

“ Robert Plant contacted us and said he wanted to do a free gig ”

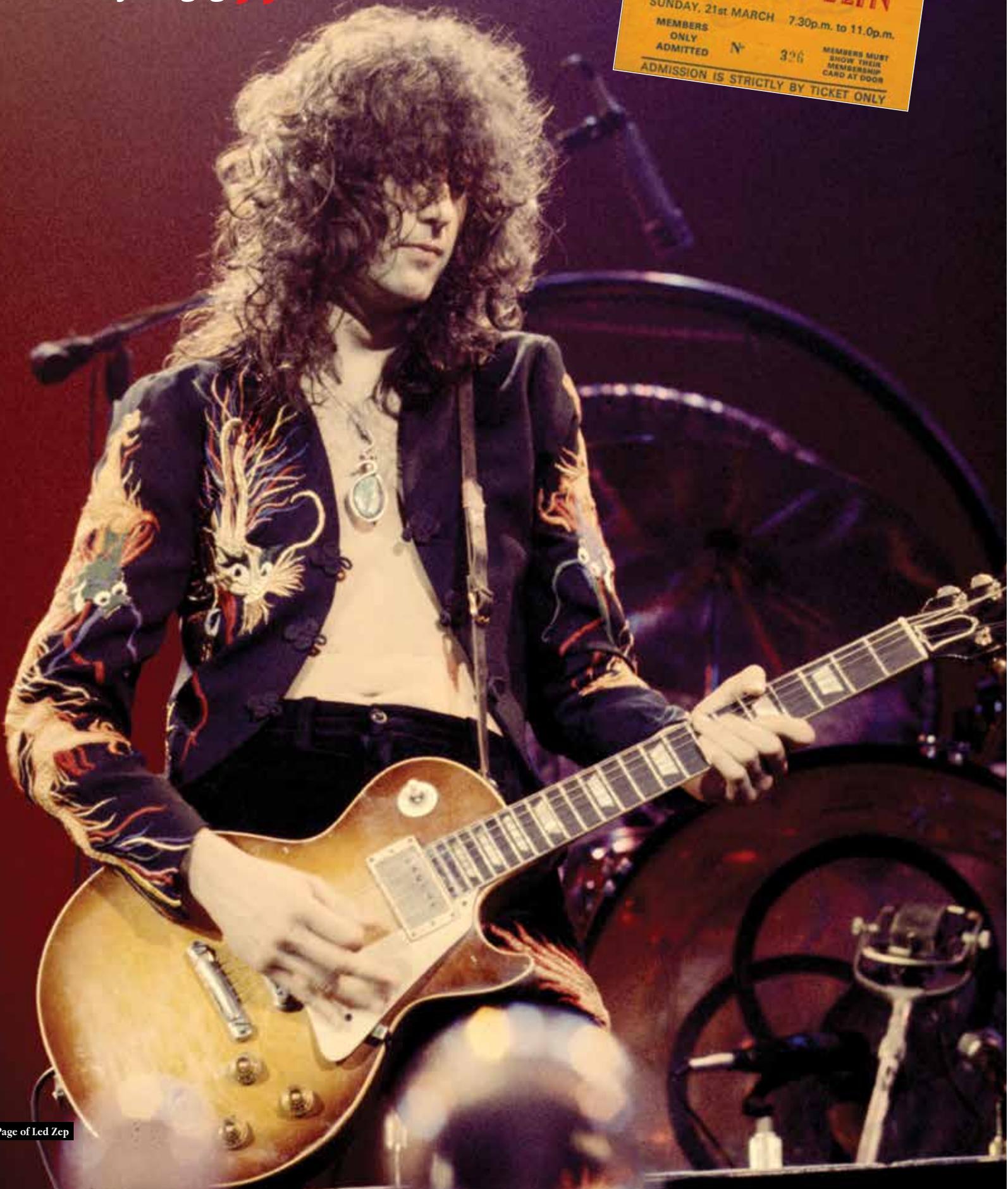
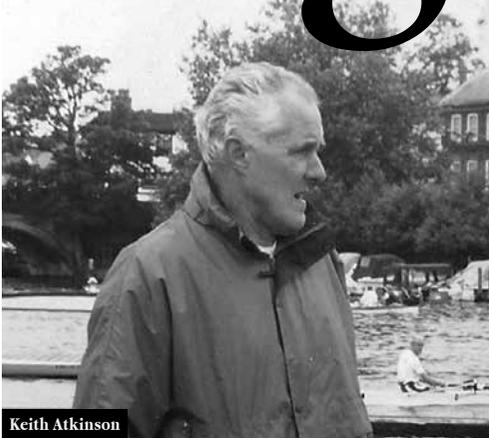


