



2022, vol. 9, issue 1, 157-166

RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6795742>

## Led Zeppelin's Music and Its Black Blues (un)credited Influence

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### Abstract

Led Zeppelin is considered one of the most influential rock bands in the history of music due to their sophisticated sound and seminal compositions. Their music prodigiously impacted the industry, blazing the trail for today's prominent artists. Throughout the years, their cultural legacy was fathomlessly analysed and assessed by a plethora of music pundits who focused their investigations on the musicians' educational and artistic background, early musical influences and creative mindset. Despite being notorious for their rock supremacy, many of their works are deeply rooted in African-American blues music. Nevertheless, despite Jimmy Page and Robert Plant's public enthusiasm for this genre due to their early involvement in the blues music scene, the band arguably premeditated to omit crediting blues artists whose black heritage significantly contributed to Led Zeppelin's awe-inspiring success. Consequently, they faced several resounding trials for unfairly exploiting many blues musicians' works in creating their own repertoire which led to serious cases of copyright infringement. During the course of this essay, I will outline the band's misappropriation of African-American blues culture in regard to their phenomenal rock establishment as a result of a Western white predominance in the music industry at the time.

*Keywords: Led Zeppelin, rock, blues, black music, influence*

Led Zeppelin was formed in London in 1968 and consisted of guitarist Jimmy Page, singer Robert Plant, bassist John Paul Jones and drummer John Bonham. London represented the epicentre of rock and roll at the time due to the numerous emerging rock artists and bands such as The Who, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks and many more that were about to forever define this genre. It was a place in which 'the partying, the alcohol and drugs, the loud music, the easy girls'<sup>1</sup> started to represent the quintessence of the young artists' inspiration. This complexity of the rock music scene in London is a result of the eclectic fusion of cultures and music trends. Therefore, London became an auspicious environment for artistic development and social emancipation. This newly revived freedom of expression led to an innovative multicultural approach which broadened the musical horizon of recently emerged bands such as Led Zeppelin. Consequently, their style was tremendously moulded by 'a wealth of influences' which 'were shaped into a sound louder, more bottom-heavy, arguably more raw, [...] and in some cases more deliberately unpolished than any other white rock of the time'.<sup>2</sup> This inevitable immersion in a multifarious collection of genres resulted in a swift and smooth development of their musical diversity, facilitating their manifold ways of experimenting with progressive rock, folk, and even country music. Jimmy Page himself clearly stated that this direct access to an impressive abundance of artistic references provided by the London music scene

<sup>1</sup> Richard Cole, *Stairway to Heaven: Led Zeppelin uncensored*, 1st edn (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Fast, *In the houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the power of rock music*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4.

tenaciously sculptured the band's musicianship: 'It was a process of accessing what was going on [...] and then, bit by bit, your tastes changed and matured as you accessed more'.<sup>3</sup> Under these propitious circumstances of unlimited societal and aesthetic inspiration, the group implacably built and developed their trademark compositions. However, out of all these various sources of inspiration, their paramount creative trigger was undoubtedly the influence of the American blues music. Plant himself expressed his profound affinity with blues which for him represented a fulfilling musical inspiration: 'When you look deeper into that kind of music, you find that it has a lot of the feelings that exist in blues. Then, of course, you realize that the blues field is a very wide one'.<sup>4</sup> It is highly visible how their London origins and proximity to the various multicultural sounds represented a key-point in the shaping and evolution of the band's musical venture.

Led Zeppelin's prominent blues influence was also a result of Page and Plant's previous interaction with this genre. The latter developed his love affair with blues from a very young age when his dad encouraged him to pursue a music career at The Seven Stars Blues Club in Stourbridge. At the age of fifteen, he was part of the Delta Blues Band which opened his voracious appetite for discovering the American blues legacy. Plant himself nostalgically recollected in an interview his band's plenary engagement with blues music: 'The group was called the Delta Blues Band, and when we weren't doing that, a guitarist and myself would go round all the local folk clubs doing Corinna, Corinna and all those really vulgar blues, like Peetie Wheatstraw's stuff'.<sup>5</sup> Mikal Gilmore clearly describes Plant's 'special affinity for American country blues singers, such as Skip James, Bukka White and Memphis Minnie'<sup>6</sup> as a result of his immeasurable desire to expand his blues experience and knowledge. The singer was significantly outspoken on how various blues artists represented a prime reference point in his career: 'My own influences were more blues people like Snooks Eaglin, Robert Johnson, Tommy McClellan, and even Bukka White. Bukka had a really nasal thing [...] a nasal vocal approach which I sometimes use'.<sup>7</sup> This evidence supports the argument that Led Zeppelin's aesthetics was designed based on frontman's transparent familiarity with blues as Robert was 'an inspired fan who was educated about the art form and its intricacies'.<sup>8</sup> However, it can be argued whether the blues artists mentioned previously were purely a source of inspiration or just some victims of Led Zeppelin's misappropriation of African-American culture.

