

Robert Plant – Now And Zen (1988)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Heaven Knows* [play](#) 02. *Dance On My Own* 03. *Tall Cool One* 04. *The Way I Feel*
05. *Helen Of Troy* 06. *Billy's Revenge* [play](#) 07. *Ship Of Fools*
08. *Why* 09. *White Clean And Neat*

Personnel * Robert Plant - Vocals, Producer * Phil Johnstone - Keyboards, Producer * Tim Palmer - Producer * Jimmy Page - Guitar (on tracks 1 & 3) * Doug Boyle - Guitar * Phil Scragg - Bass * Chris Blackwell - Drums, Percussion * David Barratt - Programming, Keyboards * Marie Pierre - Vocals (Background) * Toni Halliday - Vocals (Background) * Kirsty MacColl - Vocals (Background) * Rob Bozas - Engineer * Martin Russell - Engineer * Richard Evans Design & Art Direction

Recorded after a three-year hiatus – and the winding-up of Plant's creative partnership with Midlands guitarist Robbie Blunt – *Now & Zen* signalled a new stage in the former Zeppelin marauder's musical journey. It also revved up what Plant called his "technobilly" side, and stands to this day as his most slickly (some might say over-) produced 80s album.

Influenced by everyone from Prince to Depeche Mode, Plant had already upped the synth-and-sequencer quota on 1985's *Shaken 'n' Stirred*, but the album stiffed and the singer sought fresh young blood to help him change course. After demoing material with Buggles' Bruce Woolley and writing with Eurythmics co-producer Robert Crash, Percy saddled up with session musos Phil Johnstone (keyboards) and Chris Blackwell (drums, no relation to the Island founder) and quickly formed a new unit around them.

While Jimmy Page trod water in hoary blues-rock outfit *The Firm*, Plant now took the more keyboard-swathed side of late Led Zeppelin to a late-80s extreme. Opener *Heaven Knows* – a track that didn't even bear the songwriting imprint of Plant himself – was Hounds of Love Kate Bush with testosterone, thanks in part to the guesting presence of Kirsty MacColl on backing

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vocals. Dance on My Own and Walking Towards Paradise were sequenced 80s dance-rock at its most overcooked and arid; The Way I Feel, all gloopy fretless bass and sub-Edge guitar atmospherics. White, Clean and Neat was a finger-popping essay about growing up on pristine 1950s pop culture, complete with name-checks for Debbie Reynolds and Johnnie Ray.

If Ship of Fools veered closer to the mood of Big Log – Doug Boyle's coiled guitar recalling Robbie Blunt's playing on that track – it was another guitarist who stole the limelight on Now & Zen. None other than Jimmy Page dropped by to fire off rockabilly licks on the pumping Tall Cool One, his contributions augmented by a barrage of sampled Zeppelin riffs (Whole Lotta Love, When the Levee Breaks, Black Dog, Custard Pie and The Ocean, the latter sampled by the Beastie Boys only a year earlier).

While Plant himself thought Now & Zen was "contemporary, young, virile music", diehard Zepheads like Cream's Chuck Eddy were less convinced. Though Eddy reluctantly came round to the album – characterising it as "sort of the animal you'd get if you crossed In Through The Out Door with [the Cars'] Panorama" – even he ultimately found it "emotionally restrained – too cold, too clever, too calculated... too 80s, I guess." That is a verdict many would stand by to this day. ---Barney Hoskyns, BBC Review

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