

Waking up I smile

a brand new day is before me...

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Zeppelin, timing, and the desire for control

Categories : [General](#)

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*My joy is like spring so warm, it makes flowers bloom all over the earth,
My pain is like a river of tears, so vast it fills the four oceans,
Please call me by my true names, so that I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
So I can see, that my joy and pain are one.*

-Thich Nhat Hanh

During my junior year of college I was introduced to Led Zeppelin. I had listened to music before, but this band transformed my experience of merely listening with the ears to actually *hearing* with my whole body. I had their Greatest Hits CD (this was before Spotify, and even iTunes didn't yet carry Zeppelin), and for my birthday my girlfriend at the time bought me the entire Led Zeppelin collection. Whoa; celebration day! With so much music at my fingertips, a question arose: *how can I maximize my experience of listening to all this music?*

I imagined being alive when *Led Zeppelin I* was released, racing to bring it on home from the record store to put on the CD (...err LP), playing it endlessly, and then counting the days with my friends until the next one came out. But in these advanced times I had the entire collection at my fingertips, able to conjure up any song at will. Yet something about witnessing the evolution of this rock & roll legend seemed appealing, and so I decided to re-create the experience, as best I could, of what it would be like to watch it all unfold out on the tiles. I embarked on the following journey:

First I read about how the band was formed, how Jimmy Page wanted to form a supergroup but that someone commented that it would probably be a disaster, like a 'Lead Zeppelin.' They dropped the 'a' and the name was chosen. Then I researched each member's music influences, learning more about blues and some of the context behind the music of the mid-sixties.

When I felt it was time, I placed *Led Zeppelin I* in my stereo system, closed my eyes, and just breathed in the music: 'Good Times Bad Times' exploded out of the gate with a roar; guitar, drums, bass and vocals densely packing 2 minutes and 46 seconds of auditory bliss. Then the mood changes dramatically with a cover of Joan Baez' 'Babe I'm gonna leave you', conjuring up the restlessness of a man caught in stagnation who needs to make a move. After the delightfully blues-drunk 'You Shook Me', comes the iconic 'Dazed and Confused': John Paul Jones sets the stage with an infamously haunting descending bassline, Robert Plant wails, John Bonham releases an avalanche of drum-bombs, and they all clear the way for Jimmy Page to shine in the light and rip us to shreds in a monster guitar solo.

This journey continued through the rest of the album's songs, and what was only 45 minutes in clock-time stretched into a seemingly infinite stream of musical ecstasy.

For the next few weeks I would continue listening to the entire album from beginning to end, giving it my full attention. I was careful to not listen when I was studying, or watching TV, but only when I could truly devote my undivided self. I also resisted the temptation to flip to my 'favorite' tracks, allowing for an understanding and savoring of the album as if I was slowly peeling a tangerine. Each listen would reveal nuances that I didn't hear before: Bonham's inconceivably fast drum pedal at 2:13-2:21 of GTBT, the graceful cross-fade transition from 'Your Time is Gonna Come' to 'Black Mountain Side', a surprise instrument faintly heard at 4:28 of 'How Many More Times'.

After dozens of complete listens I felt ready to ramble on to the next album, and would read a bit about what the band did between studio recordings before mentally committing to begin the next chapter.

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And so it continued, with *Led Zeppelin II*, III, IV and beyond, each album revealing an endless galaxy to explore with layer upon layer of enjoyment. I found in each album a distinct flavor to be savored and appreciated.

It was sacred to me. Sounds great, right?

A few years later I was on a consulting project in Qatar and would spend 30 minutes each day in a car with my fellow consultants driving to and from the hotel we were staying (/living) at.

It wasn't a particularly scenic drive; plenty of roundabouts, half-completed buildings and a whole lotta sand. The rental car we drove contained a CD player, and one day I had the notion that it would be fun to listen to music together on the ride home (Doha isn't exactly famous for its radio stations). My co-workers thought it was a great idea, and that night I meticulously went through my music collection and chose a selection of songs which I envisioned would make for an ideal in the evening chill out. From the Zeppelin library I chose "The Lemon Song" from *Led Zeppelin II* for its groovy bass. The next day after work we put on the CD and cruised through the Middle East in style. The songs were a huge success, and I was feeling great.

Then the next morning we shuffled into the car at our usual 7am, and from the backseat I could hear the driver mutter a groggy "hey, put on that Lemonade song again". To my horror the passenger pressed play and "*I should have quit you a long time ago!!*" came blasting through the side-speakers, while they began discussing the day's agenda. Listening to this care-free tune while my mind was filling with to-dos for the day was auditory sacrilege in the house of the holy. I was miserable, and actually debated plugging my ears so that I couldn't hear the music. Imagining my co-workers would think me insane if they saw me, I just closed my eyes wishing for it to end. The driver and passenger seemed unaffected by the music, just chatting away.

That afternoon I pleaded to them to not listen to the CD in the mornings. My co-workers were baffled, wasn't I the one who offered the music? It was nobody's fault but mine. I wasn't exactly sure why I had such a strong reaction either, I just knew that the morning was painful. I requested morning silence (and this was before I knew about [Plum Village!](#)) but they found that odd and a bit uncomfortable. We settled on mornings to be mostly talk-radio / classical music with the CD reserved for after work, which seemed to meet everyone's needs.

In the days that followed I tried to explain to them about what Zeppelin meant to me, offering more context on my relationship to music. A co-worker then opened up and began sharing about some of his favorite music, and the accompanying stories of what the tunes meant to him. As we continued to share more we discovered many overlaps in the music we liked, and began selecting songs to share with the other.

Our remaining months together in Qatar turned into a delightfully continuous exchange: lounging in the W Doha after a long day, gazing out over the Persian Gulf and rocking out an ocean away from home. Years later I credit this friend for opening new musical doors for me, and can see that what was initially an alarming event ended up offering an opportunity to connect meaningfully with another human being, and to learn more about myself.

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Recently it occurred to me that perhaps the esoteric joy I received from carefully manipulating each detail of my Zeppelin experience in college was somehow intimately related to the pain I encountered in the back seat of the car years later. Even though the song remained the same, my experience of listening was over the hills and far away.

In college I developed a pretty strong view on the “right time” to listen to Zeppelin, which of course, comes with an equally strong view that there is such a thing as a “wrong time”. My view on “right time” was incredibly specific, and this narrow definition limited the circumstances unto which listening to Zeppelin manifested happiness for me. I witness this tendency playing out in various arenas of my life, whereby I can drastically limit my own happiness due to an inflexible view on the “right way” or “right time” to engage in an activity.

This view becomes compromised when I am the [back seat](#), so to say, at whim to the innumerable external forces at work in my life, which so often seem to have little regard for me and *my plans*. Sure there are times when I can make a request, but when I bind my happiness to the expectation that all my requests will be fulfilled, or even that upon fulfillment of those requests I will most definitely be happy...well that clinging has created problems for me.

But if I can stay steady by observing my rigidity and opening to the possibility of more than one satisfying outcome...then some space naturally arises. Once there is space it becomes clearer for me to see the way forward in any given moment, and oftentimes the answer that comes back is somewhat paradoxical: *nothing*. I see that often nothing needs to be *done* in a conventional sense; everything is actually unfolding just fine. The only question is, am I awake enough to realize the precious opportunity that this moment is offering, or am I trapped in a story of how something has gone wrong?

Zeppelin put it thus in Ten Years Gone:

*Then as it was, then again it will be
An' though the course may change sometimes
Rivers always reach the sea*