Jimmy Page had also fallen under the blues' spell before Led Zeppelin as he had already broadened his blues proficiency while being a renowned guitarist of a band called Blues Incorporated. As a reflection of his inexorable devotion to music, in his early career he vividly built his reputation of a 'blues purist'<sup>9</sup> who later edified Led Zeppelin's creative spectrum. Inevitably, Page's fervour for blues facilitated his first encounter with Plant after the guitarist's blues band The Yardbirds had split in 1968: 'Jimmy was so impressed with Robert Plant's singing that he invited the fledgling vocalist to his boathouse on the Thames where the two discovered they shared the same love of the blues'.<sup>10</sup> Their unquenchable passion for African-American euphony built a tight relationship between the two

<sup>3</sup> Barney Hoskyns, *Trampled under foot: the power and excess of Led Zeppelin: an oral biography of the world's mightiest rock 'n' roll band*, 1st edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ritchie Yorke, *Led Zeppelin: The Definitive Biography*, 1st edn (California: Underwood-Miller, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Kemp, 'The Forgotten Bluesman Who Introduced Robert Plant to Rock', *Far Out Magazine* <<https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-forgotten-local-musician-introduced-robert-plant-to-rock/>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Mikal Gilmore, *Stories done: writings on the 1960s and its discontents*, 1st edn (New York: Free Press, 2008), p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> Yorke, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> 'Today We Learn About: Led Zeppelin & the Blues', *A Curiosity Complex* <<https://curiositycomplex.wordpress.com/2010/05/19/today-we-learn-about-led-zeppelin-the-blues/#sdfootnote13sym>> [accessed 9 April 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Mick Wall, *When Giants Walked the Earth: 50 years of Led Zeppelin. The fully revised and updated biography*, 1st edn (London: Orion, 2008), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> *A to Zeppelin: The Led Zeppelin Story*, dir. by Mark McLaughlin (2004) - 12 minutes.

musicians which was fortified through ample auditions of blues guitarists such as Muddy Waters and Joan Baez.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the duo formed the basis of Led Zeppelin and debatably shaped new forms of blues and means of artistic expression. Therefore, it can be argued whether the band preserved blues' traditional musical norms, which represented a palpable 'key strain in British rock'<sup>12</sup>, or significantly altered the genre's trademark.

The release of their self-titled album *Led Zeppelin I* in 1968 paved the way for the band's international breakthrough. Despite the short amount of time spent on creating the record, roughly thirty hours, their debut album profoundly changed the course of rock music. Firstly, the musical style foregrounded the kernel of the 60s counterculture movement by the aggressive, sophisticated rock, yet bluesy sound that stirred a wave of both ineluctable praise and unequivocal critics which however did not prevent them from gaining a tremendous commercial success. This irrevocable division in people's opinion resulted in a 'homogeneous audience' which, as Jon Landau believes, later 'evolved into a clearly defined mass taste and a clearly defined elitist taste'.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, this record surprisingly lacked in 'political, social or diehard sensibility'<sup>14</sup> which differentiated itself from the cultural cognizance invoked by other imposing bands and artists at the time such as Cream, The Beatles, Bob Dylan or Jimi Hendrix. As a result, Led Zeppelin formed an ardent young fanbase that briskly propelled the band into stardom stratosphere. However, this blazing and sudden hype led to a backlash from certain critics, accusing them of being 'another white British band exploiting and colonizing American black musical forms'<sup>15</sup> by misappropriating the blues culture.

