

DON FITZPATRICK
REVEALS WHAT REALLY WENT DOWN AT GONZAGA.
ANOTHER LED ZEPPELIN MYSTERY SOLVED!

The late Don Fitzpatrick was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His family relocated to the West Coast and settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. He graduated from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. As a student there, he promoted concerts and booked acts such as The Moody Blues, The Eagles, Santana and Led Zeppelin. After graduation, his career took many turns. His final stop was the challenging field of news management and television research. He was a talent scout for the broadcast media. He founded the prestigious San Francisco media and communications company, Don Fitzpatrick and Associates as well as the online company still known as tvspy.com.

I conducted this interview in January 1998. Don graciously agreed to answer my questions about Led Zeppelin's First U.S. and Canadian Tour of 1968–69 appearance at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington when he was a student concert promoter there.

This interview hugely advances our knowledge of this very early Led Zeppelin date on U.S. soil. Their Gonzaga University performance on December 30, 1968 is the first of Led Zeppelin's live concerts known to have been recorded. Thanks to Don, we are able to learn of the fascinating details of his promotion of this most notable event in popular music history.

Don wrote me the following note:

Dear Frank:

Here are the answers to the questions you sent me regarding the Led Zeppelin concert which I helped to promote in December 1968, further to our enjoyable telephone conversation of a few weeks ago. I don't think I understood until reading the books which you sent me how "early" that concert was in their career. I just assumed they had played elsewhere at larger college venues before they came to Gonzaga.

If you need anything further, please contact me. In the meantime, if I think of anything else or come across anything that may be of help to you, I'll send it along. I'm very much looking forward to reading your book. Keep at it and I wish you the best of luck for all your hard work.

Don Fitzpatrick



Break & Enter

Sadly, Don passed away on April 18, 2006.

REDDON:

Thanks very much for agreeing to answer my questions, Don. I'd like to start with some background information about you as a student at Gonzaga. Were you an active participant and devotee of the popular music scene in 1968? Who were some of your favourite musicians at the time?

FITZPATRICK:

I was a disc jockey, first at KGU-AM (the Gonzaga campus *Top 40* radio station) and later at KJRB-AM in Spokane (a *Top 40* commercial radio station). I had wanted to be a DJ since I was 5 years old. I went to Gonzaga, in part, because they had a campus radio station and they told me they would put me on the air immediately.

My interest in music was as a fan. Promoting concerts also gave me the opportunity to feel the intensity of performing live and on-stage, even though I was not a musician. My favourite bands at the time were, of course, The Beatles, The Moody Blues, Buffalo Springfield, The Doors, Eric Burdon and The Animals, Yardbirds, Cream, Blind Faith...

REDDON:

Were you aware of Jimmy Page and his considerable contributions to The Yardbirds before they disbanded in 1968? Did you ever attend a Yardbirds performance?

FITZPATRICK:

No, I never attended a Yardbirds concert. However, I was very much aware of Jimmy Page's contribution, not only from being a fan but in research I did while a DJ.

REDDON:

How did you manage to book and promote Led Zeppelin at Gonzaga University?

FITZPATRICK:

I was second Vice President of the student body, the Associated Students of Gonzaga University (ASGU). I was aware there was a loophole of sorts in regard to the Kennedy Pavilion at GU. The student government could rent the facility for \$500 versus renting the Spokane Coliseum for \$15,000 a night.

I contacted the folks at Concerts West in Seattle (also Northwest Releasing in Seattle) and suggested that if they brought their larger acts to Spokane, I would act



as their representative in Eastern Washington and provide the Kennedy Pavilion as their stage. In return, they would give Gonzaga students a discount on the price of tickets.

I would also handle the mechanics of producing the concert for them: I distributed tickets to the various locations, hung posters publicizing the concert, hired ticket takers and other concert-night personnel and hired off-duty Spokane police officers for security.

