When Giants Walked the Earth

A BIOGRAPHY OF

LED・ZEPPELIN

MICK WALL
PART ONE

Ascension!

‘Worship me with wines and strange drugs whereof
I shall tell my prophet, and be drunk thereof!
They shall not harm ye at all!’

– Aleister Crowley, The Book of the Law
The Dawn of Now

You are Jimmy Page. It is the summer of 1968 and you are one of the best-known guitarists in London – and one of its least famous. Even the past two years in the Yardbirds haven’t brought you the recognition you know you deserve. People talk about the Yardbirds as though Jeff Beck is still the guitarist, not you, despite everything you’ve done for them; giving up the easy-money session gigs that bought you your house by the river; gifting them one last ride on the merry-go-round with ahead-of-the-game hits like ‘Happening Ten Years Time Ago’, even as Mickie Most sucked the life out of them making them do codswallop like ‘Ha Ha Said The Clown’; sticking with them as their profile has slowly faded from view, along with their own self-worth. They still mean something in America, just about, but back home they are dead meat. And what’s the point in traipsing around America, them and the other half-dozen acts on the same poxy package bill, earning less in a week than you used to get for a day’s worth of sessions, when no-one even knows your name, knows how important you are now to the whole set-up?

Jeff Beck? Jeff is an old mate, but who had recommended him for the job in the first place? Done him a favour when he was on his uppers? You – Jimmy Page. The one who turned down the Yardbirds after Clapton had walked out, not because you were afraid, like Eric, that their craving for pop stardom would ruin your image as a ‘blues purist’ – you were never one of those, your love of folk, rock’n’roll, jazz, classical, Indian, Irish, anything and everything, meant you always felt sorry for those poor unfortunates that could only ever like one form of music – but because you’d secretly shuddered at the prospect of trawling the country’s pubs and clubs, bouncing around in the back of a shitty bloody transit van like you’d done before with Neil Christian and the Crusaders, ending up so ill you couldn’t get out of bed for three days. Not even
making any bread out of it. Stuff that for a game of soldiers.

And so you’d recommended your old mate Jeff, who was just sat around doing nothing. Then stood back and watched as the Yardbirds with Beck had taken off like a rocket . . . ‘For Your Love’, ‘Heart Full of Soul’, ‘Shapes of Things’, hit after hit . . . Next thing you were in the Yardbirds too. It was never supposed to last, and you never made any promises, but you had to admit it was all right. Even when you were just supposed to be helping them out till they found a proper replacement for Samwell-Smith, twanging the bass as a bit of a laugh, the buzz was good. When they suggested moving Chris over onto bass and having you and Jeff both on guitar, you couldn’t believe it! You did wonder how long Jeff would be able to hack it, but while it lasted it was actually really good. Not just the playing – you and Jeff had always played well together – but the vibe, the scene. It felt like an omen when you found yourself booked with them to appear in the Antonioni film, Blow Up. All you had to do was make like you were playing a club, steaming it, a great laugh. Though Jeff moaned when the old director asked him to smash his guitar. Six times he had to go through it, pretending to be Pete Townshend, before the old Italian was happy. God, did he moan! You just couldn’t stop smiling though.

Then he left. Jeff Beck, the great guitar hero who had no discipline whatsoever, brilliant one night, less so the next; the so-called cool cat who couldn’t write an original tune to save his life and had sold out to Mickie Most and his off-the-peg hits. Jeff is a mate and you don’t like to bad-mouth him, but even Jeff knows ‘Hi Ho Silver Lining’ was a load of old rubbish; everyone knows it was a load of old rubbish. Yet there it was as soon as he left the Yardbirds, courtesy of Mickie, in the charts and in the discotheques; on the radio and being danced to by all the leggy birds in their miniskirts on Top of the Pops.

Well, good for Jeff Beck, but what about you, Jimmy Page? What are you gonna do now Jeff has his own thing going and the Yardbirds have finally gone kaput? You don’t know. Or rather, you do, but only on an instinctual level. You don’t have the proof yet but the answer, you’re fairly sure, is to take the Yardbirds and build on it, take their rinky-dink rock’n’roll and so-called experimentation – their gimmicks – and turn them into something much more deliberate; something that will make you gasp, not just sigh, something that will actually compete with Hendrix and Cream and the Stones and the bloody Beatles. Really show the world who’s who and what’s what.
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But you are also wary of letting go of the bit of fame you’ve finally found, however meagre. Most people may think Jeff Beck is still the guitar player in the Yardbirds but at least they’ve heard of the Yardbirds. Who’s heard of Jimmy Page, outside of the know-all producers and record company bigwigs, the studio broom-pushers and pretty receptionists? Outside of all the guitarists you’ve replaced on sessions over the years – the guy in Them, the guy in Herman’s Hermits, the countless others whose faces you no longer remember and who would never acknowledge what you’d done for them anyway, never thank you . . .

At least you know where you stand. Self-confident, well off, used to being on your own, you have always been someone who knew exactly where you stood, even as a kid playing on sessions for old timers like Val Doonican. You had always walked tall, always known your own worth even as others discounted it, sending you on your way to the next session – sometimes as many as three a day, six days a week, never knowing what you were going to be asked to play next, picking up good money and taking none of the risks – and none of the glory, either, when it worked.

Now it is your turn to shine. You are twenty-four, a hardened session pro who knows all about working in the studio, taking your cue from famous knob-twiddlers like Shel Talmy and Mickie Most, playing along with other session pros like Big Jim Sullivan and Bobby Graham, sharing a fag during tea breaks, taking it all in, crossing paths again and again over the years like lucky black cats. Now you want to do something for yourself. You’ve always wanted it. Now it’s time. Something big, like Eric with Cream – only better. Like Jeff with Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood – only better. Like George Harrison and Brian Jones with their sitars, even though you had one first – only much, much better, you wait and bloody see.

First, though, you need to put the pieces together, find the corners of the jigsaw. The years working behind the scenes – in the dark, a hired gun, doing as you were told, looking and listening and taking it all in, sharing a fag and laughing up your sleeve – have taught you about more than just the playing. You now know where to place the mikes. ‘Distance makes depth,’ as the old lags liked to say. You now know how to operate the desk, what makes bad groups good and good groups better. You now know it’s about more than just being able to play, otherwise you’d have been a star long ago. You have also learnt something about the business. You know the value of a name and of having the right record company behind you, the
right guys in suits. And for that you know you will need help. You’ve got a
head start though. The Yardbirds still have a name – just – and you aren’t
about to let go of it. Not yet. You have to be sure first; have to be precise;
your timing, as a pro, will have to be perfect, you know that.

