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Your Time Is Gonna Come

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It had been quite a weekend for seeing live music. On successive nights, I had seen John Lee Hooker (for the first time), Stevie Ray Vaughn (for the nth time), and now I was sitting in a crowd watching the second ARMs concert, a benefit show which featured Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker, Jeff Beck, and Jimmy Page. The newspaper's review of the show of the previous night had lauded Beck to the skies, but had been scathing toward Clapton and Page. Still, I wasn't worried. Clapton played very well and Beck had justified the review's superlatives, although this was of very little concern. No matter what the critic had said, based on what I now see as no real evidence, I couldn't imagine that Page would play badly. Having never seen Led Zeppelin, I was there for one reason: to see Jimmy Page play guitar. When Page was announced, last after the other stars had finished their sets, he took the stage and said into the microphone, "Now is the time for the critics to leave the auditorium." Hmm, I thought. Even gods care about the critics.

The concept of recognition has played an important role in social philosophy for two hundred years, generating provocative arguments about the nature of the self and our obligations to others. Given the extreme recognition accorded rock stars, and especially Led Zeppelin, they can help us better understand the concept, which itself explains interesting aspects of the band.

Hegel and the Formation of Led Zeppelin

The German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1832) first "recognized" the importance of recognition in an argument called "the

master-slave dialectic." It's a pretty cool argument, and worth summarizing before we take up Led Zeppelin.

Imagine two individuals (call them "Frank" and "Elvis") meeting in the "state of nature" (a situation outside of society). Since Frank and Elvis are in a state of nature, they have a very rudimentary grasp of their relation to the world. Each considers himself to contain all of the world's meaning and value and both are entirely governed by their desires. Upon meeting, the mere existence of the other constitutes a challenge to the individual: the other doesn't recognize one's claim to contain all of the world's meaning and value. As mutual threats, but without a culture in which to compete, Frank and Elvis fight until one, let's say Elvis, kills the other. However, what seems like a solution fails, since the loser is no longer around to recognize the winner. What Elvis thought he wanted turns out not to be what he wanted after all. Elvis thought he wanted to destroy Frank, but really he wanted to be recognized by Frank.

Hegel concludes that the desire for recognition is a fundamental human desire. This desire isn't satisfied once and for all and left behind, but continues throughout life. Another conclusion Hegel draws, although it doesn't follow from the master-slave dialectic, is that recognition must be "concrete": for someone's attitude to you to count as recognition, it must relate to a characteristic which is specific to you. Hegel is concerned that recognizing someone on the basis of their being "human" will neither satisfy the individual's desire for recognition, nor motivate those who supposedly are recognizing the individual to actually treat them in a decent fashion.

A different sort of example makes the point more clearly. The Grammy award that Milli Vanilli received for musicianship wouldn't count on Hegel's account as recognition, since they didn't perform the music on the album. (Everyone knows the problems that the Grammys have had in being taken seriously as a form of recognition. This is consistent with the same point: if an award is so far off the mark as not to relate to the actual quality of the music which is being produced, then it may cease to be a form of recognition at all.)

Finally, the most important and interesting conclusion that Hegel draws from the argument is that the struggle for recognition is an important component in one's formation as an individual. This means that one becomes an individual through interaction with others, rather than being essentially an isolated individual who later

comes into contact with others, as is claimed by leading rationalist philosophers prior to Hegel, such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant. Because of the desire for recognition, one's very being as an individual is constituted by one's interactions with others.

Hegel doesn't discuss how this happens, but if we connect his account of recognition with some of his other ideas, we can envision it this way: If someone claimed to be an outstanding songwriter, on the order of Page and Plant, without depending in the least on others, based entirely on his or her own thoughts, his or her own work, we would be fully justified in rejecting the claim as impossible. Any such story is a fantasy. People become songwriters by hearing songs written by others, absorbing them, and then trying to make something like—but also unlike—what has been absorbed. Songwriters inherit and work within traditions, even if they transcend them. Having created, the writer gets feedback and learns through the reactions of others. This was how Page and Plant became songwriters; neither achieved greatness without these sorts of interactions.

