

Journal Log #20

Can We Know the Past?



<http://www.echs.k12.sd.us/Adv%20Pages/Dustin/MY%20PAGE/Led-Zeppelin.jpg>

After watching and listening to the film clip from “Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same” and reading David Montgomery “Heavy, Wheaton; A Faithful Few Insist They Saw Led Zeppelin Play a Local Gig in 1969, but the Details Are Hazy” (The Washington Post, March 9, 2009, C1), complete the following.

1. Jimmy Page, Robert Plant, John Paul Jones and the late John Bonham made up the rock band Led Zeppelin. In 1973 when they played at Madison Square Garden (the film), they were one of the biggest draws in rock. But like all such acts, their origins were humble; they played at small venues as they honed their skills. The main question for you is whether Led Zeppelin played the Wheaton (suburban Maryland) Youth Center on January 20, 1969. What do you think?
2. Whether you believe that Zeppelin played Wheaton or not, review the evidence in the David Montgomery article and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the author’s points.

Heavy, Wheaton

A Faithful Few Insist They Saw Led Zeppelin Play a Local Gig in 1969, but the Details Are Hazy

By David Montgomery
The Washington Post

Monday, March 9, 2009, C01

Some stories sound preposterous, if delightfully so -- like the one about the night Led Zeppelin played the Wheaton Youth Center.

Robert Plant doing a whole lotta lovin' on Georgia Avenue? Jimmy Page climbing a stairway to suburbia? No ticket stubs, posters, pictures or news clippings of the gig are known to exist. Yet some people passionately insist they saw the performance. Zeppelin-in-Wheaton is Washington's own rock-and-roll Loch Ness Monster. Could it possibly be real?

Yes. No way. Depends whom you ask.

To appreciate the monumental improbability, you had to be there Saturday afternoon, amid the motley crowd of graying Zeppelinheads -- with their T-shirts, ticket stubs and precious original LPs -- gathered for an earnest experiment in the nature of truth, myth, memory and dreams.

It was a reunion -- a reunion of people who attended an event that may not have occurred.

Apparent eyewitness testimony was recorded for posterity. Skeptics were listened to. In the absence of physical evidence, any totemic link to the fabled show was deemed potentially worthy. Then veteran local musicians took the stage and everybody totally rocked out.

"They were definitely here," said Anne Marie Pemberton, a computer systems engineer who was 17, she said, when she saw the show. She paced the gym floor Saturday, marking specific spots, occasionally wielding an air guitar.

"Page was over here. John Paul Jones was over there. Plant the showman was right here. And right behind was John Bonham with his hellacious drum set."

Tom McAleer, a liquor salesman who grew up near the center, carried a grocery bag containing the battered white Chuck Taylor high-tops he says he was wearing that night 40 years ago when he and a friend sneaked in to see Led Zeppelin. "My girlfriend gives me a hard time because I save everything," he said.

But Sharon Ward Ellis, the former director of the youth center, who can recall telling Iggy Pop to stop smearing peanut butter on his chest during his Wheaton concert, has no recollection of Led Zeppelin. And former teen center fan Ruth Lynn Youngwirth brought her scrapbook documenting scores of concerts from 1967 to 1972. Curiously, the log does not include the Wheaton Zeppelin show.

"If Led Zeppelin was here, I don't remember," Youngwirth said.

Hmm.

Way up Georgia, next to the public library and the townhouses, the Wheaton Community Center, as it's called now, is one of those bright, smiley concrete-block havens built by society to keep the kids out of trouble. It's got a trippy, wavy roof to remind you it dates from the 1960s.

Then as now, the space was operated by the Montgomery County Department of Recreation. Today the main floor is a basketball court. Back then, kids roller-skated on that floor. Today there are DJ classes, teen dances, art lessons and computer labs. But once upon a time, the rec department found itself in the unlikely role of rock concert co-promoter, and the Wheaton Youth Center was almost unbelievably cool.

Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper, Dr. John, Rod Stewart, Rare Earth, Bob Seger and local boy Nils Lofgren with his national act Grin: They played Wheaton.

But Led Zeppelin?

The show supposedly took place the evening of Jan. 20, 1969, the day of Richard Nixon's first inauguration. Zeppelin was on its first U.S. tour. The band's first album had just been released. Hardly anybody had ever heard of the group, though Jimmy Page was sort of famous for having been in the Yardbirds.