In the early days, I saved Concerts West thousands of dollars in security costs because the Spokane Coliseum required one police officer per door. And there were many doors! They also required police officers around the stage, in the dressing room area and outside the Coliseum. I provided many students free of charge who handled most of those duties. The university only required three police officers, instead of the 25 or 30 the Coliseum did.

Getting Led Zeppelin was pure luck! Concerts West had dates with Vanilla Fudge in late December and early January. The unknown Led Zeppelin was added at the last moment as the warm-up band for Vanilla Fudge. When I was told they were coming, I asked, "Who are they?" The Concerts West promoter said some members used to be in The Yardbirds before they broke up earlier in the year. That planted the seed in my head to introduce them as "Formerly, The Yardbirds."

REDDON:

How did you decide on the date of the Led Zeppelin performance—Monday, December 30, 1968? Was this one of the "free nights," when Zeppelin wasn't performing somewhere else in the Washington State vicinity?

FITZPATRICK:

Concerts West always booked their larger acts on Friday and Saturday nights in Seattle and Portland, where the larger facilities and larger crowds were located. The Kennedy Pavilion was available on December 30th. Since the next night was New Year's Eve, Concerts West or another promoter had them booked elsewhere. Again, the night was a combination of luck and facility availability.

REDDON:

Although Led Zeppelin was a virtually unknown group in December of 1968 in the United States, Page's esteemed reputation gained from his Yardbirds days made him a celebrity of sorts. He was already known in the U.S. Was there any reaction from the student body you can recall, when people found out you were in the process of bringing Led Zeppelin to Gonzaga?



Break & Enter

FITZPATRICK:

The students were impressed that Jimmy Page was coming to campus but, quite honestly, they were more interested in hearing Vanilla Fudge. The Fudge had had a big hit earlier in the year and they were a top-of-mind rock'n'roll group. Page was frosting on the cake since they hadn't heard of Led Zeppelin—nor did that group have an album that anyone had heard of.

REDDON:

You've already outlined some of your responsibilities as "student promoter." Did you have any additional ones, in conjunction with the Concerts West promoter?

FITZPATRICK:

No one from Concerts West was interested in flying over to Spokane to set things up. They would send someone the day of the performance to make sure everything was satisfactory. I actually took great pride in the fact I was left to my own devices to organize and co-ordinate these concert events. I took it upon myself as a challenge and I took it very seriously, despite the inherent headaches I knew would surely occur during the promotional process. I *had* to take things seriously though. There was security to think about for the student body and members of the general public.

When I think back on it now, it was lots of responsibility for a kid like me back then! But I really feel it helped me tremendously. It gave me a unique form of education out of class at Gonzaga that I could not have obtained by any other means. And, I really enjoyed doing it so I never regretted taking on the promotional stuff. It helped me later on in the various undertakings of my career in broadcasting as well. There's no question about that.

The main reason Concerts West liked my promotional proposals was because I was so keen! I offered them a *free* enthusiastic employee! They sent me the tickets and posters/handbills. I drove the tickets to about six different locations and picked up the unsold tickets, which we would sell at the door that night. I also used volunteer students with cars to distribute posters and handbills around Eastern Washington. And no, Frank, I didn't save any posters from that night. I still kick myself for that one!

REDDON:

I'll bet! But how were you to know? Who would have ever thought Led Zeppelin and everything associated with the band would become such a huge piece of music history?



While we're talking about advertisements for this Gonzaga show, an ad appeared in the local paper *The Spokesman Review* on Monday, December 30, 1968, that read, "Concerts West Presents In Concert, The Vanilla Fudge with Len Zefflin." It's amusing today to see such a spelling error, since Led Zeppelin was almost completely unknown at that time! Obviously, that isn't your spelling error! It's also interesting to note the ad states that the concert will take place at The Kennedy Pavilion. Is this, in fact, the proper name for what is most commonly referred to in the Led Zeppelin literature as the "Gonzaga Gymnasium"?

