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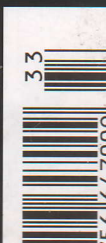
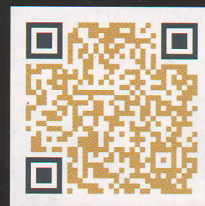
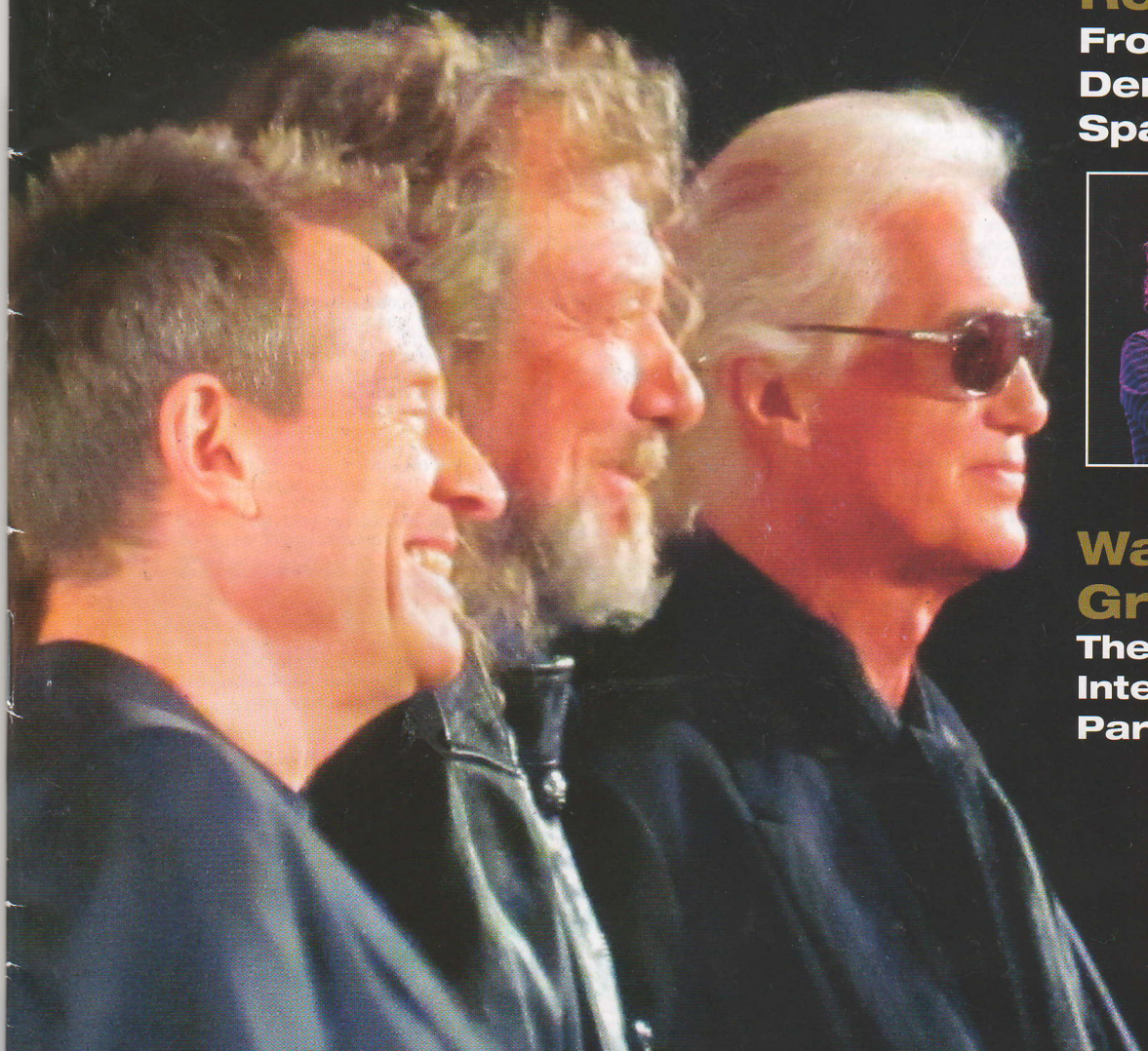
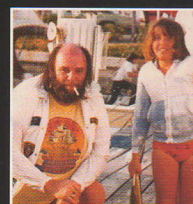
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Robert Plant From the Artists Den to Sensational Space Shifting



Warren Grant: The TBL Interview Part 2



From the Artist's Den to Sensational Space Shifting...

