

A BUSTLE IN YOUR HEDGEROW: LONG BEACH, LED ZEPPELIN AND THE WEST COAST SUBLIME

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Kevin Schmidt's *Long Beach Led Zep* (2002) is an eight-minute video, looped for installation purposes, in which an unaccompanied guitarist, standing on Vancouver Island's Long Beach, plays Led Zeppelin's 1971 "Stairway to Heaven" in its entirety.

But the ice-edge seems to have had a fascination for him.
—J.C. Beaglehole, *The Life of Captain James Cook*

Blocked everywhere by
stubborn lumber. Where even the ocean cannot reach its
coastline for the lumber of islands or the river its mouth.
—Jack Spicer “Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival”

This ocean, humiliating in its disguises
Tougher than anything.
No one listens to poetry.
—Jack Spicer “Thing Language”

The enemy is the democratic enemy, in a country where people
have lost their stations and like badly behaved children can
neither keep to their own places nor respect other peoples.
—Mary Butts “A Warning to Hikers”

Though a vague guilt often accompanies the lack of an appropriately epiphanic response to the glories of the intercoastal British Columbia landscape, such occasional indifference is not without precedent or foundation. If, when looking up at, say, the snow-capped North Shore mountains arrayed in spring sunshine, one registers either nullity or irritation, it is wise to remember (before succumbing to the cringing unworthiness that the landscape’s monumental scale seems to encourage) that the waves of quasi-religious ecstasy that the viewer has temporarily failed to summon are arbitrarily determined. The love of landscape is a learned behaviour like any other. And we must remind ourselves too that any regard, either “spiritual” or aesthetic, for the sort of dramatically craggy and uneven landscape that graces our coast is a very recent phenomenon. Early European visitors, peering speculatively into the prevailing gloom (an island? an inlet?) saw our towering mountains and shore-crowding forests as barriers to progress; one can read a shelf of explorer’s journals BARELY encountering

a syllable of Romantic rapture. But, over time, the artists and publicists who followed the explorers, from the in-house Canadian Pacific Railway fabricator Lucius O'Brien to the self-mythologizing colonialist Emily Carr—along with the phalanx of postcard colourists and bar-room Bierstadts that followed in their wake—created a commercialized and sentimental iconography of the West Coast landscape that to a large extent still dominates our response to it. Its inescapable mediation acts as a screen—sometimes transparent, sometimes filled with distracting static and pop-ups—between our senses and the topography they encounter. Surely part of the somewhat desperate appeal of snowboarding and off-course skiing must be their apparent ability to recover by crudely adrenal methods the synesthesia that would presumably once have been produced by the landscape itself. For what other reason would a person willingly wander into avalanche country than out of an unspoken desire to let, even at the point of oblivion, an otherwise inert landscape have its way with them? Super, natural, as the ads remind us.

Although a critical and informed relationship to various landscape traditions has been a defining feature of Vancouver's postmodern aesthetic, too often this has meant the reflexive consignment of natural beauty *as such* to a despised realm of touristic kitsch. Anyone viewing the corpus of Vancouver art over the past couple of decades could reasonably conclude that dwelling in paradise is more of a burden and less of a pleasure than it often is. Disneyland without the rides, Utopia with guilt. Amongst other things, Kevin Schmidt's *Long Beach Led Zep* attempts to restore to the parched discourse of landscape a liberating trace of the sublime in its most vulgar sense; that sense, however degraded or symptomatic, that the landscape's beauties are democratically available, that Friedrich and the four-wheel drive are trying to access, for better or worse, the same place. Neither the aristocratically pristine imaginary of the environmentalists nor the virtual service wilderness of the tourist industry, Schmidt's *Long Beach* is public space, freely inherited and held in common. Its use for temporary and celebratory purposes the *assumed* part of a natural social order. Use establishes precedent. Thus the work acts not only as the documentation of an event but an assertion of legal and social continuity. In its combination of theoretical rigour and qualified humanism, *Long Beach Led Zep* enters the increasingly elegiac and recuperative discourse that has in recent years emerged from the critical asperities of the Vancouver School. Consider the bright social comedy that emerges from the austere method of Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project* photographs, or the ways in which Scott McFarland's bucolic images are deepened in their nostalgic affect by the same digital manipulations which would seem to undermine them. Like his colleagues, Schmidt seems less concerned with the rewards of institutional critique than with the reclamation



Kevin Schmidt, *Long Beach Led Zep*, 2002, video still.

of transcendent possibility—however fleeting and contingent—from a corrupt culture.

