

MUSICIAN



RICHIE SAMBORA

Life's trials lead him beyond Bon Jovi to a very personal solo effort

By Russell Hall

RICHIE SAMBORA ISN'T ONE TO HOLD BACK. HIS NEW SOLO album is the best thing he's done outside Bon Jovi, he insists, and he's not going to rein in his enthusiasm with false modesty. "People have been very surprised by this record," he says. "They're surprised it's me. I could take that as a bad thing, I suppose, but I think it's cool."

As its title implies, *Aftermath of the Lowdown* comes in the wake of some thorny issues Sambora has faced in recent years. A much-publicized divorce from actress Heather Locklear, a stint in rehab and an arrest for driving under the influence made him fodder for the tabloids. He handled the tribulations by throwing himself into his work with Bon Jovi. Following the release of their 2009 album, *The Circle*, the band undertook a mammoth world tour that lasted a year and a half. "When you come off a tour like that you usually feel like you're toppling off a cliff," says the ace guitarist. "You sort of fall down, exhausted. But I felt none of that."

Instead, he went on a writing tear. Working with co-producer and co-writer Luke Ebbin, he recruited an A-list of musicians that included keyboard wiz Roger Joseph Manning Jr. and guitarist Rusty Anderson from Paul McCartney's band. "Rusty's a great player," says Sambora. "He helped get some guitar parts going while I was putting the melodies and some arrangements together."

Aftermath of the Lowdown shifts smoothly between glam-tinged pop rockers, acoustic ballads and scruffy blues-rock tunes that lie somewhere between the Black Keys and the Black Crowes. Sambora wanted both variety and authenticity. "I like diversity," he says, "but I also wanted the songs to fit me well, like a comfortable coat. I think I accomplished that."

From his home in Los Angeles, Sambora talked about the new album, his approach to guitar, his days as a session player and the values of taking lessons at age 53.

Why make a solo album now?

There were many reasons. Bon Jovi had been ultra-busy to the point that I didn't have time to stop and look at what was happening in my life. At the end of our last tour—after traveling to 52 countries in 18 months—I finally had a chance to think about myself. I came home energized and started to write songs. I had no idea I was making an album, but as the songs started to take shape, they turned out to be very reflective of where I am in my life. That's when I decided to get some musicians together.

Which song set the tone?

"Seven Years Gone." It's about the passage of time. In the past seven years I've gone through lots of low points, lots of personal travails. My dad died of cancer, I was battling substance abuse, and I was in the middle of a divorce and facing single parenthood. I looked up and all those years had passed. I felt compelled to take stock, and was pointed in the direction of an inward search.

Did that affect your playing today?

I think so. Once I realized the pentatonic scale was a movable thing, up and down the neck in any key, I became a lead player quickly. I was in a band within six months of picking up the guitar, playing lead solos. It helped that I was an avid music listener. I bought a new album every week or two and really studied them. It also helped that I had played the accordion, and the sax and trumpet in the school band. Those instruments came easily to me, so when I started playing guitar, I already knew my ear for music was very acute.

What's your writing process?

Ideas can come at any time—but when I'm in a writing mode, I try to sit and come up with something every day. It might be just a title, a verse and a chorus, or just a vibe. But usually I'm able to write a complete song. You can be the greatest guitar player in the world, but if you don't have a good song to play to, you don't have much. The groove of the song and the emotion of the lyric dictate what you play. I'm always following the song, or chasing it.

How is writing solo different from writing for Bon Jovi?

Jon and I always write together in the same room. The energy and the push and pull between us—we like to call it "healthy debate"—is at the heart of the band. When I'm writing for a solo record I'm sitting by myself, or with one of my co-writers, telling my story. There's a huge difference. There's also the matter of influences. Jon's are different from mine, and his lyrical preferences are different, too. He's the megaphone for the band. He's the one who has to stand up there and sing those songs, not me.

What did you learn from session work prior to joining Bon Jovi?

The golden rule is to *listen*. The guys I was playing with were professional musicians, much older than I was. They taught me not to overplay, to really listen and see what the song needs. That's probably why I became a good record maker in terms of arranging and producing. It's about what to play, and where. What's right for one album or one artist might not be right for another.

What were you doing when you met Jon?