The problem is time is running out. Only twenty-four but already the
music is moving on without you. You wouldn’t have said it out loud but
you know it’s true. Cream is already coming to its end and you feel like
you haven’t even started. Hendrix is now everybody’s guitar god but you
haven’t shown them what you can do yet, given the opportunity, away
from the sessions and the smoky studios and the bands crumbling from
within, lost somewhere out there on the American road, just counting the
days till something better comes along. Time is running out and though
you’d never say it out loud you are starting to worry you have missed the
bloody boat; that if you’re not careful you will have to go back to doing
sessions. ‘Becoming one of those sorts of people I hate,’ as you tell your
friends.

The last Yardbirds tour comes to an end in Montgomery, Alabama, the
gig at the Speedway Fairgrounds coming the day after Bobby Kennedy is
shot in Los Angeles. You all watch it on TV back at the hotel and you all
go ‘wow’ and shake your heads and light more cigarettes. But it means
nothing to you compared to the thought of the group breaking up. By the
middle of June you are at home again in your groovy riverside abode in
Pangbourne – a converted Victorian boathouse thirty miles up the Thames
from London with one of those basement boat moorings, not that you have
a boat – wondering what on earth you are going to do now.

Fortunately, you have an ace up your sleeve; someone who knows what
you can do, who you are, what you could become, and who shares your
determination to make something of it, to finally let the cat out of the bag:
Peter Grant. ‘G’. The hulking, oversensitive giant who co-manages the
Yardbirds with Mickie and who has kept you safe throughout your travels,
especially on that bloody awful last American tour, when Keith Relf was
going off the rails, getting drunk on stage every night and only Chris Dreja
still seemed interested in keeping the whole thing together. G, who’d sat in
the car with you, stuck in traffic in Shaftesbury Avenue, just days after
getting back from America, both of you knowing it’s over, talking about
what you are going to do now. G, who sits and listens as you, in your
quiet, well-mannered voice finally says what it is you’ve secretly been
thinking all this time, finally says it loud: that you think you can take
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the group and do better, add new members, write new music, do better.

The stumbling block, you both know, will be Mickie, who is only really interested in singles. Art for art’s sake, hit singles for fuck’s sake. That’s Mickie’s motto. But singles aren’t where it’s at anymore. The Yardbirds should be more of an albums’ band now, it’s obvious. You haven’t said so to Mickie because you know he would only scoff, just as he had when Jeff complained he wanted to make albums too, but you say it now to Peter, who sits and listens, looking straight ahead through the windscreen at the traffic. The key, you say, feeling courageous, would be letting you have a free hand to do it the way you know it should be done. The way you hear it in your head sometimes when no-one else is listening. Not just leading the group but writing the music and lyrics, producing the records yourself, doing everything yourself except managing. That’s where Peter would come in – if he’s interested. G, who has worked for years in the shadows of other, more powerful music businessmen, waiting his turn in the dark, just like you. G, who sits there at the steering wheel, staring at the traffic straight ahead, and simply nods his head. ‘All right then,’ he says. ‘Let’s do it.’

There is one last Yardbirds show, a low-key contract-filler in the Student Union hall at Luton College on 7 July – almost two years to the day since the last big single in Britain, ‘Over Under Sideways Down’ – and then it really is all over. Only Chris has said he’s willing to stick with it and give it another go with you but even he is now having second thoughts. Oh, he hasn’t said anything yet to you or Peter, but you both know. So what? You’re gonna need 100 per cent commitment if the new music you want to make is to sound the way you want it to. Chris is no great shakes on the bass anyway. Better he go now then, even if it does leave you on your own. Well, you’re used to that. As an only child, you’ve never been afraid of being on your own. So when, barely a month after that last show in Luton, Chris finally owns up to the fact he isn’t into it anymore, would rather go off and try for a new career as a photographer – ‘He thinks he’s the new fucking David Bailey,’ laughs G – you are secretly relieved.

Now it’s down to just the two of you, Jimmy and G. And of course, the name, for what it’s still worth: the Yardbirds. Or maybe the New Yardbirds – G’s suggestion. That way, at least, it won’t be like starting again from scratch, he says. Not entirely, anyway. And you can still get paying gigs. Keep the wolf from the door until you can come up with something better. That’s the plan anyway, this long, rainy summer of 1968 . . .

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‘I knew exactly what I wanted to do,’ says Jimmy Page nearly forty years later, sitting in his basement kitchen at the Tower House, the nineteenth-century Gothic pile in London’s Holland Park, designed by the architect and Freemason William Burges. It’s a sunny late summer’s afternoon in 2005 and we are having a cup of tea, looking back at the early days of the band for yet another magazine profile. Over the past twenty years this has become almost an annual ritual for us, the interest in Zeppelin having magnified over the years to the point where they are now more popular than they ever were in their lifetime. Of course, the days of Jack Daniel’s and cocaine, of groupies and smack – the days of dragon suits and black swans – are long gone. Jimmy Page doesn’t drink, doesn’t take drugs; doesn’t even smoke cigarettes anymore. But that doesn’t mean he’s forgotten what it was like, what it was all about. Or that he is in the slightest bit repentant. Indeed, his only real regret, he says, is that it had to end. ‘It was hedonistic times, you know?’ He shrugs. ‘But the thing is the playing was always there. On maybe just a very rare occasion did it suffer – a rare occasion relative to the volume of tours. But we wanted to be on that edge, it fed into the music.’

