epics, clocking in at 8:00, "Stairway To Heaven."

Not only is this the biggest song in Led Zeppelin's history, it is also the one filled with the most controversy. We'll get to some of the more controversial aspects a little later, but one thing that has been brought up is that the intro for the song isn't entirely original. A group called Spirit, who Zeppelin opened for in their early days, released a song in 1968 titled "Taurus" that bears quite a strong resemblance to the opening of "Stairway."

That much is true. And since Spirit played this song whilst on tour with Zeppelin, it is undeniable that Jimmy heard it. However, I must say, once again, that Jimmy took the seed of an idea, and produced an absolute rose garden of a song. Spirit's version is nowhere near as crisp as "Stairway" nor does it flesh out into so many different areas. This is one instance where I give Jimmy leeway because he added so much more to the intro and, to top it off, he totally changed the way rock ballads would be written from then on.

According to Page, the song was written over an extended period of time and it began during a respite from the road when the band was holed up at Bron-Yr-Aur in Wales. As Jimmy explained it, he had an idea for a song that would speed up and constantly continue building, much like an adrenaline rush, until it would eventually reach a crescendo. One of the reasons he wanted to write a song like this was because both he and John Paul Jones were former studio musicians and the one rule they had to follow was to never speed up. It was a rule Jimmy hated

and purposely writing a song that broke that rule was something that really appealed to him.

Robert first began writing lyrics for this at Headley Grange whilst relaxing by a fire. As Plant stated: "My hand was writing out the words, 'There's a lady is sure [sic], all that glitters is gold, and she's buying a stairway to heaven'. I just sat there and looked at them and almost leapt out of my seat."

Plant's own explanation of the lyrics was that it "was some cynical aside about a woman getting everything she wanted all the time without giving back any thought or consideration. The first line begins with that cynical sweep of the hand ... and it softened up after that."

According to Jimmy, Robert wrote roughly 80% of the lyrics on the spot and early bootleg recordings seem to support this, as only minor changes were made. John Paul picked up a recorder {a flute-like instrument} and created the intro section that plays alongside the guitar whilst hearing it at Bron-Yr-Aur.

Jimmy's opening guitar piece is so beautifully played and has inspired millions of guitarists, despite what jokes were made during the movie *Wayne's World*. The acoustic guitar shows Jimmy picking out the individual notes of the chords; the bass notes descending as the higher notes ascend, creating an absolutely celestial beginning. He then drops down the neck and plays a D/F# barre chord, before switching to the Fmaj7 and then ends with the G/B and Am chords. Then the beautiful slide from the open A note up to the 8th fret on the A string, then the note on the 7th fret on the A string {E} and then he repeats the entire section.

He then shows how beautiful simple chords can be as he articulates the C-G-D-C-D-Fmaj7-Am-C-D-Fmaj7 section that leads us to the entrance of Robert.

There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven

When she gets there she knows

If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for
Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven

There's a sign on the wall
But she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings

In a tree by the brook
There's a songbird who sings
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven

At this point Page continues playing the intro, though he is now playing it faster, giving it very much a classical guitar feel. And then the first change appears as Page begins strumming the guitar{s}, both acoustic and electric, and the first sign that this is going to be something special, something unique, is revealed.

Ooh – it makes me wonder
Ooh – it makes me wonder

Jimmy's use of a twelve string electric really brightens the chords throughout this section and adds a very positive vibe to the song and basically works as a counter to Plant's lyrics, which takes on a bit of a cynical view.

There's a feeling I get
When I look – to the West
And my spirit is crying for leaving
In my thoughts I have seen
Rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand looking

Ooh it makes me wonder
Ooh it really makes me wonder

And it's whispered that soon
If we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to reason

And a new day will dawn
For those who stand long
And the forests will echo with laughter

Page continues alternating between the picked notes and the strumming chords, and while the chords he plays are simple, they have such an ethereal quality to them that whole track begins to reveal a completely majestic side to it that nothing else rivals. It is music at its finest and most brilliant and I would be willing to bet that if someone like Beethoven or Mozart could hear this; they would approve.

Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh

And now the third change in the song as Bonham enters and you can feel the song slowly rising, like a morning sun, casting a light - and shadow - over all who stand attentive.

If there's a bustle in your hedgerow
Don't be alarmed now
It's just a Spring-clean for the May Queen

Yes there are two paths you can go by
But in the long run
An' there's still time to change the road you're on

And it makes me wonder...
Ahh...oh-oh

Your head is humming and it won't go
In case you don't know
The piper's calling you to join him

Dear lady can you hear the wind blow?

And did you know

Your stairway lies on the whispering wind

Ahh...