I had just come back from Los Angeles, where I was auditioning for Kiss. They had asked me to come out there. I didn't get in the band, obviously. It wasn't my style of music—but they're a really good band, and important to rock 'n' roll history. But I was more into blues-based

'I took my first guitar lesson at the age of 53'

Did you have musical goals?

I wanted to play more emotional solos. On the last three Bon Jovi records, my solos have been brief, more about melody. My heroes—Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Duane Allman, Johnny Winter—were all about self-expression. Listening to them made me want to play solos all the time. A lot of the playing on this record was done straight off the floor in the studio. Several songs have extended solos. There's not enough of that in rock music these days. Guitarists rarely take solos anymore, but I've always felt that's one of the best things about playing guitar.

How did you learn to play?

I approached it a bit backward. I would put on something like the *Live Johnny Winter* And album—which has lots of fast lead solos—and try to move my fingers as fast as I thought he was playing. I didn't know which notes I was playing, I was just trying to get the same type of phrasing. I did that for a long time with lots of different albums. That created a kind of muscle memory in my hands. By the time I tried to actually put notes to what I was doing, I was already pretty good.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Sambora tore into his vast vintage instrument collection for *Aftermath of the Lowdown*. "I used everything from a 1959 Les Paul to a '58 Flying V to some '50s Fender Broadcasters," he says. "I even used an original Gibson Explorer. I also used lots of Strats—'61s and '63s—and lots of Gretsches, including a 1954 Country Gentleman, a 6120 and a Duo Jet. I played a National Dobro on some of the record as well. As far as acoustic guitars go, it was mostly some really nice Martins. One of my favorites is a 1938 OM-28. I also played a 1938 000-42."

For amplification, Sambora relied mainly on "a bevy of Marshalls." "I used a JCM2000 and a JCM800 with Randy Rhoads heads," he says. "I sometimes used Blackstar amps as well, mostly the Artisan 100. I also used an Orange amp, all sorts of Fender tweeds, and a '62 Fender Twin."

For his live setup Sambora relies on lighter configurations, geared toward versatility. "Obviously I can't take all those instruments on the road," he says. "Lately I've been bringing along one of the Les Pauls, a really nice



'61 Strat, and a great '53 Telecaster." His effects gear included "plenty of different pedals, both vintage and new."

Sambora claims the artistic freedom he enjoyed in making the album—no time constraints—allowed him to try various combinations. "I really broke out the arsenal," he says. "It was great being able to make this record on my own terms."



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Neil Lipari/Redfern

Inset: Kevin Wastenberg

'Listening to my heroes made me want to play solos all the time!'

guy. They were sort of looking for someone to worship them for the huge band they were at that time. I wasn't that guy.

Do you still practice?

Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I've started taking lessons. I walked into Norman's Rare Guitars in L.A., and there was a guy playing acoustic guitar. He sounded like two players at once. I asked how he was doing that, and he started showing me all these alternative tunings. He turned out to be [former Wings guitarist] Laurence Juber. I said, "Would you teach me how to do that?" It was fingerstyle playing that had passed me by when I was learning to play. So I took my first guitar

lesson at the age of 53. I'm still taking lessons from him. It's been a gas.

Bon Jovi will soon be celebrating 30 years together. Should rock 'n' rollers ever retire?

Not if they can help it. As long as people want to see me play, I'm going to go out there. Look at guys like B.B. King and Buddy Guy. B.B. is 87, and he's out there 200 days a year. I did a PBS special with him not long ago, and he's still in great form. Buddy Guy's last album, *Living Proof*, might be his best ever. The Rolling Stones are still great. Those guys are still smoking. I've got no problem playing till I'm dead.

THE AXE FACTOR

Although he's never been on *The X Factor* panel, Sambora has served as a mentor for several contestants on the reality TV talent show. What's his motivation? "Obviously, it's a way to keep your persona out there," he says. "That's one reason. But as someone who's been in the music business for 30 years, I think I have a lot of wisdom to share. These kids go from their bedrooms to being thrust onto a national stage in front of 30 million people. If they're lucky enough to win or to come in the Top 5, they then have to struggle to find out who they are as an artist. That's not an easy thing to do. It's not like when I was coming up, when I could always find clubs to play, five or six nights a week. It's a lot tougher to do that these days."

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