Of course it did. That was what it was all about for a rock monster like Led Zeppelin, feeding on planets and shitting stars. Drugs were their fuel, sex a form of self-expression, music merely the map to the treasure. Think of the Stones, crammed into Keith’s sweaty windowless basement at Villa Nellcote in France in 1972, waiting for him to come to after another three-day mindbender; waiting for him to get enough coke and smack up his nose and in his arm before he is ready to lay down the bones of what will become the greatest Stones album ever made, whatever Mick and his posh new foreign bird thinks. Think of John and George, acid buddies suddenly, united for once against strait-laced Paul and clueless Ringo; high priests labouring devoutly to take the Beatles beyond the yeah-yeah-yeah of their lovable mop-top past and into the infinitely more knowing, vastly more expanded consciousness of Revolver and eventually Sgt. Pepper, the album that transformed the world from black and white into colour. Think of Dylan smoking his weed, swallowing his pills, wearing sunglasses at midnight and vibrating in his chair by the window as he sits up all night at the Chelsea Hotel in New York writing ‘Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands’ for . . . her. Or Hendrix tripping on godhead in some beer-sticky London dive full of fag smoke and jealous white males, as The Who and Cream
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and everyone else who tried to follow him bathed in his comet trail and foolishly tried to hold onto the sparks. Of course the drugs fed into the music of Led Zeppelin. That’s what the drugs were for. That’s what Led Zeppelin was for. That’s what it was all about, right Jimmy? Back then in the Seventies, that bridge-burning, hyper-individualistic era that began in 1968 and burst into a cultural forest-fire that would keep on spreading all the way up to around 1982; after birth control but before AIDS, when suddenly everything seemed possible and nothing was verboten. The flipside of the idealistic, consensual Sixties, the Seventies was the era when doing your own thing and letting it all hang out ceased to be mere slogans and became a birthright. When doing what thou wilt really had become the whole of the law.

How is someone like Jimmy Page supposed to put all that into words now, though, without everyone pulling a face, or worse still laughing it off? Almost impossible to do back then, it is frankly out of the question now. Even for Robert Plant, who always has an answer for everything, he thinks. Clearly, though, those early days of Zeppelin are just as vivid to Jimmy Page now, in his still smouldering old age, as they were forty years ago, in his death-defying, universe-baiting prime. In his mid-sixties now, you could forgive him for being vague on the details. But he’s not; he’s very precise, in fact. As he has been about everything important he’s done in his career. ‘I knew what I’d been working on in the framework of the Yardbirds,’ he says, drinking his tea, ‘and I knew that I wanted to take that further on – and you can hear all of that on the first [Zeppelin] album.’

Yes, you can. Not in the material, per se – there was little that was original about that – but in the idea; the methodology; the determination to take over the entire conversation. Recently, though, I’d read that he’d originally had something lighter, more acoustic in mind, then had a change of heart after he saw drummer John Bonham play. An idea encouraged perhaps by his solo appearance in Zeppelin’s earliest days on the Julie Felix TV show, picking elegantly at ‘White Summer’, the acoustic guitar interlude based on legendary folk enigma Davy Graham’s instrumental raga on the Irish melody ‘She Moved Through The Fair’ which was Page’s showcase even back in Yardbirds days and that had one enthralled reviewer comparing him to flamenco guitarist Manitas de Plata.

‘That’s bullshit,’ he told me, contemptuous of the notion that
Zeppelin might ever have been anything other than what they were. ‘I had a whole sort of repertoire in my mind of songs that I wanted to put into this new format, like “Babe I’m Gonna Leave You”, for example. But it wasn’t just the sensitivity of doing an acoustic number, cos it was all gonna grow.’ Zeppelin would not be anything so simple as all-acoustic or all-electric. Zeppelin would not be nailed down. ‘I was seeing all this sort of dynamic. Because my tastes were all-encompassing, musically, it wasn’t down to one particular thing. It wasn’t just the blues, it wasn’t just rock’n’roll. It wasn’t just folk music or classical music. It went all the way through the whole thing.’ Later, when I checked, I discovered he’d said much the same thing to writer Mick Houghton as far back as 1976. ‘I knew exactly the style I was after and the sort of musicians I wanted to play with,’ he’d declared then. ‘I guess it proves that the group was really meant to be, the way it all came together.’ Then again in 1990, when he told Mat Snow in Q: ‘We knew what we were doing: treading down paths that had not been trodden before.’

So Jimmy Page had the whole thing worked out right from the start, did he? Musically, perhaps he did. Or, as he says now, what he wanted ‘the framework’ to be. However, the manner in which he really put the group together was much more haphazard; much more risky. Luck played a huge part. In fact, at first it appeared Lady Luck was working against him when he realised he couldn’t get any of the people he really wanted in the band interested. Or if they were interested, that something else stood in the way. For example, hindsight tells us that vocalist/guitarist Terry Reid, one of the first people Page approached, was a fool to turn down the chance to join Led Zeppelin. But they weren’t called Led Zeppelin then – they were still just the New Yardbirds, a new name that made the band sound very old. Reid was young, a gunslinger in his own right with, ironically, a solo deal with Mickie Most on the table. What did he want to join the New Yardbirds for?

Still only nineteen and hotly tipped by the music press as the ‘Pop Star Most Likely To’, Reid had been a star-in-the-making since he was sixteen, when Peter Jay of the Jaywalkers made him his new frontman. Then came Hendrix and Cream and just like everyone else, Terry had wanted to get in on the act too. By February 1968, his pal Graham Nash – who had just left the Hollies to do his own thing in America
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with two groovy new cats he’d met named David Crosby and Stephen Stills – had talked Mickie Most into signing him. When Jimmy Page came along with his offer to join the New Yardbirds, Reid was already hard at work on the songs that would end up on his Superlungs album – the naff nickname dreamed up for him by Most. How could he turn his back on all that just to try and help refloat a leaky boat like the Yardbirds?

Page, who’d remembered Reid from a show the Yardbirds had done at the Albert Hall two years before when Terry and the Jaywalkers had been on the bill, was devastated. Especially when Peter Grant told him the reason Terry wouldn’t join was because he’d just been signed as a solo artist by Mickie, who he still shared an Oxford Street office with. Despite his growing trust in G, Jimmy felt cuckolded. ‘You know their two desks faced each other, right?’ he still notes sourly all these years later.

‘Meanwhile,’ said Reid, ‘I was doing a gig. I think it was in Buxton with the Band of Joy. I’d seen them before, and I knew Robert Plant and John Bonham. And this time, as I watched them, I thought: “That’s it!” I could hear the whole thing in my head. So the next day I phoned up Jimmy. He said, “What does this singer look like?” I said, “What do you mean, what does he look like? He looks like a Greek god, but what does that matter? I’m talking about how he sings. And his drummer is phenomenal. Check it out!”’

