TURN THE PAGE

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

Robert Plant flourishes in his post-Led Zeppelin career

It's been 10 years since the demise of Led Zeppelin, and the rock world has yet to come to terms with the fact that it's over. Zeppelin's unique combination of mysticism, hard-rock grunge and Middle Eastern exotica has yet to be matched, though there's no shortage of bands willing to cop aspects of it — Robert Plant's lustful yowl, for example, or Jimmy Page's slashing guitar attack, or John Bonham's thunderous drum sound. For Plant, the Zep mystique has been both a boon and a curse. He continues to reap some degree of goodwill from the band's fans, as well as financial considerations from such projects as the recent Led Zeppelin box set, a brilliantly remixed four-CD collection that makes the group sound as fresh today as it did at the start of its career back in 1969. But even at this late date, Zeppelin continues to cast a long shadow over the considerable accomplishments of Plant's eight-year solo career, which includes the one-shot oldies revue the Honeydrippers and five fine albums, the latest of which — *Manic Nirvana* — was released earlier this year.

Plant is adamant about not looking back. He continues to turn down offers for a Zeppelin reunion, even one which would reportedly pay him, Page and John Paul Jones $200 million to perform one final tour. He's content playing his own music, thank you very much, and is currently on the road with his band of the last several years: Phil Johnstone on keyboards, Doug Boyle on guitar, Chris Blackwell on drums and Charlie Jones on bass. Here's some of what transpired recently, when Plant called the *RFT* from Miami.

RFT: Let's start by talking about touring. Is it still an exciting thing for you to do? How do you keep it fresh?

Plant: How do I keep it fresh? I make music that I think is vital and challenging — challenging for myself, anyway.

RFT: But the day-to-day slogging along I would think you wouldn't find entertaining anymore.

Plant: Oh, but it is, because I've found Rand McNally. I take a car and I go off the freeways and the interstates and head for the blue highways, the little roads that weave around the American landscape, and go through small-town America, population 223. And I have some incredible experiences with these people. Because generally, in a rock & roll environment, you're only playing in cities, in major urban areas where people have their citified attitudes and their citified dogma and stigma.

RFT: Is performing live the most enjoyable feature of what you do? Or do you prefer writing and recording — the creative process?

Plant: Writing is very exciting and very challenging, but actually performing nightly is probably the biggest buzz. Because for one reason or another, my voice has gone into a new kind of mode now. It's really more than I could have ever expected it to do.

RFT: Are there aspects of singing that you're only just discovering now?

Plant: Not really. It's just attitude that forces you to create. One way or another, attitude predicts or demands a certain delivery. And generally, I've steered clear of that kind of demonstrative attack since Zeppelin. Now, I've decided, if the subject matter is interesting enough, or ridiculous enough, I can do it.

RFT: So it's the material you're working with now that's pushing you to new levels?

Plant: Yeah.

RFT: You're about eight years into your solo career now, and I've always been curious about this: After Led Zeppelin ended, it would have been very easy for you to go out and just throw a band together and do a rehash of Zep material. Yet you made a conscious effort not to do that. What forces were at work at the time to make you want to continue to grow artistically rather than simply cash in?

Plant: Well, remember that Led Zeppelin never made the same record twice. I figured that the greatest motto that you could have was to create music that was always challenging and changing. And you know, without being part of a legend, or without being the legend itself — by only being just a fraction of it — then you have a totally different canvas on which to work. And it's much more difficult, but the challenge is most refreshing after all those years of acceptance. It's very, very invigorating to have to get out there and do something new without having the kiss of life permanently bestowed on you by the American public. I'm a working man, I'm a working musician. Nobody does me any favors now, really.

RFT: *Manic Nirvana* strikes me mostly as a big, loud rock record. Is that what you were striving for this time out?

Plant: Well, superficially, it's a big, loud rock record. But if you look inside it, there's sort of a contradictory thing. "Watching You," for example is not a big, loud rock song. But what it does is reinvoke the mood of "Slow Dancer" or "Reckless Love" or "Kashmir" or whatever. Or "Friends" or "Four Sticks." It leans toward the East — toward Eastern elements. Well, it doesn't lean, it possesses them.

The aesthetic of making a rock record is that you have to make a record that carries or portrays or allows enough dignity to exist so you're not just a puppet, or you're not creating a sort of middle-age, hard-rock symphonia, you know, which is just so much garbage. You've got to make something of some substance. So with tracks like "She Said" and "I Cried" and "Anniversary," the band really has grown as a unit, to be able to move around in different fields comfortably, and create different soundscapes. Those songs are all radically different, one from the other. I mean, they're rock, because they're played by electric instruments and with a lot of fury, but what's going on within them and around them is not "rockist," if you will.