Page then leads us into change number four and a beautiful interlude based around the D chord. Playing the "Da-Da-Da... Da-Da-Da" section, we are being prepared for an onslaught of the senses. A simple Dsus4/2 - D - Dsus4 chord progression, combined with Bonham's thunderous drums, signal the war cry and a fair warning. To me, this section has always seemed to be connected to "Immigrant Song," even though that probably makes no sense. It's like the call of the Viking god as he descends upon his enemies and the chant: "Valhalla I am coming" seems to fit perfectly with what is played here.

Bonham then kicks into high gear as Jimmy lays down one of his greatest solos ever and the solo voted best ever in rock music by *Guitar World*. The chord progression that Page solos over is a standard Am - C/G - Fmaj7 progression and he solos in the key of Am. Yet he uses a very clever idea by landing on the F note, which is not in the Am pentatonic scale, yet it fits here because of the F chord that is played. That F note in the solo gives the solo its very distinct sound quality and really adds flavor to it in a way that would not have been possible had he avoided the note simply because it isn't in the Am pentatonic scale. It was a brilliant decision by Page and one that has influenced many guitarists since.

Jimmy's solo is just perfect and he brought out his old Telecaster for this one. Listen as he gradually builds the solo, ranging from lower notes in the scale to quickly flying up to higher notes and at the 6:26 mark he adds a slide guitar melody to which his lead guitar responds to in a classic call and response that Page seemed to make a trademark in Zeppelin's music and is deeply rooted in the blues.

During this part Jimmy adds some tasty bends, squeezing every last drop of emotion out of his Tele as Bonham and Jones are locked in a tight groove underneath him. As Jimmy's solo reaches its apex, Bonham delivers a punishing pattern on the drums, leading us into the final, furious section.

And as we wind on down the road
Our shadows taller than our soul
There walks a lady we all know
Who shines white light and wants to show
How everything still turns to gold
And if you listen very hard
The tune will come to you at last
When all are one and one is all
Yeah...
To be a rock – and not to roll
Ohh...

And she's buying a stairway - to Heaven

For more evidence of how great John Bonham is, just listen to him between the 7:15-7:29 mark; he is absolutely magnificent throughout that entire section. As the song slows down, all the instruments fade out as Robert sings the final line alone and the single greatest song in rock history is done. Hearing this song, whether for the first time or the millionth time; feels like an absolute roller-coaster ride.

The song made its stage debut on 5 March 1971, in Belfast at the Ulster Hall. It was then played at every Led Zeppelin show onward save for the two shows that were cut short; Tampa in 1977 and Nuremburg 1980. The final show that Led Zeppelin played, in Berlin, on 7 July 1980, saw, ironically, the longest known live version of "Stairway" ever.

There were many great things about the live versions of this wonderful song, including the fact that Jimmy would add a lot to his playing; during the intro he would add hammer-ons and pull-offs, trills, slides and would take what was an already amazing piece of music and make it better. In the solo sections he would often venture off into new realms, never playing the same solo on a given night. He always kept the main structure intact, as that was so classic and well-known, but he always stretched it out, constantly adding and searching for new ways to express himself in the solo.

Robert was well known for creating certain vocal additions as well; his famous "Does anybody remember laughter?" is one notable addition, his humorous "Does anybody remember... forests?" is another. The line, "And I think you can see that" is another, that one made famous from the movie "The Song Remains The Same." After the lyric: "There's still time to change the road you're on" he would add "I hope so!" And of course, this was also known as a "song of hope," an edited version of what Robert said that night in 1973 that made it onto the soundtrack for the film.

In 1983 Jimmy was invited to take part in the A.R.M.S. Benefit Concerts for Ronnie Lane, noted bassist for The Small Faces and The Faces and Page played an instrumental version of the song on that tour. Then, on 13 July 1985 when the remaining members of Led Zeppelin took the stage to support Bob Geldof and Live Aid, during their brief, three-song set, they closed with "Stairway" with Robert's bassist from his solo band at the time, Paul Martinez, filling in on bass as John Paul played the organ.

It was then revived again on 14 May 1988 for the Atlantic Records 40th Anniversary concert, this time featuring Jason Bonham on drums.

Later that year Jimmy embarked on the Outrider Tour and he would play "Stairway" as an instrumental with Jason encouraging the crowd to sing until it was time for him to play. When Jimmy would introduce the song, he would tell the crowd "you can sing along, air guitar along... do what you want!"

The 1988 versions were good, and showed that Jimmy was still very proud of this song and sincerely appreciated the warmth he received from the crowd as he played this long-standing favorite.

In 1993, on the Coverdale/Page tour of Japan, on the final night, 22 December, during "Take Me For A Little While," which Jimmy was playing on his double-neck, just before launching into the solo, he played the first few opening notes of "Stairway," which must have certainly caught the Japanese audience off guard.

In 1994, in Japan again, this time promoting the "Unledded" album with Robert, they played a brief, just over three minute

acoustic version on a talk show they were on. While Robert has tried to distance himself from the song, he sang it that night due to losing a bet with Jimmy. And while Robert maintains that he doesn't care for the song as much as he once did, he sang it very beautifully that evening and seemed to be enjoying himself.

