

AIN'T SO HARD TO RECOGNIZE:
AN ANALYSIS OF THREE LED ZEPPELIN SONGS

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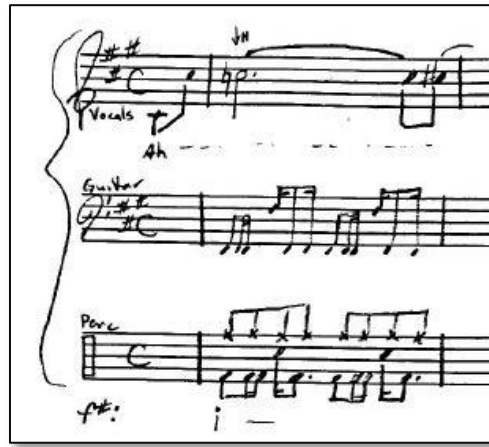
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With this essay I have endeavored to analyze three songs by the band Led Zeppelin in light of the material covered over the last several weeks in Temperley's *Musical Language of Rock* (2018): *Immigrant Song* (1970), *The Rain Song* (1973), and *Whole Lotta Love* (1969). The main focus of my analyses have been with regards to form, however I will also discuss aspects of harmony, timbre, tonality, rhythm, instrumentation, and motivic usage and transformation. Please refer to the attached formal line-diagrams throughout this essay, as well as the lyrics which are listed as Appendices A, B, and C. Lastly, as there are multiple versions of each of these songs, I have listed the specific recordings used for this essay in the bibliography with links for reference purposes.

Immigrant Song

Brought to popular attention again recently through its use in the wildly successful film *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), the *Immigrant Song* is among Led Zeppelin's shortest songs. At only two-and-a-half minutes in duration, it nevertheless is immediately recognizable and has an infectious sense of energy and rhythmic drive. I believe this is, in part, due to the efficiency of material used. With references to "Valhala," and having come from the "land of ice and snow" and that of the "midnight sun", it is clear we are hearing a tale of ancient Norse warfare. In F# minor, the song begins with a rhythmic motive which is sustained throughout in all sections but the two brief refrains. After a brief introduction of four bars which establishes this basic motive for the song and the tonic of F# in octaves, the guitars and drums continue as the vocal line raises what I consider to be a *battle cry*. It is a moment of immediate and heightened emotional tension, as the voice rises an entire octave (on C#, the fifth of the tonic chord), but immediately drops to a chromatic neighbor, sustaining this dissonance for the entire bar. (This use of half-

step neighbor relationships as a device to create dissonance and thus emotional tension and release will be seen again not only in this song, but more elaborately in *The Rain Song*.)



Including this “battle cry” which begins the song, nearly the entirety of each verse is accompanied by merely octaves of the tonic root F#. Only on verse lines 3, 4 (both sung very rapidly), and 8 do the octaves briefly drop by a step to imply *b*VII (which is further confirmed by the vocals on E and G#).

This style of composition is not unlike music of the ancient Christian church. Among the earliest music we study in Western music history is that of Hildegard von Bingen. A common structural component of her music, for example *O vis aeternitatis*, is vocal melismas over octave drones. Similarly, this song by Led Zeppelin (“LZ”) is largely simple octaves, albeit infused with a driving rhythm, over which the vocal line implies the harmony. There is not a single guitar chord in the verses on the tonic of F# minor – *only* rather on the *b*VII’s. F# minor is only established by the occasional (and subtle) emphasis of a flattened third scale degree (A-nat.) in the vocal line.

The momentum continues, breathlessly, through the brief four-bar refrains which complete each of the two Verse-Refrain units (“VRU” on the attached line-diagrams).

These two refrains are sung over three rapid scales in the bass guitar (too short to be considered a Chorus, in my opinion). I consider the harmony implied by these scales to be III, which rises by step and could be considered to be iv, and ending with the final of the three scales now starting on the lowered C-nat. I perceive this to be a bV implication. A blues reference/influence like this is not at all uncommon in LZ's music. Their affinity for blues has been more than well-established with songs like *Since I've Been Loving You* (1970), *The Lemon Song* (1969), and *In My Time of Dying* (1975).