It was the same for drummer Aynsley Dunbar, a veteran of John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers and the earliest incarnation of the Jeff Beck Group. As Dunbar says now, ‘I was offered the chance to join the New Yardbirds. They were already talking about going to America – that was the lure, as I’d never been. There’s no doubt in my mind that if I’d done so I’d have ended up in Led Zeppelin. But the Yardbirds was already sort of old news by then, and I had my own band, Retaliation, that had just signed a record deal. I liked the idea of playing with Jimmy because he was like me, very into improvisation, something which Beck couldn’t manage at all – everything he did was always rehearsed right down to the last note. But joining the Yardbirds at that moment would have seemed like a step backwards, not forwards.’

It wasn’t even the first time Jimmy Page had tried to put together his own group. As far back as the summer of 1966, he had tentatively imagined an outfit of his own with either Small Faces frontman Steve
Marriott on vocals and second guitar, or possibly Spencer Davis Group protege Steve Winwood on vocals and keyboards, along with what Page now calls a ‘super hooligan’ rhythm section comprising The Who’s Keith Moon on drums and John Entwhistle on bass. That had been in May 1966, when he had overseen the session at London’s IBC studios that would produce ‘Beck’s Bolero’ – Jeff Beck’s guitar-enflamed version of Ravel’s ‘Bolero’ originally intended to be his first solo single and that Page has consistently insisted over the years that he arranged, played on and produced – ‘Jeff was playing and I was sort of in the control booth. And even though he said he wrote it, I wrote it. Bollocks. I’m playing all the electric and 12-string but it was supposed to be a solo record for him. The slide bits are his and I’m just basically playing’ – and which Beck just as stubbornly flatly denies. ‘No, Jimmy didn’t write that song. We sat down in his front room once, a little, tiny, pokey room, and he was sitting on the arm of a chair and he started playing that Ravel rhythm. And he had a 12-string and it sounded so full, really fat and heavy. And I just played the melody and I went home and worked out the up tempo section.’

In the end, it hardly mattered. Mickie Most would only release it as the B-side of ‘Hi Ho Silver Lining’. Still, the guitarists continued to argue over who did what. The only thing they did later agree on is that the ‘Beck’s Bolero’ line-up could have been the ‘original’ Led Zeppelin. Also present on the session that night were two players Page knew from the sessions’ world: a young pianist named Nicky Hopkins and bassist John Paul Jones. Hopkins was twenty-two, an old head on young shoulders who had started out as a schoolboy in Lord Sutch’s Savages, then played with Cyril Davies’ All Stars, as had Jimmy, which is how they’d first met, before a serious stomach ailment landed Nicky in hospital for eighteen months. Now he was a full-time session guy. Good money, no travelling, easy on the tummy. Later that year the Kinks would immortalise him on the track ‘Session Man’. He was quiet, talented and shy, hardly ever said a word to anyone, just played his part and fucked off like a good boy afterwards. Jonesy wasn’t much of a talker, either. He was all right, though, a good player, sure of himself. Also in his early twenties but an even older veteran of the session scene, it wasn’t the first time he and Pagey had worked together either and it wouldn’t be the last. Within weeks, in fact, he would be brought in at Jimmy’s insistence to arrange the strings on the Yardbirds
track, ‘Little Games’ (and later to play bass on the ‘Ten Little Indians’ single).

The biggest presence at the ‘Bolero’ session, though, was that of Keith Moon, who’d arrived at the studios in Langham Place wearing shades and a Cossack hat – ‘Incognito, dear boy’ – in case anybody saw and recognised him. A get-up which, unsurprisingly, had the reverse effect of making everyone stare at him intently. Moony was pissed off at The Who, fed up with Daltrey’s constant fighting and Townshend’s black moods. John Entwhistle, who’d also promised to turn up then backed out at the last minute, felt the same, Keith said, both boys looking for a way out of the grind of being the background to the Pete and Rog show. Sensing an opportunity, Page laughingly suggested they all team up together: Keith and Jimmy and John and Jeff. (No mention of Jonesy or Nicky, at this stage.) Moony got all excited and even accidentally suggested a name for the new line-up when he joked that it would go down like a lead zeppelin, meaning balloon. (Entwhistle would later swear blind it was he that had suggested the name but it was Moon that Page would later ask for his blessing to use the name.) Smoking cigarettes and speeding out of his head, everyone had laughed at Keith. But Jimmy had liked the idea – even the name – and tucked it away in his back pocket, like he had done a lot of good ideas over the past four years working in studios with frustrated musos.

Half-Yardbirds, half-Who; pushed in the right direction by boss man Page. All they would need was a good singer. Moony had said Entwhistle could sing but Jimmy was thinking more of Stevie Winwood. Then Traffic started taking off big time and so he thought of Steve Marriott instead. Page had been to quite a few Small Faces gigs and already knew Marriott well, knew he was up for anything. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea: Jimmy, Jeff, Moony and Entwhistle, with Steve Marriott upfront . . . What a supergroup that would be! Or as he later told the writer, Steve Rosen, ‘It would have been the first of all those sort of bands, like Cream sort of thing. But it didn’t happen . . .’

Not surprisingly, the success of the session had given Beck similar ideas, like two mates out for the night spotting and fancying the same bird. Keith Moon, he said, ‘had the most vicious drum sound and the wildest personality. At that point, he wasn’t turning up for Who sessions, so I thought that with a little wheeling and dealing, I could
sneak him away. To what, though? The Jeff Beck Group was still, at that stage, more wishful thinking than reality, and there was his old pal Pagey, in the control booth, overseeing everything, letting Jeff think it was all his idea. Not that Beck didn’t cotton on to all that. As he said, ‘That was probably the first Led Zeppelin band – not with that name, but that kind of thing.’ Moony, he said, ‘was the only hooligan who could play properly. I thought, “This is it!” You could feel the excitement, not knowing what you were going to play, but just whoosh! It was great and there were all these things going on, but nothing really happened afterwards, because Moony couldn’t leave The Who.’

This fact alone wasn’t enough to deter Jimmy Page, though, and despite joining the Yardbirds just weeks later – ostensibly as a temporary replacement for bassist Paul Samwell-Smith – he still put feelers out to see if Marriott might be interested in leaving the Small Faces to join forces with him in some new unspecified group project. ‘He was approached,’ Jimmy would later reveal, ‘and seemed to be full of glee about it. A message came from the business side of Marriott, though, which said, “How would you like to play guitar with broken fingers?”’

