

THE BLUES AND BEYOND joe bonamassa

GUITARIST JOE BONAMASSA WAS A CHILD PRODIGY. By age eight, the Utica, New York, native was B.B. King's opening act. He co-formed the band Bloodlines while still a teen, then kick-started his solo career in 2000 with *A New Day Yesterday*, a fiery blues-rock outing overseen by legendary producer Tom Dowd. Bonamassa's six subsequent releases have topped the blues charts as predictably as Joe's name dominates the guitar magazine reader polls.



"I LIKE MY ACOUSTIC GUITARS REALLY BIG AND LOUD ONSTAGE."



At age 31, Joe may have grown up, but he hasn't stopped growing. He stretches the boundaries of the blues further with each release, notably on last year's *Sloe Gin*. Highlights of his subsequent world tour will be released soon as Joe's new live CD.

While Bonamassa is best known for his electric playing, his albums are peppered with deft acoustic numbers, and his live shows feature an extended segment in which Joe pushes his Yamaha LJX36C acoustic cutaway to its limit. He also plays a Yamaha LL16 12-string acoustic.

People often compare you to great American blues players like B.B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughan. But you've said that certain British players influenced you more.

Well, people think "he plays blues-rock guitar, so he probably sounds like Stevie Ray Vaughan." Stevie Ray was a great player, but out of, say, the 20 players who influenced me the most, he might be number 19 or 20. My guys were Peter Green, Paul Kossoff from Free, Eric Clapton, and Jeff Beck. It's not right or wrong—it's just a matter of taste. I share a birthday with Robert Johnson, but frankly, I like Cream's version of "Crossroads" better than his original. *[Laughs.]*

Heresy!

I know. When people hear that, they'll throw eggs at my house. That's why I have an unlisted address. Anyway, those are the kind of players that I dug. Most people think of them as rock guitar players. I really think they're blues players, down deep.

You could be talking about yourself. You're moved far away from the harmonic foundations of the blues, but the blues phrasing is always there.

It is. I try to keep the blues phrasing, but I'm liberal enough to stray here and there. Actually, it would be hard for me to make a record with just I-IV-V songs at this point. But even if it's not a blues song, I can play it like one.

You're famed for your electric work, but your acoustic set is a highlight of your show.

I use Yamahas exclusively for the acoustic part of my show. That's because I like my acoustic guitars really big and loud onstage. Or as [progressive bluegrass mandolinist] Sam Bush put it, "Your acoustic guitar in the monitors is louder than my entire band!" But at the same time, I need to be able to get quiet—basically, I want huge dynamic range. Now, when you play Yamaha guitars in a nice acoustical setting, they're beautiful—immediate, warm, and inviting. But live, it's different.

How?

We take all those beautifully crafted guitars and shove beach towels inside them! That's the only way I can get the volume I need onstage without feeding back—that's just basic physics. Before I worked with Yamahas, using towels like that would make the guitar sound like a rubber band. But with Yamahas, I can still hear the wood, the bottom end, everything. And the pickup system is so immediate—it responds the instant the pick hits the string. Yamaha builds an excellent guitar, and it's an honor to be associated with them. I've collected literally hundreds of guitars over the last 20 years, so I don't need a guitar I can't use!

How would you describe your acoustic style?

Bull in a china shop! *[Laughs.]* When I play acoustic live, subtlety is checked at the door. I want the acoustic to respond just like an electric. I even string my acoustics and electrics with the same gauges, .011 through .052.



Do you write on acoustic?

Yes. I've been busy writing my next studio album this week, almost entirely on acoustic. If I can get swinging grooves on just plain old acoustic, I'll know I can transfer them to electric later if I want.

Yes—originality. Saying more with less. Guys I look up to, like B.B. King, can play one note, and you know it's them. B.B.'s style is so powerful and simple. Same with Beck, Clapton, and Kossoff—they can play something so simple, but still make me say, "Now why didn't I think of that?" My goal is to say more with less. To play one note and have people say, "That's Joe Bonamassa!"

You've played so well for so long. Are there still things you feel you're reaching for?