

Jump!



BLOW UP Neal Preston was Led Zeppelin's tour photographer for the 1970s. Here he gives MOJO the lowdown on what it was like as appointed lensman to the legendary rock monsters.

IT OCCURRED TO ME, LOOKING AT this picture, that you never really see very many photos of Jimmy where he's actually in the air. It wasn't a big stage move for him at the time — he only did it once a night (during the third verse of Rock And Roll, I believe), and for some reason other photographers never captured it. I never missed it.

The other photo of Jimmy here (below) has "swagger" written all over it, and that word aptly describes almost every aspect of what being in and around Led Zeppelin meant back then. Not only were they at the top of their game musically in the mid-'70s, but there was always that... swagger. That attitude.

They knew they were the best, the biggest, the sexiest, and everybody else knew it, too. No one else came close; not the Stones, The Who... nobody touched them. And Zeppelin revelled in that knowledge. They swaggered across America and they owned it all.

Somehow, fortune (and Peter Grant) had smiled on me and I worked as Zeppelin's tour photographer in the 1970s, on and off for six or seven years. Pretty heady stuff for a 22, 23-year-old.

By then, they were my favourite band, my favourite subjects, and my entrée into the rarefied air of rock royalty... the A list.

In 1975 all you had to do was tell someone you worked for Led Zeppelin and you'd see that odd look of respect combined with wonder on the person's face, just like if you'd told them you worked for Elvis. Or Frank.

Even now I get it from people if Zeppelin comes up in conversation. The myth lives.

Touring with Led Zeppelin was, for me, an assault on all senses 24 hours a day (and when I say 24 hours a day, I'm not kidding; I rarely slept on tour). Besides the memories I have of seeing some amazing shows and taking some beautiful photographs, I have other, indelible memories that have stayed in my head and my heart like they happened yesterday: the smell of the dry ice used during No Quarter; the queasy feeling I got in my stomach if I missed the limo after the show (thereby missing the plane as well); the look on Peter's face during a magnificent guitar solo, like a proud papa admiring the fingerpainting his five-year-old made. Jimmy smiling at Bonzo during a show like they were the only ones in the arena. And every night... "Do you remember laughter?" from Robert.

I was never quite sure why I was ultimately given the access to the band that I enjoyed. Although I knew that my photography was the ultimate litmus test, everyone had to pass another kind of test that was just as important: could you be trusted? Did you have a big mouth? Did you act like you were as important (or even *more* important) than the band? These were defining questions, and the answers were obvious. And, of course, the person who held the keys to that kingdom was Peter Grant.

I've been fortunate to have photographed the biggest rock acts of my generation: Bruce Springsteen, Queen, the Stones, The Who, Fleetwood Mac, Madonna. But there was a certain exhilaration that always came after that call from the Swan Song office when they'd give me tour dates, that reminded me that working with Zeppelin was just a little more special than anyone else.

Yes, I do remember laughter. I was there.

Led Zeppelin by Neal Preston
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