These accusations were later based on obvious evidence revealing Led Zeppelin's attempt to define their musicianship by exploiting the black music culture. The album closer, 'How Many More Times' is a cogent example of blues misappropriation. Not only does this song share the same title with Howlin' Wolf's 1951 release, but it also 'borrows' evident structural and rhythmical arrangements.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, the band obstinately omitted to give any recognition to the blues musician's pivotal influence, any form of credit or royalties being 'conspicuously absent'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, this song is also a 'little snatch'<sup>18</sup> of Albert King's 1967 'The Hunter' as Led Zeppelin appropriated almost an entire verse, but they slightly made some semantic modifications; King's song starts with the lyrics 'They call me the hunter, that's my name/[...]Ain't no use to hide, ain't no use to run/'Cause I've got you in the sights of my love gun'<sup>19</sup> while Led Zeppelin finished their song with 'Well, they call me the hunter, that's my name/[...]Ain't no need to hide, ain't no need to run/'Cause I've got you in the sights of my gun'.<sup>20</sup> However, in terms of giving any kind of musical acknowledgment, there is a notable exception on their debut album with 'You Shook Me' and 'I Can't Quit You Baby' being appropriately credited to Willie

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<sup>11</sup> Yorke, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Barney Hoskyns, 'Got Dem Ol' Home Counties Blues Again, Mama: How the Surrey Delta Shaped British Rock from the Early Stones to Led Zeppelin', *The Times* <<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/got-dem-ol-home-counties-blues-again-mama-how-the-surrey-delta-shaped-british-rock-from-the-early-stones-to-led-zeppelin>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

<sup>13</sup> Gilmore, p. 300.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Wall, p. 101.

<sup>17</sup> Lindsay Planer, 'How Many More Times - Led Zeppelin', *AllMusic* <<https://www.allmusic.com/song/how-many-more-times-mt0046444807>> [accessed 14 April 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Gavin Edwards, 'Led Zeppelin's 10 Boldest Rip-Offs', *Rolling Stone* <<https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/led-zeppelins-10-boldest-rip-offs-223419/>> [accessed 16 April 2022].

<sup>19</sup> Booker T. Jones, C. Wells, Al Jackson Jr., Donald Dunn and Steve Cropper, *The Hunter*, Albert King (Stax Studio, Memphis, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> John Bonham, John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant, *How Many More Times*, Led Zeppelin (Olympic Studio, London, 1969).

Dixon.<sup>21</sup> Page himself admitted that they used Dixon's influence in composing some of the riffs for the two songs mentioned above: "The riffs we did were totally different, [...] apart from something like "You Shook Me" and "I Can't Quit You Baby", which were attributed to Willie Dixon".<sup>22</sup> Conclusively, it is obvious that Led Zeppelin arrogated the African-American blues heritage and used it as a stark starting point for their ultimate commercial success. The painstaking insight into their debut record uncovers an evident mimicry of black music in the roots of their artistic endeavour.

Nevertheless, the main event which contributed to the band's prodigious fame as a result of a repeated manipulation of the black culture was the release of their second album Led Zeppelin II. A paragon of their undisclosed blues reproduction was the opener 'Whole Lotta Love', undoubtedly one of the band's most renowned songs. Similarly to the circumstances of copyright infringement encountered in their first record, the lyrics of this song ('You need cooling/Baby I'm not fooling/I'm gonna send ya/ Back to schooling')<sup>23</sup> bear a striking resemblance to Willie Dixon's 'You Need Love' written for Muddy Waters ('I ain't foolin', you need schoolin'/Baby, you know you need coolin').<sup>24</sup> Unlike previous situations in which the band was accused of both lyrics and composition plagiarism, Mick Wall contends that Page's use of diverse guitar pedals such as the Etherwave-Theremint to generate psychedelic audio effects indubitably contributed to the song's compositional originality.<sup>25</sup> However, these circumstances did not preclude Dixon from suing the band for music plagiarism in 1985.<sup>26</sup>

Another example of black music imitation in their second album is 'The Lemon Song' which 'borrowed' the guitar riff and the main lyrics from Howlin' Wolf's 'Killing Floor'. As a shrewd attempt to strategically cloak the blues musician's pellucid influence, Led Zeppelin faintly changed the composition by turning the song into 'a jazzy blues jam powered by Jones's fluid bass lines and some adept rhythmic shifts'.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in Wolf's biography the band's clear imitation of 'Killing Floor' is referred to as a 'sincerest form of flattery' which 'carried too far, it'll land you in court',<sup>28</sup> outlining their problematic and relentless habit of being legally accused of copyright infringement.