It was then played, perhaps for the final time, on 10 December 2007 at the O2 reunion. After finishing the song Robert said; "Ahmet! We did it!"

Now here's a real test for anyone who's been reading this series... if you recall SOTD XLV {that's 45 for those who don't like Roman Numerals} I made a promise at the end of that SOTD to talk about my feelings on Zeppelin and the rumors of their alleged "Satanic pact." I said, at the end of that SOTD that you'll have to wait till I get to the Stairway... Well, we're here... finally... and so I will make good with my promise on this.

There are several things that we know as fact; one, Jimmy was interested in and intrigued by the Occult and by Aleister Crowley; two, Zeppelin had an "aura" around them that outsiders simply could not explain and three; the members of Zeppelin didn't really go out of their way to dispel some of those crazy rumors. To me, there's a very good reason why they chose to remain silent and it's called; marketing.

There's a phrase that any press is good press, even if it's bad press. And if you think about it, Zeppelin's fan base was mostly teenagers at the time when they were starting out... from 1968-1971, and probably through their entire career, though some of those teens grew into their twenties and still followed the band. And what appeals to teens? Anything that is anti-establishment and anything that will frighten their parents.

I feel that Zeppelin used mystique as a huge marketing tool and that's been pretty well documented with Peter Grant's insistence on controlling every single aspect of the band, from concert tickets to tour shirts to albums to singles... or the lack thereof.

Peter Grant was a smart man, and he knew that the more "mysterious" Zeppelin were, the bigger they would become. It's like anything in life; if you tell someone they can't do

something, they want to do that exact thing. And so I feel that Zeppelin used the "rumors" to help create even more mystery around them and ultimately, help them sell albums and concert tickets.

There are tons of videos on You Tube declaring Zeppelin as "Satanists" and they even have the lyrics to "Stairway" printed out for you as the song plays backwards. All I can say is that some folks have way too much time on their bloody hands.

Back in the early 1990's, I had a four-track tape recorder; as a musician I needed one to record ideas and I decided to listen to "Stairway" backwards at the insistence of a friend. We popped the tape in, hit play, and we heard what sounded like Satanic messages. Then I popped in a tape of a bootleg.. and sure enough, the same "messages" were there.

So, I looked at my friend and asked him how Zeppelin could infiltrate some bootleggers tape and get their evil, Satanic message on that, when Peter Grant would kick the crap out of anyone he caught bootlegging the band?

He didn't have an answer, but I suggested that he sing the song into my four-track player while I played the guitar. He did, and then we listened to that backwards. And guess what? We heard the same "messages."

Now some will have you believe that Led Zeppelin sat down and figured out which words would sound one way forward, but would actually be a Satanic message backwards. And to that; I call, horseshit! It comes down to this.. the word "Yes" when played backwards sounds like "Satan."

This means, of course, that every song that has ever used the word "Yes" in it is Satanic in nature. And every time you are having sex and you utter the word "Yes" you are actually praising Satan. In fact, if we take this even further, the rock band Yes... are actually Satan.

Do you see how crazy and stupid this whole thing gets?

I think Robert Plant summed it up best when he said: "To me it's very sad, because 'Stairway to Heaven' was written with

every best intention and as far as reversing tapes and putting messages on the end, that's not my idea of making music."

Well stated Robert!

I mentioned earlier that Jimmy had taken part in the Ronnie Lane A.R.M.S. benefit, well here's something many of you may not know; when Ronnie was sick and had no royalty money coming in, Jimmy Page, along with Ronnie Wood and Rod Stewart, were paying all of Lane's medical bills. Ronnie had Multiple Sclerosis and believe me; that can get expensive. Yet Page was helping him out. Does that sound like a Satanist to you?

I have personally met Jimmy on five different occasions, one of which I went into great detail on in SOTD XXIII {23} and each time he has been gracious, kind and polite. In fact, the first time I met him, which is what SOTD XXIII is about, he ended the show by telling the crowd: "Thank you very much. Good night, God bless you, see you again soon. Thank you!"

Now I don't know a great deal about Satanic worshippers, but if the man were a practicing Satanist, I rather doubt he would tell the crowd "God bless you." He would probably stand there and repeat: "YES! YES! YES!"

Anyway... now that I have gotten that rant off my chest, I realize that this series has come to its conclusion. It's been 15 years. It sounds absolutely crazy that it has taken this long to finish, but then again, life has a way sometimes of getting in the way.

There will be one more SOTD... I couldn't end on 99... someone might think I did that purposely and that 99 is 66 upside down, and then they'd start accusing me of being a Satanist! LOL

The final SOTD... which will be # 100; will be a lot of explaining certain things and giving thanks to some very special people. It won't be about a song, but I hope you read it anyway; you may be one of the people I am writing about in that one.

Until the next time,

Jeff