The learning takes place within the context of the struggle for recognition; one accepts instruction from those one recognizes as worthy, and one strives to be worthy oneself. The struggle is to reach a point where one's abilities as a songwriter are objectively established, and this can't be done unless one interacts with others in these basic ways. How much recognition is enough may vary from person to person, but the desire for recognition tends to continue throughout life.

I think Hegel's account applies to the formation of Led Zeppelin in two ways, one pretty straightforward and the other more controversial. Most obviously, Jimmy Page formed Led Zeppelin because the recognition he received from being the top session guitarist in London wasn't enough for him. And John Paul Jones joined for the same reason. They needed more recognition than they could receive in that way. Songwriting and performing have the potential for greater prestige than session work. Of course, their motivations could be stated as a need for creative expression, which is certainly true, but this doesn't negate the role played by recognition. They could have expressed themselves by writing songs on their off time while keeping their day jobs. In other words, the "expressive" explanation fails to account for why they wished to tour as a band and make albums. In short, Jimmy Page wanted to be a rock star.

A complete account of the formation of Led Zeppelin as interactive would consider how the band and each of the musical selves of the members were formed by their interaction with each other. Unfortunately, I don't know enough about this part of the story. However, it's interesting that at their formation Robert Plant was the weakest link. (With the notable exception of "Thank You," it wouldn't be until the third or fourth album that Page would leave him to write lyrics unassisted.) And Plant was the only one to have a substantial solo career after the breakup. Could it be that he felt he still had something to prove?

The Critics and Led Zeppelin

I would consider the career of the band and its relation to rock critics as an example of the interactive formation of a self. Here the "self" is that of the band, rather than that of the individual members. I know that Zeppelin fans have a tendency to see the band as great from the very beginning, that all of their albums were great going back to the first, and that the struggle for recognition was merely a struggle to get the critics to see what was there from the start. However, I see things somewhat differently.

The first two albums are pretty good but not great. They each have a couple of great songs, and some moments on the other songs, but they are bombastic. The first album consists mostly of covers and the second was hastily recorded in bits and pieces. For a band which was supposed to be about albums, not singles, the records are disjointed. Rolling Stone now takes a lot of heat for dissing Zeppelin because the magazine was hung up on some misguided idea of authenticity. But Zeppelin's version of hard rock on their early albums leans very heavily on the blues, so much so that I think it could be called "histrionic blues," and the blues lives on authenticity. The blues has its bragging element, but bragging and bombast are not the same. Neither Plant's histrionics nor Page's virtuosity convey the emotions from which the blues arises. In short, Zeppelin, in spite of its surfeit of musical talent, and Page's highly imaginative production, was no Muddy Waters, nor even an Allman Brothers Band.

From the beginning, Zeppelin was an outstanding live band and was immediately recognized as such by the fans. And fan recognition of the albums was immediate as well. But the reviews of the albums were negative, sometimes harshly so, and this bothered all of the members of the band. (Both Page and Bonham have been

quoted as saying that the critics don't understand music—this will be relevant in the next section.) Robert Plant was acutely aware of the band's struggle for recognition at this point in their career, stating in a March 1970 interview, "What we've got to do now is consolidate the position we've arrived at, so that eventually we'll be able to say what we really want to say and people will listen to it because it's us."¹ As I see it, the albums improved in part because of the struggle for critical recognition. *III* is a transitional album; it is perhaps not better than the first two, but it is more cohesive and Plant is writing more lyrics. But it is *IV* where Zeppelin achieves greatness.

The basic elements are the same as on the first three albums, but it's as if a blurry and distorted photograph had suddenly come into sharp focus. All of the songs are very good, and more than half achieve some sort of perfection. The blues is still there—and better than before—but Plant is writing lyrics, not merely appropriating them. The key is not merely that Plant is writing his own songs, but that he is writing hippie songs ("Stairway to Heaven," "Misty Mountain Hop," "Going to California"). This resulted in an improvement because, one, hippie music was more authentic to him than the blues, both as an individual and as a musician—at the time the band was formed, in addition to sharing Page's blues and R&B enthusiasms, Plant was into California bands—and two, hippie music tends to be more self-effacing and this brought the bombast under control.