The album closer is another reflection of Led Zeppelin's attempt to emulate blues musical elements. 'Bring It on Home' was a dedication to the singer Sonny Boy Williamson. However, Willie Dixon had already composed for Williamson a song with an identical title. Therefore, it can be argued that the band intentionally omitted once again to acknowledge Dixon's influence in their visceral musical approach. However, Mick Wall contends that despite this transparent similarity between Led Zeppelin's song and Dixon's composition, 'Bring It on Home' evinces musical originality through 'Page's own blazing riff and Bonham's shock-and-awe drums'.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, Led Zeppelin anew misused

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, 'Led Zeppelin's 10 Boldest Rip-Offs'.

<sup>22</sup> Wall, p. 118.

<sup>23</sup> John Bonham, Willie Dixon, John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant, *Whole Lotta Love*, Led Zeppelin (Olympic Studio, London, 1969).

<sup>24</sup> Willie Dixon, *You Need Love*, Muddy Waters (Chicago, 1962).

<sup>25</sup> Wall, p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, *Dixon v. Atlantic Recording Corp.*, 1985 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 15291, 227 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 559, Copy. L. Rep. (CCH) P25,847 (S.D.N.Y. October 3, 1985) <[https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=e177bd4b-9d3c-4ca2-92d4-39a2d739084f&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fcases%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A3S4N-D740-0039-R2N3-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=6412&pdteaserkey=sr0&pditab=allpods&ecomp=sb\\_yk&earg=sr0&prid=0e5be0e5-6c31-489f-938f-35a708e77596&federationidp=V2PNTN59413&cbc=0](https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=e177bd4b-9d3c-4ca2-92d4-39a2d739084f&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fcases%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A3S4N-D740-0039-R2N3-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=6412&pdteaserkey=sr0&pditab=allpods&ecomp=sb_yk&earg=sr0&prid=0e5be0e5-6c31-489f-938f-35a708e77596&federationidp=V2PNTN59413&cbc=0)> [accessed 20 April 2022].

<sup>27</sup> Scott Schinder and Andy Schwartz, *Icons of rock: An Encyclopedia of the Legends Who Changed Music Forever*, vol.2 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), p. 387.

<sup>28</sup> James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, *Moanin' at Midnight: the Life and times of Howlin' Wolf*, revised edn (New York: Pantheon, 2004), p. 392.

<sup>29</sup> Wall, p. 230.

their white privilege to exploit African-American culture in order to define their musical footprint and rock domination in the industry.

A discernible pattern in Led Zeppelin's reuse of popular blues pieces can be plainly observed in their third self-titled record released in 1970. Once again, their album closer is inspired by one of Plant's blues idols, Bukka White. Scott Schinder and Andy Schwartz describe 'Hats off to (Roy) Harper' as 'an extended slide guitar workout built upon Bukka White's classic Delta blues "Shake 'Em on Down"',<sup>30</sup> clearly highlighting Bukka's forthright influence in their composition. Moreover, Page himself revealed in a *Melody Maker* interview that the song was rooted in multifarious blues elements: 'This came about from a jam Robert and I had one night. There is a whole tape of us bashing different blues things'.<sup>31</sup>

A plausible reason for the band's evident 'love of the country blues which was well-established by the third album'<sup>32</sup> is the Memphis roots of the record. Led Zeppelin III was mixed at Ardent Studios in Memphis, a 'hotbed and a crossroads of the blues', which definitively moulded the sonic texture of the record.<sup>33</sup> One of the Ardent's sound engineers, Terry Manning, recalls that the studio provided a suitable environment for the British musicians to finish their third album and become a band which 'will last a long time': 'Ardent was already getting quite a name as a state-of-the-art studio [...] So it was a great place for Jimmy to come'.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, the Memphis' blues surroundings and its unavoidable impact catered for Led Zeppelin's artistic development and validation.

However, despite the band's immersion into the roots of blues music, the public perception of the record was one substandard. The press cast a scathing shadow over Led Zeppelin's third album as they mainly focused on 'the usual whinges about crass metalism and blues thievery', rather than the band's revolutionary rock architecture.<sup>35</sup> Many reviews at the time underlined the band's embezzlement of blues culture as a result of an intransigent white predominance in the rock industry. For example, in a 1970 *Rolling Stone* review, the album is considered to 'refine the crude public tools of all dull white blues bands into something awesome in its very insensitive grossness, like a Cecil B. DeMille epic'.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the quasi-general lukewarm reception from critics resulted in an unexpected commercial downfall; the album stayed in the *Billboard* chart for just forty-two weeks, significantly less than their previous LPs.<sup>37</sup> This is an obvious backlash from both music critics and mainstream audience as a result of the band's long-lasting intention to establish and expand their commercial prosperity via a conscious exploitation of the African-American heritage.