After two musically identical VRU pairs, we enter a coda at 1:40. Robert Plant's vocals here are even more akin to the melismatic style of the ancients, sung again over octave $F\#$'s. And then, in a wonderfully funky and characteristically *Led Zeppelin* moment of creativity, we hear a chord repeated on beat four of every other bar, and then doubled in rate to every fourth beat – this chord has no business in the key of $F\#$ minor. Due to the timbre of the instruments and the brevity of the cord, it is terribly difficult to determine what this chord is. Alas, it seems I am far from the only person who has had trouble determining the nature of this chord. After several failed attempts to work it out to my satisfaction at the keyboard, I retreated online and found an article on this specific subject with *many* different versions and solutions to this chord

“mystery” suggested by guitarists, including a definitive answer which was confirmed in a written edition with which Jimmy Page himself was involved¹.



This chord, I believe, is a further expansion on this *neighbor* idea from the basic “battle cry” octaves at the opening of the song. The bass guitar moves down a tritone to C, while above the tonic chord (an implied F# minor) rises by half-step to a neighbor *bII*, G-Bb-D.

The Rain Song

The Rain Song is an unusually tender and lyrical creation of LZ, with stylistic similarities to the ubiquitous *Stairway to Heaven* (1971) of two years earlier. At first hearing (and, perhaps, even after multiple hearings), it is difficult to discern *Rain*'s relation to any traditional song structure. Where is the chorus/refrain!? Only after hearing this work dozens of times did it finally occur to me that this is actually a *very* traditionally constructed song. However, LZ has replaced several sections with purely instrumental versions of what are traditionally sections with sung lyrics. The motivic and harmonic material clearly marks the beginning of each section of this song – more on that in a moment. First, let's look at the large-scale structure, and then work our way down to the details.

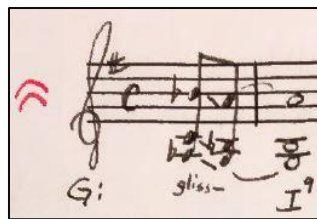
Referring to the attached line-diagram, starting from the bottom, you will see that I have labelled this song as AAABA, a minor expansion on the very traditional AABA song form.

¹ Jesse Gress. “Jimmy Page's ‘Immigrant Song’ Mystery Chord-SOLVED!” *GuitarPlayer.com*, 25 Apr. 2016, www.guitarplayer.com/technique/jimmy-pages-immigrant-song-mystery-chordsolved.

Moving up one level, you will see the four A groups further described as “VIU” – in this song, LZ has replaced all of what would have been *chorus* sections with purely *instrumental* sections, creating three Verse-Instrumental Units (“VIU”). Further adding a bit of confusion for the listener regarding this form is that the second verse is also a section which has been replaced with only instruments – a mini song-without-words, if you will. However, harmonically and rhythmically it mirrors the other verses exactly!

Lastly, again referring to the attached line-diagram, you will notice several colored symbols in red and blue.

- The verses are all composed of either 6 or 8 lines (the last two are expanded). All of the *odd-numbered* lines of the verses begin with a tonic G-maj chord, with an added 9th scale degree, which is arrived at by way of a glissando from a half-step above (again, LZ creating a sense of tension and release via neighbor relationships). I have marked this motive with a pair of curving red lines.



- Every *even-numbered* line of each verse is accompanied by a version of the following falling line motive in anticipatory syncopation (this transcription is taken from the wordless Verse 2 at 2:10). I have marked these with a red crossed turn symbol.

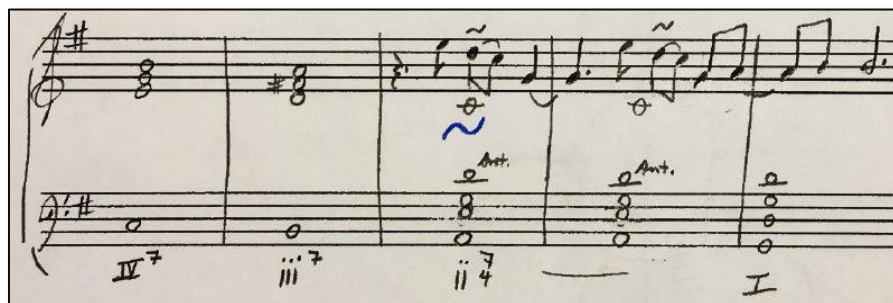


Next, looking at how each instrumental “chorus” is begun and concluded:

- All four of these instrumentals begins with a rising figure over a pedal tonic G (labelled with a blue step-like symbol). This leads each time to a secondary dominant of...



