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Local author to sign Led Zeppelin book Tuesday in Hawthorne



John Bonham, Robert Plant, Jimmy Page with Sandy Denny, second from right, in 1970.

BY JIM BECKERMAN

STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD



WHO: Hank Bordowitz, signing "Led Zeppelin on Led Zeppelin."

WHEN: 7 tonight.

WHERE: Well Read Bookstore, 425 Lafayette Ave., Hawthorne; 973-949-3440 or thewellreadbookstore.com.

HOW MUCH: Free with purchase of book (\$28.95).

There may have been an Atlantis. There may have been a Kraken. There may even have been a few TV sets tossed out of hotel windows by that seminal '70s band Led Zeppelin.

Myths – and Zeppelin has more than its share of outlandish ones – often have a basis in fact, notes Hank Bordowitz, editor of a new anthology, "Led Zeppelin on Led Zeppelin: Interviews and Encounters."

"There's a lot of folklore, a lot of myth and legend about Zeppelin," says Bordowitz, a Ridgewood rock scholar and critic who will be signing his ninth book tonight at Well Read in Hawthorne (Chicago Review Press, 458 pp., \$28.95).

You'll find a trove of interviews with guitarist Jimmy Page, singer/lyricist Robert Plant, bassist John Paul Jones and the late drummer John Bonham going back to 1957, and covering every phase of the band's evolution, from their emergence from their Yardbirds chrysalis in the late '60s to the momentous years of "Whole Lotta Love" and "Stairway to Heaven," to breakups, reunions and Plant's recent collaborations with Alison Krauss. It was, says Bordowitz, a lengthy project – a year and a half in the making.

"It involved a lot of research," he says. "I spent a week at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. You can't find stuff from the '60s on the Internet."

All of which makes Bordowitz ("The Bruce Springsteen Scrapbook," "Turning Points in Rock and Roll," "The U2 Reader") a helpful fact-checking source, when it comes to the more outrageous legends about

the baddest of rock-and-roll's bad boys.

The TV story? Likely true, Bordowitz says. At least, the tale was common currency among those that worked with the band in their heyday. "There's a great story about it, involving their manager, Peter Grant," Bordowitz says. "They were at the checkout of a hotel, and the desk clerk says, 'I've always wanted to throw a telly out the window,' and Grant peeled off two 100 pound notes and said, 'Be my guest.' "

The "shark" story? This alleged 1969 incident involving Zeppelin, Vanilla Fudge, a groupie and fishing from a hotel room overlooking Seattle's Elliott Bay, is so over-the-top we can't repeat it here (suffice it to say, it has its own Wikipedia page). But it probably has some basis in fact, Bordowitz says. "Let's just say the band says it was the crew," he says.

The "band name" story? Supposedly it came from a remark from The Who's Keith Moon, who said in 1968 that a Yardbirds spinoff band would go over "like a lead zeppelin." Yes, it was Moon, says Bordowitz, and yes he made the remark. But it was two years earlier, in reference to a different project with Page. "Jimmy Page remembered the name, and he thought it fit this band well," Bordowitz says.

Another oft-repeated story about Zeppelin is that their signature song "Stairway to Heaven" – never even released as a U.S. single – owed its success to its length. FM deejays, the story goes, loved to play it because it gave them more than 8 uninterrupted minutes to step outside and smoke a joint.

Something like that has at least a basis in truth, says Bordowitz, who is in a position to know. He himself was a college deejay, at what was then Livingston College at Rutgers University, in the late 1970s, when "Stairway to Heaven" was a radio staple.

"It was one of the songs I used when I needed to go to the bathroom," he says. "I would say that was true. If I had a more complicated issue, that might take more time, I might have played 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida' or [Funkadelic's] 'One Nation Under a Groove.' The long version is 15 minutes."

But this, he says, gets to a larger point about Zeppelin. The band as a general thing released few singles – the old-school gauge for success in the pop world. Zeppelin's rise in the late 1960s and '70s coincided with the rise of a new broadcast medium: FM radio.

"FM progressive radio was just starting in America, and people were playing album cuts," Bordowitz says. "Deejays found a lot to like on Zeppelin records. It was the right band at the right radio format at the right time. That was one of the elements that helped make Zeppelin a monster band. That, and their live show."

Another diehard notion is that Zeppelin was "the first heavy metal band." Not precisely, Bordowitz says.

"I never thought of them as metal," he says. "They started off mostly as a blues band. They just played extremely loud. If volume makes a metal band, they were. But for every 'Whole Lotta Love,' there was a

'Stairway to Heaven.' ... You can listen to any metal band now and if you slowed it down, you can hear 'Whole Lotta Love.' It did inspire dozens of other bands with that kind of riff – but that was just one of the cards in their deck."

Readers, even hard-core Ledheads, will likely learn much that is new from "Led Zeppelin on Led Zeppelin." Certainly Bordowitz did.

"A lot of stuff surprised me," says Bordowitz, who teaches courses in music and writing at Bergen Community College. "First of all, how literate Robert [Plant] is. It's not just the Tolkien. He reads Nietzsche and understands it. He's incredibly smart and very funny."