**Robert Plant**

***lullaby and… The Ceaseless Roar***

On his Nonesuch debut, *lullaby and… The Ceaseless Roar,* singer/songwriter Robert Plant bookends an album of brilliantly realized original material with two versions of the haunting bluegrass tune “Little Maggie,” popularized in the mid-’40s by the Stanley Brothers. In the Stanley Brothers’ hands, the song is mournful yet stoic as the narrator vows to leave for some “far distant land” rather than see his beloved with another man. While traces of its bluegrass roots clearly remain, Plant’s “Little Maggie” veers off into intriguingly uncharted territory, a foretaste of the album to come, with throbbing bass redolent of the “Bristol sound” made famous by Massive Attack and a keening fiddle solo that was actually created by a one-stringed Gambian instrument called the *ritti*. At the album’s close, the song is reprised in an even more striking, dub-like form, renamed “Arbaden (Maggie’s Babby).” The lead vocal is initially handled by Gambian *ritti* virtuoso Juldeh Camara, in his native Fulani tongue, before Plant steps back up to the mic, to urgently trade vocal lines with Camera, backed by pounding drums and dueling guitars.

In his nearly 50-year career, former Led Zeppelin vocalist and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member Plant has indeed gone to far distant lands, not as forlorn lover but as intrepid musical explorer. To write and produce *lullaby and… The Ceaseless Roar,* though, he returned to his native England, enriched by all he has seen, heard, and investigated. For the last few years, Plant has lived and recorded in America, working with musicians in Nashville, residing for a spell in Austin, and making time to drive along the byways of Mississippi, fueled by the sound of the delta blues that has inspired him since he was teenager (a car journey recollected in the new “Turn It Up”). He had previously traversed North and West Africa, following the trail of the blues back to the desert, where he famously joined nomadic Tuareg musicians and others at the renowned Festival of the Desert in Essakene, Mali. But now his creative wanderings have led him back to his native England and a rediscovery—and a reappraisal—of himself as an artist and songwriter.

While collaborating on record and on stage with bluegrass superstar Alison Krauss or hitting the road with guitarist Buddy Miller and singer songwriter Patty Griffin as part of his more recent Band of Joy, he largely performed other people’s songs: modern and traditional folk, blues, and bluegrass, trying to better understand and assimilate the particularly American sound of this music. His success, especially with Krauss, was extraordinary, and it expanded his fan base far beyond the world of classic rock. Plant’s knowledge and taste, combined with Krauss’s virtuosity, proved formidable, interpreting songs from Gene Clark, Sam Phillips, Tom Waits, and Townes Van Zandt, among others. Looking back, Plant remarks, “I was really happy to learn my trade, to extend my trade, so that I could make my way into the guild of good singers.”

On *lullaby and… The Ceaseless Roar*, Plant—whom *Rolling Stone* readers had already voted as the top rock vocalist on all time in a 2011 poll—essays what are among the finest vocal performances of his solo career, balancing power and pathos—intimate and emotional at times (the keyboard-and-voice ballad “A Stolen Kiss,” recorded starkly in a chapel), atmospheric and incantatory at others (the dramatically unfolding “Embrace Another Fall,” a trip across the Welsh border). But the challenge for him, he reveals was not the singing but the songs themselves: “After I came back to England, I wondered, could I actually write? Did I have anything left? Not knowing and not being really convinced I had anything of my own because I’d been singing other people’s songs for a long time.

“In the beginnings of my efforts to write songs, when I first met Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones,” he continues, “I was just trying to join in with the times and what was going on and use what I’d learned from Dion and Howlin’ Wolf. Now I have a whole index, an absolute rainbow, of influences.” As for subject matter, he decided, “I need to talk about what’s going on in my life, in my lap, speaking from my experience; it’s far more honest and much more appropriate.

