



Sound Tracks

by Mark Teehan

LED ZEPPELIN — "Physical Graffiti" (Swan Song). At long last, after a 2-year absence, Led Zep are back with a hefty double package their 6th release that lends further credence to their imposing legend. A new Led Zep album is always a welcome prospect, and the fact that we now have 4 sides of choice prime heavy metal-delivered in unique Zep fashion - to drool over, makes the Halifax blahs and the exam banzais all the more bearable. Meanwhile, Zep continue to tear up the U.S. on their Mammoth '75 tour and break all sorts of attendance records. Truly on the misty mountain top I'd say, and with their integrity/artistic sensibility still intact. A rare exception indeed in the topsy-turvy, rootless, over-commercialized popular music scene/biz of today.

"Physical Graffiti" is Zep's equivalent of the Beatles "White" and the Stones' "Exile" double sets in that it represents a coherent summation of the band's past musical experiences. As well, it's a return in large part to their natural basics - the uncompromising hard blues-rock pioneered on their 1st album - but still manages to integrate this more primal style with the more complex/exploratory visions of the last 2 albums. After the rarefied trappings of '73's "House of the Holy," "Graffiti" socks a potent contrast. "Holy" never fared too well at the hands of critics, but much of this slugging was unwarranted and overdone. The 1st side of "Holy" may have had its problems ("The Crunge" being the worst offender), but with successes like "Dancing Days," "Dyer Maker," and "No Quarter" (a Zep classic that always strikes right to the bone) on the flip I'd say that the goods were more than delivered. And while "Graffiti's" emphasis may be on hard crunchers a la "Dazed and Confused" and "Black Dog," you can find both hard and subtle traces of "Holy" here as well: a track of the same name that sounds like a cousin to "Dancing Days," as well as the mysterious "In The Light" (cf. "No

Quarter" for mood/errie effects).

As always with Zep, Jimmy Page is the one who holds it all together with his expert production and guitar prowess, though here he seems to lurk in the shadows more than on past albums. The sounds, especially on the 1st record, is similar to that achieved by Bad Co. on their excellent debut of last Summer: open, "live," and spontaneous. Highly immediate and compelling. In this crude set-up, John Bonham's drumming is high up in the mix and quite dominant, somewhat overshadowing the subtle bass lines of John Paul Jones. Robert Plant sounds strangely smothered amidst all this raunch and his vocals on Side 1 are especially weak, though the excellence of the performances makes this a minor irritation.

The Klutzy charges of "Limp Blimp" levelled last time out in RS are trampled 10 feet into the ground by the dinosaurian force of "Custard Pie" — a staple bluesy riff hardened into a rugged assault, on which Page chips in (as elsewhere) some interesting bits of synthesizer as well as some earthy soloing. This approach sets the pace for much of the 1st record, and the band show that they aren't afraid to rock. The energy's still there. "The Rover" follows and is early vintage Zep also, being distinguished from its predecessor by better dynamics and a more developed melody line; Jones' bass anchors it all down quite securely. Before you have time to catch your breath, the extended (11 min. plus) standard "In My Time of Dying" is unleashed in full tortured fury; a confessional blueser punctuated by drum outbursts that accelerate in pace, reaching a pounding climax in mid-break. Surely one of Bonham's finest moments; poor Plant sounds wrecked by the end of it all with his "Bye Bye, feels pretty good up here" banter.

Opening up Side 2 is the already-mentioned "Houses of the Holy," a solid Zep-rocker of more recent ("IV" on) origin with some really clean Page breaks. Last time out the boys tried their

hand at some soul the result wasn't too satisfying, but this time they turn in a convincing performance on "Trampled Underfoot," a funky-up disco number that, if edited down, would make a killer single. The band rely on duplicated rhythmic lines to generate the zig-zag funkiness. They have "Kashmir," the only track on this 1st record that really doesn't do too much for me. At close to 10 mins., its plodding beat and too-obvious string arrangements (fit for a Central Asian bazaar) drag on far too long to provide any challenge.

The second record is not as homogenous as its counterpart and features a greater variety of styles. Once pulverized, you are more than ready to be taken on mystical/romantic adventures by Pages studio wizardry and Plant's idealistic lyrics. Side 3 is where it all comes together. "In The Light" has that "cosmic freeze" atmosphere about it that made "No Quarter" such a haunting experience to hear. It's arguably the best, most accomplished track on the album. Opening in a dronal fog, with synthesizer lickings winding thru, it gives way to an ascending riff that accompanies Plant as he moans, "Well, if you f-e-e-l you can't go on/And your wheel's sinkin' lower/Just believe and you can't go wrong/In the light, you will find the road." Maybe, but only in dreams. While the lyrics never rise above this lame escapism, the remainder of the song goes thru all manner of well-handled changes, from hard bluesy stretches back to the intro/central motif. Zep at their most engaging.

After a short acoustic interlude that's also fairly spacy ("Bron-Yr-Aur"), the group nudge into "Down by The Seaside," an eminently likeable tune of disarming simplicity that features gentle vibrato/tremelo guitar effects and soft vocals - just right. Plant longing for the unadulterated rural utopia, through interspersed with a bit of lightening that acknowledges the downer realities of our existence. Zep romanticism of a general sort, and appropriately followed by the more individualized "folk sage" epic "Ten Years Gone," with its sad, slow pace and shrouded 12-string chord interjections. In mournful manner Plant intones, "As it was/Then again it will be/ Though the course may change sometimes/Rivers always reach the sea."

Take my word for it, it sounds a whole lot better than it reads.

The only real dip in the album's high-level quality comes on Side 4. After the solid "Night Flight," a well-structured rocker with a lot of keyboard fills, problems of a sort creep in. "Wanton Song" is pedestrian, a mediocre jam a la "Immigrant Song" riffs that don't even develop into anything substantial. "Bogie with Stu" is an inoffensive jovial break, and a plus is scored by "Black Country Woman," a fairly likeable acoustic folkism via "III." But the album-ending "Sick Again" doesn't quite come off. It might have decent lyrics ("From the window of a rented limousine, I saw your pretty blue eyes/One day soon you're gonna reach 16, painted lady in the city of lies") but the way Plant mumbles them, they're barely audible. It's good to see the band zero in on LA trash/degeneration, but the song itself is pretty plain stuff. The whole thing is very rough sounding, from the fuzzy intro to the plodding gait, and while I can appreciate well-channeled raunch, this is too much of a busted tune; besides, Pages normally impeccable styling lacks any bite. Which all just goes to show that Zep are only human after all.

In the overall scheme of things, such lapses are trivial and can not negate the impressive success of "Graffiti" on all levels. Led Zep may not take many bold chances here, but neither do they mark time. Their classic 4th remains on the catalog mountain top, but "Graffiti" should hold up well in the future - as a double LP it can hold it own with any of their earlier albums (of course, all singles). As for this Rolling Stone crap about Zep "proving their respectability," they did THAT a long time ago when RS had their head up their ass. And as far as the outside competition goes, well to each's own; but the way I see it, Zep has left 'em far behind in the dust. When you climb the stairway to heaven, the mountain top gets pretty misty.



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