FITZPATRICK:

I didn't handle the advertising for this concert. All the newspapers ads and radio ads came out of the Concerts West ad agency in Seattle. At later concerts, I handled just about everything—but this was only the third concert I had ever promoted (the others being John Mayall in September and Kenny Rogers and the First Edition in late October).

REDDON:

Until you granted me this interview, information about the First U.S. and Canadian Tour of 1968–69 performance of Led Zeppelin at Gonzaga University has always been exceedingly scarce. I've always been curious to know how many

Concert ad for the main act, Vanilla Fudge. Led Zeppelin was the warm-up band, mistakenly advertised as "Len Zefflin." The group's fifth known appearance in the United States would become known as the "Gonzaga Gig." The performance yielded the prized first-ever live concert bootleg of Led Zeppelin. For a taste of what else was on the scene at that time, look at the cinematic offerings to the left of the Vanilla Fudge ad. The Beatles' animated feature *Yellow Submarine* and Roman Polanski's chilling now-classic *Rosemary's Baby* were first-run films on America's big screens.

Source: *The Spokesman Review*, Spokane, Washington, December 30, 1968. Courtesy of Encyclopaedia Archives

SONIC BOOM: The Impact of Led Zeppelin — Volume 1



Break & Enter

tickets were printed and sold for this Gonzaga concert. Do you recall, even though it's so long ago?

FITZPATRICK:

About 3,800 tickets were printed. We had about 1,200 in attendance. Keep in mind that Gonzaga and other local college students were off campus and at their homes celebrating Christmas with their families. The crowd in the Pavilion that night was mainly Spokane locals. Also, the winter of 1968 was brutally cold. Spokane is known for having mild winters and summers but December 30th was one of the coldest days in Spokane's recorded history. The people from Concerts West kept saying they figured ticket sales at the door were so slow because people just didn't want to go out in the cold weather and snow.

The misspelling of "Len Zefflin" in the *Spokesman Review* is nothing new. Mistakes were commonplace at that newspaper on both the editorial and advertising side.

The name of the facility was "The John F. Kennedy Pavilion." The Pavilion housed an indoor swimming pool, workout facilities, offices and a gymnasium where they played basketball. The concert was held on the gymnasium floor with the bleachers pulled down. Seating was "festival" in nature. This was the first time we had tried anything like this. In the case of the Mayall and Kenny Rogers concerts, we had laid a tarp over the basketball hardwood floor and placed rented chairs facing toward the stage. For Led Zeppelin, we removed the chairs so people could crowd in closer to the stage.

REDDON:

On the night of Led Zeppelin's performance, how did you spend the two or three hours prior to the show? Did you have the opportunity to meet Led Zeppelin and get to know the group a little bit? If so, what were your impressions of these flamboyant musicians from across the sea?

FITZPATRICK:

The day of the show was quite busy for me. I picked up the unsold tickets around 2:30 PM. That took until 4:30 PM. Then I returned to the Pavilion where the Concerts West people and the group's roadies were there to set up. The roadies did mike tests and played with the PA systems but, as I recall, neither of the bands took to the stage to rehearse.

Led Zeppelin's dressing room was really the men's locker room for the gymnasium. It looked like one! A large tub was brought in and it was filled with Coors beer. Vanilla Fudge had requested Coors, which was not available in the State of



Washington. We had to drive 25 miles to the Idaho border to get Coors for them! There were also soft drinks, water, Jack Daniels and other liquor that was provided. I wasn't old enough at the time to purchase the liquor so the promoter from Concerts West, who was now on the scene, bought the booze.

The Led Zeppelin showed up in a station wagon, between 7:15–7:30 PM. They were quite messed up! When I promoted the Mayall concert, John and his band had smoked quite a bit of marijuana beforehand and in the locker room. I kept the police officers away from the area and had students stand as security. Remember, this was Spokane, Washington in 1968. The riots at the Democratic Convention between the Yippies/Hippies and the police had just occurred.

