

That Which Survives: Jim Page's The Time is Now

by Omar Willey
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I'm not an optimist. In Vaclav Havel's sense of the word, I am "hopeful." Believing that things will work out optimally is difficult to accept. I tend to say "Yes" to life, and affirm that it all makes sense as it is, and that things are open to change. I even go further and affirm that things will all work out acceptably, but optimally? I leave that to others.

Jim Page is an optimist.

It's in his music but also in his life. Indeed it would have to be for him to have survived so long and so well. From the small folk clubs to the stage of the world, he has been on a long, strange trip for sure, but it has always led him back to Seattle.

The Seattle of 2021 is different from the Seattle that first welcomed Jim Page in 1971. The boom of today was preceded by the bust of 1970, and the Boeing implosion that saw the state's largest employer lay off 40,000 workers.

Yet Mr. Page is a living link between these two times, *The Time That Was* and *The Time That is Now*. His new record (his twenty-fourth) is called *The Time is Now*, but part of the message in his music and his life is always that there is continuity. Underneath the surface of politesse and superficial wealth that is just as sure to burst as Boeing or the timber industry or a reputation for being the great maker of roofing shingles, there are still Seattleites. They want to live. They want to listen. They want to laugh. And sometimes they want to be heard.

"This is a great town," he tells me as we sit and talk. "It's got everything, right there in front of you. You just have to see it."

I think about this later as I listen to *The Time is Now*. The first thing that strikes me about it is how very different it sounds from a lot of his past work, certainly on record. Much of Jim Page's recording features him and musicians who show up for songs, where they are clearly accompaniment to the meal. This is different. This is an actual group.

"After all this time I wanted to play with an ensemble of players that I liked, and that we could relaxedly play the music, which means they know what I do and how I do it. I like what they do before we even get together."



Jim Page,

streaming live during the pandemic. Photo: Katy Keenan.

It's obvious as one listens. Mr. Page is known as being a folkie (whatever that happens to mean in one's present company) but that epithet conceals more than it reveals. He started out as a guitarist taking jazz guitar lessons, and it was the blues of Lightning Hopkins and Blind Willie McTell and others that truly lit his fire.

That fire is still burning, however subtly. Even a casual listen to the arrangements of songs like "Sleepin' on a Car Seat" with its lovely interplay of loping guitar lines and tenor sax punctuation would prove the point. More explicit than that are the lyrics of the opening track, "Ain't That Somethin'":

you ever hear about Blind Lemon Jefferson?

he had quite a style

people down in Texas in those days

they came for miles

to listen to the big man play

and they'd say

ain't that somethin'

you ever hear Billie Holiday

when she was singin' her song?

and everything was just right

right where it belonged

gardenias in her midnight hair

she could take you anywhere

ain't that somethin'

Mr. Page continues to add to his reputation of sociopolitical commentary with his hymn to the building my friends and I refer to as "Jeff's Balls," in his rather forthright song, "Amazon."

As he told me, "It was specifically written with two things in mind, three really. The fact that Amazon is a people, it's a river, it's a jungle, it's not just your plaything. The second thing is that people in America tend to worship money when it comes around, you know, fall on their knees and they genuflect. The third thing is that it, the song, had holes in it, where oddly enough I heard a saxophone. And then Jessica showed up."

Too, *The Time is Now* revisits the past with a new version of Mr. Page's song from Y2K, "Amadou Diallo."

"Amadou Diallo was written in about 2000 but it had a different melody. It was angrier and in your face. The thing I was playing on the guitar was power chords that in my head I heard as the Rolling Stones' drummer or something. And I wanted to do it again because of the George Floyd thing, you know, but I didn't want it to be like that. I wanted it to have love in it, and recognize the beauty of the place and the people that Amadou Diallo came from. I didn't want it to be angry from my point of view because the song wasn't about me! It was about him, his family, his mother. She came across the ocean to see justice get done and it wasn't done. And she was quoted as saying, 'I felt like I got a slap in the face.'"

I've listened to *The Time is Now* eight times now. Despite Mr. Page's penchant for talking about how messy his playing is, I find it quite the opposite here. I would even use the word "elegant." The ensemble setting provides every one of his group members a warm setting. No one is in anyone else's way. Everything sounds purposeful. From the wonderful storytelling of "Only Heat I Have" and the heroic celebration of [Flying Karamazov Brother turned Metro driver Sam Williams](#) "Everybody Rides the Bus," to the restrained protest of "Down to Zero" and the bouncy tale of one of my favorite cranky Seattleites, "Angeline (Kikisoblu)," the record reveals more layers of wit and sensitivity with each listening.

The ensemble here are phenomenal and renowned musicians on their own: Jessica Lurie on saxophone and tangents, Dune Butler on bass, Joel Litwin on drums and paraphernalia, and Orville Johnson on all the metal strings combine lushly with the extraordinary vocals of J.R. Rhodes.

"Jessica, who was the spark for this idea," mused Mr. Page. "I'd met her a couple of times before. She played on a track of mine that I don't even think was released. That was ages ago. She contacted me a couple of times to sit in with Living Daylights. A couple years ago at Moisture Fest she was there while I was there, and it came together."

I'm overjoyed that it did. It was far from a sure thing. Originally the ensemble had started to come together in 2018, but when 2020 arrived everything in the world went on hiatus including music. After a certain amount of time and travail, and the exhaustion of remote recording where Dune Butler, Joel Litwin, and Mr. Page laid down basic tracks with Jessica Lurie, J.R. Rhodes, and Orville Johnson "phoning in" their parts, *The Time is Now* finally became a record under the skilled fingers of engineer Floyd Reitsma and Ed Brooks.

With that kind of support, musicians feel free to say what they really want to say. Listening to the record, I'm certain Mr. Page really wants to say, "Hey, it's not over. Beauty survives. Memory survives. Value survives. People, in all their raucous diversity, survive."

"You can be Lou Reed and relentlessly push that into people's faces," says Mr. Page, "I mean, he did that. And I honor him for doing that. Or you can understand that a suggestion is sometimes more powerful than bluntness. What I've come to over the last ten years or so is a theory that the Big Thing you want to talk about is like the Loch Ness monster, hiding under the surface. You as a songwriter are going to skim stones across the surface of the water, and where they land — those are your verses. You don't describe the whole fucking thing — you *can't* do that, it would take up a whole encyclopedia. But if you do the skimming right, you can suggest it."

In post-Trump, long-tail-pandemic America, survival means far more than people think. After seeing that survival is not guaranteed, and that indeed nothing is when the world presses down, it does a soul well to relearn the lessons.

Call it hopefulness. Call it optimism. Jim Page is a fine keeper of the knowledge.
