

Ramble On

The Led Zeppelin Reunion Blog

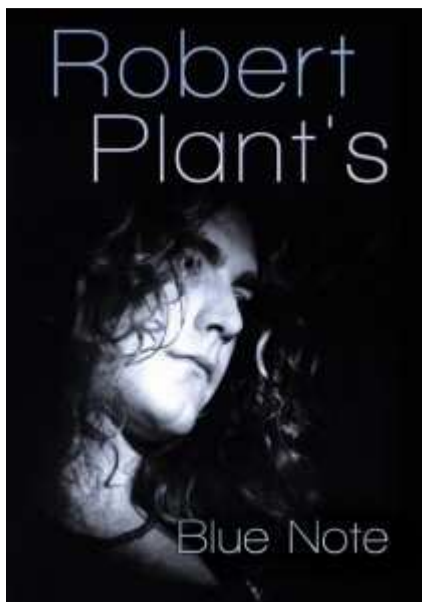
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Robert Plant's Blue Note: DVD Review

Thursday, September 1st, 2011

The blue note is a musical term for a note that is played slightly flat, "for expressive purposes." The blue note, in point of fact, differentiates itself from the normal musical expression, creating a sound, a feeling that is wholly different with greater feeling.

Naming the unauthorized [Robert Plant DVD The Blue Note](#) was no accident. It took Plant's fondness for the blue note, and extrapolated from it that Plant is a wholly different singer who sings with greater feeling. The blue note is, in other words, where Plant finds his inspiration and where his influence lies.



At two hours and thirty-five minutes long The Blue Note is surprisingly not comprehensive, as Plant's Led Zeppelin period is breezed over in twenty minutes of film time. While this allows for a solid look at Plant's solo years, specifically from 1981 to 1994 when he performed Unledded with Jimmy Page, far too much time is spent on Plant's early influences. The first half hour covers his blues influences, with video footage of Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson and the Jeff Beck era Yardbirds doing Train Kept a Rollin'. While much of this is interesting and worth seeing, it's possibly too much for a DVD on Robert Plant.

The west coast influences of Moby Grape, Jefferson Starship and Buffalo Springfield are also covered, including video footage that feels too common. It is unnecessary and far too much time is taken up covering the people Robert Plant listened too. It is almost inexcusable that Led Zeppelin doesn't come up in a Robert Plant retrospective until the 45 minute mark, but that's what occurs here.

The problem is compounded with a pathetically short feature on Led Zeppelin, as if hey were a small band Robert Plant was in before going on to bigger and better things. It is twenty minutes from Peter Grant and Jimmy Page going to see Robert Plant perform to the death of John Bonham. So short on information during this period is the DVD that the death of Plants young son, Karak, in 1977 gets a one sentence mention, along with the death of John Bonham. Every album from the fourth on is ignored. It is as if Led Zeppelin had two good albums, the acoustic third album and Kashmir, which the video takes five minutes of time to explain the genesis of the one song.

It is the five minutes devoted to Kashmir that really develops the theme of Robert Plant's Blue Note, namely that the blue note is not just an American phenomenon, but African in origin: Robert Plant has searched North and West Africa for it, finding the link between American and African music. This theme is why Arab singer Oum Kalthoum get's six minutes of video time, explaining her influence on Slow Dancer, and Stairway to Heaven doesn't rate a mention.

The video segments from the Led Zeppelin period are also a disappointment as they show clips of Whole Lotta Love and I Can't Quit You Baby from the 1970 Albert Hall show, and Kashmir from the 1979 Knebworth show. All three performances are publicly available on the Led Zeppelin DVD set. The Page and Plant material is also supplemented with songs from the Unledded DVD, nothing that any moderate Led Zeppelin or Robert Plant fan doesn't already have in their collection. One clip of Robert Plant backstage in 1973, originally from The Song Remains the Same is actually credited, "Copyright Swan Song 1970."

However, the time and effort spent on his solo years is as good as the early part of the DVD is disappointing. Starting with gigging as the Honeydrippers before spending any studio time, the first part of Plant's solo career is talked through mainly by Robbie Blunt, Plant's guitar player and songwriting partner. Blunt is funny and interesting, telling stories and explaining the music. His pride in the first two albums is clear, the third, Shaken 'n' Stirred less so. Plant was, by 1985, restless. And in a pattern Plant fans know too well, decided a change was needed. He was searching, and the band behind him simply couldn't follow. Blunt's telling the story of his struggles with the Roland Guitar Synthesizer, and Plant's insistence that Jimmy Page is getting along fine with his is worth the price of the DVD:

...Trying to record with the Roland Guitar Synth, I really tried (laughs) to utilize this piece of crap, because obviously the latency. And Robert Would say, "I don't know what's the matter with you, Jimmy's getting on fine with his." And Benji called up Jimmy's guitar tech and he said, "he's fuckin' thrown 'is out the window.

From 1988, Now and Zen, until 1993's Fate of Nations is told largely by Phil Johnson who co-wrote many songs with Plant and produced his albums in this period. Johnson is , like Blunt, funny and easy going. His stories are incisive and help tell a fairly complete picture of Plant's musical life at this time. He also, by the end, is frustrated by Plant's need for change.

Blue Note returns to it's thesis here, Plant's search for the blue note in African music, a search that ultimately frustrated those he worked with, and led him back to Jimmy Page.

The first Page and Plant album is again, well covered, with emphasis on it's North African influence. Plant turned to Page, according to the DVD, not to relive Led Zeppelin, but because he found himself in a place musically where he couldn't get the sound he wanted. Jimmy Page could.

Percussionist Hossam Ramzy, who recorded on the unLedded album and toured with Page and Plant carried the narrative for this section. He connects dots and draws lines between American Blues, Led Zeppelin and African music. His amazement at listening to Since I've Been Loving You every night,

his story of taking two weeks of rehearsals to get the percussion for Friends down, all provide a interesting backdrop for the tour and album.

Plant's career post-Page and Plant is covered with less detail, but in a good light. Journalist Amanda Petrusich fills in the gaps about Alison Krauss, but ultimately little is added to the story once Plant's African infatuation ends with Strange Sensation.

While DVD's of this type are usually filled with journalists making a few extra bucks pontificating for the cameras, Blue Note actually pulls together an impressive list of people to help weave the Robert Plant story together: Led Zeppelin authors Nigel Williamson and Barry Hoskyns; Fellow musicians Tom McGuinness (from Manfred Mann), Hossam Ramzy, Chris Dreja, Robbie Blunt as well as producer/song writer Phil Johnson. Plant himself is represented via a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) interview in 2010.

If you are a Led Zeppelin fan, Blue Note is probably a DVD you can take a pass on, but if you are a fan of Robert Plant's solo work and, especially as I am, his work from 1980 - 1995, then this is a great DVD. It covers his career, without delving into personal life, with great detail through those years. It make a convincing argument that Plant spent a career searching for the Blue Note, and perhaps still is searching.



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- I was one of the fortunate few who won a Golden Ticket to go see Led Zeppelin at the O2 arena in London on December 10th. While this blog chronicled my trip to London, the concert, and all things Zeppelin in between, it will remain active until either a Led Zeppelin tour has been completed, or I have given up hope of a tour.

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