RFT: On the track "SSS & Q," you do a small section that's a sort of rap, much like you did on "Tall Cool One." What do you think of rap music in general?

Plant: Well, you know, from a technical point of view, I like a lot of the sounds and samples that they use. I find it's challenging because there's so much of it that's so good. The dance rap shit I find very hard to come to terms with. But when you get radical rap, it's great, because it's very clever. The lyrical content is often really challenging, really — well, it's hardly the beginning of the Bob Dylan era, but it does wake people up and it does give you different insights or different ingredients which you can use within your own music. I mean, it's not music that I can immediately say, "This music was made for me," but I find that by listening to it, and getting into certain parts of it, it can improve my music. All music can do that.

RFT: You mentioned sampling there, and that's something that you've been doing on your last couple of albums. For instance, there's the nick from "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" on "SSS & Q." Zeppelin has been sampled to death by various groups, and I wonder how you felt about that. Is sampling fair to the original artist?

Plant: It's not a case of whether it's fair or not. But rather, is it game? Is it sport? You don't have to think about it being fair. I mean, who's gonna rip off Chuck Berry next? Who's gonna do Willie Dixon? Who's gonna screw Muddy Waters? Which Robert Johnson song is gonna appear on the next Eric Clapton/Robert Plant/Robert Cray album? The question is, is this OK right now, and the answer is yes. Or, it's happening, anyway.

RFT: I wasn't really talking about who gets screwed financially, but rather how does it make you feel as an artist when you hear your earlier work sampled and laid on top of someone else's song?

Plant: Well, if it's used properly, I think it's very clever. But the thing with Zeppelin is, it's so obvious anyway. You know, it's like sampler's paradise with Bonzo's drum sounds. But if it's used to good ends, it's great. I don't think it matters. Who really cares about it? Nobody. So long as it's part of the entertainment game, as long as it fits, that's fine.

RFT: The track "Tie Dye on the Highway" is really interesting, with its commentary on the '60s, and its samples from the *Woodstock* soundtrack. How did that song come about?

Plant: Well, I just thought how embarrassed people were about the whole thing of being an old hippie. Or, you know, the thing in England where you've got the Happy Mondays and all those groups who've taken a lot of psychedelia and the hippie vibe at face value and just used the fashion elements of it to promote something that's half-dance and half-not.

Being around at the end of the '60s was the most illuminating part of my life in every respect. It was a marvelous time to be around. You know, it's no good that people keep going, "In those days, nobody knew what the fuck was going on, everybody was out of it and it doesn't matter." The thing was, it was an incredibly optimistic time. For a while, everybody thought that the world was gonna change, that we were gonna change the world, that guys a bit older than me were gonna wind up running things properly. Well, unfortunately, it went up its own backside. Too many drugs and too much excess and stuff like that. But for a moment in time, it was marvelous. Everybody had an optimism which no longer exists. Maybe it never existed before, or maybe it just comes in cycles, but that song kind of celebrates that moment and says, look: Whatever you know about it, you had to be there. It's like Led Zeppelin. You had to see Led Zeppelin on a good night; it's no good seeing them now.

RFT: There *is* a lot of nostalgia for the '60s and the '70s now, and it all seems so superficial. And to me, that tendency to look back runs counter to the rock & roll spirit of living in the present moment.

Plant: Yeah, that's right. But there *is* no rock & roll spirit in the present moment. Can't you see that? I mean, who's giving us anything new? Maybe Faith No More, maybe Soundgarden, maybe Mother Love Bone or something like that. But not many people. Sonic Youth — are they helping us really? I hope so. But there's not much else.

RFT: But there's still this mass of diehard Zep fans out there who want to see the band resurrected. You really slam the door on that with the song "Liar's Dance," which has the chorus,

"We won't be back again."

Plant: Well, that's exactly what that song is all about. It's saying, "Forget it."

RFT: Your latest work does look to the past in some respects, though. On the album, you do a cover of the song "Your Ma Said You Cried in Your Sleep Last Night." Is it important for you to go back and rediscover material like that, or is it just a lark?

Plant: It's both. It's a lark, but it's also a lesson in attitude. There's a lot to be found out from those records, the more obscure pop where people are actually going out on a limb and doing ridiculous stuff. I think you gotta have a sense of humor. That's what it all is.

RFT: It sort of puts me in the mind of one of your earlier projects, the Honeydrippers.