The Struggle for Recognition

As I said, the musical elements remain the same as on the first three albums, so there can be no thought of Page "selling out" his vision, but his and the band's desire for critical success led them to continually improve, to the point where the individual songs and the album as a whole are stronger. Zeppelin had suffered above all from the critics' claim that from the very start they were nothing but hype. With their fourth album, their substance and seriousness were unassailable. As John Paul Jones said, after *IV*, "no one ever compared us to Black Sabbath again."² In other words, with *IV*, Led Zeppelin had won the struggle for recognition.

¹ Quoted by Keith Shadwick in *Led Zeppelin: The Story of a Band and their Music 1968-1980* (Hal Leonard, 2005), p. 109.

² Mick Wall, *When Giants Walked the Earth*, p. 267.

And the story can be continued. According to Keith Shadwick, circa 1973, "Zeppelin's band members, especially Plant and Page, yearned for wider recognition, not only of their talent but of their increasing sophistication and worldliness" (*Led Zeppelin*, p. 184). After *Houses of the Holy*, another critical flop, Zeppelin produced something which was scarcely believable—an album better than *IV*. *Physical Graffiti* is similar to the previous albums in that it delivers monster, bludgeoning riffs, but due to its different song structures, and the attainment of some genuine sentiment, it sounds unlike every other Zeppelin album. It is notoriously difficult to explain why some music succeeds, and it is especially daunting to criticize Keith Shadwick's approach to the album, given his extraordinary knowledge and abilities as a musician and a music writer. Nevertheless, I will try to articulate the reasons why *Physical Graffiti* is Led Zeppelin's greatest album by responding to his critique of the album.

Shadwick criticizes "Custard Pie" for having "no great distinguishing features." "In My Time of Dying," he says, has "the bloated effect of an overlong performance" (p. 227). "Houses of the Holy" is glowingly described, but after the vocals, Shadwick believes that the song founders because "the contrasting song section that the song cries out for never arrives. . . . the riff starts up again and is here to stay . . ." "Trampled Under Foot" is praised for "some innovative guitar sounds" but Shadwick criticizes its placement after "Houses of the Holy," "with its similar strut rhythm" (p. 229). Plant's vocal on "Black Country Woman" are said to "make for a curiously static performance." "In the Light" is described more positively, but Shadwick again denigrates its length: "Once again the track is very long: close to nine minutes and therefore longer than "Kashmir," which is usually thought of as the epic on *Physical Graffiti*. The introductory section alone of "In the Light" lasts for almost two minutes" (p. 232). In short, Shadwick thinks that the album is tedious. Throughout his book, one can see that he prefers the complex to the simple, variation to repetition. Hence his sneer that the last part of "In My Time of Dying" adds "nothing to the performance apart from time. The joys of repetition, as Prince put it. Or vamp 'til ready."

It is this preference which leads Shadwick to feel that he has to plead on behalf of "Kashmir." He understands the song thoroughly ("a study in repetition and stasis") and his description of it is superb. But he concludes that:

It could be argued that 'Kashmir' ultimately lacks enough variety in its orchestration and dynamics to maintain interest for its nine or so minutes in the way that *Bolero* does. But it is a brave and imaginative shot at a new type of form through repetition taken from Eastern music and applied to rock. Perhaps the imperfections give it a vulnerable charm that *Bolero* doesn't share. (p. 232)

Shadwick is correct that "Kashmir" brings a new type of form to rock, but he fails to see that his criticism—that the song lacks sufficient variety—is thus rendered irrelevant. "Kashmir" is nothing less than riveting for its entire duration. And it's the extended length and repetitiveness of the other songs which gives them a kind of simplicity, different from but just as exhilarating as the simplicity and brevity of punk and early rock. Shadwick's dismissive remarks can easily be turned around and claimed as positives: "the joys of repetition," "the riff . . . is here to stay." The latter can proudly serve as the album's motto. *Physical Graffiti* provides an experience not to be found anywhere else in rock.

While the critics can be faulted for not seeing the good moments on the early albums, I don't think their reactions were entirely unwarranted. And I think that Led Zeppelin was "formed", not as an unfolding of what was already pre-existing, but in the interactive struggle for recognition. As well as critical recognition, there is also recognition by peers. It's clear that Zeppelin felt competitive with the Stones, for example, but it's not clear in what specific ways that affected their music. There were also early negative reactions to Led Zeppelin, from Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, and John Lennon (*Rough Guide*, p. 72).