The inevitable and constant exposure to the contemporary blues music scene impelled Led Zeppelin to persist in centring their artistic vision around black music without acknowledging their sources. Their fourth studio album Led Zeppelin IV represents the band's musical apogee, showcasing one of their most renowned songs 'Stairway to Heaven'. It is considered a musical canon of biblical proportions, 'the national anthem of rock'.<sup>38</sup> Plant himself asserted that the song is the quintessence of their fourth record: 'Yeah I mean, there was a lot of stuff on there we knew was special. But

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<sup>30</sup> Schinder and Schwartz, p. 389.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Welch, 'Led Zeppelin: Page on Zeppelin III', *Melody Maker* <<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/led-zeppelin-page-on-zeppelin-iii>> [accessed 24 April 2022].

<sup>32,34</sup> Alex Greene, '50 Years Later: The Surprising Memphis Roots of "Led Zeppelin III"', *Memphis Magazine* <<https://memphismagazine.com/features/longform/celebration-day/>> [accessed 25 April 2022].

<sup>33</sup> Fred J. Hay, *Goin' Back to Sweet Memphis: Conversations with the Blues*, revised edn (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. xviii.

<sup>35</sup> Phil Sutcliffe, 'Getting It Together at Bron-Yr-Aur: The Story of Led Zeppelin III', *MOJO* <<https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/getting-it-together-at-bron-yr-aur-the-story-of-led-zeppelin-iii>> [accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>36</sup> Lester Bangs, 'Led Zeppelin III', *Rolling Stone* <<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/led-zeppelin-iii-112284/>> [accessed 27 April 2022].

<sup>37</sup> Schinder and Schwartz, p. 389.

<sup>38</sup> Wall, p. 307.

“Stairway...” was something that had been really crafted’.<sup>39</sup> In his work about ‘Stairway to Heaven’, Robert Walser emphasizes the song’s originality and power of attraction from an emotional point of view: ‘The narrative juxtaposition of the sensitive (acoustic guitar, etc.) and the aggressive (distorted guitar, etc.) ...combines contradictory sensibilities without reconciling them’.<sup>40</sup> He furthered depicted the ballad as a magnum opus that unleashed a cultural phenomenon.

However, although ‘Stairway to Heaven’ stands out due to its stylistic originality, Led Zeppelin IV still employs a pastiche of blues sounds. In the song ‘Black Dog’ a ‘stratified metric layer’ of a ‘4/4 blues groove’ can be noticed, meaning its compositional core is once again rooted in blues influences.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the album’s closer, ‘When the Levee Breaks’, reflects blues lyrical and musical motifs. Scott Schinder and Andy Schwartz describe the song as a ‘mournful, droning blues masterpiece’.<sup>42</sup> In their work they also corroborated that the band credited the country blues singer Memphis Minnie as a co-author on their closing track; a novelty taking into consideration their previous uncredited album closers. This sudden change in their musical approach might have resulted from their commercial debasement and public’s backlash regarding their persistent misappropriation of blues’ matrix. Nonetheless, Led Zeppelin continued to expand their rock and roll empire through the misuse of blues excerpts which augmented their chart success and the subsequent revenues.

Their first four albums represented the climax of their international success which inevitably altered the intimacy of blues through their exploitation of ‘rich tradition of songs and musical styles comprising the blues’.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, their alleged impact on blues music was investigated and discussed at odds by critics. They argue whether Led Zeppelin’s artistic and commercial magnitude undermined the blues tradition or represented a means of promoting this genre. David Hatch and Stephen Millward assert that not only did Led Zeppelin’s stardom overshadow the blues culture, but it also assured their white supremacy in the music industry. They furthered this point of view when they exposed the band as ‘possessing the distinct commercial advantage of being young and white’.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Hatch and Millward contend that the key-moment in the exploitation of blues was the ‘British blues movement’ which throughout the late 60s became ‘prominent in both commercial and artistic sense of the term’.<sup>45</sup> They continue to debate Led Zeppelin’s controversy in regard to their diffused association with the blues culture: ‘There were no constraints on the British musicians to respect the blues tradition and it is arguable that such a lack of inhibition contributed crucially to their success’.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Dave Headlam discusses the band’s cultural expansion as a result of a timely craftsmanship for appropriating different cultures. He outlines the idea that Led Zeppelin ‘developed at a time when “cover” bands were greatly appreciated, and American audiences cheered groups like the Rolling Stones and Cream as they performed songs originally written by [earlier musicians]’.<sup>47</sup> He continues to explain that their overwhelming artistic and commercial success led to a gradual subversion of the intimacy of blues. Conversely, Richard Cole isolates their success from any kind of foreign cultural appropriation. He focuses on their career upsurge from an artistic point of view, rather than a social one. Cole describes Led Zeppelin’s commercial success as a ‘big business’ resulted from