As the ‘business side of Marriott’ was Don Arden, the self-proclaimed ‘Al Capone of pop’ and then the most notoriously gangster-like figure in the British music business, such a threat was to be taken seriously. When I asked Arden about this myself, before he succumbed to Alzheimer’s disease in 2007, he merely chuckled. ‘Later on I’d hang fucking Robert Stigwood over a balcony for daring to try and take Stevie Marriott away from me. You think I’d let some little schlemiel from the Yardbirds have him?’ After that, said Page, ‘the idea sort of fell apart. We just said, “Let’s forget about the whole thing, quick.” Instead of being more positive about it and looking for another singer, we just let it slip by. Then The Who began a tour, the Yardbirds began a tour and that was it.’

The idea was gone but not quite forgotten. Not by Jimmy Page anyway. So much so that when Peter Grant had asked him straight out, as they sat in the car in June 1968, what he was going to do after that final Yardbirds show, he had his answer ready. He was going to find a new singer, Page had said in his quiet but determined voice, find a new rhythm section too if needs be, and lead the band himself. Then he waited to see if G was still listening . . .
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You are Peter Grant. It is the summer of 1968, you are thirty-three and sick and tired of earning money for other fucking people. In the days when you’d worked for Don Arden, it hadn’t mattered. Don could be a right cunt to work for; always on your case, giving you a hard time, always taking the piss, but at least you’d been paid regular and in cash. No fucking tax or stamp or any of that old codswallop with Don. And you’d learned a lot too. Running around on the road with nutters like Gene and Richard, Chuck and the Everly boys, you’d learned more working for Don than anything you’d done since your two years’ National Service. A lot of lads hated doing Service. You’d hear ‘em crying themselves to sleep at night, crying for their mummies, silly little poofs. You’d enjoyed it. Being in the army was the first time you’d experienced the feeling of what it was like to belong to a big extended family, and you’d liked it. Liked the discipline, giving and taking orders, everyone knowing where they stood even if it was in a pile of shit. Men being men, doing what they were fucking told. Enjoyed it enough to win promotion to Corporal in the RAOC – that’s the Royal Army Ordinance Corps to you, sonny. Given charge of the dining hall, through which you’d got involved with the NAAFI, putting on shows, organising the tea and the sticky buns, sorting out the entertainment for the troops. ‘A very cushy number,’ you’d smile and say whenever you looked back.

Years later, you’d be driving through the Midlands one day in your brand new Rolls Royce convertible, being chauffeured by Richard Cole as you sat in the back telling it how it was to Atlantic Records’ chief whip Phil Carson, when, realising suddenly how close you were to an important piece of your past, you decided to take a little detour and show the chaps around your old army barracks. Ordering Cole to swing right through the army camp gates, driving bold as brass past the daft bastard on duty who saluted you, you’d told Cole to park the Rolls next to the little line of huts you and the rest of the lads used to sleep in. You should have bloody well seen the look on their faces as you showed them round. So much better than the ‘dreadful’ holiday camp you’d later worked in, you told them. How, after you’d finished there you’d worked briefly at that Jersey hotel as ‘entertainments manager’, another crap job that didn’t last . . .

What you didn’t mention was how, as a kid, you’d dreamed of being a film star. Six foot six by the time you were old enough for the army, already well on your way to putting on the weight you would later be remembered for – not skinny, no, but bloody tall and not bad looking actually, you
cheeky cunt. But it was all a dream. Instead, after the holiday camp and the hotel you’d found yourself working back in London as a doorman – a polite word for ‘bouncer’ – at the 2Is Coffee Bar in Old Compton Street. How even though the 2Is would later become famous as the sordid little dive where Tommy Steele started off – Tommy, Wally Whyton, Cliff Richard, Adam Faith, Wee Willie Harris and all those other cunts – it didn’t bring you any closer to making any dreams come true. Later, though, you realised the 2Is had been useful in other ways. Where you first met faces like Andrew Loog Oldham, the smart-arse kid who later worked for the Beatles and Stones, who’d started out sweeping the floor at the 2Is for pin money. Then there was Lionel Bart, funny little shit who used to paint murals on the basement wall there and would later strike it lucky in the West End with Oliver, then fuck it all up by selling his copyright for a quick bit of cash, missing out on millions when it later got tuned into the film. What a fucking caper! But a lesson you were quick to learn – always get – and bloody well keep – a slice of the pie. And of course Michael Hayes, who would later change his name to Mickie Most but was working as the waiter at the 2Is when you first met. Mickie, who you would one day go into partnership with: him as the brains, you as the brawn, looking after the acts out on the road while Mickie took care of them in the studio, producing hit after hit.

‘Mickie poured the coffee while I sold the tickets at the top of the stairs,’ you’d tell ’em when they came to ask you about it years later. That had been 1957. The pay: eighteen shillings a night (90p) and a hot meal. Not all that but better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. You became known as ‘a character’; the guy the girls had to charm to squeeze their way down to the small 25 x 16-foot basement; Mickie the clown at the counter who would leap out from behind it sometimes and also sing a few numbers. You the henchman who would grab their daft boyfriends and throw ’em out onto the street first sign of trouble.

Then one day you finally got your own chance to show what you could do – though not as a singer. The 2Is was owned by two Aussie wrestlers, Paul Lincoln and Ray Hunter. It was Paul who looked you up and down and suggested you might like to earn ‘a few extra bob’ by teaming up to ‘fight’ him in a few bouts. Willing to try anything, you turned up for your first wrestling match billed as His Highness Count Bruno Alassio of Milan, don’t you dare fucking laugh. Paul went on as Doctor Death. And guess what? The punters loved it! Lapped it right up they did. This was the old
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days, before they’d cottoned on to the fact it was all a fix, so shut it. It went over so well, in fact, that Paul arranged a few more bouts between Dr Death and the Count. Sometimes you’d be billed as Count Bruno, sometimes Count Massimo. One time you put on a Lone Ranger mask and called yourself The Masked Marauder, offering to take on all-comers, while Paul, the plant, jumped up and down in the audience waving his fucking arms. ‘Me! Pick me!’ You’d fucking pick him one of these days all right . . .

