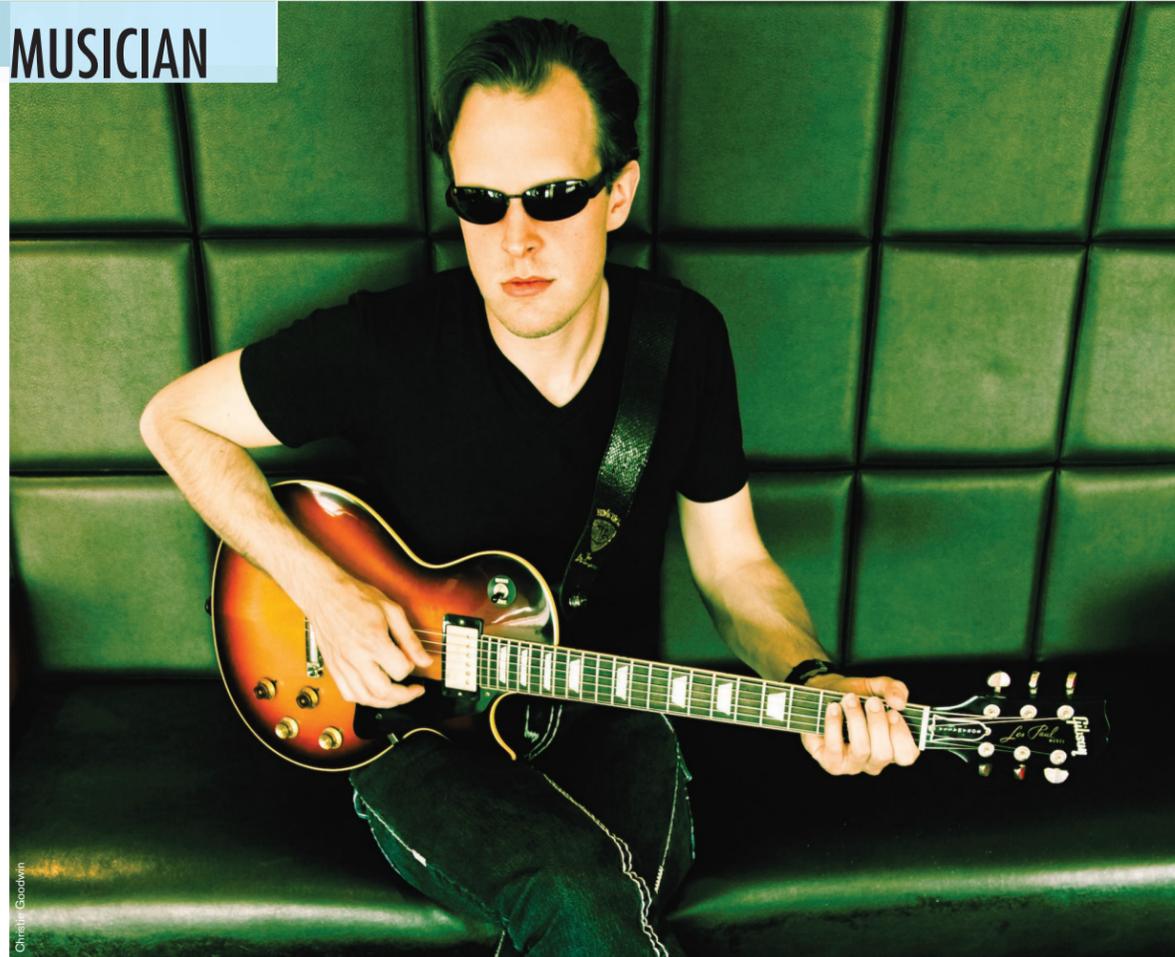


MUSICIAN



JOE BONAMASSA

Goodbye to the rib joints, hello to blues-rock guitar hero status

By Russell Hall

"PEOPLE TOLD ME I WAS DESTINED TO PLAY RIB JOINTS and biker rallies all my life," says Joe Bonamassa, reflecting on his early years as a struggling blues-rock guitarist. "But I knew there had to be a better way." But more than a decade and a half into his career, today Bonamassa has arrived at the pinnacle of the blues-rock world—and he's done it without the help of a record label. "People think my manager and I sat down and hatched a master plan," says Bonamassa, who has spent most of his career releasing albums through J&R Adventures, the label he started with manager Roy Weisman. "But it was really just a case of necessity being the mother of invention. We didn't have a label that believed in us musically, so we decided to own and control everything ourselves. That way, if we failed, we did it on our terms."