Recognition and Hierarchy

In addition to the conclusions that Hegel drew about the struggle for recognition for self-constitution, he also attempted to draw moral and political lessons from the master-slave dialectic. Returning to that argument, we need to consider its next stage. At the end of the first stage, we saw that killing one's antagonist didn't work out as expected for the victor. Now, however, when two individuals (call them "Page" and "Beck") meet in the state of nature, having no culture in which to compete, they will continue to fight to the death until eventually one of them realizes that being killed is not a desirable outcome either. Only when Page or Beck

values his physical life higher than his need for validation, will he give in and recognize the other as master. The winner then has a slave who recognizes him as having all value, which seems to be what he wanted.

Hegel's claim is that this resolution, like the first (death), is not a success for the winner. The master, Hegel says, can't be entirely satisfied with the recognition he receives from the slave, precisely because it's the recognition of a slave. The combatant wants the freely given recognition of a free human being, but receives only the recognition of a lesser being. Hegel draws the conclusion that slavery is self-defeating and thus morally wrong. Whether or not his argument establishes that, his main idea—that the quality of recognition varies with the position in the hierarchy of the one granting recognition—seems indisputable. This is illustrated by the fact that peer and critic recognition still mattered to Zeppelin even after they had achieved fan adulation. And among peer and critic recognition, some counted for more than others.

John Bonham, grumbling about critics, complained, "If Buddy Rich says I'm shit, then I'm shit, but what do these guys know?" Jimmy Page has also claimed that critics don't understand music, but if this were completely true, he would have been entirely unconcerned with their recognition. True, Zep's interest in critical recognition might have been purely strategic, since good reviews help sell records. But they had no need of critical recognition to do that, and it doesn't explain Page's comment at the ARMs concert. The place of critics in determining quality is a bit paradoxical in popular culture—since it is indeed a matter of popular culture. Still, by convention, critics are deemed to be higher in the hierarchy of opinion than the consumer, and Zeppelin recognized this conventional status by desiring and struggling for critical acclaim.

If we think that the value of recognition is relative to position in a hierarchy, then we'll construct a picture of society in which all are constantly struggling to gain the recognition of others, but especially those above them in order to move up or maintain their position. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provides a picture of society very close to this. In his terminology, Led Zeppelin was struggling to increase their "symbolic capital" or prestige.³ Hegel hoped to find a solution which would satisfy the desire of all for recognition,

³ *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford University Press, 1990).

and he believed that it could be found through some sort of "mutual recognition". There are several ways of interpreting and institutionalizing mutual recognition.

Some contemporary philosophers interpret recognition in terms of "human rights," arguing that mutual recognition takes place when all recognize each others' "humanity." One such attempt tries to find a characteristic common to all humans (such as "rationality") which deserves respect and is lacking in other animals. This approach fails because characteristics like rationality come in degrees; some people are more or less rational than others (and some animals, like chimpanzees, are more rational than some humans, like infants or extremely inebriated drummers). This leads us away from the system of equal rights we were aiming for. Are the Bay City Rollers and Led Zeppelin really deserving of equal respect?

Other philosophers, foregoing an attempt to distinguish human beings from animals, think moral equality should be based on sympathy arising from our common ability to feel pain or our shared mortality or "finitude." Since the members of Led Zeppelin and the Bay City Rollers have suffered, they are entitled to treatment as moral equals. Unfortunately, this tack is also problematic. Basing morality and equal political rights on compassion makes sense, but sympathy and recognition seem to be two entirely different things.

Both of these approaches to institutionalizing mutual recognition are based on general concepts of humanity. The one understands humanity in terms of traits like rationality; the other, based on our capacity to suffer. And both ignore Hegel's insight that recognition requires recognition of something specific about the person recognized. Recognizing someone as "human" fails to distinguish them in a positive way from anyone else. Basing our institutions on the concept of human rights is important for many reasons, but it's not going to satisfy anyone's desire for recognition—which was the point of bringing the concept into social philosophy in the first place.