Stephen Humphries rounds up a variety of Robert Plant activity that continues to beguile and captivate in equal measures... just as it should do.

At the debut gig by the Sensational Space Shifters, Robert Plant ushered his romantic and singing partner, Patty Griffin on to the Gloucester Guildhall stage by commenting, "Over the past 18 months/two years of my time as a singer and absconder I've been very lucky to work alongside Miss Patty Griffin. We scratch our heads together and wonder, 'What next?' "

They're not the only ones.

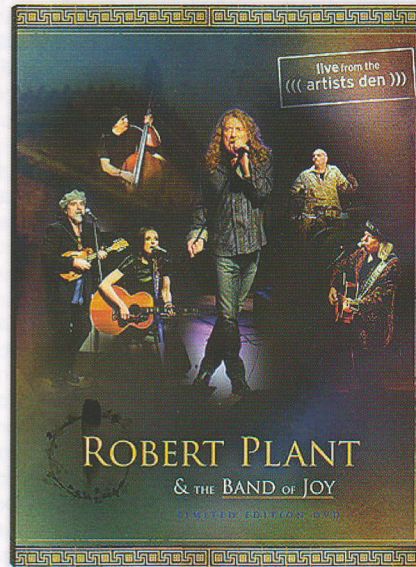
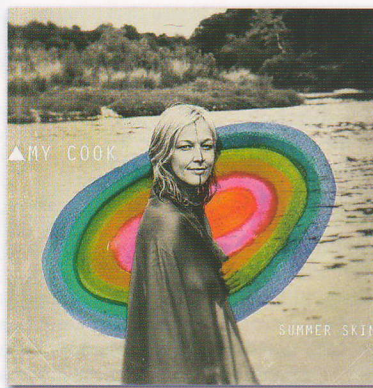
Robert Plant's career is as about as predictable as the next thing to come out of footballer, Mario Balotelli's mouth. Over the past seven years, the singer has shuffled from Strange Sensation to Alison Krauss to Led Zeppelin to The Band of Joy, and now The Sensational Space Shifters - the one crew that Robert has never left is Wolverhampton Wanderers. Indeed, whenever Robert Plant pulls the rug out from under his own feet, the only thing to do is to hang on to the magic carpet ride for thrilling dips and glides into new territory.

A series of recent releases shed some light on Robert's latest stylistic progression. The singer has spent considerable time living and recording in America since collaborating with Alison Krauss and it's afforded him the opportunity to guest with a number of American musicians. Case in point: Robert collaborates on a new record by Lil' Band O' Gold titled *Plays Fats*. As its title implies, the Louisiana nine piece, led by swamp rock guitarist, C.C. Adcock (seek out his seminal 2004 album, *Lafayette Marquis*), has recorded a tribute to Fats Domino. *Plays Fats*, only available in Australia but likely to get a worldwide release, basks in the sound of the African-American singer's New Orleans R&B. One of the two tracks Plant signs on, the jaunty 'It Keeps Rainin,' has already appeared on the multi-artist tribute album, *Goin' Home: A Tribute to Fats Domino* (2007).

More recently, Plant and Griffin stopped by the studios where Texan singer-songwriter Amy Cook was recording her sixth album, *Summer Skin*. Plant spontaneously offered to contribute a soft mist of backing vocals on It's Gonna Rain, a genteel, country-tinged ballad. Like so many of the songs on *Summer Skin* (which includes a guest spot by Griffin), It's Gonna Rain is perfect fare for a mellow Sunday morning. Cook isn't a vocalist of dynamic range, but she has a likeable voice that will appeal to fans of Edie Brickell and the winsome title track of *Summer Skin* is particularly good.