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<sup>39</sup> Wall, p. 360.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, 1st edn (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> John Brackett, ‘Examining rhythmic and metric practices in Led Zeppelin’s musical style’, *Popular Music*, 27/1 (2008), p. 73 <[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2645346](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2645346)> [accessed 30 April 2022].

<sup>42</sup> Schinder and Schwartz, p. 390.

<sup>43,45</sup> David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music*, 1st edn (Wolfeboro, NH: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 23.

<sup>44,46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> Dave Headlam, *Does the song remain the same?: Questions of authorship and identification in the music of Led Zeppelin*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1995), p. 362.

<sup>48</sup> Cole, p. 278.

their authentic rock and roll supremacy.<sup>48</sup> He does not associate the band's musical style with any other genre, relating their commercial and artistic status only to their authentic sound which 'touched people's lives'.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, it is clear that there was a mutual impact between blues and Led Zeppelin's musical signature which resulted in a new artistic expression in the rock music scene.

Led Zeppelin's conspicuous intention to emulate the blues cultural imperatives without acknowledging their sources and giving them no financial compensation resulted in various legal actions of copyright infringement. One of the most important cases is the one involving Willie Dixon's 'You Need Love' and the band's 'Whole Lotta Love'. In-depth analyses made by many music critics revealed that the songs are lyrically similar and played a key-role in the development of this case. For instance, Blues Matters published a cogent article outlining the similarities between these two songs, describing 'Whole Lotta Love' as 'You Need Love on permit'.<sup>50</sup> Another pivotal factor which decided the outcome of this trial was the examination of both compositions. Earl Danchin asserts that Dixon's song is a 'blues built on one chord (E minor) with a repetitive riff and a series of improvised guitar licks'.<sup>51</sup> Shane O'Connor however considers that there is an insignificant resemblance music-wise, especially at the end of each verse's fourth line where 'Muddy distinctively sings a "fifth" note, B, whereas Plant sings an E, resolving back on the root note'.<sup>52</sup> He further states that even though 'the notes in the main riff of "Whole Lotta Love" can be heard in some licks in "You Need Love" and "The final quaver of the bar features a "b-d-b-d" motif preceded by the "e" note predominantly', these similarities are not 'sufficiently original to achieve copyright' due to their musical simplicity: 'note patterns are standard blues fare'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Dave Lewis contends that despite being a 'simplification' of 'You Need Love', 'Whole Lotta Love' attains originality due to a wide range of effects such as layered guitars and reverse echo which had an instant impact on the listeners and contributed to a favourable closure to this resounding case for Led Zeppelin.<sup>54</sup> It is clear that these subterfuges created an obfuscation which hindered the judiciary in making a final decision on the matter of whether the conditions for copyright holding were met.

Another crucial factor in the development of this case was the musicians' public behaviour. Robert Plant clearly admitted having taken the 'vocal line, both musically and lyrically' from Dixon's 'You Need Love'.<sup>55</sup> However, Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones had a different approach and they focused more on the other musical aspects that allegedly provided intrinsic authenticity to their song. Page asserted that the guitar riff was his own creation, admitting however that 'perhaps some of the words were taken'.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, when asked about blues influence as a relevant source of inspiration, John Paul Jones himself stated that 'it never occurs to me personally that one type of music is really any

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> 'Led Zeppelin', *Blues Matters*, Issue 53, April/May 2010, p.21.

<sup>51</sup> Sebastian Danchin, *Earl Hooker: Blues Master*, (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 140.