Hegel offers an alternative. He recommends establishing a system of guilds (called "corporations") which will ameliorate the hardships of a free market economy. Sort of a cross between a professional association and a union, these guilds would mediate between the sphere of private individuals and the government. One of the hardships which the guilds would ameliorate is unemployment. Since each worker would be a member of a guild even

if unemployed, one would be assured of recognition as a “musician” or “engineer” or “teacher” even without a job. But Hegel doesn’t do much to defend the plausibility of his claims. He doesn’t address the issue of why the threshold of being a member of a profession or craft is more important than other levels of recognition within the hierarchy. Being a studio musician may be sufficient recognition for some, but others, like Page, are unsatisfied with even being the top session player. Nor does he address the issue of relative prestige of different jobs or professions. Having a guild for insurance brokers may help them with some sort of recognition, but it can hardly be said to equal the recognition of thousands of screaming fans. In order for this sort of mutual recognition to be equally satisfying, it must be equal, and Hegel doesn’t establish that a system of guilds could achieve that.

Groupies and Recognition

We have learned of two characteristics of recognition from Hegel: (1) recognition must be concrete, and (2) the value of recognition varies with the position and understanding of the recognizer. In addition, there are three ways recognition is manifested: (3) emulation, (4) association, and (5) gratification. In the rock context, we recognize our favorite groups by wishing to be like them—playing their songs, being influenced by their style or technique, adopting their mannerisms or manner of dress. If I wear a band’s T-shirt, I recognize them by associating with them. And if I pay for official Zep merchandise (rather than stealing it or buying a knockoff) I’m recognizing the band by giving something of value, which is what I mean by gratification. On this view, imitation isn’t the sincerest form of flattery; imitation, along with association and gratification is more sincere. If we think of Zeppelin’s appropriation of blues songs without crediting the writers and thus paying royalties, we can see this as a failure of recognition. Their recognition was deficient because of the lack of association (since they didn’t list the songwriter on the album) and lack of gratification (since they didn’t give anything of value for their appropriation).

Although it may be true that they were consistent in regard to song appropriation by allowing hip-hop artists to sample their songs, their appropriation of material from older blues artists seems especially heartless given the brutality of their treatment of those attempting to make bootleg recordings of their own shows.

Another aspect of recognition which I would classify under the heading of gratification is generosity in interpreting the actions and merits of the one granted recognition. Those who are admired are given the benefit of the doubt (when there is doubt), and their positive attributes are weighed more heavily than their negatives. Led Zeppelin illustrates this aspect of recognition rather dramatically. People still wanted to associate with them, emulate them, and gratify them, even though they often behaved like thugs, inflicting physical violence as retribution, intimidation, or just as a joke. And they were (and are) still adored.

Sex as Recognition

There’s an even more obvious way Led Zeppelin can illuminate the concept of recognition. Gratification offered as an expression of recognition includes sexual gratification, and the name “Led Zeppelin” is nearly synonymous with groupies. And having sex is as direct a way of “associating” with someone as there is. (“I’m With the Band,” as Des Barres titled her book.) Curiously, neither Hegel nor his latter-day followers in recognition theory have considered the case of groupies. Titillating as the subject may be, important philosophical issues are missed when one ignores groupies.

Considering sex as both association and gratification, it initially seems that groupies are entirely on the giving end of recognition, as if, to return to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, an individual was hastening to take the slave position. But this is to miss the fact that being a groupie is itself a struggle for recognition. The girls and young women who wished to be “with” Led Zeppelin were competing against each other for some recognition (in the form of association, if nothing else) from members of the band. Furthermore, attaining this recognition from a member of the band achieved recognition from the other groupies, which manifested itself in the form of envy or jealousy, which is best analyzed under the heading of “emulation.” In the introduction of her book on groupies, Pamela des Barres notes that many aspiring groupies have sought her advice over the years on how to score with rock stars.

Second, by making the connection between groupies and recognition, we can get some insight into problems that arise in feminist theory. Since the 1950s, feminist theory has produced a profusion of brilliant, interesting, and insightful philosophical theories and analyses. However, these theories, and feminism itself,

have hit a wall, and this barrier seems to be a disagreement about the answer to one question: is it legitimate for women to strive to appeal to men's sexual desire? Is this a legitimate form of empowerment, of gratifying one's own desires, or is it self-objectification, a result of false consciousness? Since the type of recognition which groupies received from the band derives from sexual appeal, a look at groupies raises the issue in a very striking way.