Plant has been honing his harmony singing ever since the blockbuster, *Raising Sand*. On *Band Of Joy*, the vocalist picked a team of musicians whose swelling voices could break a levee or linger like perfume behind his lead vocal. A new concert DVD, *Live From the Artists Den*, showcases the concordant choir collective that is The Band Of Joy. The 16 song set was filmed

at the War Memorial Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee, on a January night when the snow outside fell hard and the winds of Thor... (OK, that's enough of that). Inside the auditorium, the six piece is bathed in warm lighting, but it's the inner glow of exuberance and camaraderie between band members that radiates from the stage. During the many close-up shots, the musicians trade smiles as a synergistic telepathy. Indeed, there appear to be no egos or hierarchies in this group and that's reflected in the revue-style solo spots. During the middle of Buddy Miller's catchy composition, *Somewhere Trouble Don't Go* (recently covered by Joe Bonamassa),



Robert plays a ripping solo on harmonica and it's obvious that he's playing for Buddy, eager to earn his admiration.

Darrell Scott's traditional country voice is deep as the Mariana Trench on his showcase rendition of Satisfied Mind. And Patty Griffin delights with the boogie gospel of her cover of Move Up, which appears on her excellent, Miller-produced solo album *Downtown Church*.

Throughout the show, the musicians frequently huddle together or circle in on each other. As Robert says in one of the DVD's interview segments, "Intimacy is what I crave now." The Band Of Joy certainly reach a state of rapt communion on Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down. On this consistent highlight of the group's live set, Darrell Scott plucks his banjo as an eerie omen, Byron House's bow scrapes ominous notes from his double bass and Marco Giovino drags a pair of chains across his drum kit for a Jacob Marley effect. The band's voices sound like banshees from the underworld as Plant escalates his voice in a vocal exorcism.

The concert includes several numbers from the *Band Of Joy* album - including a sped-up version of Cindy, I'll Marry You Someday - but it unfortunately omits *Monkey or Silver Rider*, two songs that nudged the band out of its traditional Americana sound and into shoegaze (or should that be cowboy bootgaze) territory. That said, guitarist, Buddy Miller gets to cut loose as he grinds into his

Gretsch guitar for the fluidly fast solo of Down to the Sea. The Band Of Joy version of the Fate Of Nations song is particularly inspired and surpasses live versions by Strange Sensation and the Sensational Space Shifters. Later on, Plant appears giddy with happiness amid the mellifluous pedal steel of the breezy In the Mood. It's the only other time Plant dips into the deep well of his solo catalogue. The Band Of Joy's definitive romp through Tall Cool One is sorely missed but he's more than generous in doling out six Led Zeppelin songs to an appreciative audience. Robert deserves kudos for continually searching for fresh interpretations of these canonical songs (as he observes in the DVD interview, "Nobody wants to be a tribute band") but the group's versions don't always hit the mark. Absent the Jimmy Page riff, Black Dog sludges along formlessly even though Robert's cry of "Ooooooh" does raise one's pulse. Similarly, one misses the springy coil of the original riff to Houses Of The Holy. A fine version of Gallows Pole, boasting tandem vocals by Plant and Griffin, moves from simmer to boil yet doesn't quite erupt as

volcanically as the Strange Sensation versions nor, indeed, the original. Tangerine is lovely, though, as Scott's pedal steel emulates Page's lead lines. The infectious 1950s rockabilly of Rock And Roll taps into Led Zeppelin's primary inspirations and is tremendous fun. Best of all is the inspired reworking of Ramble On. It is, hands down, the best song of the night. The song veers unexpectedly into progressive folk territory during an ethereal and exotic middle section in which Darrell Scott teases out eastern modalities from a balalaika. It inspires Plant to conjure up one of those rafter rattling sonic wails that have been known to make women weak at the knees and make men leap into the air.

One conjectures that the live rearrangement of Ramble On pointed toward the musical direction that a follow-up album to *Band Of Joy* might have taken. Indeed, in November 2011, Robert told GQ magazine, "On our tour we just finished we wrote prolifically at the soundchecks, so it's a very trippy psychedelic trance-like bunch of demos."

During the final leg of the Band of Joy tour, Robert began to revisit *Mighty Rearranger* tracks such as Another Tribe, Four Winds Blow, and a stunning rendition of Shine It All Around. In hindsight, it was, perhaps, indicative of his next move. Though Robert opted to put an indefinite hold on Strange Sensation, the singer occasionally teamed up with Justin Adams and his new musical cohort, Gambian roots musician, Juldeh Camara, for several one-off shows, including a headlining slot at WOMAD, in Dubai in 2009. Six months later, the Bat signal went up for another convention. The occasion: A benefit concert for Nordoff Robbins on a stage where, two years earlier, Led Zeppelin placed the final (?) seal on its legacy.