Don Arden – who gave Peter Grant his break in the biz when he hired him in the early Sixties as his ‘driver’, an all-purpose job title that involved ‘hand-holding’ some of Arden’s most notorious clients, including Gene Vincent, a crippled American ex-pat alcoholic fond of brandishing knives and guns, and Little Richard, a religious-guilt freak who always carried a bible with descriptions of his orgiastic exploits scribbled in the margins – shakes his head with disgust. ‘Peter Grant was never a fucking wrestler. He couldn’t punch his way out of a paper bag!’ I remind Don that being a wrestler is not the same as being a boxer and that Grant wouldn’t have needed to punch his way out of anything. An ability to growl and look threatening – well within his range – and a nicely stage-managed forearm smash – also well within his scope – would surely have sufficed. ‘All I’m saying is he traded on that reputation: the hard guy; the heavy. Well, let me tell you, Peter Grant was nothing but a big fat bully. He was so fucking fat he could barely stand up. That’s why he always used to take the car everywhere. He couldn’t walk more than ten feet without getting out of breath. His legs were gone.’

Even allowing for Arden’s famously dark sense of humour, there’s clearly some truth in what he says. As Mickie Most later told writer Chris Welch, he and Grant ‘used to put up the wrestling rings for Dale Martin Promotions. Sometimes if a wrestler didn’t show up for the first bout, Peter used to do a bit . . . that was the basis of Peter’s wrestling career.’ He added: ‘When Peter butted someone with his stomach, that was just using a wrestling technique. Nobody ever got hurt. If they did get hurt it was an accident. It wasn’t meant to happen. There was no physical damage because it was all showbiz.’

That said, there was far more to Peter Grant than mere bulk. Shrewd enough to know a reputation as a former ring-pro only added to the air of intimidation he liked to wield over those he was determined
would come off worse in their dealings with him, he was also sensitive enough to be repelled by a 1971 *Daily Mirror* article that purported to ‘expose’ his past life in ‘the grapple game’. Wrestling was something he’d done ‘for about eighteen months when I needed the money,’ he said, not something he was proud of. But by then his reputation was firmly established, and not just amongst British tabloid journalists. Three years into his reign as Led Zeppelin manager he was routinely referred to in the press as the ‘brute’, the ‘giant’; the old-school music biz hustler who looked ‘like a bodyguard in a Turkish harem’ as one paper unkindly but not inaccurately described him. Jibes that hurt all the more for carrying the ring of truth. For like a lot of exceptionally large men, Peter Grant was highly sensitive, particularly about his size and misleading general demeanour. While he no longer saw a potential leading man in the movies when he looked in the mirror, he didn’t see an ogre, either. In fact, by the time he was in his late thirties and overseeing the affairs of the most financially successful act in the music business, he liked to see himself as a man of wealth and taste, a cultured figure who could just as easily sit and have tea with the upper crust as he could dish the dirt with the shysters of Tin Pan Alley.

According to the former promoter Freddy Bannister, who worked with Grant at the beginning and end of his career with Zeppelin, ‘Peter has this reputation now as this almost gangster-like figure, and yes, he was fairly awful and intimidating in his latter days of managing Led Zeppelin. But in the early days he could be quite the gentleman, quietly spoken and very well-mannered. He was interested in antiques, and we both had a passion for vintage cars. I would often bump into him at car auctions and we would have a very jolly time together. Of course, you were always aware of this other side to him, too. When it came to negotiating deals for Zeppelin, he could be very forthright indeed. But not like later on when he really did become very nasty. But that was the drugs, too, of course.’

It also has to be borne in mind that Peter Grant came from the era before accountants and lawyers took over the music business. What his former mentor Don Arden, the ultimate poacher-turned-gamekeeper, calls ‘the wild west days of the music biz’. Or in the words of someone Grant befriended later in life, Dire Straits’ manager, Ed Bicknell: ‘In Peter’s day, you put the money in the Hammond organ and made a
dash for the border.’ As Mickie Most once said, ‘[Peter] was a dreamer and he hustled.’ He was also intelligent and could spout you facts and figures from a contract at random. If that didn’t work, he would take a leaf from Don Arden’s book and back you up against a wall and threaten you. Unlike Don, however, who had spent his war years faking illness in an army barracks many hundreds of miles from the frontline, Peter wouldn’t pull a gun on you – not in the early days anyway. But he wasn’t in the least bit fazed when he saw one, and certainly not in America, where you would see them all the time. What made his manner more frightening was his unexpectedly soft voice, surprisingly high, even when shouting at you; and the beautiful, long-lashed cow eyes that would narrow into unreadable slits when angered. Word had already gone out across America long before the arrival there of Led Zeppelin: Peter Grant didn’t argue. He merely told you how it was. And if that didn’t work, he showed you – personally.

He also, practically unheard of then, regarded his artists as friends, members of his extended family, particularly Jimmy Page, who he treated as almost a second son. ‘I always had the most respect and admiration for Jimmy,’ Grant said. ‘I felt that I was closer to Jimmy than any of the other members of the Yardbirds. I had immense faith in his talent and ability. I just wanted him to do whatever he felt was best for him at the time.’ A man who had grown up without a large family circle for support thus went out of his way to create his own, now he was a father – manager – himself. As such, he had no precedent. In later years, people liked to compare him to Col. Tom Parker, Elvis Presley’s manager. But the Colonel would – and did – sell Elvis’s name to the highest bidder, both before and especially after his death. G would rather have cut off his own arm than sell his artist down the river of commercial shit the Colonel routinely sent Elvis blithely skittering down. Similarly, Brian Epstein had been intensely supportive of the Beatles, but he was a novice, weak on the small print, who would eventually throw in the towel in the most dramatic fashion possible, leaving his artists high and dry and at the mercy of much larger, more vicious predators. By comparison, Peter Grant had been around the block so many times before Zeppelin came his way he felt like he owned it. So much so, unlike the ruinous penny-ha’penny record deal Epstein negotiated for the Beatles – then failed to renegotiate after their career had lifted off into the stratosphere – Grant was able to
land his act the biggest deal in music biz history. In fact, Grant had more in common with the man who eventually replaced Epstein, the pugnacious Allen Klein, who, when asked by Playboy magazine if he would lie or steal for his clients had replied respectively, ‘Oh, sure,’ and ‘Probably.’ Peter Grant was looking for love from his artists; to give and receive.

Even Don Arden, who was so fiercely protective of his artists he would physically go to war on their behalf – breaking bones, smashing furniture, brandishing shotguns – only did it to protect his own interests, primarily money. G was different. He was after the lolly too. But it wasn’t his prime motivator. He wanted respect, he wanted loyalty, he wanted family. Most of all, he craved ultimate control of that family. Hence the surprisingly small but loyal staff Led Zeppelin would employ throughout their career, on the road and off, always the same trusted officers and infantrymen. The minute you proved yourself untrustworthy or disloyal, you were expelled – forever. It was a zero-tolerance approach that extended to record company execs, promoters, agents, merchandisers, journalists, anyone who had anything to do with the band. You were either for Peter Grant and Led Zeppelin or you were against them. And if you were against them, Peter Grant was against you – big time.