Lead single “Rainbow” feels like a long-lost rock-and-roll tune, propelled by a big, reverberating Bo Diddley-by-way-of-West Africa beat. At its bridge, Plant interpolates a couplet from a poem by Victorian writer-designer William Morris, considered the progenitor of the fantasy fiction genre thanks to his revival of medieval texts and translation of Icelandic folk tales and undoubtedly a longtime Plant inspiration. On “Embrace Another Fall,” Plant invited the esteemed Welsh-language folk singer Julie Murphy, with whom he had previously sung on a track for Afro Celt System, to perform a section of a centuries-old Welsh song, “Marwnad yr Ehedydd,” another touchstone for Plant, given his fascination with Welsh mythology and music.

“Pocketful of Golden,” in part a paean to the land to which he had returned, is an especially compelling example of what Plant is capable of creating with his current group, the Sensational Space Shifters. As he notes, it is “one of those amazing instances where we pieced together so many great ideas. All the combined gifts of the band, drifting through these varieties and styles, give us some amazing places to go.”

As he contemplated the writing process, Plant had been instinctively drawn back to the impressively eclectic group of musicians he had previously toured and recorded with as Strange Sensation, early in the last decade. With a few members of that combo, he’d cut 2002’s *Dreamland,* an album of covers dating mostly from the late ’60s psychedelic folk and rock era, and, with more of these live band members, 2005’s acclaimed *Mighty Rearranger.* Plant explains, “As I was turning towards the east and back across the Atlantic, I was starting to make moves to reunite with my friends from Strange Sensation and see what we could do. We played together for about 15 months and those were such exciting concerts. We changed the name to the Sensational Space Shifters and brought in the amazing Juldeh Camara from West Africa, from the Gambia, who plays the *ritti* a one-string fiddle, and the *kologo*, which is the African origin of the guitar. And Dave Smith joined us on drums. So this amazing hybrid developed. This is where it all began.”

The Sensational Space Shifters created a serious buzz on the concert and festival circuit (and, thanks to a legion of fans, all over YouTube). They built a rapport and a sound on stage that allowed them to freely experiment together when they finally reconvened in the studio. Working at Helium Studio in Wiltshire and Peter Gabriel’s Real World complex in Bath with Plant himself as producer, they quickly and intuitively found a fierce groove. Recalls Plant, “There were moments when the songs quite openly and inevitably told us what they would be. They were not only recorded but written on the spot.”

His band’s name couldn’t be more apt, given their ability to move rock and folk melodies into exotic new places with a seeming improvisatory ease. A glimpse at their individual resumes underscores Plant’s own adventurousness in his choice of collaborators. Guitarist Justin Adams had been instrumental in the world music crossover discs of such groundbreaking artists as Jah Wobble and Natasha Atlas, and he produced the world-renowned Tuareg group Tinariwen. Both keyboardist-programmer John Baggot and bassist Billy Fuller had been key players in fashioning the deep, dub-influenced Bristol Sound alongside Massive Attack and Portishead (and Fuller has been collaborating with Portishead’s Geoff Barrow in a trio called Beak). Young Gambian multi-instrumentalist Camara, who learned his craft from his venerable *griot* father, regularly collaborates with Adams in a hybrid project called Juju. Drummer Dave Smith is part of the London-based Loop Collective and specializes in jazz and electronic music. Finally, guitarist Liam “Skin” Tyson hails from the chart-topping Brit-pop band Cast.

“It's so joyous,” Plant told London’s the *Guardian* of his work with this line-up, “and the great thing is that it’s not a precious metal at all. People come together to do what they want to do, and what they can. The sound Justin and Juldeh make melds into one beautiful thing. The space-shifting is a natural movement.”

So, too, is *lullaby and… The Ceaseless Roar*: a natural movement, another fascinating progression, for Plant himself. More than any artist of his generation, Plant, an indisputable rock legend, continues to surprise and challenge his audience—and himself—with music that is smart, exciting, and completely of the moment. His decades of experience, his incredible legacy as the front man of Led Zeppelin and as a solo artist, only serve to keep pushing him forward. He’s steeped in history but his ears are attuned to the entire world around him, listening for the future.

*—Michael Hill*