

Music

Decoding Lez Zeppelin

by Allyson Polsky McCabe

Every band wants you to believe that it's all about the music. And every band's success depends on sustaining that illusion. But for a tribute band, the task is infinitely more difficult. It isn't enough to play just like the members of a defunct "real" band. You have to vanish behind the characters you portray. When that "real" band is Led Zeppelin, whose yearly album sales reach into the millions despite having disbanded more than 30 years ago, and the tribute band is comprised of an often-changing female line-up, we're talking about an act of stunning bravado. Then again, there is no other band quite like Lez Zeppelin.

The band is the brainchild of veteran New York guitarist Steph Paynes. Paynes was between gigs when she first dreamt of putting together an all-female supergroup that possessed the same virtuosity and stage presence as her most beloved rock idols and was capable of scaling the same gargantuan heights. Although Paynes is unusually ambitious, Lez Zeppelin's runaway success took her by surprise. In 2005, only a year into the band's tenure, Chuck Klosterman lauded Lez Zeppelin in the pages of *Spin* as the most powerful all-female band in rock history. Paynes capitalized on the plug by touring relentlessly, cultivating the band's fan base and legend even as new members came and went. By 2008, Lez landed on the bill for the Bonnaroo festival, playing before an audience of more than 20,000.

Paynes understandably wants to avoid the double stigma of fronting an all-female tribute band even as she benefits from those associations. She's claimed that because Lez Zeppelin is all-female, they are inherently incapable of impersonating Led Zeppelin. Ergo, they are not a tribute band. But there are scores of other all-female tribute bands, including well-known Zep imitators Zepparella. That fact forced Paynes to lean on Lez's superior musicianship and dedication to show that the



Lez Zeppelin at the Brooklyn Museum. Photo: Kalli Angel.

band is more than just another second-rate Zeppelin clone. She enlisted legendary Led Zeppelin recording engineer (and former Jimi Hendrix producer) Eddie Kramer to produce the band's 2007 debut album, and she executed their 2010 sophomore effort as a meticulous song-by-song recreation of *Led Zeppelin I* using all the same vintage equipment and analog recording techniques.

Though novel, this strategy hasn't entirely worked, because Lez's greatest distinction isn't in how well or fastidiously the band plays Zeppelin; it's in how they channel the band through their own formidable talents and sensibilities and a complicated—and ambiguous—prism of gender and sexuality. In their current configuration, Lez Zeppelin has performed everywhere from trashy dive bars to upscale theaters, outdoor festivals, even in an art museum. There is never an opening act or announcer. The band suddenly starts playing and it feels like a true revival—not of Zeppelin, but something else entirely. That *mélange* of Led plus Lez is the energy fueling the band's uniquely potent magnetism.

At the center of it all is Shannon Conley, who looks like a cross between Robert Plant and Jerry Hall, sings like a cross between Robert Plant and Janis Joplin, and moves like a cross between Robert Plant and Shane from the *L Word*. All of this is to say there is no one in the room who isn't turned on. Fans thrust themselves at the band and at each other. The stage, when there is one, becomes a shrine of bras and boxers. And at the end of the show, Lez Zeppelin doesn't spirit away through some secret door to a waiting limousine en route to their private jet. They're out at the merch table, bumming cigarettes, and taking confessions from ostensibly straight middle-aged guys about their secret crushes on Jimmy Page and Robert Plant—this is minutes after the band has serenaded the ladies to “The Lemon Song” and “Whole Lotta Love.”

The band is mum about the off-stage sexual orientation of its members, preferring only to say, “We're whatever you want us to be.” And that's exactly the right answer. Lez's recent show at the Highline Ballroom was billed as “stripped down and strapped on.” That's truth in advertising: Stripped down because they're doing everything I've just described without being propped up by major recording labels and radio stations, massive infusions of drink and drug, and hordes of young, nubile groupies. Strapped on because that takes serious balls. Lez Zeppelin is a real rock and roll band. And then some.

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