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MUSIC CHRISTOPHER JOHN TREACY February 15, 2006

## Is Lez Zeppelin a lesbian band?

**'DEFINITELY MAYBE,' THEY SAY AS THIS GROUP PREPARES TO PERFORM ON FEB. 18 AT MIDDLE EAST, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.**

Chatting with Lez Zeppelin mastermind Steph Paynes the day after the Grammy awards provides a side door into a conversation about musical synergy.

The Grammy's by most accounts were a bust ("American Idol" beat "Music's Biggest Night"'s ratings). Perhaps it has something to do with lack of synergy in joining acts like Mary J. Blige and Bono. Paynes, and her girls, seem to be on the right track for attracting new audiences that music's "oldest" night seems dearly to need.

For the last three years, Lez Zeppelin - an all female Zeppelin cover band consisting of Paynes, Lisa Brigantino, Helen Destroy, and Sarah McLellan - has been astounding audiences with, well, their balls; musically speaking, that is.

"Zeppelin had a unity of the highest calling, a near-telepathic understanding of one another - they were in touch with their music, and with themselves - individually and as a band," explains Lez Zeppelin guitarist Steph Paynes, who occupies the Jimmy Page spot in the band. "To really grasp Zeppelin, you need to reach for that kind of synergistic magic. Otherwise you're just paying homage, which is fine, but there are limits to where you can take that sort of tribute. A lot of it hinges on our ability to stay in the moment, to really listen to what one another is doing on stage, because while we're playing to an audience, we're also playing to each other."

Whether or not the ladies that comprise Lez Zeppelin are in fact lesbian is up for debate, and the band is happy to let us chatter on without divulging any information either way - good for them.

"The answer to the question is 'definitely maybe.' It works on a number of levels. First of all, part of the whole Zeppelin motif was an air of mystery and mythology - nobody knew that much about these guys, and the music spoke for itself. And our sexuality isn't relevant to the music, which should be the focus, right? Plus, to say that we are or aren't gay women will invite in a negative backlash either way. But we're proud of our name - once we'd thought of it, there was no question about using it. So, let people believe what they want. But to come out under a banner, we'd get pigeonholed. After all, folks have all sorts of political lines they draw - it gets very touchy."

Payne jokes that the press has often just assumed the band is gay, but all the while, she's far from oblivious about the cauldron of psycho-sexual implications that she and her musical comrades are stirring. The notion of women delivering the music of Led Zeppelin, the almighty Gods of what the press has (unfortunately) coined as 'cock rock,' conveys a host of delightfully mixed messages - perhaps especially confusing to straight men. Furthermore, so many



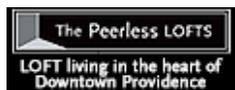
Lez Zeppelin: "Our sexuality isn't relevant to the music, which should be the focus, right? ... We're proud of our name."

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of contemporary music's most powerful women have been obscured by their pens - the power is in the writing more so that in the performance; Lez Zeppelin turns that notion on its ear.

"People come with all sorts of expectations - that we can't play, or it'll be really light, or that we're gay so it's a fem thing," she says. "But think of it this way; guys know this catalogue, so we're spoon-feeding them images of female musicians in a position of power, yet in a language they already know - a code they can understand. The aggression in the music isn't easily ignored - it's right up in their faces, and they can really feel the awe. Plus, Page and Plant had a downright effeminate sexuality about them - pretty boys. I think we have the potential to put some men at ease for having guiltily felt the sexual magnetism of the original band."

Paynes makes no bones about taking this project seriously, but if the band wasn't having fun all the same, they'd find other things to do. One thing is certain - they won't tolerate being sold as a nostalgia novelty.

"We're very aware that the industry would be more than happy to make a circus act out of us - and that's to be avoided at all costs. We don't do tribute-band lineup shows for that reason. We're all incredibly satisfied - this whole project is amazingly resonant with each of us. We've got a ton of charisma and we've thrown ourselves into this work in a joyful way. I just hope people come with open ears and let the power of the performance hit them. To us, it feels limitless - the magic is definitely there." •

*Lez Zeppelin busts out with the magic at Middle East, Cambridge, Mass., on Saturday, Feb. 18. For more information, connect to [www.lezzeppelin.com](http://www.lezzeppelin.com) or [www.mideastclub.com](http://www.mideastclub.com).*

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Openly gay Mass.-native Luke Parkin releases his first commercial album, an instrumental CD called 'Winter,' and braces for success



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