A DVD of the Rockwell charity concert captures the evening's performances but, it must be said, it's hard to see the musical through line that links Razorlight, David Gray, Tom Jones, Joss Stone and Robert Plant.

Robert re-affirms Plant-ness at WOMAD

There are some of us who have never quite forgiven Robert Plant for breaking his pre-O2 reunion agreement with Page, Jones and Bonham Junior to play more shows as Led Zeppelin. But you have to hand it to him, he's played a canny game over the following five years, re-moulding a five decade career to reflect the dignity and reserve of veteran status.

That said, the return from the country lane to the sound of the Strange Sensation era is a welcome one for fans who prefer their Plant with a harder psychedelic blues edge. And as the five-thousand-strong crowd at WOMAD discovered to their delight in July, the 64 year-old can still rock hard – with added Ghanaian garnish. The audience, unlike those for the majority of performances at this largely sedate festival, was packed; only the canniest of maneuvering ensured a frontline view – proof, as if it were needed, of Plant's continuing pulling power. Yet the palpable excitement was tinged with a certain concern following the much-maligned show at the Forum seventeen days previous. Had Robert really lost his 'Plant-ness'?

The initial signs were not good as he joined the band for the Bukka White opener, Fixin' To Die, moving slowly from behind the drum riser with head and shoulders down, wearing a black hoodie. But a quickfire James Brown spin, mic stand foot flip and the first of many trademark "Woou Yeah"s were more than enough to prove that quintessential Plant was very much in evidence as he and the Incredible Space Shifters tore into the first of the set's four blues standards; John Mayall's (I'm Your) Witchdoctor, Howlin' Wolf's 44 and Willie Dixon's Spoonful completing the cornerstones.

Five Zeppelin classics kept the Holy happiest. A brooding Friends, happy-clappy Bron-Yr-Aur Stomp and a "Hawkwind version" as the singer put it of Gallows Pole for an encore were delivered close to their original versions. But the presence of Justin Adams' JuJu bandmate Juldeh Camara on his one-stringed riti morphed Black Dog and Whole Lotta Love into dark, atonal territory – the rhythm pushed hard by Plant, stalking the stage bashing his bodhran. A brace of Strange Sensation songs took the set into its hardest rock territory. The riff explosion of Tin Pan Valley showcased Skin and Adams trading slide guitar licks from each side of the stage to pulverising effect, while The Enchanter lifted the audience high on its epic wings. There was no doubting Plant was enjoying himself. Gone is the preening – but he's still grooving, nodding appreciatively as Adams, Skin and Camara took their solos, his face a picture of concentration – eyes closed – as he delivered the lines to She Cried by 'Jay and the Americans' before it segued into Whole Lotta Love. There were Plantations galore, goading Womad founder Peter Gabriel for allegedly cheating at tennis and responding to a call of "I love you, Robert" with typical dryness: "Just keep it between the two of us." The biggest laugh came when "Strider" was replaced with a shout of "Asda" at the end of 'Bron-Yr-Aur Stomp'. As the man himself summed up towards the end of this rich and dynamic set: "Ain't it great to have fun?"

Simon Cadman

Space Shifting to South America

Robert Plant Presents Sensational Space Shifters have announced an 11 date

tour of South America in October and November.

Dates are as follows:

- Oct 18th Rio de Janeiro, RJ – HSBC Arena
- Oct 20th Belo Horizonte, MG – Expo Minas
- Oct 22nd São Paulo, SP – Espaço das Américas
- Oct 25th Brasília, DF – Ginásio Nilson Nelson
- Oct 27th Curitiba, PR – Teatro Guaira
- Oct 29th Porto Alegre, RS – Gigantinho
- Nov 1st Luna Park Argentina, Buenos Aires
- Nov 2nd Luna Park Argentina, Buenos Aires.
- Nov 4th Orfeo Superdomo Argentina, Cordoba
- Nov 7th Arena Movistar Chile, Santiago
- Nov 9th Jockey Club Peru, Lima



