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Concerts: Four ladies of Led Zeppelin rock like Led

By JACK HILL (CONTACT)

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LITTLE ROCK — Led Zeppelin never had a No. 1 song, but its influence has continued long past the time the band actually existed. As it to add to its mystique and level of integrity, it's one of few bands that ever hung it up when one of its members died.

And though the band influenced countless other young bands that sprang up, determined to play just as heavily, loudly and tastefully as the British rockers whose sound spanned from 1968 to 1980, there have been few, if any, reports of the phenomenon of a "tribute" band devoting itself to the music of Led Zep.

Not until now, and certainly not a band made up of, not four English gents, but four American women.

Lez Zeppelin they call themselves. The four women, who formed in 2004, are based in New York and are poised to release a debut, self-titled CD on Tuesday.

The CD includes versions of "Whole Lotta Love," "The Ocean," "Since I've Been Loving You," "Rock and Roll," "Communication Breakdown" and "Kashmir." There are also two spirited originals, "On the Rocks" and "Winter Sun." There is not, however, a version of "Stairway to Heaven." Some things remain sacred, apparently.

Already, rave notices are pouring in, with Spin magazine saying the group is "the most powerful all-female band in rock history," while its hometown New York Times weighs in with "Strapping on the double-necked Gibson with attitude to burn, this all-girl quartet pays tribute to its swaggering namesake Led Zeppelin, ripping through the catalog with blazing accuracy."

Members of the band are Sarah McLellan on vocals; Steph Paynes on electric and acoustic guitars, theremin and backing vocals; Lisa Brigantino on bass, keyboards, mandolin, bass pedals and backing vocals; and Helen Destroy on drums and percussion.

Paynes is happy to describe how her band came to be.

"I wish I could say it was brilliantly premeditated in all its aspects," she says, "but I was really just listening to Led Zeppelin after getting their remastered boxed sets seven or eight years ago. I really got into it and was really astounded by it when I got deeply into it, how broad it was, and I thought, 'How much fun this would be to play.'

"I thought if I couldn't have my fantasy, to be in Led Zeppelin, why couldn't I get some people together who felt the same way? They'd have to be girls, and I just went for a word-of-mouth


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process to findsome. In the past, I'd advertised, but that never seemed to work."

Paynes spent time playing guitar behind Ronnie Spector before opting for her Led/Led Zeppelinband. She adds that McLellan was singing in We Will Rock You, a Queen musical in Las Vegas, and working as a dancer on Broadway. Destroy played drums in TheLunachicks, and Brigantino was doing her own thing, writing for soundtracks.

"We do it like Led Zeppelin did, like our bass player also plays keyboards and mandolin, and even plays a total of 13 instruments. We choose the instruments that our counterparts in the original band would have played, we hope."

Lez Zeppelin has been to Europe to play a couple of times and plans on returning in November. In Germany, the group was especially well-received, Paynes says.

"In Europe, we played large clubs, and in England, especially, we were curious to see how we would go over, in the land of Zep, the land of ice and snow, as they sang," Paynes notes. "And it was absolutely great when we played London in February at the end of our tour. They went nuts."

Paynes has a new fantasy to help her rock 'n' roll dream take off: She'd really like it if President Clinton came to the band's show tonight (just in case he happens to be in town, spending some qualitytime at his Presidential Center).

"When I was with Ronnie Spector, we played for him once, at a G8 conference in Denver," she says. "He was a big fan of Ronnie and her old group, The Ronnettes, so he talked to all of us afterwards. So, Mr. President, if you're in Little Rock when we are, we'd be glad to put you on our guest list."

Skip Rutherford, you know what to do.

LEZ ZEPPELIN

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(501) 823-0090

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