Record labels might not have believed in Bonamassa, but his guitar-slinging forbears certainly did. Befriended by blues legend B.B. King when he was just 10, Bonamassa went on tour as a

pre-teen with the likes of King, Buddy Guy, Robert Cray and John Lee Hooker. A friendship with the late Danny Gatton helped to expand his musical horizons, and at age 14 he co-founded the band Bloodline with sons of Miles Davis, Robby Krieger and the Allman Brothers Band's Berry Oakley. Bloodline recorded a self-titled album for Capitol Records in 1995 before breaking up, but now Bonamassa has a new supergroup alongside first- and second-generation rock royalty: Black Country Communion, which features Bonamassa, Glenn Hughes, Jason Bonham and Derek Sherinian.

His new solo effort, *Dust Bowl*, finds Bonamassa mixing incendiary originals with gritty covers like John Hiatt's "Tennessee Plates" and Free's "Heartbreaker." The acclaimed six-stringer also recently wrapped up work on the second Black Country Communion album, set to be released in June and followed by a tour early next year. Bonamassa spoke with us about his guitar roots, his aversion to demos and the advice he received from the King of the Blues.



'When I walk onstage, I see that as a privilege. I play with the same intensity no matter what'

When did you start playing?

I first held a guitar when I was 3 and started playing when I was 4. I was always picking it up. It never got old. I started playing classical guitar, but that involved too much discipline. The blues, on the other hand, is a blank canvas. There are no rules—you can interpret it any way you want. That really appealed to me, and it still does.

How did you learn?

I listened to albums and tried to emulate my heroes. My influences early on were Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Rory Gallagher and Paul Kossoff of Free. It was great to stumble upon all those great British blues artists who had been influenced by American artists.

What did you admire about Kossoff?

He's such an unsung hero. I recently watched a bunch of concert footage of him playing with Free just before their big hit, "All Right Now." They never got the notice that Led Zeppelin got, but they were just as innovative.

'I try to practice things that are outside my normal sphere.'

Kossoff's playing cuts like a knife through butter. You can feel his emotions in every note, whether it's a hard note or a soft one. He's a tactile player, and the tone he got with that beautiful '59 Les Paul was just crushing. I actually got to play that guitar at a show in Newcastle last year. A friend of a friend owns it, and he let me borrow it. That was a thrill. I felt like I was channeling Kossoff.

How about Danny Gatton?

He turned my world from mono to stereo. He said, "You know, kid, you know something about the blues, but you don't know anything about jazz and rockabilly." He had this Virginia way of speaking. He got me listening to people like Howard Reed, Wes Montgomery, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Bryant, James Burton and Duane Eddy. That opened up my world.

Did B.B. King give you any advice?

Watch your money and keep your eye on the business side. It's about music, but it's also about business. When I walk onstage,

I see that as a privilege. I don't think about how much people paid for tickets—though I am sensitive to that—and I don't pay attention to how much money I'm making on a given night. I play with the same intensity no matter what. But B.B. King sat me down and said, "Joe, you need to always reinvest back into what you do, back into your fan base. Fans can detect if you're not doing that, if you're not doing things to improve the show." It's no different from running a Walgreens or a Joe's Pizza Shack.

How do you practice?

I try to practice things that are outside my normal sphere. I tend to pick up an acoustic guitar or a mandolin instead of just hammering something out with a Les Paul and a Marshall. I might practice prog rock. In live shows we sometimes do Yes' "Heart of the Sunrise." We used to do Genesis' "Los Endos," from their *A Trick of the Tail* album.

How do you construct solos?

They're nearly always improvised, even in the studio. Solos are a reaction to what's going on around me. The new album is more oriented toward melody and songwriting structure than the previous albums, and having that solid framework can help power a solo. I have great players, and I often react to what they're doing. They take me to a good place.

Is rhythm guitar underappreciated?

