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All-female Led Zeppelin tribute band steps up to challenge  
Surprisingly successful group makes its way through Austin tonight

By Patrick Caldwell

As the four ladies of the coyly named Lez Zeppelin strut confidently onto stage before an audience of disbelievers (like they do night after night in bars and clubs across America), they face a tall challenge: bringing to life the music of rock's most lionized band, the greatest foursome to ever write lyrics about J.R.R. Tolkien.

But it's to the credit of this all-female Led Zeppelin tribute group that they pull it off. Steph Paynes perfectly apes Jimmy Page's backwards walk while vocalist Sarah McLellan releases a banshee howl in reverent homage to Robert Plant, shirt open in Plant's trademark fashion - albeit with one button just below the breast. Aided by bandmates Helen Destroy and Lisa Brigantino (filling in for John Bonham and John Paul Jones, respectively), the foursome wins over some of the hardest-to-please fans of "cock rock" around. And they make it all look so very easy.



Media Credit: Photo courtesy of Lez Zeppelin  
Vocalist Sarah McLellan and her fellow Lez Zeppelin band members rock out in homage to the progenitors of heavy metal.

"Everyone's skeptical," said Paynes. "No one thinks you can do it, but once they see that you can, people go nuts. The way audiences respond is so great. It's almost mystical."

And audiences do respond, on a level unusual for a tribute band. Lez Zeppelin toured Europe early in 2006, got cover attention in Spin, played to a crowd of over 40,000 in Times Square in conjunction with a marathon to benefit breast cancer research and rocked the highly prestigious Download Festival in England. With an album in the pipeline and a tour that swings through Austin tonight, Led Zeppelin's she-incarnation began surprisingly inauspiciously, with a veritable rite of passage undertaken by nearly every music fan at some point or another: the adoring re-examination of the band's discography.

"I grew up with Led Zeppelin on in the background, like nearly everyone, but I really became intrigued with them 7 or 8 years ago," recounted Paynes. "And I just started listening to the stuff with fresh ears. Some of it was quite new for me, and I really couldn't believe how good it was. It was just Zeppelin-land in my universe, and it just spoke to me in kind of every way. As a guitar player, what could be more fun than doing what Jimmy Page does?"

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