- IV^7 . Then we hear descending stepwise seventh chords to the tonic (G-maj). This final G-maj chord is approached by a ii^7 (with an anticipatory D resolving as the fifth of the tonic in the final measure). On each occurrence, above this ii^7 harmony, is a turn figure on D in the lead guitar, which I have labelled with a blue turn symbol. This is how *every* instrumental section closes.



While at first the form of this song seemed elusive, even perhaps largely a formless fantasia with intermittent verses (due to the absence of traditional and structurally specific lyrics), these recurring harmonic and melodic motives clearly provide auditory signposts of a fairly traditional formal structure.

One other minor detail I've included on the attached line-diagram is the fact that Robert Plant's vocals overlap with the beginning of the instrumental section on each occurrence – thus I have continued the curved line to overlap into each successive instrumental section.

Also of interest in this unique work is the absence of any percussion until well into the song. From the beginning, any sense of rhythm and meter is provided only by rhythm guitar. Finally at 3:36, we hear a fairly subtle snare drum and cymbals fading in from near silence, though ultimately growing in emphasis to provide for a very definitive start of the *bridge* at 5:01.

The song ends as gently as it begins by way of a *coda* (6:58) and a definitive last chord (no fade out.) The final chord is again a tonic G-maj with an added ninth scale degree.

Whole Lotta Love

Like *The Immigrant Song*, LZ's *Whole Lotta Love* begins with an arresting rhythmic motive on guitar which persists through the entirety of the song. It is immediately recognizable to most any casual classic rock listener. Joined by bass guitar an octave lower, it is only these two instruments and Robert Plant's vocals which are present for the first verse. This creates a very satisfying sense of arrival when the percussion finally enters with a destabilizing fill leading into the first refrain (0:32).

Again, like *Immigrant*, the refrain is very brief, without in this case even a notable change of harmony or rhythmic material – just four statements of the title driving inexorably on ahead.

Referring to the attached formal line-diagram, you'll see what follows the first two Verse-Refrain Units ("VRU") is a sudden drop into what I have called the "Ecstatic Psychedelia." Given the lyrics of this song, and the suggestive nature of Robert Plant's vocals, I interpret this whole *Psychedelia* section to be a fantasia suggestive of sexuality and erotic ecstasy. It is in the same vein as that of Wagner's "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde* (1859), or Scriabin's *Poème de l'extase, Op. 54* (1908).

The *Psychedelia* section begins with high-hat on eighth-notes preserving a sense of tempo throughout, elaborated with weaker off-beats and improvisatory embellishments of single, ringing strikes on cymbals. All manner of sonic effects follow, including electronics and distant echoes of earlier (and later) vocals. Cross-rhythm drumming starts to fade in, these percussive effects eventually taking on an almost African or perhaps Gamelan-like flavor. Also – and present to an almost maddening degree if listening on headphones – are antiphonal effects as electronic sounds and vocals are panned from left to right! At around 2:40, we hear the bass guitar ever-so-softly start to emphasize the low E (the root of the tonic key), played in pairs and each approached by whole-step from below.

The *Psychedelia* section comes to a close in a style again reminiscent of blues, with six double-hits on the tonic E, and guitar riffs following each. This closing segment (marked as a "transition" at 3:01) is approached by way of a destabilizing guitar fill.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a rock band. It consists of seven staves, each labeled with an instrument: Lead Guitar, Rhythm Gtr, Bass Gtr, Snare, Toms, Hi-hat, and Kick. The Lead Guitar staff features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The Rhythm Gtr and Bass Gtr staves show chordal accompaniment. The Snare and Toms staves have rhythmic patterns with markings like '6', '3', and '37'. The Hi-hat and Kick staves show a steady rhythmic pattern. The score is written in a clear, legible hand.