The Empowerment of Groupies

On one side would be the claims of Des Barres and other groupies that they are doing what they want to do, and thus should be seen as empowered, not subordinate. In support of Des Barres's claims, Susan Fast connects female pursuit of Led Zeppelin with earlier rock'n'roll examples:

. . . in the wake of a growing disenchantment with the prospect of marriage and life in the suburbs, young white girls saw in the Beatles or, previously, Elvis several things. Elvis "stood for a dangerous principle of masculinity," a "hood" who was "visibly lower class and symbolically black (as the bearer of black music to white youth)"; the Beatles "while not exactly effeminate, [were] at least not easily classifiable in the rigid gender distinctions of middle-class American life." Further, these were not men with whom the girls would marry and "settle down"; the "romance would never end in the tedium of marriage. . . . Adulation of the male star was a way to express sexual yearnings that would normally be pressed into the service of popularity or simply repressed. The star could be loved . . . with complete abandon." In other words, the Beatles and Elvis offered both alternative constructions of gender to these young women and a safe way to explore their own sexuality. Idolizing these performers was an empowering act. (*In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*, p. 161).

This passage could be taken to show that groupies are even more empowered than fans, who are only empowered in fantasy. This idea, that being a successful groupie is empowering, is expressed in Des Barres's story of meeting Patti Boyd in a restroom. According to Miss Pamela, Patti said "George and I think you're the star of *this* show."⁴ It's also expressed in books like the *Rough*

⁴ Pamela des Barres, *I'm With the Band* (Chicago Review Press, 2005), p. 254.

Guide to Led Zeppelin and Danny Goldberg's *Bumping into Geniuses*, where Page and other famous rock stars are listed as "conquests" of Des Barres and Bebe Buell.

It's not clear whether Fast herself sees it this way, since although she does note that Des Barres's activities as a groupie involved attaining power, she dismisses Des Barres as an example because, according to Fast, "her mode of engagement is exceptional and has little to do with the music" (p. 161). According to Des Barres and other groupies, being a groupie has everything to do with the music. This is especially clear in Des Barres's later book of interviews with other groupies, where they make a sharp distinction between themselves, who are after musicians because of the music, and those who are after them because they are celebrities. This point is also made explicitly and rather pointedly in the movie *Almost Famous*.

Fast, in her own analysis of Zeppelin fandom and gender, turns away from groupies to focus on regular fans. She argues that being a Zeppelin fan can be empowering for a woman in spite of the fact that she agrees with the view that hard rock cultures, including Zeppelin's music, are "sometimes overt and crude celebrations of machismo . . . perpetuating patriarchal values" (p. 168). Fast's view is that the female fan can, in fantasy, take on the position of Plant or Page, imagining themselves as the leader of the band. Some of these fans might even take that position in actuality, by taking up the guitar or singing and forming a band. (I won't consider the GTOs here: check them out on YouTube.) In terms of the elements of recognition noted above, Fast is exclusively on the side of emulation, while groupies devote themselves to association and gratification.

Many feminists would object to both Fast's and Des Barres's claims that Zeppelin fandom and groupiedom can be empowering for women. Some would note that sexual and romantic attractiveness arises from characteristics which are not equally distributed, hindering solidarity among women. However, no matter how far one wishes to distance oneself—and others—from taking physical beauty as the object of one's desire, whichever characteristics one says that people should find attractive, it needs to be demonstrated that such characteristics are not also unequally distributed. The fact is, sexual and romantic interaction is unavoidably a struggle for recognition. This critique of groupies runs aground in the same way as Hegel's political concept of recognition; both try in vain to impose an egalitarian conception on a competitive, hierarchical endeavor.

Other feminists would note that actions take place in a social and historical context and that any argument that ignores this context is an irrelevant abstraction. Groupies, they would argue, are striving to objectify themselves; thus they are actively trying to take up the subordinate position in a gender hierarchy. It may be conceptually possible that one could feel empowered by fandom of "cock rock" or being a groupie, but social relations take place in the context of stereotypes, and as a practical matter, groupies reinforce stereotypes which work to the disadvantage of all women, including themselves. There is no logical reason why a woman couldn't be both an object of physical desire and a thinking, creative being, but the mutual exclusivity of these two roles is built into gender stereotypes.