Paradoxically, the location of Schmidt's video, Long Beach, is on the far coast of Vancouver Island—the west coast of the West Coast—the nearest place from the artist's Vancouver home where it seems possible to actually *escape* the landscape's constant encroachment. The sensation of walking through the parking lot's screen of alders and onto the big beach's gleaming expanse, facing “like stout Cortez . . . with eagle eyes” the open Pacific—is, after having passed as well through the winding clearcuts, dinosaur swamps and overhung rock faces of the road from Nanaimo—one of intense lightness and relief. One is pulled insistently towards the continent's shifting edge. The intense and unexpected novelty of a naked horizon sometimes causes unwary visitors to rush towards it, as if the flat earth had been tipped suddenly.

Though the eastward-turning lens of *Long Beach Led Zep* faces that horizon, it does not make an issue of it, breaking it up with visual data; subject, amplifiers, a generator, low islands. And the work's guitarist, in facing away from that evanescent limit, in directing his performance toward not only the lens but the viewer—and by implication the continental mass looming behind that viewer—replaces the monocular subjectivity of conventional landscape depiction with the scruffily communal ethos of the garage band. The central figure does not, like a Byronic hero or Friedrichian wanderer, interpose his subjectivity between ourselves and the absolute, but modestly invites us to sing along, to complete the work with the trace of our active subjectivity. Long Beach becomes the scene not of a private longing for the infinite but of the recuperation of alternative cultural possibilities.

In playing Led Zeppelin's “Stairway to Heaven” Schmidt chooses a song as much a part of the landscape as any mountain. By the time the thirty-year-old artist would have first encountered it, its status as the most classic of “classic” rock songs—challenged but not supplanted by the excoriations of punk—was secure. If fallen slightly in reputation in recent years, it remains to this day an incredibly assured piece of record making, less dated (and rather better produced) than most of the New Wave posturing that was supposed to supplant it. If such ominous Zeppelin masterpieces as “When the Levee Breaks” and “Kashmir” speak more directly to our post-millennial dread, “Stairway” is still the song in which the band's strengths are most clearly enumerated. Coming as the (always pivotal) first side closer of Led Zeppelin's fourth album, it was clearly intended as such. By the time of the album's 1971 recording, guitarist and producer Jimmy Page had been in studios for almost a decade. While the scholarly Eric Clapton and Keith

Richards were still mastering, with raw and malnourished postwar fingers, the blues licks of Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker, Page was becoming a seasoned session man, a “go to” guy playing on everything from TV commercials to Screaming Lord Sutch novelty singles. At the same time bassist (and on “Stairway” recorder player and electric pianist) John Paul Jones was arranging and playing most of the instruments on such flower-power confections as Donovan’s “Sunshine Superman”. Led Zeppelin’s enduring blend of blues, folk, and pop was elaborately calculated, built on a brightly cynical foundation of studio savvy and entrepreneurial energy. And any lingering hangover from punk’s ethical strictures—the ipso facto assumption that such energy is incommensurate with the “rebel” spirit of rock and roll (an enduringly pious set of solecisms that helped drive Kurt Cobain to an early grave) tends to be swept aside by the first Thor-like thwack of John Bonham’s floor toms.

“Stairway” (as much as “Sympathy for the Devil”, “Won’t Get Fooled Again”, or “Smells Like Teen Spirit”) was a deliberately crafted “classic,” one that consolidated not only the group’s achievements but measured the distance rock had traveled from its roots in accident and cultural marginalization. If, three decades on, rock’s self-invoked moment of maturity and artistic fruition seems in many ways as “Torn and Frayed” as most of its practitioners—rendered hollow by a triumphant present—neither have that moment’s swaggering heights been quite equaled. The three songs that precede “Stairway” on *Led Zeppelin IV* provide a matchless set-up. The proto-metal opener “Black Dog” almost drowns both album and infant genre in a drunken farrago of thickened, stumbling beats and the kind of guitar-driven sexual innuendo (“gonna make you burn/gonna make you sting”) that speaks unerringly to the libidinal confusions of the adolescent male. “Black Dog” is followed by the dynamic but literally generic “Rock and Roll” which skids into anthemhood not through its Dick Dale-isms or facetious nostalgia (Sha Na Na had already played Woodstock less than two years before) but on the infantile propulsion of Bonham’s hi-hats.