Robert Plant and Jimmy Page almost fell out of the station wagon. They had joints in their hands and Robert Plant's eyes were almost swollen shut, they were so bloodshot. The Spokane off-duty police sergeant who was assigned to the back door literally turned his back and walked away so he could say that he didn't see anything.

The band proceeded to the locker room where they continued to smoke pot. I found one of my student "security" people sitting down there and smoking with the band! I had to tell him to get his butt back in the hallway, if only to keep the cops away from the door to the locker room!

For the first time, I became concerned. These guys were so messed up they could barely sit or stand. They were almost unintelligible because their heavy British accents were slurred by the alcohol, pot and whatever else they'd had before arriving at the university.

REDDON:

As Led Zeppelin prepared its equipment for the show, did you perceive the band's set-up as quite modest in relation to the other acts you had promoted before? Did the group have their simple "Led Zeppelin" backdrop at Gonzaga or were you just too preoccupied with the business at hand to notice?

FITZPATRICK:

Their equipment seemed fairly normal for a rock band of that era. I don't recall a "Led Zeppelin" backdrop but my mind was occupied on other matters surrounding the concert.

REDDON:

Led Zeppelin was the opening act on the bill at Gonzaga University that evening. Vanilla Fudge was the featured band. Will you reiterate for me the amusing circumstances by which you assisted Zeppelin's vocalist, Robert Plant, to the microphone on stage?



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FITZPATRICK:

When it was show-time, Robert Plant was not operating very well under his own steam. He bounced off a couple of lockers and almost fell down in the locker room. The Concerts West promoter asked me to help him on stage. I held onto his arm and led him from the locker room to the foot of the stage. We paused there. I told him he had to go up three stairs. It was a real struggle. I literally pulled him up those stairs. Once on stage, I moved him to the middle and placed him in front of the microphone. There, I took his hands and placed them around the mike.

REDDON:

When we spoke on the phone a few weeks ago, you mentioned that introducing Led Zeppelin at Gonzaga University was a memorable experience. The group had yet to release their self-titled debut album, *Led Zeppelin*. And in December 1968, the group's name was gradually been moulted from its former moniker of "The New Yardbirds." Please tell me again how you introduced the band and what Jimmy Page's reaction was to it?

FITZPATRICK:

By now, Jimmy Page and the rest of the band were on stage. Page and John Paul Jones were plugging their guitars into their amps. John Bonham had just sat down behind the drums and began banging away. I walked over to Page's microphone which was stage right.

I had been wondering for some time exactly how I was going to introduce the band, since they didn't have an album out yet and no one had ever heard of Led Zeppelin. I even pondered it at length the night before the concert so I would get it right. Taking my cue from the Concerts West promoter who had first introduced me to the band, I said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the group formerly known as 'The Yardbirds.' This is Britain's Led Zeppelin!"

At that point, I started to run off the stage. But Jimmy Page was standing between me and the stairs down. As I passed him, he unexpectedly threw a punch at my face. He was so messed up and his depth perception was so off, all he punched was air in front of my face. He yelled at me, "We're not the f***ing Yardbirds. We're LED ZEPPELIN!!"

With that, I got off the stage. No one heard the exchange between Page and me. The Concerts West promoter asked me what "that" was all about and I told him. I was really rattled. I was so nervous that the band wouldn't make it to the stage and now I had the lead guitarist take a swing at me in front of 1,200 people.



REDDON:

After dodging a swipe by Page, did you still hang around to watch them play? What were your initial impressions of the group's music as they started to perform?

FITZPATRICK:

I watched the band from the back, behind the pulled down bleachers. I became very impressed. First, all of the staggering and slurring caused by the booze, pot and whatever magically disappeared when the guys were on stage. It became immediately evident to me that this was *not* The Yardbirds. The style was of a band I had never heard before. A new band which has never been imitated then or since. Led Zeppelin was born!