Plant: Well, that was too cheesy. It was a bit too glossy. It was the right idea, but close, no cigar. At the age of 42, I can hardly consider it all to be so serious, that I'm giving some gift to the world, that nobody's ever done it before. You gotta be realistic about it. There's still some element of masculine prowl to my music, thank God, and some essence of humor. And now with the enthusiasm of new musicians who were never actually exposed to the big ego binge before, it really does give it a whole new kick. But does that give us commercial success if we go out on a limb left and right and we sample this and do "Your Ma Said?" A lot of rock & roll fans think that I'm completely cookies. You know, why don't I do "Heartbreaker Part 10"? But the point is, I've done "Heartbreaker Parts I & II" and there's no point in doing it again.

RFT: Do you see yourself doing covers like that only from time to time in the future, or will there be a *Honeydrippers, Vol. II*?

Plant: Well, there's no point really. I mean the track "Nirvana" on the album and "Hurting Kind," they're both rockabilly. They're cosmic rockabilly. So basically what I'm doing is, I'm satisfying my urge for the wild side of '50s rockabilly, and also dressing it up in different clothes. The trouble is, I played with the Honeydrippers in England after John died. And it's OK playing those songs, but after a while it gets pretty boring unless you can write your own personality into it.

RFT: So you don't mind nostalgia as such, but there's a point where it turns sour.

Plant: Right. It gets too cheesy.

RFT: What do you think about the Zep parody band Dread Zeppelin?

Plant: Well, I liked Tiny Tim when he came along. I was just given a tape of him doing "Stairway to Heaven." I guess that the Dread Zeppelin kind of performance has a function. They're good fun. I have to say that their record is really good. But I don't have a conscience about it. I talked to some Zep fans who get furious about it. It's like you shouldn't sing Zeppelin with an Elvis voice, and I said, well, listen to "Candy Store Rock," from *Presence*. That was total Presley.

RFT: Is it preferable being subjected to parody as opposed to being ripped off by groups like Kingdom Come or Whitesnake?

Plant: Well, I don't consider that from my part of it, from my lyrical and melodic input in Zeppelin. I don't consider any of it a problem. It's just the fashion. Cynicism is part of today's fashion, especially if you go to England. Christ. The English attitude towards everything is overtly cynical. If groups like Dread Zeppelin want to take it to any extreme they want to, that's fine by them. That's fine by me, too. It doesn't matter.

RFT: As an English artist touring in America, how do you view the political climate of this country as it regards artistic expression? I mean, we now have art and artists on trial, and people who don't really understand the works in question accusing them of being obscene.

Plant: It's ridiculous. I can't believe a country that's so forward-thinking could do this. In many cases, many individual Americans that I've met have been most illuminating. And the most gratifying aspect of it is to meet people who think so freely and express themselves so clearly. And yet, there are certain areas within the American social structure which are barbaric beyond even contemplation, by European standards.

Every country and every personality, or every nationalistic personality, has a skeleton in his cupboard. And with Thatcherism in England, we have a lot to answer for. But in America, there's so many fractured areas, so many elements of society as a mass which are confusing to me. I'm constantly surprised that Ku Klux Klan members are close to becoming senators—it's 1990 and we're still dealing with individuals as if they have no personal freedom.

RFT: Getting back to music, Led Zeppelin was one of the first rock bands to promote a sort of global consciousness by way of introducing elements of world beat music into your songs. And it seems to be a continuing passion of yours.

Plant: Yeah, absolutely. There's a form of music coming out of Algeria now call Rai music, which is very interesting, because it's modern Arab pop. It's a bit Europeanesque, but with some *great* Arabesque singing. Really good. I mean, I play it all the time. It's part of my diet.

RFT: But I always felt that was one of the elements that separated you from the rest of the hard-rock pack. If you look at the bands out there now that just take off on the most superficial aspects of Zeppelin, you can see that they never really went to the well like you did.

Plant: Yeah, but that wasn't really a conscious effort. We just weren't that bright cerebrally. I mean, we were pretty much cerebral tyrants sometimes. But we were drawn to that music voluntarily. We weren't out for the commercial killing, although Led Zeppelin *was* a commercial killing. But it was never actually taken advantage of. We didn't even have, you know, a T-shirt deal in the whole history of the band. No merchandising whatsoever. It was, fuck it, let's just play, and let's play badly one night. Or let's try and play good forever. And now it's so much more commercially oriented, so much more conservative — the whole rock *thing* is so much posture. Mind you, kids who read this article might go, "Fuck him, the old cunt, what does he know?" But the thing is, I *know* what was real, and what is and isn't real now. We had the capacity to care and to want to do it for real, not just to put on some Lurex trousers and pretend you've been to Kashmir, you know?

Robert Plant, with Faith No More, performs on Nov. 21 at the Fox Theatre. ■