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The song remains the same

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Like Led Zeppelin once sang, "It's been a long time since I rock and rolled." Recently I've punk-rocked, I've rockabilled, I've '80s-revived and, on some rare occasions, I've emoed. But I can't remember the last time I truly rock-and-rolled, and yes, it has been a long, lonely time. But now Lez Zeppelin, the female Led Zeppelin tribute band, has let me get back to where I come from.

Female cover bands that pay tribute to some of the most masculine idols around aren't such anomalies anymore. Cheap Chick, Hells Belles and AC/DShe have all been injecting testosterone anthems with estrogen. Not until Lez Zeppelin, however, have any of these bands captured the essence of the original without taking themselves out of the equation.

"I think that the real challenge is playing it with the right kind of feel, playing it with the right kind of emotion and letting yourself come through it in the spirit of how it should be played," said Steph Paynes, the Jimmy Page of the group.

As it should be when covering one of the greatest bands in history, each of the women brings a massive talent to the group. Sarah McLellan may not have the same reckless wails as Robert Plant, but her bluesy voice is just as alluring. Lisa Brigantino doesn't miss a beat when emulating John Paul Jones' bass lines, and Helen Destroy takes the place of the late John Bonham, securing herself as an exceptional drummer in her own right.

Every note is right on, the swagger and presence of the ladies is anachronistic and the power of the songs comes through as if they were the originals. Even the mystery and intrigue that surrounded Led is encompassed in Lez. The implications of their name and their militant "don't ask, don't tell" policy have left many people guessing: Are they or aren't they?

"I think that if we were to answer that question we kind of lose either way," Paynes said. "I think it's much better to let people wonder what the truth of it is. Zeppelin always kept a mystery about them, which I think was very effective. I mean, why not leave something for people to imagine?"

What is hard for some to imagine is cock rock being played by four individuals void of the required appendages. However, Lez Zeppelin is proof that it can be done, and Paynes will argue that the latent female sexuality in Led Zeppelin is responsible for the success of her band and the misnomer of the label.

"For Christ's sake, Page and Plant idolized Joni Mitchell," she said. "How can you do cock rock when your idol is Joni Mitchell?"

The notion of starting an all-female cover band hit Paynes – the group's founder – about five years ago.

"Zeppelin's kind of been the soundtrack to my life," she said. "The more I listened to it as a mature musician, the more I was struck by how brilliant they really were."

After the original Zeppelin started making continuous rounds on her iPod, the idea for a tribute band was there, and she knew it had to be all girls.

Now the band has reached another level and will be releasing their first album. No official release date has been set, but Paynes said they are shooting for a May or June date. She also teased that



Photo by Michael Goldberg, courtesy of <http://www.lezzeppelin.com>

Living, loving maids. From left, Lez Zeppelin is Lisa Brigantino, Helen Destroy, Sarah McLellan and Steph Paynes.

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while they are still shifting things around on the album, at least one song from Zeppelin's first six albums will be found on the album.

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For that extra bit of Zeppelin magic, seminal producer Eddie Kramer was enlisted. Kramer is famed for having worked on *Led Zeppelin II* and *III*, *House of the Holy*, *Physical Graffiti* and *The Song Remains the Same*. Kramer also engineered all of Jimi Hendrix's studio albums.

"He is just great at what he does," Paynes said. "He's got the most incredible sense of sound. We went through things and when we heard something we liked, he knew just what to do with it."

As surreal as the experience of sharing the studio with a such a musical intellect can be, their whole adventure as a band has been surreal for Paynes, too.

"Things keep happening that are more and more outrageous," she said. "I'm beginning to expect the unexpected."

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