Another guitar fill, at 3:20, takes us back to familiar territory for the final VRU. Verse 3 is slightly elongated by the lyrics "Hey!, Let's go!" added, as if announcing the next section in a manner akin to James Brown. (Led Zeppelin was outspoken on multiple occasions about their admiration for funk, and the music of James Brown in particular, going so far as to mimic Brown's *Sex Machine* in their song *The Crunge* (1973)²). This final VRU pair continues until 3:58, at which time we hear a textbook example of a *Grand Cadence*, moving to the sub-dominant at 4:16.³ Interestingly, during the Grand Cadence, Plant's vocals are actually preceded by preemptive echoes of what he's about to sing – an interesting effect which adds an almost spiritual or supernatural element to the plagal-ness of the Grand Cadence's move to IV.

Whole Lotta Love ends with an *outro*, as Robert Plant's improvisatory vocals lead to a fade out. Throughout the *outro* only, there is an embellishment in the lead guitar which reveals a level of melodic/harmonic divorce in this song. This song generally has had a feel of E-minor

² John Brackett, "Examining Rhythmic and Metric Practices in Led Zeppelin's Musical Style." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2008, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2645346.

³ David Temperley. *The Musical Language of Rock*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 203

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"Whole Lotta Love." Performance by Led Zeppelin, YouTube, 25 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaSk5vnAVJ8

Appendix A

Immigrant Song (1970)

[V1]

Ah-ah, ah!

Ah-ah, ah!

We come from the land of the ice and snow
From the midnight sun, where the hot springs flow
The hammer of the gods
We'll drive our ships to new lands
To fight the horde, and sing and cry
Valhalla, I am coming!

[R1]

On we sweep with threshing oar
Our only goal will be the western shore

[V2]

Ah-ah, ah!

Ah-ah, ah!

We come from the land of the ice and snow
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flow
How soft your fields so green
Can whisper tales of gore
Of how we calmed the tides of war
We are your overlords

[R2]

On we sweep with threshing oar
Our only goal will be the western shore

[Coda]

So now you'd better stop and rebuild all your ruins
For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing

Ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh ^(5x)

Appendix B

The Rain Song (1973)

[V1]

It is the springtime of my loving
The second season I am to know
You are the sunlight in my growing
So little warmth I've felt before
It isn't hard to feel me glowing
I watched the fire that grew so low, oooh, oh

[V2, without words]

[V3]

It is the summer of my smiles
Flee from me, keepers of the gloom
Speak to me only with your eyes
It is to you I give this tune
Ain't so hard to recognize, oh
These things are clear to all from time to time,
Oooh, oh, oh

[Bridge]

Ah, talk, talk, talk, talk
Hey! I've felt the coldness of my winter
I never thought it would ever go
I cursed the gloom that set upon us, upon us, upon us
But I know that I love you so, ohhhh, oh
But I know that I love you so

[V4]

These are the seasons of emotion
And like the winds they rise and fall
This is the wonder of devotion
I see the torch we all must hold
This is the mystery of the quotient quotient
Ah, upon us all, upon us all a little rain must fall
Just a little rain, oh yeah
Uhh, oooh, yeah yeah yeah

Appendix C

Whole Lotta Love (1969)

[Intro]

[V1]

You need cooling
Baby I'm not fooling
I'm gonna send ya
Back to schoolin'
Way down inside
A-honey you need it
I'm gonna give you my love
I'm gonna give you my love

[R1]

Want a whole lotta love^(4x)

[V2]

You've been learning
Um baby I been learning
All them good times baby, baby
I've been year-yearning
A-way, way down inside
A-honey you need-ah
I'm gonna give you my love, ah
I'm gonna give you my love, ah oh

[R2]

(Want a) whole lotta love^(4x)

[Psychedelic Instrumental]

[V3]

You've been cooling
And baby I've been drooling
All the good times, baby
I've been misusing
A-way, way down inside
I'm gonna give ya my love
I'm gonna give ya every inch of my love
I'm gonna give ya my love
Hey!
Alright! Let's go!

[R3]

(Want a) whole lotta love^(4x)

[Grand Cadence]

Way down inside
Woman, you need, yeah
Love

[Outro]

My, my, my, my
My, my, my, my
Lord
Shake for me girl
I wanna be your backdoor man
Hey, oh, hey, oh
Hey, oh, hey, oh
Ooh
Oh, oh, oh, oh
Cool, my, my baby
A-keep it cooling baby
A-keep it cooling baby
Ah-keep it cooling baby
Ah-keep it cooling baby
Ah-ooh...