

Not your average Joe

American blues rock wonder Joe Bonamassa returns to Israel

• By JENNIFER GREENBERG

There are very few musicians who are genuinely humble. There are even fewer musicians who can open for B.B. King before reaching puberty, produce a prolific 13 albums in 18 years, collect enough guitars to supply a cavalry, yet still keep that modesty intact. In fact, there is only one and his name is Joe Bonamassa.

"I never got into the music business for the ego boost," says Bonamassa, who treats his unbelievable professional success as an excuse to grow his extensive guitar collection. One of the most acclaimed blues rock guitarists in the world, the well-seasoned music man takes pride in his "Bonaseum" and the stories that it tells.

"I mostly collect guitars from their original owners. I just love that history. And it's still out there. I just pulled an original '59 Les Paul Sunburst from its original owner last week," he said in a phone interview last week.

Some boys collect baseball cards, others collect Fender Stratocasters. Bonamassa's knack for collecting can be traced back to his parents who not only owned and managed a guitar shop in Utica, New York, but supported his artistic vision from the get-go. Since the day he was old enough to hold a pick, Bonamassa knew he wanted to be a professional musician.

"It was a high priority for me, a personal mission. And my parents were very encouraging even though there were no guarantees at the time. It's a tough business. I was better off going into the restaurant business. The success rates were higher," he jokes.

At the end of the day, with some personal initiative and perseverance (and unmistakable talent, of course), it didn't take long for the budding musician to hop on the I-90 to fame — all thanks to a little band in upstate New York that was drawing a good crowd. With the right college gigs and promoters in the area on their side, the band got a call to open for the legendary B.B. King in Rochester, New York.

"Meeting B.B. King changed my life and trajectory," to say the least. He continued, "You know when a child violin prodigy hears classical music and their eyes light up? That's where their DNA defaults. It was



JOE BONAMASSA plays with blues in his soul. (Marty Moffatt)

the same with me and the blues. When I heard B.B. King or Eric Clapton, it was like fitting a square peg into a square hole."

His career veered into the fast lane from there. Today, barely two years into his forties and already a long road behind him, he still has a longer road ahead — with Clapton in semi-retirement and King no longer with us, Bonamassa is carrying the blues torch with finesse. However, he doesn't feel that he is carrying this torch on his own. Bonamassa says he believes that there is a generation of young sparks igniting the blues right now.

"The game has changed radically over the past 30 years," to which he credits social media: "In some ways it's good, in others it's bad. It's good in that if you can

get enough people to follow you, it's a nice way to market yourself. The only problem is that the farm system for playing gigs has changed as well."

For instance, Bonamassa — who is phoning in from Lincoln, Nebraska, before heading over to Red Rocks — shed light on the fact that in cities such as Lincoln, he used to be able to just show up to small dives and blues clubs and play a gig in front of 40 or so people, building that market. But today, "It just doesn't work that way anymore."

Nonetheless, he is active on Twitter with a profile photo showcasing a Simpsons-ized version of himself. "I'm a huge fan of the show, so being on the *Simpsons* was a unique experience," he smiles.

Bonamassa is equally idiosyncratic in his

approach to the blues — a somewhat limited form due to its 12-bar nature. So how does he keep finding new ways to reinvent it? "You just have to disregard the purists," he answers. "You have to amalgamate it into as many different forms as possible."

For example, he might take a couple of songs with Pink Floyd-like arrangements, but set them to minor blues changes. "We draw from Pink Floyd, heavy metal influences... wherever! It doesn't matter as long as we keep it interesting. No one wants to hear a traditional take on the blues on repeat. There's a very limited market for that."

The ongoing success story is brutal-aware of audience reception and thus makes sure to constantly offer them an

escape. They were the first act to play Dayton, Ohio, after the August 4 shooting.

HE EXPLAINED that everyone — especially the media — was poking around for his reaction, but all Bonamassa said was, "This is between me and the fans. It wasn't the time or the place. The whole thing about the music business is that we offer an escape," he waxes poetic. "We always have. There are only a few artists out there that can get away with being overtly political and keep the other half of their fanbase. We have to assume a 50/50 split in the house. Everyone may be on different sides, but they do all like our guitar riffs over blues rock changes."

Playing to a split crowd is something that resonates with Israelis and perhaps part of the reason that Bonamassa fills a Tel Aviv venue to maximum capacity every few years. In 2009, he was shocked to see a turnout of 1,200 funnel into Reading 3. While his 2015 show in the White City brought the house down with its animated horn section. This time around, he is bringing an eight-piece band with him, which will include horns and singers.

"It's a great show. We're coming in hot. We've already perfected the set, so it's not a one-off. We're well-rehearsed and excited to return," he said, referring not only to their performance at the Charles Bronfman Auditorium on August 22, but also for the Israeli cuisine. "I'm no foodie," he claims, "but the food in Tel Aviv blows me away every time."

Food, a fun city, and a loving fan base keeps the small-town New York boy coming back for more. And while he has started to find calm in his hectic touring schedule — explaining that "everything changes in a decade and I'm trying to put out music only when I have something to say rather than simply adding to all the noise" — Bonamassa shows no signs of slowing down his visits to Israel.

"It was one of those things where I thought nobody even knew who we were in Israel, but there is always such a great, loving audience," he says. "It's really worth making the trek every three or four years. It's a great music town with a lot of amazing musicians. And they appreciate the roots of blues rock."