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Lez Zeppelin — a lotta love

Songs, not the gender, remain the same in Led Zep tribute band

By Len Righi Of The Morning Call

In 2003, when Lez Zeppelin, the all-female Led Zeppelin tribute band, played its first show, it could have been as catastrophic as the Hindenburg disaster depicted on the cover of the revered British band's 1969 debut album.

Instead, it turned into a celebration day with a whole lotta love.

"Instantly, there was this response," says guitarist-founder Steph Paynes via cell phone as she and her band mates — vocalist Sarah McLellan, drummer Helen Destroy and bassist-mandolinist-keyboardist Lisa Brigantino — travel by bus from Baltimore, Md., to Louisville, Ky., to play with Glenn Frey (!) at a Kentucky Derby party.

"Really, everybody loved the idea. It was like toilet paper. Who thought about it [before it was invented]? But it works."

New York-based Lez Zeppelin, which will play Sunday at

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RiverFusion in Bethlehem, really started taking off a year later, according to Paynes, after Spin magazine wrote about the band in a story headlined Chicks with Picks.

"The article was about the trend of girls playing guys' music in tribute bands, and the writer served us up nicely," says Paynes. "That elevated our profile nationally. We got a booking agent and started touring a lot more."

The next big boost came early this year. In late January, Reuters did a story about the band and CNN.com put it on its Web page.

"We heard from everywhere, Argentina, Brazil, Croatia. It was crazy," says Paynes. "The last few months, things have really started to snowball..."

"The press, they absolutely love us. I used to do some freelance rock writing for Rolling Stone, Musician and New Musical Express, and I never read press like that!"

As for the audiences at Lez Zep shows, "at first they are skeptical, but then they are bowled over," says Paynes. "Generally, most people who haven't seen us don't think we can do it. That's where the sexism comes in. Then they're stunned and can't believe it. I guess that's sexism, too, but at least it's a step in the right direction."

Paynes will not discuss whether the band's name indicates its members' sexual preference. Like their ages, that is a topic left open to speculation, Paynes says.

At RiverFusion, Lez Zeppelin will be limited to a 45-minute set. "We might do seven or eight songs," says Paynes. "Maybe 'Dazed and Confused,' 'Babe I'm Gonna Leave You.' We're working up a few new numbers from 'Physical Graffiti,' including 'Ten Years Gone.' But I don't know what we'll play."

Paynes notes that Lez Zeppelin's repertoire spans every Zep album except 1979's "In Through the Out Door." "We pretty much have something in there from every record," she says. "We're determined to work our way through the whole catalog."

Growing up, Paynes favored "the classic Beatles stuff and the stolen British blues," music played by bands such as the Yardbirds, Cream and, of course, Zeppelin.

Paynes says Zep's music has been firmly implanted in the collective cultural psyche. "Zeppelin has always been hugely

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popular," she says. "Our audience ranges from kids and teen-agers to 25-year-olds and the older generation who saw Led Zeppelin play. People are desperately hungry to hear this music."

Paynes notes that while Zeppelin's blend of folk, thundering blues-rock and heavy metal "was a very powerful thing, musically, it also has a real allure, something you can't put your finger on."

She tries, nevertheless. "You have to be an extraordinary musician to play this music, to tap into what type of magic they were conjuring," she says. "The band had a lot of passion, and we're just in love with it. We're completely dedicated to it. Our audience picks up on this. They go into their own trance."

Then, perhaps thinking she has been rambling on, Paynes brings it on home with humor. "Another six months, they'll be camping out in front of box offices with sleeping bags."

So how do the four women get along with each other?

"We each carry Mace," Paynes deadpans. "If anyone gets too close to the other, we spray. It's exceedingly annoying, but we're stuck with each other. It's really a drag."

"Actually, we get along great. But don't print that. It's boring."

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