

ZEPPELIN

THE FIRST
100 DAYS

To mark the 50th anniversary of **Led Zeppelin's** debut album and first US tour, Zep experts *Dave Lewis* and *Mike Tremaglio* – authors of a new book, *Evenings With Led Zeppelin* – trace the astonishing events of the first 100 days of the greatest rock band ever...

IN THE SUMMER OF 1968, Jimmy Page found himself facing something of a dilemma. His group, The Yardbirds, was in the process of disintegrating, with long-time vocalist Keith Relf and stalwart drummer Jim McCarty exiting the band.

By that time The Yardbirds was already a well-respected act. Besides Page, two other esteemed guitarists – Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck – had already passed through its ranks. Clapton had exited the group in March of 1965, concerned about a veer away from the blues and a move toward a more commercial sound. Jimmy Page joined Beck in The Yardbirds in June 1966, but the collaboration didn't last long. According to Jim McCarty, Beck was fired in November 1966 because "he wasn't showing up for gigs," leaving Page to lead the group through a difficult period afterwards. The band's UK hits had long since dried up, but led by the shrewd management of Peter Grant, The Yardbirds had built up a notable following on the US circuit.

WHEN RELF and McCarty left, Page, bassist Chris Dreja and manager Peter Grant had the right to use the group name and there was a handful of dates in Scandinavia booked. "I knew Jimmy wanted to carry on," remembered Peter Grant years later. "He told me he wanted to produce the group himself, so we

set about getting a new line-up and a deal." Jimmy initially approached much-vaunted singer Terry Reid to replace Relf. But Reid had just signed a solo deal and so recommended that Page check out Robert Plant as a possible option.

Midlands-based Plant had forged a strong reputation in a group known as The Band Of Joy. By July of 1968, though, he was fronting another act, Obs-Tweedle. Page, Dreja and Grant went to see him perform at the West Midlands College Of Higher Education in Walsall, just outside Birmingham. Page was suitably impressed and offered Plant the job.

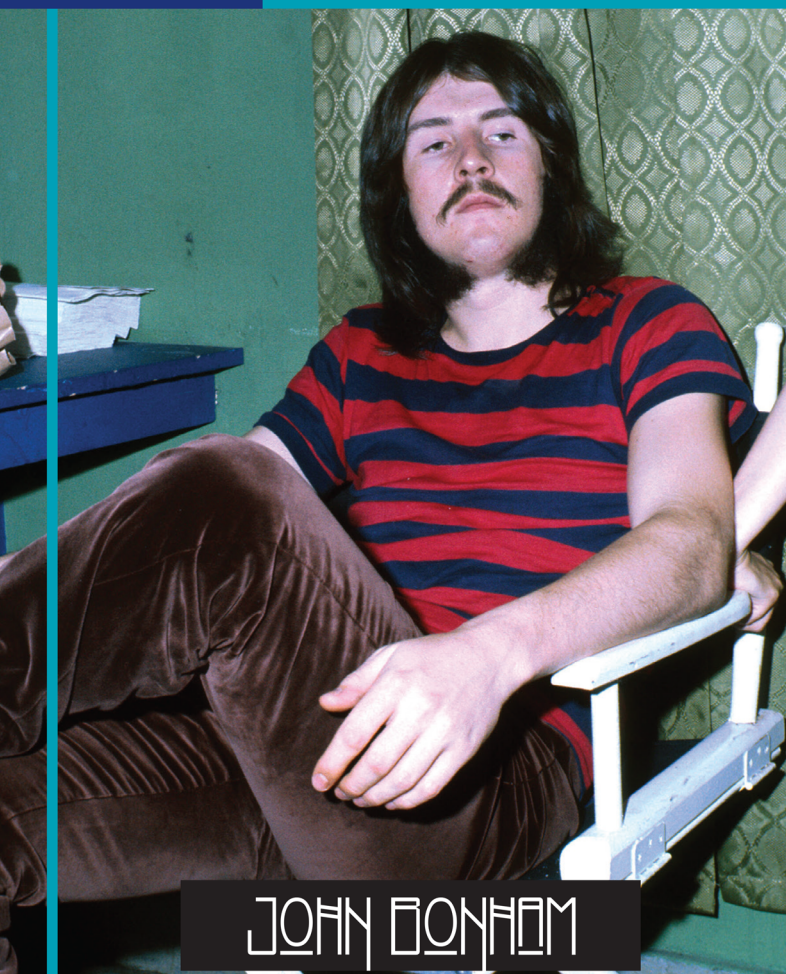
The group still didn't have a drummer, though, so Plant recommended his former Band Of Joy mate John Bonham, then on tour with Tim Rose. "I saw John Bonham playing with Tim Rose at a London club and I knew I didn't need to look any further," recalled Page.

By August of 1968 Chris Dreja had decided to opt out of the band to pursue a career in photography. Seasoned session musician and arranger John Paul Jones came in to play bass and keyboards. Jones remembers being wary of how the younger, more inexperienced Plant and Bonham might perceive him.

"They'd heard about this session man bassist, and I think they expected me to be smoking a pipe and wearing slippers. So we all got together in this room

Led Zeppelin shot in London, December 1968. Clockwise from top: John Paul Jones (bass and organ), Robert Plant (vocals and harmonica), Jimmy Page (guitar), John Bonham (drums)

Photo: Getty Images/Dick Barnat/Redferns



JOHN BONHAM



ROBERT PLANT



JOHN PAUL JONES



JIMMY PAGE

for a first rehearsal in London's Chinatown and someone said, 'What shall we play?' Jimmy suggested 'Train Kept A-Rollin' and away we went. The whole room exploded and it was pretty obvious that this was going to work very well indeed."