For her part, Des Barres does distinguish between being "accomplished," which is creative and intellectual, and being romantically and sexually desired (pp. 149, 163). Not surprisingly, she wants to be both: "It was my twenty-first birthday, and what I wanted was an exciting lengthy resume or an engagement ring from Jimmy Page." Although in her memoir these goals don't seem to conflict, in her book of interviews with other groupies she identifies a conflict between being a groupie and pursuing her own creativity (*Let's Spend the Night Together*, p. 174). However, this is not because of social pressure from stereotypes but because it's difficult to find the time necessary to pursue both activities.

The position of groupies neatly illustrates the dilemma faced by contemporary feminism. On the one hand, the liberation of women's desire is claimed to be a triumph of feminism. Feminists on this side would be satisfied with the references by rock writers to Jimmy Page and other rock stars as the conquests of Pamela des Barres. On the other hand, it is claimed to reinforce gender hierarchy in a way which disadvantages women. The issues are complex, involving hierarchy, stereotypes, and sex. I'll leave it for feminists to find the solution.

Led Zeppelin and Art

"Can rock'n'roll be art?" "Isn't Led Zeppelin's music art?" Some variant of these questions is the start of many dorm room discussions, or used to be. (I imagine now the question involves rap and Jay-Z.) These questions, and the distinction between art and popular culture they imply, involve claims of recognition. Fans of popular

culture seek to attain for their own favorites, and thus also for themselves, the prestige they see accorded to high art. Nor is it only fans who do this. Plant called Page the "Mahler of the Telecaster" and said, "What we talk about is creating something as notable as Beethoven's Fifth. Not just something that will still be remembered in fifty years, but something so mammoth that it would last . . . forever."⁵ Such remarks situate Zeppelin in relation to high art as part of a struggle for recognition.

In this struggle the positions are radically contested. On the one side, the advocates of art claim that there is a sharp divide between art and mass culture, in which art is clearly superior. Art is said to be beautiful, or sublime, or transcendent, or timeless, or all of the above, and mass culture is said to be mere enjoyment, entertainment, escapism. On the other hand, advocates of mass culture see the art position as mere snobbism, a pretentious and unjustified claim to superiority when all culture is merely a matter of likes and dislikes, and the likings of anyone are just as good as those of anyone else. Any foray into these subjects will inevitably hurt some feelings. No doubt it would hurt the feelings of Bay City Rollers fans to know I used them as the miserable example in my argument in the previous section.

This split is so sharp there isn't even a neutral set of words to use to describe it. The word "art" itself carries an aura of prestige which introduces bias. Moreover, the terms preferred by the high-art position tend to be pejorative: high culture vs. low, art vs. entertainment. On the other hand, the pop culture position denies the very existence of a hierarchical split in culture, rejecting distinctions of high and low.

In this dispute, two arguments suggest the high culture position is correct. First, the mass culture position demands claims to equal recognition which we've already found untenable. Second, boundaries of high and low can't be crossed at will. It might be thought that Led Zeppelin has a claim to high-art status because they incorporated improvisation, an element of jazz, into its music. Jazz has been considered high culture for quite some time, and improvisation is antithetical to the norms of mass culture, which prefers the expected, the formulaic. However, the question is one of how something is done, not what is done. Led Zeppelin successfully

⁵ Quoted in Shadwick, *Led Zeppelin*, p. 211.

incorporated a high-art element in order to make a fresher, more compelling version of pop culture, rather than lifting their music into the art tradition, or accomplishing the rare feat of attaining both mass and artistic success.

A helpful example is Yes. A lot is made of the fact that the members of Led Zeppelin were superb musicians, and this is undeniable. But what exactly is this supposed to prove? The members of Yes were superb musicians as well, and instrument for instrument, they were probably a match for Led Zeppelin. Yes's career can also be seen according to the struggle for recognition: they were trying to incorporate values from classical music (symphonic structure, complexity) into rock. Ultimately it didn't work. Meanwhile, Zeppelin was striving to realize their fresh vision for better rock music. Page didn't try to compete with Yes in a "high art" contest, though he attended art school. This decision served him well, as any comparison of Zep to their progrock contemporaries shows.