Faced with an audience seemingly comprised of mature women who cannot wait to hurl underwear at Jones, Robert's most charitable contribution to the evening is his concession of two Zep numbers, Black Dog and Whole Lotta Love. Of course, Plant's crew (which includes Strange Sensation's Billy Fuller on bass) subverts expectations. A slowed-down Black Dog is driven by the sinuous sidewinder of African banjo and unexpectedly shifts into sixth gear midway through as Plant's voice takes flight and the drums kick in. The version is arguably the best

reincarnation of Black Dog yet. Plant doesn't hold back during his magnificent soaring bellows during a four-to-the-floor Whole Lotta Love, the middle section of which features a Camara solo on the riti (African violin). Funny in My Mind (I Believe I'm Fixin' to Die) is an evolution from the *Dreamland* version and pivots on a stuttering strut of a riff by Adams – who bobs his head in ecstatic head

banging – and a recurring riti riff from Camara. It's effectively a prototype for the version now performed by the Strange Shape Shifters. More recently, Robert revisited *Dreamland* for a new cover version of Song To the Siren with Alfie Boe. The Blackpool-born opera star asked the rock singer to duet on the Tim Buckley classic, which appears on his crossover album *Alfie*. Plant's vocal, etched with wrinkles of regret, is arguably even more nuanced than his earlier version, but Boe's tenor is overly dramatic as a counterpoint and the string section is far too treacly sweet for such a melancholy song.

Plant's gravitation toward Strange Sensation material is a welcome step for those of us who felt that that band still had the potential to one-up Mighty Rearranger, a high-water mark of the singer's career. But when Robert announced five summer shows by a newly constituted group, few expected that it would contain not only all the members of Strange Sensation (bar Clive Deamer, now the second drummer in Radiohead's touring lineup) but also Camara and Griffin. As Plant put it during the Gloucester gig, "The Strange Sensation sort of polyglotted."

Many observers expected that the Sensational Space Shifters were to be a short-lived proposition, a sort of fun diversion à la Priory of Brion in between *Band Of Joy* albums. So the announcement of an official concert download of the band's London Forum date was welcomed as a lovely souvenir of a band that had a sell-by date stamped on it. The London concert isn't quite the classic, hammy version of the band's

Gloucester show, and Griffin's three-song set midway slows the momentum too much, but it's still a very good outing for the band and the hi-fidelity recording is beautifully mixed. Marvel, for instance, at how dynamic Tin Pan Valley sounds as Robert unleashes the first of many potent howls that evening.

The Sensational Space Shifters revisits the core Strange Sensation sound with its blend of West African blues, West Coast psychedelics and Bristol trip-hop, but there's now the addition of Patty Griffin's Americana folk influence as well as a greater injection of Western blues this time around. The band's cover versions of 44, (I'm Your) Witchdoctor and Spoonful are highlights of the show with the latter, in particular, showcasing a muscular, yet fluid, mélange of styles that might be dubbed Psychd'afrika. The middle section is particularly exciting. Skin Tyson's guitar sounds like an aural tornado that seems to tear through the Forum. In its wake, the rhythm section of Billy Fuller and Dave Smith create a groovy current for Camara's riti to surf on.

The band's roots sound lends itself to great interpretations of Led Zeppelin's acoustic numbers such as Friends and Bron-Yr-Aur Stomp. What's also apparent is that Robert has taken what he has learned about during his recent Americana adventures and incorporated it into the Sensational Space Shifters sound. Witness, for example, how the band's voices weave together as a mass choir during Black Dog, Whole Lotta Love and Gallows Pole. Robert's strident voice leads from the front but he also allows Griffin and Camara to come to the fore on occasion. Indeed, one of the most gratifying elements of the band's sound is how Camara's beautiful vocal solos on Somebody Knockin' and Black Dog.

The news that Plant is recording an album with The Sensational Space Shifters – described to *The Telegraph* in August as "12 tracks, 11 originals and no sentimental stuff" – was a surprising development given that a follow-up Band Of Joy album appeared to be in the works. It's an exhilarating prospect. The Sensational Space Shifters' stunning shows showcase how Robert is bringing together the best elements of recent projects for a record that promises to be a culmination of everything he has learned as an artist. As Plant put it at the Forum show, "It's such a thrill, you know, because this is a great combination of good intention and pretty risky stuff for us."

You could say the same thing about his inspiringly unpredictable career.



Photos: Simon Partridge