PHOTO: CHRIS WALTER

Jimmy Page of Led Zep

# Legends *of Nottingham*



Keith Atkinson

If you love music, then welcome to Nottingham BC! In the '60s and '70s the rowing club hosted some of the world's biggest bands, including the mighty Led Zeppelin. **Martin Cross** meets **Keith Atkinson**, the man behind the music...

**T**hink of some of Britain's greatest ever bands and performers. If you're a bit stuck, here's a shortlist – with a couple of American 'greats' thrown in for good measure:

Led Zeppelin, U2, Dire Straits, Motorhead, Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, The Pretenders, Rod Stewart, Jeff Beck, Ian Drury, The Scorpions, The Sex Pistols, Ultravox, Simple Minds, The Dog is Dead, Eric Clapton, Jethro Tull, Supertramp, Medicine Head, Muddy Waters, Siouxsie & the Banshees (née 'Janet & the Icebergs'), John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Witherspoon, King Crimson, Fairport Convention, Gary Moore, Judas Priest, Sensational Alex Harvey Band, Average White Band

In some ways, if you love music, you'll probably have a smile on your face just looking at that list: those amazing songs, unforgettable lyrics and incredible personalities. When you hear that these rock and blues legends all played at Nottingham Boat Club between 1962 and 1981, you're likely to just gawp – if it's any consolation, I found it hard to believe as well... It's no surprise to hear that visitors to the Trentside Club often have a similar reaction. They stare at the memorial plaques, read the list of bands on the wall, look back at the space around them and wonder if someone is maybe having a laugh at their expense.

Once you've got over the shock, there are plenty of stories to go along with those names as well – and just room for a few here. In the early '70s, Led Zeppelin were unquestionably the biggest band on the planet. They were playing to sold-out crowds in some of the world's biggest stadiums. But on Sunday 21 March 1971 they played the Boat Club for nothing. The whole area was absolutely heaving. Fans were desperately trying to climb into the club over the balcony and volunteers from the club were trying to stop them. But even if you just sat on the slipway outside on the Trent, you'd have heard Zeppelin's set start with Immigrant Song. If you were waiting for

Stairway to Heaven, that came halfway through – and for the encore, you'd have heard Communication Breakdown.

Wind forward five years to an August night in 1976 and it was a very different sort of crowd: the Sex Pistols were playing the Boat Club. Nottingham BC had just renovated the toilets, so when a club member saw a punk rocker carving his name on the wall, he took exception and 'decked him'. The punk in question was Sid Vicious. But the blow didn't stop him getting up to play in the Pistols' Nottingham concert. According to one of the club members who was there: "The crowd divided with all the 'normal' people at the back, watching the weirdos pogo up and down at the front to the band, who never said a word to the audience."

It was a far cry from the concert nights in the early '60s, when the Boat Club started out.

"Then, the club was broke and getting some income was a necessity," explained Keith Atkinson, now the President of Nottingham Boat Club. Back then he was a young teacher who was happy to be convinced by his mate, Roy Crane, that it would be a great idea to have a resident jazz band at the club.