ON 7 September 1968 the four man line-up that would soon become Led Zeppelin performed their first ever gig at the Teen Club in Gladsaxe, Denmark, a suburb of Copenhagen. They were billed as The Yardbirds.

Later that month and following the Scandinavian dates, Page booked the band into Olympic Studios in Barnes. They began recording their debut album on 25 September. "We'd begun developing the arrangements on the Scandinavian tour and I knew what sound I was looking for," remembers Page. "It came together very quickly. I had a lot of ideas left over from the old days of The Yardbirds. They allowed me to improvise a lot in live performances and I started building a textbook of ideas that I eventually used in Zeppelin.

"Ultimately, I wanted the group to be a marriage of blues, hard rock and acoustic music with heavy choruses, a combination that hadn't been explored before, lots of light and shade in the music. As for the sound, I'd learnt a lot during the session days about distance miking. I'd also developed techniques like the use of backwards echo and reverb."

Plant recalled being nervous at those first sessions: "I was a little bit intimidated by it all," he said. "Looking back, I could have sung a little less nervously. It was like, 'Do I really belong here?' But as a collection of tunes and

a way to play and expand, it was great." The album was recorded in just nine days with a total use of 30 studio hours. The whole project cost a mere £1,782.

IN EARLY October of 1968 the band made a few UK appearances, still billed as The Yardbirds. However, Page felt they were working "under false pretences" and decided a name change was needed. After rejecting the likes of Mad Dogs and The Whoopee Cushion, Page recalled a phrase Keith Moon had used a couple of years earlier when there'd been a vague plan to form a new group out of the players at a Jeff Beck session in May 1966 for the track 'Beck's Bolero'. Moon had joked about the group going down like a lead balloon or even a lead zeppelin. Grant also remembered the phrase and, in the circumstances, the name seemed perfect: "I got rid of the 'a' [in 'lead'] - it just looked better," said Grant. "I also didn't want any confusion over the pronunciation in America."

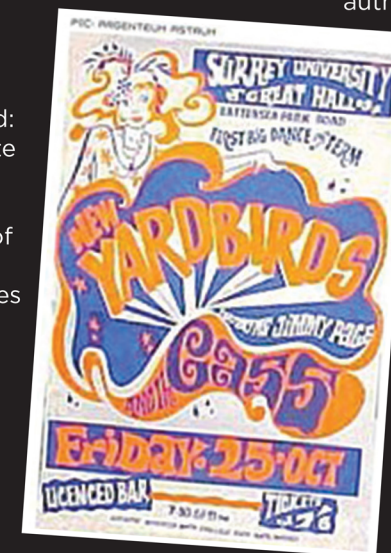
On 19 October 1968, the band made their last appearance as The Yardbirds at Liverpool University. Once reborn as Led Zeppelin, the new band's formative time together would see them make a remarkable impact in the US, both with their incendiary live shows and their jaw-dropping debut album.

HERE'S HOW the crucial first 100 days of Led Zeppelin's existence set up the globe-straddling career that followed, and how that remarkably short time period made a major contribution to Zep changing the face of hard rock forever...

25 OCTOBER 1968 - GIG AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY, BATTERSEA, LONDON

THE BAND'S VERY FIRST SHOW AS LED ZEPPELIN.

On 20 December 2003, Jimmy Page was at the University of Surrey in Guildford where a plaque was unveiled that stated: "This plaque is to commemorate the debut performance of Led Zeppelin, University Hall, 15 October 1968." There's plenty of evidence, however, to suggest that the plaque not only features the wrong date, but also the wrong location. An ad in the *Melody Maker* music paper dated 26 October 1968 stated that the first Zeppelin show would take place "tomorrow" at Surrey University. The paper would typically appear two days before the cover date, making the actual show date Friday 25 October. As for the concert location, a poster from Bonham's auction house emerged in 2003 advertising the venue as the Surrey University Great Hall on Battersea Park Road in London. Incidentally, the Great Hall just so happened to be located over the road from the imposing Battersea Power Station building, which would later gain iconic



status amongst music fans after featuring on the cover of Pink Floyd's 1977 album 'Animals'. The poster also had the band billed as "New Yardbirds featuring Jimmy Page" rather than Led Zeppelin. If this poster is authentic, then it was probably printed just before the band made the decision to switch the name to Led Zeppelin and before the change had been announced in the music papers. Interestingly, the poster touted ticket prices at just seven shillings and sixpence, which would be about £5 in today's money. And the highly prominent mention of a licenced bar at the bottom of the design was clearly also a major attraction.

The University of Surrey's move from Battersea in London to the Guildford campus wasn't actually completed by the autumn of 1968. In fact, concerts - including shows by Traffic, Junior's Eyes and David Bowie - were still being held at the Great Hall on Battersea Park Road as late as 1969. It seems highly unlikely, therefore, that the *Melody Maker* would have failed to mention that this New Yardbirds/Led Zeppelin gig was being held at the Guildford campus, rather than in London itself. Bobby Tench, leader of support act The Gass, has since confirmed that the gig definitely took place in London, not Guildford, when he recalled, "They had a big sound system and played loud. It was clear that they would progress." A *Melody Maker* story at the time announced the show, while also explaining that band manager Peter Grant was lining up a six-week American tour "starting around 16 November."

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