Absolutely. Even someone like me, who often gets caught up in soloing, plays rhythm guitar 80 percent of the time. Even a guy who puts on a "guitar show" has to play rhythm, and has to be fluent in chords and voicings. Also, if you don't learn how to back off your volume when someone else is soloing, that's problematic. Rhythm playing is about learning how to blend with the band and be part of the ensemble.

Do you have a home studio?

No. I have GarageBand and the little built-in microphone that Apple provides. I hate making demos. I always feel I'd rather be making the real thing. The first thing you play—your first instincts—are the most inspired, and I'm always fearful of losing that. I make the world's worst demos. They're distorted, sloppy and usually played on the wrong guitar. Our demos aren't elaborate.

Do you prefer digital recording?

I've used Pro Tools to do all but one album. The only album in analog was my first, with [producer] Tom Dowd. It all gets whacked down to "1s" and "0s" anyway. Maybe

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

"Nothing seems to change radically, much as I sometimes would like it to," Joe Bonamassa says of the effect of gear on his playing. "It all comes out sounding like me." He played plenty of Gibson electrics on *Dust Bowl*, including his own Signature Les Paul Gold Top. "The Signature model is basically an early '57 Les Paul, with black parts," he says. "I also have a vintage '59 Sunburst that I used on the album. All told, I probably have 35 to 40 Les Pauls." He also played several hollowbodies, mostly Gibsons. "I wanted a Bigsby for the title track, so I used my ES-295," he says. "On some of the other songs I used a Barney Kessel, a Trini Lopez and an L-5."

Bonamassa utilizes an even wider array of acoustics. "I have a Gibson J-45, an old J-50 and a bunch of Martins," he says. "I have a couple of D-41s—a '69 and a '70. And I have a '57 D-28 that I've used on a couple of albums. And then there's the Grammer acoustic—a Johnny Cash model that's really cool—that I used on the new album. Onstage I play either a Yamaha or [an Alvarez] Yairi acoustic."

For amplification, Bonamassa usually alternates among a Category 5, a Van Weelden Twinkle Land or a Marshall Silver Jubilee. "The Silver Jubilee is a great amp," he says. "It's almost as if it's made for what



I'm trying to accomplish." His pedal board is heavy on Dunlop gear. "I use a custom Crybaby wah pedal that George Trippis makes," says Bonamassa. "I also use a custom Dunlop Copper Fuzz Face that I've had for four years."

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On stage in Wolverhampton, England, December 2010

'The blues is a blank canvas. You can interpret it any way you want!'

audiophiles can hear the difference on their \$15,000 turntables, but that's not who I'm making albums for. I'm making albums for people who put an iPod in their car or a CD in their player. I truly don't hear the difference. Plus if you play a CD inside a Pontiac it sounds completely different from how it sounds in a BMW. At that point analog versus digital becomes a moot point.

Why do you usually play Gibsons?

It's about how well those guitars channel what you hear in your head. There's no better guitar than a Les Paul to achieve a warm and inviting tone. Even when I played a Strat, I

always found myself trying to make it sound like a Gibson. I would roll off the treble so much and put so many boosts on it that in the end I would think, "Hell, I might as well just play the Les Paul."

Does blues have a future?

I see kids in the audience who are 14 or 15, and even kids as young as 4 or 5. It used to be all old dudes, but now it's guys and girls of all ages. The audience has become really varied, and we've done surprisingly well with women. Based on who I see at the shows, I'm not worried at all about the future of the blues.

CHARITY CASE

Bonomassa recently parted with his beloved gold sparkle Stratocaster, allowing it to be sold at auction to benefit Eric Clapton's Crossroads Centre addiction recovery facility in Antigua. Bonomassa was apprehensive at first—but of all the items donated by Clapton's friends, his Strat ended up generating some of the greatest proceeds, selling for \$30,000. "I sold off all my gear when I was 19, but for some reason I kept that guitar," Bonomassa says. "It was the guitar that inspired me to pull myself up by my bootstraps and keep going when things got tough. I wanted a Strat that looked like no one else's, so I essentially built one. I hadn't touched it in four years, so when the Clapton auction came up, I thought, 'Well, he's the only guy I would trust to handle this type of sale and see that it's done correctly.' So I donated it to his very worthwhile cause."

BOOTSY COLLINS | AVRIL LAVIGNE | STEVE EARLE | NIKKI SIXX



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ALISON KRAUSS
Goes home

R.E.M.
In the now



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