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Making Music All Their Own

Bjorkestra and Lez Zeppelin Find Creativity in Covers

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The philosopher Jean Baudrillard believes American culture today has entered a state known as hyperreality, where everything is an imitation of something else. Movie remakes, Converse All-Stars, and the ironically retro t-shirts found in Urban Outfitters all testify to the fact that authenticity has been replaced by duplication.

But all these examples dim in the face of the cover band, loosely defined as one group of people getting together and mimicking another group of people's way of playing instruments, singing songs, and wearing their hair in funny styles. Take these two New York cover bands: Lez Zeppelin, the all-female Led Zeppelin tribute band, and the Björkestra, a jazz orchestra devoted to synthesis of bebop and Björk.

When Lez Zeppelin hits the stage, it might as well be the real thing. The band is notorious for playing difficult Zeppelin songs flawlessly and donning tailor-made Zeppelin outfits. Crowds cry out "Robert!" and "Jimmy!" when they're onstage. When they're offstage, devoted Zeppelin fans give them hand-made gifts that they would have given them to the real Robert and Jimmy to wear, but, um, they don't tour anymore.

Lez Zeppelin's powerful stage presence is undoubtedly what led to over 150 comments in their online guest book, from fans both obnoxiously male ("Who was that on guitar? Would've made a calendar out of you, girl.") and admiringly female ("You girls rock so hard!!"). It's striking how many fans comment that they entered the venue wary but left thinking Lez Zeppelin was better than the real thing.

"People come in and are skeptical, but you can see the transition with the people in the front row," says lead guitarist Steph Payne. "Ten minutes into it, people are loving it and going nuts."

The perfection of the show presents a problem, however: if you're a serious musician, how much time can you devote to a seemingly gimmicky performance-art that can only go as far as the boundaries set by the original artist?

"It can't ever be pure imitation, there is no trickery involved," responds Payne. "What's been

surprising has been how the idea runs away with itself. Led Zeppelin is the canon of music, but it's just a springboard. When we're on stage, the synergy creates its own thing and it transcends the band."

Instead of limiting the group's imagination, covering the "canon" actually drives Lez Zeppelin's creativity forward. Travis Sullivan, active New York jazz musician and founder and arranger for Björkestra, finds similar inspiration in the songs of Björk. Far from being a stereotypical cover band, Björkestra focuses on exploring jazz by using Björk as a starting point. Unlike the note-for-note reproduction of Lez Zeppelin, Björkestra's foundation allows for more creative interpretations.

"In Björkestra, we try to combine the language of Björk with the language of jazz," Sullivan explains —no easy task considering Björk's immense persona, Icelandic background, powerful vocals, and spectacularly creative song stylings. Initially, Travis approached the challenge by using electronics and drum pads to compliment the orchestra. When this direction didn't work, he decided to use only the orchestra to perform his arrangements.

Sullivan compares himself to a composer who writes music inspired by particularly meaningful poems, and this framework results in covers of "Cocoon" and "Army of Me" that sound like remixes, not duplications. Björk fans coming to performances do not wish to see a cover band, but rather hear interesting renditions of familiar songs. They are not unlike jazz fans listening to Ella Fitzgerald do "Mack the Knife" or Thelonius Monk covering "The Way You Look Tonight."

There is a possibility both Lez Zeppelin and Björkestra will sell out their upcoming Bowery Ballroom shows. Payne talks about the band getting big enough to be signed to a major label and produce records. Travis Sullivan dreams of Björk herself performing with the orchestra in Carnegie Hall. It's hard to believe cover bands would get so popular and people would so readily embrace replication. But both Björkestra and Lez Zeppelin reject the traditional cover band concept. Instead, they see the simulacra they create as personal expression, something that carries originality and meaning.

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