Directly preceding “Stairway” is the folk-pastiche “Battle of Evermore”, a song so tied to “Stairway”—especially in its initial reception—that it functions as a kind of overture. If one can speak of early seventies progressive rock as a kind of Yeatsian Celtic Twilight—with “Stairway” its refined and reflective “Sailing to Byzantium”—then “Battle of Evermore” is its necessary preliminary immersion in folkloric materials. Robert Plant, over a bed of keening twelve-strings and mandolins, bardically intones what seems to be a workaday mead-hall battle chant. He is vocally accompanied by Sandy Denny, the then undisputed Faerie Queen of English folk, who’s bell-like contralto—slightly roughened by cigarettes and the road—soars through

John Paul Jones, Robert Plant, Sandy Denny, and Jimmy Page circa 1971.



and over the main vocal line. Denny is strategically employed here in much the same way as Merry Clayton was on The Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" (from *Let it Bleed*) a couple of years before. By allowing Clayton and Denny to step out so dramatically from the role of the female "backup" singer—both singers ultimately dominate the songs—both Plant and Mick Jagger would seem to risk professional exposure. But instead, the women's audibly superior vocal prowess paradoxically serves to ground and authenticate the songs. Self-consciousness is confronted and defeated. Every song, in fact, on both *Let it Bleed* and *Led Zeppelin IV* speaks to a similar confidence in the security of its cultural legitimation impossible to imagine today in any field.

Of course the confidently invoked mythic aura of a song like "The Battle of Evermore" has eroded over time, and is felt today (if at all) mostly as poignant evidence of unbreachable historical schism. But the nature of the song's legendary material bears not only on the context of "Stairway", but on the memory of the cultural formations that *Long Beach Led Zep* tentatively evokes. Many first listeners to "The Battle of Evermore" would have hardly have needed reminding that the event it recounts is The Battle of Pellenor Fields, from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Return of the King*. As anyone who was present in 1971 can tell you, the present movie-driven Tolkienian moment is but a shadow of the one that permeated our culture in the late sixties and early seventies. A wanderer from Middle Earth, visiting the Long Beach of those distant days—with its scattered colony of hippies living in amiable fraternity in ad hoc shacks, tents, and lean-tos—would have felt right at home. To this day, in such remaining enclaves as the Gulf Islands, a walk down certain unpaved roads can reveal houses and mindsets that might have leapt unaltered from the pages of the late Oxford fabulist.

That the Utopian ethos of the hippie era was inextricably bound up with such possibly dubious material—Tolkien's hardly the worst of it—made the scorched earth rejections of the punk era understandable. But in sweeping away so much of what it took for false consciousness, punk negated as well the yearning for a shared connection to the mythical strata of experience that "Evermore" and "Stairway," for all their commercial calculation, so convincingly embody. Ironically, punk—in many ways the last gasp of modernism as a cleansing force—ended up preparing the ground for a re-invigorated corporate musical culture. That culture, now truly monolithic, would co-opt the energy of punk's negation as easily as it would hip-hop's indignation. Beyond a shelf full of remastered CD's, this might be punk's most enduring legacy. Perhaps Kurt Cobain knew this, and seeing Lollapalooza's battery-farm privations end as a rehearsal for the loudspeaker torture of Guantanamo Bay was an eventuality he chose to forego. Beside the faux-primitivism of The White Stripes or the prep school posturing of The

Strokes—let alone the actual grim contents of the “Top 10”—such reviled products of the pre-punk era as *Dark Side of the Moon* or *Band on the Run* seem like enlightenment manifestoes. Good, even great, music is still being made, of course, but is produced and consumed in protective and autonomous communities. If it might be argued that the occasional cross-fertilisation of these communities is sufficient in itself, the public sphere that Led Zeppelin could so confidently address has, for better or worse, vanished.

For musicians and artists of Schmidt’s generation, who came of age in a post-punk era in which “hippie” had become a term of abuse, to overcome the reflexive cultural cringe attached to almost any unironic expression of communitarian spirit is itself a subversive act. The recent anti-war and anti-globalisation protests were notable for an emphasis on *personal* expression at all costs, to the extent that an often infantile acting out—protest as “theatre”, revolutionary violence as hockey riot—hobbled the conceptual unity and focused organisation without which political change is impossible. For many of the millions who marched on the eve of the Second Gulf War the act was a one-time registration of personal disapproval, the inscription of a personal petition, without long-term consequence. A consumer choice, ultimately ignorable if the product can be made to sell anyway. Such organized dissent as the artistic community managed seemed more a matter of confirming the comforts of marginalisation than seriously repudiating—or risking—the status quo.