Led Zeppelin (here circa 1971) is said to have played in Wheaton in 1969.
(Photo by Neil Zlozower)

Zeppelin-in-Wheaton is a weird subcultural enigma on the blurry frontier between the absurd and the sublime -- which means it's a perfect assignment for Jeff Krulik, the local filmmaker whose body of work roams this frontier, going back to his cult classic, "Heavy Metal Parking Lot," the documentary about big-haired heavy metal fanatics shot with John Heyn in the parking lot of the old Capital Centre in Landover before a Judas Priest concert in 1986.

Krulik put out the call: If you attended the maybe mythic show, come to a reunion at the Wheaton Community Center.

He also invited anyone connected to the regional teen center scene of the time. The centers were vital venues for youth culture and music as the 1960s burned out. The modern rock concert industry had yet to be born, there was no Ticketmaster or Live Nation, and a ticket to a Zeppelin show at Merriweather Post Pavilion (where the band definitely did play in May 1969) cost \$5.75 -- while a ticket for a show at Wheaton cost a dollar or two.

More than a hundred people showed up Saturday -- a bigger crowd than the 50 or 60 who are said to have attended the Zeppelin show. About a half-dozen at the reunion said they had attended the concert. The rest were fans who had seen other shows in Wheaton, or they were musicians who had played in bands on the teen center circuit.

In the end, it wasn't just a reunion of a storied Zeppelin show. It was a reunion of people who had even more in common -- having been young at the same time, when music was the crucial soundtrack to important dreams.

Krulik ran around the gym like a madman with a camera, doing interviews. The working title for his documentary-in-progress, about the birth of the local concert scene, is "Led Zeppelin Played Here."

"Please talk me out of ideas like this!" he hollered in passing, clearly delighted with the chaos.

Brian Knapp, a leading collector of Zeppelin memorabilia, from Alexandria, sidled around the room in faux snakeskin boots, showing off an album of artifacts, hoping to acquire more. He showed Pemberton a Polaroid of Page playing a Fender Telecaster with a psychedelic paint job.

"I saw that guitar!" said Pemberton, who thinks Page may have played it at Wheaton.

Subsequent Led Zeppelin performances are well documented, including the band's appearance at the Laurel Pop Festival in July 1969. The Post sent Carl Bernstein to review the show. He was unimpressed with Zeppelin: "Mildly interesting, if not musically original," he said, and he lamented that the popularity and success of Zeppelin and other British power groups "make it unpleasant to contemplate where rock is going."

The Wheaton show has remained mysterious. Despite the clear recollections of several who say they were there, it is puzzling that so many others who were regulars at the Wheaton center never heard of the show at the time.

Those who did say they were there seemed to possess a special aura. They were avatars from the creation, that brief moment before *Zeppelin* was Zeppelin. Imagine being one of the privileged 50 or 60 in the room that inauguration night! Those who were not there begged to be transported back.

"They did a great version of 'Train Kept A-Rollin',' " said Tom Grooms, public affairs director and DJ with WJZW.

"I just remember it was noisy and I didn't understand what it was all about," said Marc Elrich, the Montgomery County Council member who played guitar and sang in a band called Franklin Park Zoo.

"I think they were wondering where everyone was," said Pemberton. "You just sort of walked in. They were setting up. Next thing you know, bam, 'Good Times Bad Times' and whoa!"

Do surviving members of Zeppelin remember the show? Messages sent through their representatives yielded no response. The band's former touring manager, Richard Cole, does not recall the Wheaton show now, according to Sam Rapallo, the webmaster of the authoritative Web site ledzeppelin.com.

However, the site does list the Wheaton show in the chronology of all the band's gigs. Aha!

The source for that reference, Rapallo said by e-mail, is the book "Capitol Rock," an encyclopedic record of the local music scene by Mark Opsasnick. Opsasnick was at the reunion. He got the story from Barry Richards, the ambitious young DJ and promoter who brought numerous acts to Wheaton.

Reached by telephone in Los Angeles, Richards said Zeppelin really did play Wheaton. It was a last-minute gig to fill an off night for the band between dates in Detroit and Pittsburgh. Richards didn't have much time to promote it.

Richards said the band's manager, Peter Grant, who died in 1995, was bitterly disappointed in the turnout, and blamed him for it.

"He was [angry]," Richards says. Out in the parking lot, "he got in my face." Richards thought Grant was going to beat him up.

Instead, Richards handed over \$100 for gas money, and that's how Led Zeppelin left Wheaton -- so the story goes.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/08/AR2009030801927.html>