"Mind you, we had to tear apart this lovely old Edwardian boat club to make room for a performance area," said Atkinson. "That included ripping out the rows of beautiful wooden lockers. But we used the wood to build a stage."

On Sunday 11 November 1962, The Ray Crane Jazz Band played their first set. Initially, it was to just a few club members and students. But word soon ➤



Nottingham BC

PHOTO: LOUISE TOWNROW

# Hidden Depths

spread. By 1964, the music had evolved to blues and roots – and a link with London’s Marquee Club began to see some of the world’s top musicians arrive in Nottingham to play the Boat Club. John Lee Hooker first played there in May 1965.

“Although the idea of jazz at the South Bank Bar was mine,” said Atkinson, “many others were responsible for the programme of artists. Bill Kinnell ran a record shop on the old Arkwright Street and booked Rod Stewart. The late Keith Symons also ran a restaurant on Parliament Street and he first booked Zeppelin.”

Atkinson, now in his 70s, has a rowing CV almost as impressive as that list of bands. His exploits have long since passed into the folklore and legend of Nottingham’s illustrious rowing history. He rowed for both Durham and Nottingham BC, coached Henley winners, became a FISA umpire, helped found the education team at Concept 2. More recently, he’s become an inspiration to many in the way that he’s responded to his MS diagnosis – by rowing millions of metres on the Concept 2 ergometer. He was awarded an MBE in 1996 for services to rowing and education. But when he can find the time, he loves to relate the improbable story of how his club became part of the fabric of Britain’s music scene.

Zeppelin’s ‘free’ concert is naturally a stand-out memory. “Robert Plant contacted us and said he wanted to come and do a free gig for us,” explained Atkinson. “They’d played here on the way up and it



The Sex Pistols

PHOTO: RICHARD DAVIS

When asked what made the Nottingham Boat Club so special, Atkinson is clear: “It’s an intimate venue down by the river, where you can stand out on the balcony with a pint in your hand, listening to this great rock band behind you.” Certainly, the likes of Rod Stewart and Eric Clapton have backed Atkinson’s view: and both said they have very fond

The music scene at Nottingham Boat Club faded away in the late ‘70s, when it became too expensive to maintain the club after some of the bands and their audiences made a mess of the building’s interior. But more recently, there has been a revival.

In 2012, the up-and-coming indie band Dog Is Dead launched their excellent new album in front of a sell-out crowd. You might not be surprised that Atkinson was there. Loving the atmosphere, music and the pleasure of seeing that the magical legacy that he and others started back in the ‘60s is still very much alive.

“It was a brilliant night. The kids really enjoyed themselves,” said Atkinson: “It was just a one-off. But I sold them the idea that Led Zeppelin played for nothing and I’m hoping that when they make it big they’re going to come back to the Boat Club and do the same.” You’d bet that if Keith Atkinson has anything to do with it, they just might...

## “When a club member saw a punk rocker carving his name on the wall, he took exception and ‘decked’ him. The punk in question was Sid Vicious”

was a thank-you for looking after them.” He still has the contract they’d signed to play the club for the first time back in April 1969. “I think it was for about 90 quid. But when they came back in ‘71 they told us we could only charge five bob a ticket.” In fact, just a couple of years ago, one of those very same treasured tickets sold on eBay for £536!

memories playing down the Boat Club.

But perhaps surprisingly, Atkinson’s favourite band was Geno Washington & The Ram Jam Band, who first played at the Boat Club in October 1965. “If you’ve ever seen the movie The Commitments with those soul bands and those great brass riff backings, you’ll know what they sounded like,” he added.

Do you know anyone at your club with a special talent or extraordinary hobby? Why not get in touch at [magazine@britishrowing.org](mailto:magazine@britishrowing.org)



The Dog is Dead played Nottingham BC just last year



Posters on the clubhouse wall in 1966

PHOTO: DOM HENRY