As John Paul Jones would later recall, ‘[Peter] trusted us to get the music together, and then just kept everybody else away, making sure we had the space to do whatever we wanted without interference from anybody – press, record company, promoters. He only had us [as clients] and reckoned that if we were going to do good, then he would do good. He always believed that we would be hugely successful and people became afraid not to go along with his terms in case they missed out. But all that stuff about renegotiating contracts through intimidation is rubbish. He wasn’t hanging people out of windows and all that crap.’

Well, no. Not out of windows, perhaps. But intimidation, threats, ultra-violence, all would be used regularly by Grant at various points throughout Zeppelin’s career. ‘If somebody had to be trod on,’ he would say, ‘they got trod on. Too true!’ That wasn’t all there was to his style of management, nor was it even the biggest part of it. But, yes, it was always there, bubbling like a sea monster just beneath the blackest, most oily part of the surface; one that would certainly bare
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its teeth with ever more scary frequency as the years rolled by and the band became more and more successful and, ironically, less in need of such ferociously over the top tactics.

Back in 1968, though, Grant had found himself at a crossroads. The imminent dissolution of the Yardbirds was hardly a surprise. The group had been at each other’s throats since he and Most had taken them off previous manager Simon Napier-Bell’s hands two years before. What really bugged Peter, though, was the thought of going back to square one with some other group. That is, some other group controlled by Mickie. Sooner or later that, too, would come to an end and what then? It was all right for guys like Don Arden and Mickie Most with their big houses and flash cars; they had seen enough of the back end in their careers to view the whole thing as simply another business deal that had gone down before moving straight onto the next one. Peter Grant was tired of roaming around on the road to no discernible purpose, other than paying the rent. He was married, with a small son, Warren, and a baby daughter on the way and he wanted his stake in the dream to come true too. Like Jimmy, it was time for him to strike out on his own. No Mickie or Don this time, no lurking in the background this time; no more second banana. It was time for Peter – G – to show what he could do too.

When sitting in the car, passing time, Page had said he wanted to do his own thing, dreaming of the future, Grant had been pleased and surprised but not entirely sure what that would entail. All through that final Yardbirds show in Luton he had thought about it, watching Jimmy from the wings, wondering. And the more he thought about it, the more sure he became that it could – would – work. However, he was taken aback when Jimmy had mentioned Terry Reid – Terry, who Peter knew had just signed to Mickie, who he still shared an office with, their desks facing each other. Peter knew there was no chance with Terry now that Mickie had gotten his claws into him but he didn’t want to discourage Jimmy. So he went along with it, knowing they’d have to look elsewhere. Sure enough, Jimmy was disappointed. If Peter knew there was no chance why hadn’t he said something, tried to stop Jimmy? When Terry himself suggested someone else, it was almost too good to be true. Peter breathed a quiet sigh of relief and made himself busy trying to track the kid down . . .
Terry said they called him ‘the Wild Man of the Black Country’. You didn’t know if that sounded promising or not, but you wrote down the bloke’s name and gave it to G. It was an easy one to remember anyway – Robert Plant. Made you think of flower power sort of thing, which might have been good a couple of years ago. Things had changed since then, though. The main thing was, could the bloke sing? And did he look the part? Terry seemed to think so and Terry would know, wouldn’t he? So you asked G to look into it and that’s when you found out that Tony Secunda, The Move’s manager, was also sniffing around; had already had the bloke down to London for an audition. G suggested they move fast, before Secunda did a Mickie and got in there first. It still seemed a bit much though, having to drive all the way to Birmingham, or wherever it was, when there were so many good singers already in London: Chris Farlowe, Rod Stewart, Stevie Marriott, lots of others like Terry that didn’t have names yet. The boy in Free, he was good, too. But G said all the good ones were taken, reminding you that Stevie Winwood came from up there somewhere too, didn’t he, so you never knew.

It was a Saturday night. G drove, you and Chris, who was still making up his mind, sitting in the back, smoking cigarettes and fearing the worst, that it would all be a big waste of time. Then you got there – another college gig. Small room at the back of the building, band called Hobbsweeble. Like something out of Lord of the Rings. Then they came on and you really feared the worst. Bunch of dope-smoking yokels, doing covers, American hippy, old flower power stuff. Waste of time. But the singer, he was quite good, actually. Big bugger in a University of Toronto sweatshirt. Did a version of the Airplane’s ‘Somebody to Love’ and really turned it on. A bit too good, perhaps. How come no-one had heard of him apart from Terry? And bloody Secunda?

You were suspicious, didn’t believe in gift horses. Either there was something wrong with him personality-wise or he was impossible to work with. It was the only explanation you could think of. But G, who hadn’t come all this way for nothing, was more gung-ho. ‘Invite him down for an audition, then decide,’ he said. So you did and a few days later this big kid with big curly hair was standing at the door of the pad in Pangbourne, grinning. You had taken him in and made him a cup of tea, offered him a fag. Told him to skin one up if he wanted, offered him your stash. At first it had been awkward, you could tell the kid was nervous. A few years younger, he’d done a couple of things, made a couple of records, but no hits
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to speak of. The only people you had in common were Terry, who the kid didn’t actually seem to know that well; Secunda, who was always too busy with The Move to make up his mind one way or the other, and Alexis Korner. But then every young kid you ever heard of had once sung or played in a band with Alexis.

Things warmed up when you started playing records. You told him about your idea for taking the Yardbirds and building on it, going in a whole new direction. The kid nodded along, ‘Yeah, great’, though it was fairly clear he didn’t know any of the Yardbirds’ songs – not from your time with them anyway. But you sat there on the floor together, letting him flick through your LPs, pulling out stuff by Larry Williams, Don and Dewey, the Incredible String Band, Buddy Guy and early Elvis. A mixture of stuff the kid – Robert – claimed to know well or admitted he’d never really heard before. When you put on ‘You Shook Me’ by Muddy Waters, then ‘She Said Yeah’ by Larry Williams, his face lit up. When you put on ‘Babe I’m Gonna Leave You’ by Joan Baez he looked puzzled. He was still nodding, still sitting there pulling on a joint and going, ‘Yeah, man, groovy,’ but you could tell he didn’t really know what on earth you were on about half the time. He’d heard of Joan Baez, all Dylan fans had heard of Joan Baez, but what did she have to do with the New Yardbirds? He was just a big curly-haired kid with a big curly-haired voice from somewhere up there in the Midlands.