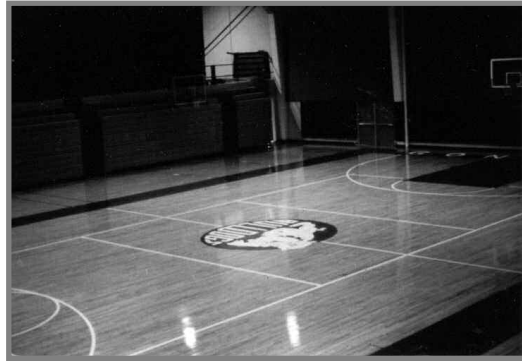


Photo courtesy of Encyclopaedia Publishing, Inc., used with permission.

The John F. Kennedy Pavilion's gymnasium at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, USA as it looks today. Led Zeppelin definitely played its early, mysterious "Gonzaga Gig" here on December 30, 1968, opening for Vanilla Fudge.

REDDON:

You mentioned having recently listened to a live recording of that Gonzaga concert you helped to arrange. You said you were unaware anything like that ever existed. Despite the marginal quality of this recording, does hearing it bring it back for you? Or was it just too long ago?

FITZPATRICK:

Yes, the recording did bring a little of that concert back to me. Keep in mind that when I was producing a concert, I never had the opportunity to sit down and listen to it. I was always busy running around and checking on the lighting, the in-house ticket sales, problems with security, etc. I always made it a habit never to invite a date to the concert because she would want me to sit down with her and then take her to the band party which always followed.

Looking back, I remember there were folks who brought reel-to-reel tape recorders into the Pavilion and asked if they could plug into the gymnasium's electrical outlets. Back in those days, they didn't have the rules they have today about recording the concert or taking photographs. I never thought anyone would ever try to sell—or that anyone would actually *buy*—those tinny, god-awful recordings!



Break & Enter**REDDON:**

The audience reaction also comes across as very reserved on this recording. Is this assessment of the aural evidence accurate, given your “eye/ear witness account” of this concert? Or do you recall a more riotous response that this recording just does not capture properly?

FITZPATRICK:

Remember: no one had ever *heard* of this band before that night! They were there to hear recording artist Vanilla Fudge and this band was the new group hired as a warm-up. No one there, me included, had any idea that we were watching music history being made.

REDDON:

What was your overall evaluation of this formative Led Zeppelin set you saw? Did you foresee the band as being something special or merely another one of the very good contemporary blues bands working the same general, musical territory?

FITZPATRICK:

I knew the band had something. Plant’s unique voice and delivery and Page’s guitar were amazing to behold. I’m not sure I was aware that evening that a superb band had played at Gonzaga. For years afterward, though, I told people how I had helped promote one of the first Led Zeppelin concerts and that Jimmy Page had taken a swipe at me on stage! But I could honestly tell you that, on December 30, 1968 I had no idea of what the band would become.

REDDON: Do you recall if Led Zeppelin played any encores?

FITZPATRICK: I don’t believe they did.

REDDON:

After Led Zeppelin completed its set, do you recollect if Page and the rest of the band hung around to watch Vanilla Fudge perform?

FITZPATRICK:

They didn’t hang around to watch Vanilla Fudge. Quite honestly, I stayed away from the back of the stage when they walked off. I didn’t know if Jimmy Page was going to try and hit me again! As I recall, they just picked up their jackets and got back into the station wagon. Either they went to a Spokane hotel or flew out that



night. There was no post-gig celebration and there usually was. Once they got off stage, they were out of the building and out of Spokane.

REDDON:

When we spoke on the phone a few weeks ago, you said you had recently seen a terrific television documentary on Led Zeppelin. The program was discussing the topic of how announcers would mis-introduce Led Zeppelin in the band's earliest days. What was your reaction when you saw this portion of the documentary, since Page was so unhappy with the way you introduced Led Zeppelin at Gonzaga, thirty years ago?

