

Posted on Mon, Jun. 04, 2007

## Blues-rock guitar ace will take theaters over arenas any day

By MICHAEL DEEDS

When guitarist Joe Bonamassa presents a blues seminar to students -- something he does about 20 times a year -- he likes to play Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love."

"You like that?" he'll ask the teens, whose enthusiastic response indicates that "like" may not be as accurate as "love."

"Well, who wrote it?," Bonamassa continues. "Willie Dixon."

"My big line with the kids is, 'If you listen to Led Zeppelin, you listen to the blues,'" explains Bonamassa, phoning from his California home. "But the English were able to sell it to the young people, to the masses."

Decades later, pitching blues to the mainstream is no easy task. But Bonamassa, after years of gigging, is making inroads. A white-hot guitarist and husky-voiced singer, Bonamassa mixes Gatling-gun licks with songs that, while bluesy, often contain fragments of rock, soul, jazz, even funk. There's also a distinct heaviness on his latest album, "You & Me." Bonamassa unleashes a stratospheric torrent of notes during tunes such as "Bridge To Better Days," as well as a cover of Led Zeppelin's "Tea for One."

It's blues, but it's sneaky blues. Some listeners who enjoy a Bonamassa song might not consider it blues at all. "We are in the entertainment business, and people want to be entertained," Bonamassa explains. "That's my whole thing with blues. I am blues, but we definitely go out there."

A guitar virtuoso when he was barely out of Pampers, Bonamassa began opening for blues legend B.B. King at the tender age of 12. Although he's close in age to Jonny Lang and Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Bonamassa was mostly glossed over during the media blitz surrounding those young guitar hotshots. Instead, for six years during the '90s, he was part of a rock band called Bloodlines.

Bonamassa says it was a blessing that he missed the attention that Lang and Shepherd received. Fair or not, both musicians were stigmatized as Stevie Ray Vaughan followers. Bonamassa, on the other hand, drew his influences almost strictly from across the pond.

"I'm just a hodgepodge of English guys," Bonamassa says. "That was me. Where, I think Jonny and Kenny were more influenced by American blues artists, I was more influenced by Paul Kossoff (of Free) and Jeff Beck and Paul Rodgers and Rod Stewart and Jethro Tull."

Now 30, Bonamassa has matured past the blues whiz-kid stage. In fact, two years ago, he developed a nodule on his throat and worried that his singing career might be over. "When I was 21 or 22, I literally could smoke all the Lucky Strike non-filters I wanted," Bonamassa remembers. "I could drink and hang out with girls until 6 o'clock in the morning and wake up at 6:30 and sing. When I turned 28, that changed. There was a brick wall."

Bonamassa sought out a vocal coach and learned how to sing properly. Fortunately, the nodule healed on its own. Now, instead of Lucky Strikes, he puffs the occasional cigar. And he has a steady, live-in girlfriend.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," he says, laughing about his 20s. "I just had to quit."

The timing was perfect. Seven years ago, Bonamassa set a goal. After opening extensively for King and seeing the theaters that he plays, Bonamassa decided that's where he wanted his career to end. Not in arenas. Just theaters. As Bonamassa's fan base grows, that's where he and his backing trio increasingly find themselves.

"This year, I'd say six out of 10 of the shows are now in those beautiful old theaters," Bonamassa says. "And by the fall, nine out of the 10 shows will be in those beautiful old theaters. And I look at it, and I'm like, 'Thank you, Lord.'"