Claims to high art status on behalf of Led Zeppelin take place in the context of a struggle for recognition, and such claims can go wrong. Consider Case's biography of Jimmy Page. Throughout the book, Case shows admirable restraint, refraining from making high art claims on behalf of his protagonist. But he does slip at one point, claiming that *Stairway to Heaven* "may stand as one of the landmark artistic achievements of the twentieth century."⁶ But Case's terms of comparison are all wrong. He spends ten pages establishing Page's superiority to the likes of Tony Iommi, Ritchie Blackmore, Angus Young, Eddie van Halen and others of that ilk, but makes no attempt to place Page's work in the broader context of art music (pp. 180–190). Similarly, Case argues Zep's music is more important than punk because punk's success was short-lived and Led Zeppelin were far more popular (p. 192). If one wishes to claim art status for Zeppelin, such claims are an embarrassment; where art is concerned, popular scorn is a better recommendation than success. More importantly, the members of Led Zeppelin recognized punk and its importance. Robert Plant said that punk reminded him of early Zeppelin, and John Paul Jones said that "Punk had severely embarrassed us" (*Rough Guide*, pp. 161, 138). Page was so taken with punk that when it was released, the

⁶ George Case, *Jimmy Page: Magus, Musician, Man* (Hal Leonard, 2007), p. 114.

Damned's debut album was his favorite record (*Led Zeppelin*, p. 211).

Susan Fast does a better job in trying to make a claim for Led Zeppelin's artistic merits, by appealing to Page's improvisations, his use of the violin bow and theremin:

These sound experiments coincide with those that have been made in "experimental," "avant-garde," and electronic music in the art music tradition. Unfortunately, for reasons that probably have more to do with the pigeonholing of Led Zeppelin negatively as the progenitors of heavy metal, Page's experimentations were taken less seriously than similar attempts made by others—John Cale's in the Velvet Underground, for example. (p. 29)

Fast's claims are made in the appropriate terms, but again, it isn't the elements that are used but their uses that matter. One can use high art elements to make a better (or worse) version of popular culture, just as one could use popular elements to make a new version of art. The comparison between Zeppelin and the Velvet Underground bears further consideration. The Velvet Underground had their own version of "light and shade," with the light being a lot lighter and the shade being a lot darker than Zeppelin's. Some of the Velvet Underground's songs go far beyond the limits of a pop song, and many of the rest have far darker lyrical subject matter. To the extent that Led Zeppelin has been eclipsed in the history of rock, this is as much due to the delayed influence of the Velvet Underground as to the immediate effect of punk.

If we look back at the comment by Plant referring to Beethoven, we can say that if he meant that they wanted to make music that people revered, and would listen to for a long time to come, then such a comment (and ambition) is unexceptionable. But art music has a tradition no less than pop music. And art must be original, so taking musical values from Beethoven and ignoring everything that has happened since will fail to put one in the running for recognition as an artist. Musical values from the great art musicians of the mid-twentieth century are more to the point, such as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Pierre Boulez. (When asked on "Fresh Air" if he was ever inspired by popular music, Boulez replied, "Of course not.") If a case is to be made for the artistic relevance of Led Zeppelin, I think it would have to be done by comparing the repetition within the songs on *Physical Graffiti* with

the early minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, slightly earlier than but nearly contemporaneous with Led Zeppelin's oeuvre.

So when the old topic "Can Zeppelin's music be art?" is raised and the argument starts to get heated, take a break and listen to Christopher Rouse's orchestral percussion composition, "Bonham." (You can find it on YouTube.) Note the way it's an homage to Bonham and also transforms Zeppelin's music. Read what the critics said about symphony performances of the piece.⁷ Has Zeppelin won another struggle for recognition?⁸

⁷ For example, Thomas Goss, "Heart, Body and Soul, All on Percussion", *San Francisco Classical Voice* (March 17th, 2000), and Allan Kozinn, "A Temple of Classics Has Room for Rock," *New York Times* (August 10th, 1992).

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