So you picked up your acoustic guitar, said, ‘I’ve got an idea for this one’, and began playing your own arrangement of ‘Babe I’m Gonna Leave You’, and slowly, slowly, it began to sink in. Not all of it but enough to get him started; get him thinking about it on the train back to Brum or wherever it was he came from. Then you said he could crash for the night if he wanted and he did.

‘I really didn’t know much about the Yardbirds,’ Robert Plant would tell me. ‘I knew what they had meant and that in their latter stages they’d made a lot of pop records, which were good. But they didn’t... they were very much...’ He struggles to find the right words but what he’s trying to say is that he’d never actually bought any Yardbirds records, never been what you’d call a fan. He had certainly never seen himself being in a group like that. He and his friends saw themselves more as the English version of Moby Grape, if they saw themselves as anything. Or as he put it, ‘I knew that Keith Relf had got the kind of
voice that he’d got and I couldn’t see where I’d fit in. But of course I didn’t know where it would go . . .’

Nearly thirty years after they broke up, Led Zeppelin is still a tricky subject for Robert Plant, full of ‘grey areas’ and things he doesn’t want to talk about, particularly from the latter half of their career, when the drugs had taken over and the madness seemed to double with every stumbling, life-wrecking step the unruly giant they had created took. The early days are safe ground, though. In fact, by the summer of 1968, Robert Plant had all but given up on the idea of having a career in the music business. He’d sung in various groups since he was a teenager, coming closest to the spotlight in the Band of Joy, a bunch of Birmingham-based American West Coast wannabes specialising in covers by Love, Moby Grape and Buffalo Springfield, who’d got as far as some club dates in London before falling apart from lack of any real record company interest. After that, he’d sung and played briefly with Alexis Korner, but still no cigar. He’d even released a couple of solo singles – both flops. Now he was back home, working on a building site and singing part-time in the horribly named Hobbstweedle.

Looking back now though, he tends to idealise those days. ‘I really just wanted to get to San Francisco and join up. I had so much empathy with the commentary in America at the time of Vietnam that I just wanted to be with Jack Casady and with Janis Joplin. There was some kind of fable being created there, and a social change that was taking place, and the music was a catalyst in all of that.’ He gave a more accurate description of his circumstances back then, when in 1969, he told hippy bible, International Times: ‘It was the real desperation scene, man, like I had nowhere else to go.’ Even his old pal, John ‘Bonzo’ Bonham, was now doing better than him, earning £40-a-week drumming in American singer-songwriter Tim Rose’s backing band. Forty quid a week! Robert could pretend he wasn’t jealous but no-one believed him, let alone his pretty Anglo-Indian fiancée Maureen who he had met at a Georgie Fame concert two years before. As he later told me, ‘For a while I was living off Maureen, God bless her. Then I did some road-making to earn some bread. I actually laid half the asphalt on West Bromwich High Street. But all it did was give me six shillings-and-tuppence an hour [31p], an emergency tax code and big biceps. All the navvies called me the pop singer . . .’

Plant told me he actually ‘ignored the telegrams’ he’d received from
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Peter Grant, inviting him down for an audition in the New Yardbirds, but it’s hard to believe. He said he only really considered it after Grant had phoned and left a couple of messages for him at his local pub in Walsall, the Three Men in a Boat. (Grant had phoned the pub, he explains in an aside, because he didn’t have a phone of his own and used the pub as his ‘office’.) The fact, though, as he had told IT, was that ‘everyone in Birmingham was desperate to get out and join a successful band . . . everyone wanted to move to London.’ Nineteen-year-old Robert Plant was no exception. He may not have had the same yearning to go and live in ‘the smoke’, as the rest of the country still called its capital, but he was desperate to make a living out of his singing, a dream that had stubbornly refused so far to come true. Finally, he said, ‘I went down there and then I met Jimmy. I didn’t know whether or not I would get the gig but I was . . . curious.’ You bet he was. Paul Rodgers, then fronting Free, recalls seeing Plant perform in the summer of 1968. ‘It was just before he joined Zeppelin,’ he says. ‘Free played up in Birmingham with Alexis Korner at the Railway Tavern, a blues club and Robert got up to jam with Alexis and he was the Robert Plant that we know and love today — full-on hair and tight jeans and everything, doing that “Hey babe!”’ [imitates Plant’s trademark vocal]. Full on everything, you know? He was giving it large with Alexis who was playing an acoustic guitar, and people didn’t quite get it. He really needed Bonham and Page behind him. We were staying at some hotel and afterwards he came back for a cup of tea. He said: “You know, I’m thinking of going down to London. What’s it like down there?” I said, “Oh, it’s pretty cool, you know, it’s good.” He said, “I’ve had a call from this guy called Jimmy Page, have you heard of him?” I said, “Oh yeah, everyone’s talking about him, he’s a big session guy down there.” He said, “Well, he wants to form a band with me. They’ve offered me either thirty quid or a percentage.” I said, “Take the percentage.” Next thing I knew it was Led Zeppelin, right?’ Thirteen days after the final Yardbirds show in Luton, Plant packed an overnight bag and bought the cheapest train ticket available that would take him from Birmingham to Reading, and then onto the local stopping service to Pangbourne. He walked the rest of the way to Jimmy’s, ignoring the disgusted looks of the distinctly middle-class denizens who mainly lived alongside the river. Trying not to look too impressed as Jimmy showed him in and went to put the kettle on, the
wide-eyed would-be wild man was utterly overawed by his slightly older host. When they started putting on records and talking about music, there was more of a connection, he said, though it was Jimmy who did most of the picking and putting on.

‘You can smell when people have had their doors opened a little wider than most, and you could feel that was the deal with Jimmy. His ability to absorb things and the way he carried himself was far more cerebral than anything I’d come across before and I was so very impressed. I don’t think I’d ever come across a personality like it before. He had a demeanour which you had to adjust to. Certainly it wasn’t very casual to start with . . .’

Nor would it ever truly become so.