<sup>52,53</sup> Shane O'Connor, 'To whom would the courts give a whole lotta love? English copyright law and the blues: a case study of the "Whole Lotta Love" authorship dispute', *European Intellectual Property Review*, 37(6), pp. 344-354 <

[https://uk.westlaw.com/Document/I6070C0D0F4A911E4882BF52A594DBBA1/View/FullText.html?originationContext=document&transitionType=SearchItem&ppcid=e8c8c995ac3343a49084c857dde60740&contextData=\(sc.Search\)&navigationPath=Search%2Fv1%2Fresults%2Fnavigation%2Fi0ad62aee000001809f54d8a08d35a178&listSource=Search&listPageSource=0198f8dd89003aabca24ba9287b70b2&list=RESEARCH\\_COMBINE\\_D\\_WLUK&rank=1&comp=wluk&navId=7673904F991D88C86AD5C19150344B01](https://uk.westlaw.com/Document/I6070C0D0F4A911E4882BF52A594DBBA1/View/FullText.html?originationContext=document&transitionType=SearchItem&ppcid=e8c8c995ac3343a49084c857dde60740&contextData=(sc.Search)&navigationPath=Search%2Fv1%2Fresults%2Fnavigation%2Fi0ad62aee000001809f54d8a08d35a178&listSource=Search&listPageSource=0198f8dd89003aabca24ba9287b70b2&list=RESEARCH_COMBINE_D_WLUK&rank=1&comp=wluk&navId=7673904F991D88C86AD5C19150344B01) > [accessed 1 May 2022].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Larry Rohter, 'Remastering, Reflecting: Everything Still Turns to Gold', *New York Times* <[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/arts/music/jimmy-page-talks-about-his-old-band-its-legacy-and-himself.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/arts/music/jimmy-page-talks-about-his-old-band-its-legacy-and-himself.html?_r=0)> [accessed 3 May 2022].

different from any other music. But other people can't understand it'.<sup>57</sup> He clearly tried to cloak any form of blues appropriation in order to distract people's attention from the issue in question. Their statements were intended to dissimulate the controversy and change the situation in their favour as a result of the Western light-skinned environment within the music industry.

Ultimately, these unclear circumstances regarding the composition and production of their song led to an out-of-court settlement 'on undisclosed terms'<sup>58</sup> between the band and Dixon in 1987,<sup>59</sup> crediting the blues musician as co-writer of their song.<sup>60</sup> Despite a favourable outcome for Led Zeppelin, this settlement foregrounded the depreciation of their artistic validation and credibility.

This raucous avalanche of copyright infringement accusations gained momentum with the two trials with Arc Music which involved Led Zeppelin's 'The Lemon Song' and 'Bring It on Home'. The latter represented another out-of-court 'loss' for Willie Dixon as Led Zeppelin once again succeeded in reaching an agreement without having to respond legally to the formal allegations.<sup>61</sup>

'The Lemon Song' was not credited to Howlin' Wolf despite having an almost identical riff as in the blues musician's 'Killing Floor'. The skilful rearrangement of Led Zeppelin's composition cleverly veiled Wolf's obvious influence which represents once again 'a powerful example of how they converted traditional blues into something original'.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, similarly to the 'Whole Lotta Love' case, the ambiguous sonic texture of 'The Lemon Song' provided a convenient pretext for the band to pay Arc Music a considerable amount of money and settle the accusation outside of court.<sup>63</sup> As a result, it can be argued that these unjust verdicts on Led Zeppelin's copyright cases highlighted a significant matter of a continuous misappropriation of African-American folklore. However, these plausible accusations tainted the band's artistic credibility and represented a strong impetus for many other artists to step forward and claim their copyrights.

Ultimately, these discriminatory cases further cemented the 'palpable manifestation of perennial racism' in the popular music industry which 'took advantage of the ignorance and of the weak bargaining position of black artists to hijack the product of their creativity and of their commercial success'.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, not only does Led Zeppelin's music reflect a conscious misappropriation of blues culture, but it also notably undermines the influence of a long-term persecuted community. Moreover, their overuse of blues sounds moulded their musical venture of becoming one of the most influential rock bands in the history. Consequently, their perennial legacy based on an indisputable African-American influence represents an evident example of an unreasonably accepted white supremacy in the music industry of the 60s.

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<sup>60</sup> Mitsutoshi Inaba, *Willie Dixon: Preacher of the Blues*, 1st edn (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011), p. 197.

<sup>61</sup> Tracy McMullen, 'Bring it On Home': Robert Plant, Janis Joplin, and the Myth of Origin', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 26.2, p. 385. <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jpms.12081>>.

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