FITZPATRICK:

It was a Saturday morning. I had *VH1* on in my bedroom. The TV is near my bed but I can also see it from my bathroom by looking at it in my mirror.

Plant and Page were sitting on a couch that might have been in a dressing room or someone's office. They looked much older and *much* more sober than during my first and only meeting with them! They were quite talkative and seemed to be in a friendly mood toward each other and the off-camera interviewer. This rockumentary was filmed before Page and Plant began touring again, so I was interested in seeing what they had to say about each other, the band, their music, the break-up, etc.

I was in the middle of shaving. Shaving cream all over my face watching them with one eye, while making sure I wasn't cutting my throat with the other! The interviewer asked them what it was like in those early days touring without an album to buoy their career.

Page started to laugh and then told the interviewer, "They didn't know what to call us back in those days so, invariably, they would introduce us as 'formerly The Yardbirds.'" The two of them turned to look at each other and laugh. I almost cut my throat!!!

I jumped out of the bathroom and stood alone in my bedroom screaming at the TV. "You sonuvabitch! I was the one who introduced you as 'formerly, The Yardbirds' and you just about took my head off in front of a few thousand people. You SONUVABITCH!!!" I kept saying over and over again.

REDDON:

When you promoted Led Zeppelin on the group's First U.S. and Canadian Tour of 1968-69 at Gonzaga University, you mentioned the group's debut album had not been released as of December 30, 1968. When you heard the debut *Led Zeppelin* album, what were your impressions especially after having seen the group perform live?



Break & Enter

FITZPATRICK:

I loved it! They did most of the songs on *Led Zeppelin* when they were playing live at Gonzaga and a few more that they didn't. What kind of surprised me was that they opened at Gonzaga with *Train Kept A-Rollin'* from The Yardbirds days. I was surprised they didn't put that track on *Led Zeppelin* because it would have capitalized even further on Page's former affiliation with The Yardbirds, which was very, very strong in those days and a big selling point for moving records in the stores.

But then, I had learned firsthand that Page wanted to sever his former ties with The Yardbirds, didn't I?! Given that they were opening their performances with *Train Kept A-Rollin'* which was The Yardbirds' though, I still think that song would have been a worthy inclusion on *Led Zeppelin*.

Other cover songs on *Led Zeppelin* like *You Shook Me* and *I Can't Quit You Baby* really showed Zeppelin as pros at playing the blues. When I heard *Dazed and Confused* it immediately conjured up images of Page using the violin bow on his guitar at Gonzaga. That's one visual that's stuck with me all these years and it's a testament to precisely how indelibly Page's use of the violin bow imprinted on my mind...and the minds of thousands of others, no doubt.

Because I had heard them live before I ever heard their first album, the fact that their live playing of the songs was so different from the recorded tracks on *Led Zeppelin* really jumped out at me. This observation showed me they were very good at improvising in concert.

But what surprises me most about *Led Zeppelin*?

The fact that those guys were even able to record it, with the shape they were probably in most of the time in those days! Seriously. I told you how messed up they were when they played at Gonzaga and how concerned I was the show wouldn't go on at all. I truly believed they were all too zonked-out to do anything before they started playing. But, as I mentioned, when they started to perform, they seemed to instantly change and play their music like the professional musicians they were.

I could be 'way off base with this one, but I'm guessing they probably were "feeling no pain" when they were recording *Led Zeppelin* in the studio. But old habits die hard, don't they? Maybe they only put themselves in those stupors when they were touring and were straight as arrows when they recorded the album. *Led Zeppelin* sounds like they meant business, so I'm probably all wet on that one. Looking back on it, that first album sounds as fresh as ever. I think it's one of the best rock albums of all time. Not bad for a bunch of "party animals," I must admit!

I think that answers most of your questions about that night. If you want me to elaborate or if you think of any more questions, please don't hesitate to give me a call. I wish you every success with your research and future publishing endeavours.