Against the dead weight of both an efficiently atomising global state apparatus and an exhausted, inward-turning counterculture, *Long Beach Led Zep*’s intervention is necessarily modest. The art world to which it is inevitably addressed is a demographically narrow one, which is unfortunate. *Long Beach Led Zep* has the kind of transparency of effect—a tantalising mixture of the faintly exotic and the over-familiar—which would once have been perfectly suitable for the distracted expectancy of late-night television. Though similarly ripe moments were never plentiful and are now almost entirely absent, a wide exposure to the same kind of delicately interrogative pleasures that *Long Beach Led Zep* provides gave, if nothing else, the project of rock video a cultural currency it took a long time to squander. Such “alternative” videos as The Replacement’s *Bastards of Young*, which consisted mostly of an Ozu-level shot of a cheap stereo on which the song is being played, until the song finishes and it’s kicked over, or New Order’s *Perfect Kiss*, Jonathan Demme’s stripped down real-time vision of rock stars as sullen Silicon Valley worker drones, seemed to reflect a growing rapprochement between commercial and creative forces. But like punk before it, the experimental energies and conceptual daring of rock video ultimately ended

up helping to erode, for corporate benefit, systems of representational faith that had become commercially outmoded. The attack on linear narrative represented by MTV's pioneering incorporation of avant-garde strategies was ultimately undertaken on behalf of those for whom the destruction of experience was a politically expedient end.

Long Beach Led Zep addresses a world in which coyly cynical "betrayals of expectation" have become entirely normalized and complicit. Experiments in psychosocial manipulation and perceptual bad faith once confined to experimental cinemas and backstreet art galleries have become dominant commercial forms. Bart Simpson's brazen, smirkingly insincere palms up non-admission has been appropriated as the appropriate default gesture of a war-time president.

Against these active—if intermittent—barriers to reception, *Long Beach Led Zep* deploys two strategies. The first is simply one of duration. The guitarist takes the song at a pace perhaps even a little more measured than that of the original recording. He is competent, but not to the degree that a certain empathetic performance anxiety doesn't draw one in. Having heard from any number of dorms, neighbour's garages, or Frisbee parks the working-out of chord progressions to "Stairway to Heaven" certainly prepares listeners for the worst. But over the performance the guitarist becomes audibly more confident. This narrative of triumph over adversity does more than enlist sympathy and interest, but mirrors that of the original recording. Not particularly concerned with sung narrative anyway, the song's lyrics, set up by "The Battle of Evermore", are an anthology of Tolkien-lite onto which the listener is invited to project at will—the song's real story in both versions is its inexorable build, its calculated endorphin release. The degree of imaginative involvement required differs only by degree. The moment of payoff is the same in both versions. If Page rewards the patient listener towards the song's end with a guitar solo of an architectonic grandeur the listener can't help but share, Schmidt goes a step further. At the point in the song where the solo would be played the DVD's audience is gently compelled to step up and wail. If the ghostly thrill of playing internal air guitar to Page's solo is manifestly not the real thing, it makes for an oddly satisfying substitute, a convincing echo of the adolescent triumphalism, stripped of interfering content, that is the secret spice of Led Zeppelin's agreeably narcissistic utopianism.

The artist's reliance on the song's signifying power to effectively guide viewer response is not only its most important strategy, but exemplifies the emotional truth at the work's core. That music has formidable powers to alleviate the depredations of almost any human condition is admitted by most people. Though tested by the thousand daily exploitations of advertising and film, music's ability to unite disparate streams of memory in common focus

remains an unparalleled force within human culture. Harder to own up to is the utterly random way in which those recuperative and unifying powers act, the degree to which the most wretched commercial trash can accompany the most exalted emotion. The category of “kitsch” derives from a need to conceal the redemptive power of the abject and everyday, just as the term “picturesque” derives from a need to impose a class system on the enjoyment of landscape. *Long Beach Led Zep* proposes a version of artistic practice in which such categorical simplifications are not only exposed—as partial, class-ridden and arbitrary—but actively transcended. The decline of the public sphere is addressed with a shared hallucination, an assertion of half-remembered pleasure both casually self-aware and rigorously indulgent.